

'Slipped Under the Door'

LANE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS WILL HEAR PUBLIC COMMENT ON PROPOSED CHARTER CHANGES, INCLUDING AN 11TH HOUR REDISTRICTING PLAN

By Bentley Freeman

A proposal to redraw Lane County's political map could be headed to the ballot in November, even though the plan has received none of the public attention and scrutiny that such potentially far-reaching changes normally receive.

The redistricting plan has been promoted by the Lane County Commission's three conservative members as part of potential changes to the county's Home Rule Charter.

The county commission will hold public hearings on June 25 and July 9 on a series of proposed changes to the county charter. These proposals come from the Charter Review Committee, which has put them through a year's worth of public debate and scrutiny. The county commission will decide which proposed charter amendments will go to voters in November.

The review committee's proposals include formalizing an independent redistricting committee under the charter and removing geographic descriptors from district titles, instead just using numbers.

But the move to redraw political boundaries — potentially influencing who gets elected to the county commission — has not yet received public review. It comes from a letter to the county commission and counsel dated May 24, requesting it be referred to the public.

On June 4, three commissioners — Ryan Ceniga, Pat Farr and David Loveall — allowed the redistricting proposal to proceed outside the established charter review process.

At press time, neither Ceniga or Loveall had responded to *Eugene Weekly's* questions asking why the amendments were motioned through without consulting the CRC or county counsel.

When asked why he and the other two commissioners approved the amendments to be added to the public hearing slate, Farr texted, "You are mischaracterizing the board meeting discussion."

Commissioner Heather Buch, who disagreed with the move during the meeting, tells *EW* that the action meant the redistricting plan "skipped the whole process" and allowed it to "slip under the door at the last minute."

Documents show the commissioners did not make any other last-minute additions to the proposed charter amendments.

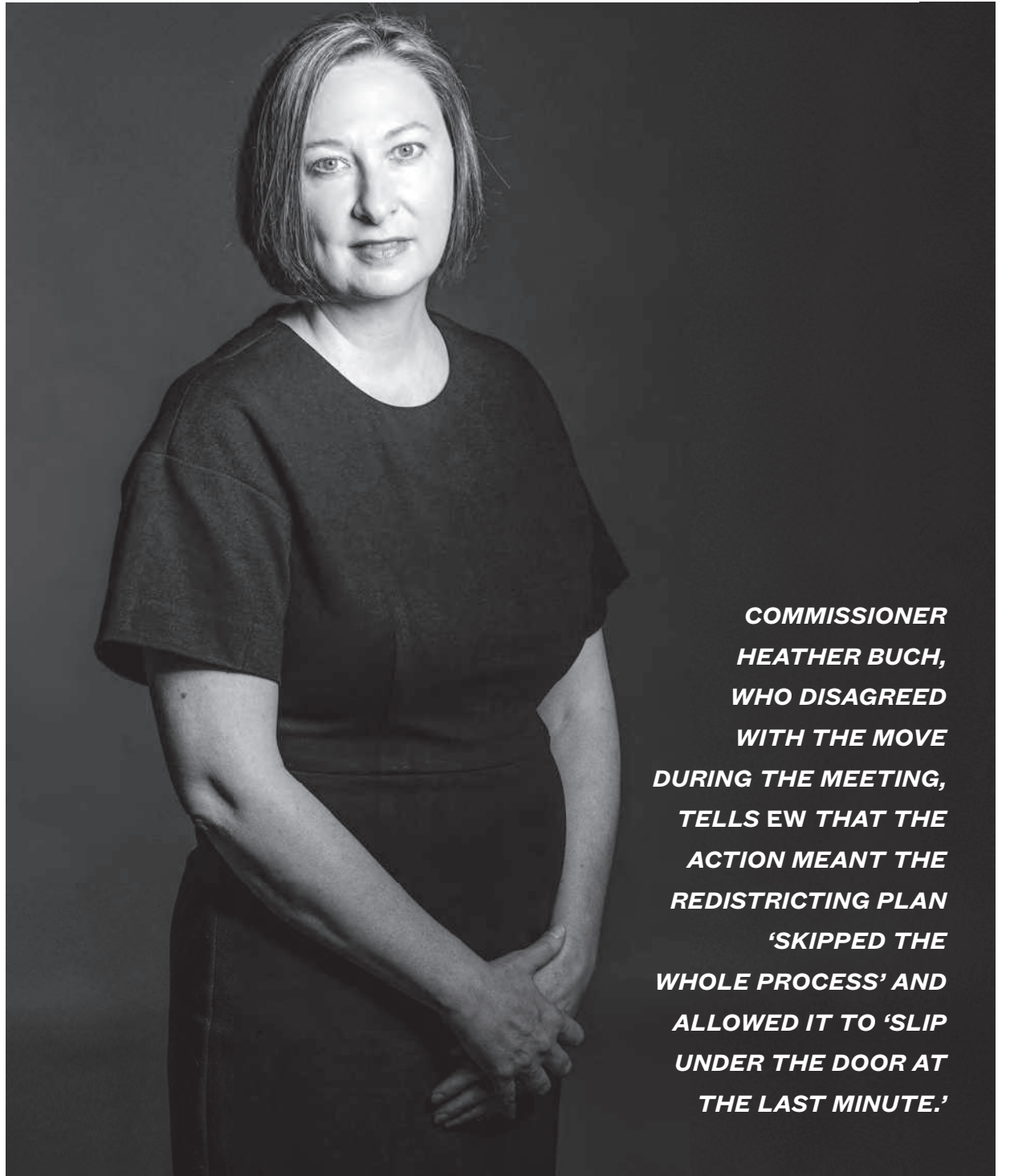
The CRC completed its work in October 2023. This late-arriving redistricting plan is part of a larger proposal to remake the process the county uses to redraw political boundaries once a decade following the U.S. Census.

The proposal comes from Stan Long, a longtime public official and attorney formerly of the Eugene law firm Harrang Long.

In his proposal, Long argues that the Lane County commissioners should have no role in drawing the boundaries of the districts from which they are elected. Currently, the county board approves a redistricting plan that has been vetted by 15 members of the Independent Redistricting Committee.

Long's proposal would create a new committee also made up of citizens, whose decision would not be subject to the board's vote.

Long did not respond to *EW's* requests for an interview. Attorney William Gary, who represents Long, tells *EW* the proposal would increase transparency and fairness in the redistricting process.



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A "redistricting method that gives that responsibility to a 15-member, non-partisan, citizen commission not only helps to bolster confidence in county government but also makes the redistricting process itself a fairer and more representative one," Gary wrote in an email response to *EW's* questions.

In a letter to the county commission, Gary called the proposed alterations in political boundaries a "house-keeping" change.

The proposed political boundary changes didn't come with a map and have not been subjected to any formal analysis.

The five Lane County commissioners run as nonpartisan candidates, but Kevin Cronin, a member of the CRC, says the plan has a distinctly partisan look.

Cronin, in an emailed response to *EW*, said the proposal would in effect move the Whiteaker neighborhood, what he called a strong "Democratic-performing" section of

voters, out of the county commission district No. 4, which Farr now represents.

The move, Cronin says, would "pack" liberal voters into District 3, now represented by Commissioner Laurie Trieger, and give Farr's district a more conservative base.

Trieger said the issue was complex and referred *EW* to several past commission meetings. "I think it's important to flag for the community that something is up," she writes to *EW* in a text.

In the submission to the county commission, Gary said Long wanted nothing more than to increase the public's confidence in how political boundaries are drawn in Lane County.

"Mr. Long has no partisan or political interest in this matter," Gary wrote, "beyond his life-long commitment to good government and the rule of law."

Scheduled Lane County Board of Commissioners meetings on June 25 and July 9 at the Lane County Public Service Building, 125 E 8th Avenue, will include public hearings on the proposed changes.