

Stewart's Last Term?

Too many black marks at the county might tarnish longtime commissioner BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

The East Lane County Commission District wraps around Springfield and parts of Eugene like some misshapen monster hand pinching the cities in its clutches. It's a vast district, stretching from the Cascades into, strangely enough, the Churchill area of Eugene, and encompassing Oakridge, Marcola, Coburg, Cottage Grove and Creswell.

This beast of a district also encompasses issues from logging and gravel mining to jobs and rural broadband, and it has attracted an array of challengers for incumbent Commissioner Faye Stewart's seat who all argue that it's time for a change.

It's easy to posit the race as timber tyrant (Stewart) versus tree huggers (Kevin Matthews or Joann Ernst), but the ups and downs in Lane County government over the past several years move the East Lane race from timber into deeper political quagmires. The question for many is whether Stewart has gotten bogged down too deeply in the mud of the county's dirty business and left the door open for one of four adversaries to either take his place, or, at the very least, force him to a run-off election in November. If a candidate gets more than 50 percent of the vote in a nonpartisan Oregon county commission race then that person is the only name on the November ballot, essentially ensuring a win. If not, then the top two vote getters advance to the fall election. In addition to Matthews and Ernst, Stewart faces Jose Ortal and Jack Schoolcraft.

Stewart has held office since 2004. In his last election in May of 2010, he won with 10,299 votes with his closest challenger, Gary Kutcher, coming in at 2,255. This year Stewart's foes are well-known community members — some with campaign cash and election staff. Even Schoolcraft, who is perhaps the least familiar name in the bunch, has a certain cachet — he's a member of the Footbag Hall of Fame (in other words, he's a rock star in the Hacky Sack world).

Mutterings about the need for a strong challenger to Stewart started shortly after his 2010 re-election. The citizens of Dexter appealed to Stewart to help them stop the destruction of scenic Parvin Butte, which stands over the town and nearby Dexter Lake. Stewart lays the blame at the feet of faulty county laws, telling *EW* that the most important part of his job is working with his constituents, though "at times I can't provide what they want" because of county regulations, "but I do my best to help." He says that in the future, "it would be nice to potentially regulate some hours of operation and have a clear expectation" for those who might be impacted by mining and for the miners.

Stewart is the lone conservative board member up for election to respond to *EW*'s request for an interview. While the County Commission seats are nonpartisan, their supporters and their commission votes often divide along party lines. Stewart has raised about \$54,000 for his campaign, with the largest donations coming from resource extraction industries. He received \$5,000 from Wildish Land Co., \$3,000 from Rosboro Lumber, \$2,600 from the Community Action Network, as well as money from trucking and construction companies.

With about \$64,000 in his coffers for the campaign, Matthews has outraised Stewart. The bulk of the donations to his campaign comes from individuals, not corporations. Donations include \$100 from Arlen Markus, a longtime opponent to mining of Parvin Butte, \$1,000 from Tom Bowerman of the nonprofit PolicyInteractive and \$1,000 from attorney (and *EW* part-owner) Art Johnson. About half the funds were a contribution from his father, Herb Matthews. Ernst has

raised about \$17,000 and Ortal \$6,000. Schoolcraft has not reported any campaign contributions.

Matthews says that the board of commissioners "has been a den of vipers for a while now" and this was part of his impetus for entering into the fray of Lane County politics. The editor of *Architecture Week* and known in Lane County for his work on land-use issues, Matthews lights up when he talks about his campaign, knocking on doors and the numerous "Coffee with Kevin" sessions he's had around the county. "People are hungry for real economic development," he says.

Both Matthews and former EWEB commissioner Ernst cite Parvin as one motivation for entering the race. Ernst says that "the commissioners were afraid they might get sued," but as a commissioner she would have felt strongly enough to go ahead with the case that sought to regulate the mine.

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Matthews, Ernst and Ortal have each called Stewart to task for the County Commission's handling (or lack thereof) of Liane (Richardson) Inkster — from appointing her to the highly paid position without a search to what Ortal calls the board majority's "lethargy" in dealing with her. Some say Inkster went rogue and others allege she was the tool of the conservative faction. Either way, Richardson cost the county thousands in various investigations and blackened its reputation in what Matthews refers to as her "reign of terror."

While Stewart cites his work with the Regional Fiber Consortium to bring internet broadband to rural areas, he's probably best known for his attempts to develop the rural-industrial area of Goshen into a campus-industrial area. The plan has been criticized because, among other things, Goshen lacks a sewer system and has a train running through it, which could lead to liability and other development issues, and it also might be affected by wetlands designation. Matthews cites Stewart's attempts to increase dump tipping fees to send money to develop Goshen, in which large tracts of land are owned by developers (and Parvin Butte miners) the McDougal Bros., in one of several examples of what he calls "crony capitalism." Stewart had allegedly promised not to spend public money on developing Goshen.

Public money — or the lack of it — is where the timber issue comes into play in a county with hundreds of thousands of acres of forested lands. Stewart, whose personal fortune comes from his timber-family background, still touts public lands logging as a means to jobs and prosperity. Ortal calls for a focus on tourism to replace timber dollars. Ernst suggests a return to a harvest tax and calls for more science on the effects of logging. A tree farm is not a forest, she says. Matthews, who was one of the hosts of a lengthy series of discussions on logging called "Conversations on the Forest," has long advocated for a severance (harvest) tax on private timberlands. In the end, Matthews says, a real part of rural prosperity is being transparent. "Lane County government is kind of in a bad way," he says. ■



KEVIN MATTHEWS