

# A long (AT TIMES, VERY STRANGE) ride on Cherriots board



Colleen Busch served as Keizer's voice on the Salem Area Mass Transit District Board of Directors from 2015 until last month.  
Photo by ERIC A. HOWALD of Keizertimes

By ERIC A. HOWALD  
Of the Keizertimes

Colleen Busch embarked on a six-year detour en route to becoming a member of the Keizer Fire Board this month.

"When I decided to run for office in 2015, I planned to run for the fire board, but then a couple people asked me if I would be willing to serve on the Salem Area Mass Transit District (SAMTD/Cherriots) board," Busch said.

She was elected to the Cherriots board in 2015, re-elected in 2017 and then received a gubernatorial appointment to the board after the method of selecting board members was changed in 2019. In May, she was elected to the fire board.

Mayor Cathy Clark and longtime Keizerite Hersch Sangster, a former member of the SAMTD board, asked Busch

if she would run for the Cherriots role instead of the fire board and then served as mentors and advisers once she was seated. But, Busch dates her commitment to service back much further.

"It probably began with Brownies and Girl Scouts, but Rainbow Girls, which was a program offered by the Masons, was also a big one," she said. The International Order of the Rainbow for Girls, is a Masonic youth service organization.

She set her sights on the fire board because she'd already volunteered on the Keizer Fire District's budget committee for years. Her husband, Bob, had volunteered as a firefighter for more than two decades.

When Busch changed tracks and headed for Cherriots, there was a steep learning curve and the transit district was

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headed into tumultuous times.

"In the last board meeting before I started my term, the previous board decided to put a tax measure on the ballot that would help restore weekend services," Busch said. The measure proved highly controversial because of the additional costs it would have placed on businesses; it eventually failed at the ballot box. Despite that early stumble, Busch was committed to restoring at least Saturday services in some of the Cherriots system. Saturday routes had been eliminated in the wake of The Great Recession.

"Being on the board was a lot of learning how to connect with people and then help them understand that a bus fare is only a twelfth of what it cost to run the bus," Busch said.

As Cherriots struggled to make some ends meet, Busch had a part in what proved to be some significant changes, most of them had to do with rebranding the service, but it included actions such

as approving on-bus advertising for the first time in the organization's history. The advertising helped cover the cost of a discount on student fares.

"Those decisions had a big, positive impact, and the brand did need refreshing," she said.

When the funding dams broke, it always came in a rush. A statewide payroll tax was passed to support transit systems and Cherriots allotment covered the costs of Saturday routes.

Next summer, Cherriots' first 10 electric buses will hit the street s- the result of a successful grant request in 2020 and additional money being sent to states as part of COVID-19 relief.

COVID-19, and the ensuing, short-term shutdown for public transit, was easily one of the most tumultuous times in Busch's tenure on the board. She showed off a manilla folder stuffed with COVID-related emails and edicts.

"There were a few weeks when we had changes being implemented hours after the board was notified. We had to shut down service because we had drivers getting sick," Busch said. She still feels it was the best decision the organization could make given the circumstances.

Busch's favorite aspect of the job were times she got to spend with drivers, whether it was riding on the routes and talking with them, judging bus rodeos or handing out awards for accident-free service.

"We have some drivers who haven't gotten into an accident in the 25 years they've worked for us," she said. "Recognizing their hard work was the best part of the job."

Her biggest takeaway from the experience was the connections it takes to make an organization like Cherriots successful. As she departed the board in June, Busch read a lengthy list of the connections she made over the course of six years.

"Cherriots tagline is connecting people with places, but that's still connecting people with people, and it takes so many people to connect an organization like Cherriots with the larger community," she said.

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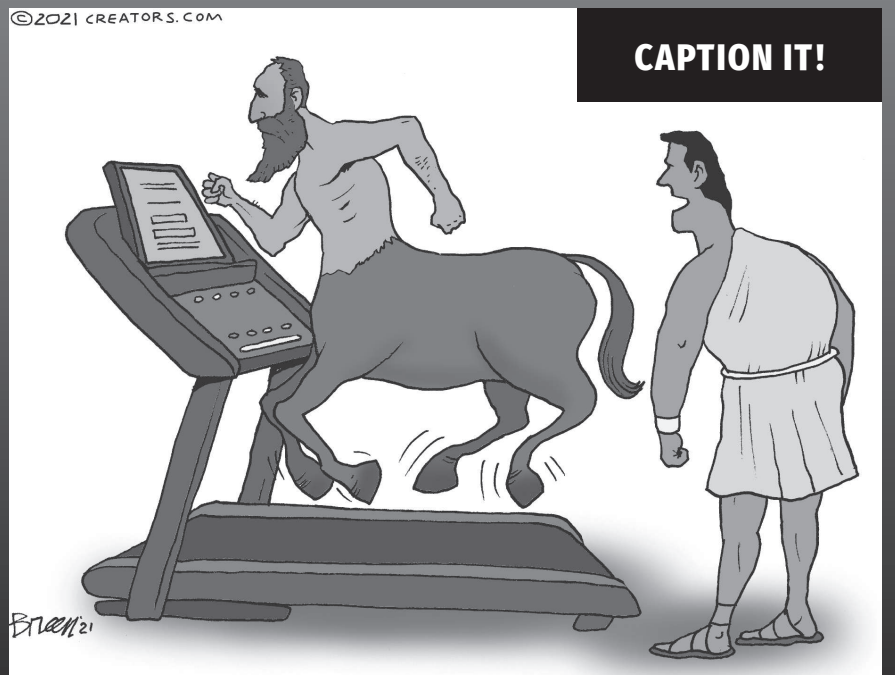


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