

# POLITICS

## OF PERSONAL

## DESTRUCTION

### SORENSEN STANDS UP TO THE RIGHT



**E**t tu, Andy Stahl? Political smears are hardly a modern phenomenon, nor is political intrigue. You can't throw a stick at the corpus of Shakespearean tragedy without hitting one in which a character is killed or victimized through the evil machinations of another. To the audience of a play, it's soon made clear who the true villains are, but in politics where we are not just the audience but actually part of the action — all the world's a stage — who the good guys are can get a little unclear once the mud-slinging begins.

Commissioner Pete Sorenson has been hit with a lot of mud, and yet his supporters haven't come to bury him, but to praise him. He's one of the good guys, say the unions, the enviros and the teachers. The news media and the right wing have tried to make the mud stick, but once the facts are examined, none of the accusations that have made headlines actually pan out. For some reason the truth doesn't seem to make the headlines.

Sorenson's record says he shouldn't have to beware the "Ides of May" in this primary election against challenger Andy Stahl for the South Eugene commission seat. Sorenson can point to his votes on issues that south Eugeneans care about, from voting against the Willamette Water Company water grab to standing up for unions and schools. Some say Stahl is taking advantage of the right-wing attack on Sorenson for his own political gain. Is this a case of Democrats eating their own in the politics of personal destruction?

### The Issues

The South Eugene race has been framed by many as a liberal versus liberal, green versus green, but Sorenson says to look at it that way is wrong. "There are a hundred other issues — public health, human rights," he points out. And he's clear on where he stands on the issues, he says, and that he is willing to vote in the minority if that vote is the right thing to do.

Sorenson says even the votes he has lost to the conservative majority are important, such when he voted to keep the Lane County Human Rights Commission, because those votes represent the dominant point of view of his district and causes that south Eugene cares about.

A key vote just last week reflects Sorenson's concerns with labor and health care. On April 24, the conservative board majority of Sid Leiken, Faye Stewart and Jay Bozievich voted in favor of authorizing County Administrator Liane Richardson to execute a contract with Corizon, an inmate medical services company, to provide medical and mental health services at the Lane County Jail. Sorenson voted against it.

Sorenson says contracting out rather than using the county's unionized nurses might seem as if it saves money at first, but he says there is only an initial savings, not a long-term savings of money.

That's not the only reason Sorenson voted against a contract with Corizon. Not only could contracting out hurt the county's union labor, Sorenson says that "the company has had a great deal of litigation against it over substandard care."

A recently released report on conditions at the Idaho State Correctional Institution called health care conditions there in violation of "the right of inmates at ISCI to be protected from cruel and unusual punishment." The report included allegations

that a prisoner who scored high as suicide risk was not referred to mental health services and committed suicide, and another patient was left unattended by a nurse during cardiac arrest and later died.

Corizon is the company Idaho contracted to provide health-care services at the prison, and the same company over which Sorenson is voicing his concerns over hiring here in Lane County.

Stahl is new to public office, though not new to issues like public schools and the environment. He is the executive director of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics and his prior elected office was serving on the school board of the Crow-Applegate-Lorane School district, which has a student population of 300. While on the school board Stahl spearheaded a grant effort to turn Lorane Elementary into a charter school.

Stahl has not been willing in public debates thus far to be clear on where he stands, Sorenson says. Sorenson on the other hand has been vocal about his issues, campaigning for schools and voting to keep the Human Rights Commission. His campaign page lists veterans, animal welfare, jobs and a sustainable economy, human rights, public education and the environment as key issues.

When asked by *EW*, Stahl, like Sorenson, says he would bring back the county's Human Rights Commission, is pro-union, pro-open conversations about the future of animal control and pro-adoption over euthanasia, to name a few.

So why run against a commissioner who already votes and speaks out on the same issues?

Stahl's campaign page doesn't appear to have a section on issues, but does list out a few things that he stands for and the top of his list is, "Transparency and accountability. No

more government in secret." There's no doubt Stahl's for open government — he points out that he's defended the rights of public employees to blow the whistle when laws are violated.

But when it comes to the accusations leveled against Sorenson by right wing and conservative interests, it seems that Stahl has either drunk the Kool-Aid or is using those accusations for political gain.

### The Why

Don't believe everything you read in the papers.

Sorenson says the positions he has taken on issues from logging to sprawl to the Strong Schools initiative over the years have reflected the views of the people in his district but have "infuriated really powerful interests."

Those powerful interests include a timber company, Aaron Jones' Seneca Sawmill Co. — the same company that just bought the much-protested Goose Timber Sale. Seneca funded a lawsuit that alleged Commissioners 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 ever in the same room together talking about the issue.

Interestingly enough, Gillespie also found that current conservative Commissioner Faye Stewart had also met inappropriately, but because the suit did not name him, he was not found in violation and his name has stayed clear of the headlines in the *R-G* bashing the liberal commissioners. Also