

SHIFTY POLITICS

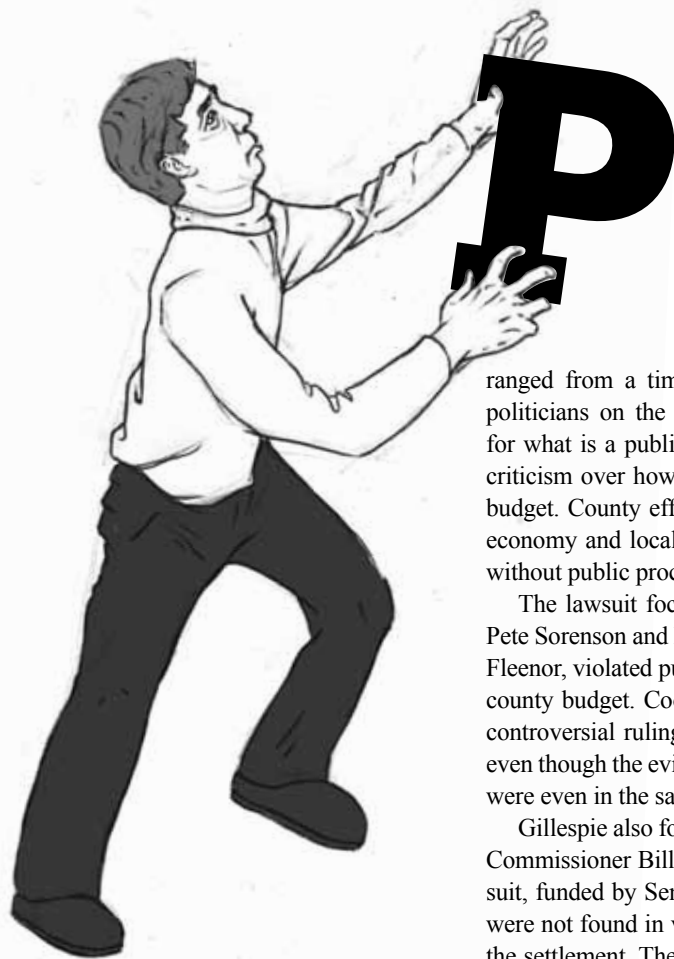
LANE COUNTY'S AWKWARD NEW LEAN TO THE RIGHT

BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN



Mothers all want their sons to grow up to be president, but they don't want them to become politicians in the process

— JOHN F. KENNEDY



Politics, it would seem, is inseparable from process. It's not what politicians get done; it's how they do it.

Or is it? The Board of Lane County Commissioners, in particular the more liberal, anti-sprawl, pro-environment commissioners, has come under fire. Hits to the board have

ranged from a timber-funded lawsuit that targeted the more left politicians on the county board and has set a peculiar precedent for what is a public meeting — or a public meeting process — to criticism over how the county will make cuts to its ever-shrinking budget. County efforts to build a more green and sustainable local economy and local energy have also been “sabotaged,” apparently without public process.

The lawsuit focused on process. It alleged that Commissioners Pete Sorenson and Rob Handy, as well as former Commissioner Bill Fleenor, violated public meetings laws in their discussions about the county budget. Coos County Circuit Judge Michael Gillespie, in a controversial ruling, found that Sorenson and Handy had done so, even though the evidence did not show that any three commissioners were even in the same room together talking about the issue.

Gillespie also found that Commissioner Faye Stewart and former Commissioner Bill Dwyer had met inappropriately, but because the suit, funded by Seneca-Jones Timber Co., did not name them, they were not found in violation or asked to pay thousands as a result of the settlement. The settlement did not require Handy and Sorenson to admit any wrongdoing in the case.

The suit was criticized as a politically motivated effort to hurt the liberal commissioners, and if it was an effort to hurt the leftward lean of the board as a whole, it worked. Fleenor did not run again for

the West Lane commission seat, and Libertarian-turned-Republican Jay Bozievich took the spot in the last election. The current board — Bozievich, Handy, Sorenson, timber family Republican Faye Stewart and former Springfield mayor and one-time Republican congressional hopeful Sid Leiken — is listing to the right. The board and Lane County's administration is rife with tension.

Many whose employment with the county has been terminated have had difficulty speaking out about what has been going on behind the scenes.

County employees have been asked to sign a “resignation and release agreement,” apparently in exchange for a settlement payment. *EW* has obtained a copy of one of these agreements. It says, among other things, that the county and the terminated employee “shall not make or publish any statement, orally or in writing, or instigate, assist or participate in the making or publication of any statement that would or could adversely affect, libel, slander or disparage the other, or expose to contempt, or ridicule or cast in a negative light, the other party.”

As the more right-wing board struggles its way through another round of budget woes, it looks like the process of how money is spent, as well as just who is making the decisions about taxpayer money, may once again need to be scrutinized. Almost \$50,000 is being spent on a biased social media PR series calling for unions to take cuts. The county spent \$5,000 on controversial software the board had not approved, and an opportunity for Lane County to receive \$10 million in grants, improve energy efficiency and help low-income residents has been left sitting on the table.

The commissioners have begun to draft a mission statement and work on long-term goal setting. So will the county begin a process that will get it back on track?

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