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## False Accusations

Commissioner Sorenson has been unjustly targeted

It is important for our community that we re-elect Pete Sorenson as Lane County commissioner. There is no other candidate who has Pete's experience or his knowledge or will hold to those core values that are central to the long-term health and well being of our community. As a member of the Lane Board of County Commissioners since 1997, Pete has established a strong record of never backing away from tough issues.

Examples from this last term include that Pete has opposed a proposal to raise the pay of the county commissioners and in fact, advocated a decrease in their pay; has supported the establishment of a Lane County independent auditor; has opposed a \$10,000 bonus for the county administrator; has opposed mining of gravel too close to the Willamette River; has opposed a proposal permitting private developers to extract water from the McKenzie River; supported Faye Stewart as chairman of the board; and most recently, Pete has raised concerns about a proposal to privatize 1.4 million acres of public land, to be clear-cut under terms denying the protection of the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Clean Water Act, for those lands and the streams that flow through them.

Pete's continued work is even more impressive when one reviews the list of serious but baseless charges that have been made against him and which he has been required to deal with. It is important that we all know about those charges which make up an alarming pattern of misconduct by his opponents on the right.

**The first was the charge** that Pete (and other commissioners) violated the Oregon Open Meeting Law raised in the action (reportedly financed by Seneca Sawmill/ Aaron Jones) filed by Eleanor S. Dumdi and Edward M. Anderson against Rob Handy, Peter Sorenson, Bill Fleenor and the Board of County Commissioners. The case was tried without a jury by Judge Michael Gillespie of Coos County, who "made a finding" that Pete (and other commissioners including Faye Stewart) violated the Oregon Open Meeting Law. The decision was wrong. However, since the trial, that "finding" has been repeated over and over, even by many who know better.

As a member of the Oregon State Bar since 1953 and continuing in active practice since returning from the Air Force in 1956, I never make criticisms of a court's decision casually. But I am very familiar with the Oregon Open Meeting Law having prosecuted an action for violation of its provisions as early as 1978. Judge Gillespie's opinion is inconsistent with the plain language of the statute. I am not alone in this view. The Oregon Legislature has its own counsel, the Oregon legislative counsel. He has the statutory duty to perform legal research for the Legislature and its members on issues of Oregon law. Upon request of a legislator he reviewed the ruling of Judge Gillespie and concluded: "the reasoning of the court [Judge Gillespie] does not support the conclusion that a public meeting law violation occurred." The Feb. 10 *Register-Guard* editorial restated that conclusion. Also, among the many attorneys I have conferred with on that issue, all have agreed with Oregon legislative counsel.

It is not a violation for one legislator or one commissioner to talk to another about a matter being considered. One-on-one discussions are expected and often necessary. It is only a violation of the Open Meeting Law if a "quorum" of the body deliberates together in private.

It is unfortunate that Judge Gillespie's opinion was not appealed. Apparently because of costs and risks to all, rather than an appeal, a compromise was arrived at. The written settlement agreement signed by plaintiffs, defendants and the county administrator states among other things: "Non-admission: no party admits liability or wrongdoing."

So to repeatedly accuse Pete as "guilty of violating the Open Meeting Law" is grossly misleading and unfair to all.

The next claim made against Pete during this past term was a charge that he had, during the trial of the Open Meeting case, given false testimony. This serious accusation was fully investigated by the Washington County District Attorney's office. After their review of all of the evidence, the Washington County DA and his staff concluded and advised that the accusation against Sorenson was baseless.

Another charge made against Pete during this term was an "economic development investigation," later changed to an "audit." Again, when the investigation was completed, the finding was that there had been no wrongdoing.

To his amazement, Pete was then accused of "harassing the Lane County administrator." Once again there was an independent investigation, this time by a retired Oregon state trooper. Upon completing his investigation he found that the charge was baseless.

**All of us in Lane County** should be concerned by this pattern of baseless charges made against an honorable, long-serving public servant. It appears they have been made by the accusers in the belief that even if baseless, they will have some cumulative effect and harm Sorenson's reputation and his future chances at the polls. A review of the charges suggest they have been made against Pete for the simple reason that he is the longest serving and perhaps most stalwart progressive in office, and therefore chosen as the target.

Pete is proud of his record, is proud of his family and proud of the community in which he lives and works. For all of these years he has served three times as chair of the Board of County Commissioners. He has been chair of the LCC Board of Education, of the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency, of the Metropolitan Policy Committee, of the Lane Council of Governments, of the Housing and Community College Association, and Pete has often volunteered to assist in other organizations including predictably, as a coach in Kidsports and in YMCA programs.

The writer of the April 22 article in the *R-G* noted that: "Environmental groups and unions largely are backing [Peter Sorenson]." It should also be noted that Pete is endorsed by Eugene's outstanding mayor, Kitty Piercy, the Democratic Party of Lane County, the Independent Party of Oregon, our former congressman Jim Weaver, and a multitude of other individuals and organizations.

We in Lane County deserve to have this remarkable neighbor continue to serve as a member of the Lane Board of County Commissioners.

*Attorney Art Johnson of Eugene is former president of the Oregon State Bar, former president of the Oregon Trial Lawyers Association, and former Eugene city attorney. He is also a co-owner of Eugene Weekly.*

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