

Three of six Port candidates appear at forum

Fulton, Hellberg and O'Grady mostly agree

By EDWARD STRATTON
The Daily Astorian

WARRENTON — About 20 people showed up to the North Coast Republican Women's candidate forum Wednesday at Warrenton High School to hear from the candidates of three contested Port of Astoria Commission races.

But with James Campbell, Dirk Rohne and Frank Spence all declining to attend, the forum turned into more of a meet-and-greet for their respective opponents Stephen Fulton, Dick Hellberg and Pat O'Grady, who have shared many of the same viewpoints and are seen by some as political allies in the Port races.

Republican Women President Patricia Roberts said that, in decades of holding such forums, she has never had half the candidates back out.

"It's our goal to help people get educated about the issues," she said, adding the group does not try to push their own agenda at the forums.

Campbell, the owner of Campbell Marine Towing & Construction, said he was in Vancouver, Washington, last night. "I had a dry-docking I had to attend to."

Rohne declined to comment on why he did not attend the forum. Spence could not immediately be reached for comment.

Transparency

Fulton, an incumbent commissioner running against fellow incumbent Campbell, has built a reputation as a firebrand, continually questioning and critical of Port staff and other commissioners. He and Commissioner Bill Hunsinger, who attended the forum, have become part of the losing side in many controversial 3-2 votes in which they've disagreed with staff and fellow commissioners Campbell, Robert Mushen and John Raichl.



Edward Stratton/The Daily Astorian

From left, Port of Astoria Commission candidates Dick Hellberg, Stephen Fulton and Pat O'Grady participated in a candidate forum Wednesday at Warrenton High School with about 20 people in attendance.

Fulton said staff is not sharing adequate information with the Port Commission, while The Daily Astorian downplays issues within the agency's administration and other commissioners turn a blind eye.

"It's been difficult to be a change agent," he said Wednesday, adding the Port Commission has become fouled. "Staff

is hiding things, and Jim Campbell is helping them."

Hellberg, a former Warrenton City commissioner, and O'Grady, a longshoreman and local business owner, echoed Fulton's argument, saying there is a lack of transparency between the Port Commission and staff, with the agency's existing bylaws not being

followed and the Port Commission not being provided the weekly updates previously agreed upon.

Bond issue

The Port is asking county voters for \$1.96 million in bonds over three years to develop a southern portion of the Astoria Regional Airport to accommodate a new hangar being paid for by helicopter medevac service Life Flight Network, while improving nearby lands for future development.

Fulton, Hellberg and O'Grady, although supportive of helping Life Flight site its new hangar, have opposed the bond measure. They argued that instead of spending on speculative development at the airport, the Port needs to focus on repairing and enhancing the central waterfront, where the agency makes a large portion of its revenue, and finding additional commodities to ship such as wheat. O'Grady said the Port also needs to fix its marinas, which are filling in with sedi-

ment on the west end of Astoria and sea lions in the east.

The Port's lease on the North Tongue Point industrial docks east of Astoria from Montana-based Washington Development Co. comes up in 2019. The Port Commission has set a goal of buying the former U.S. Navy base, which houses a seafood processor, boat repair companies and ship moorage.

Fulton said the Port should go for a bond to buy Tongue Point, calling it the future of the agency. Hellberg and O'Grady said the facility should be fixed up and used to accommodate support services for the fishing industry.

The next candidate forum will be held by the American Association of University Women Wednesday in Columbia Hall, Room 219, on Clatsop Community College's main campus, located at 1651 Lexington Ave. Candidates from the Port, Clatsop Care Center Health District Board, college board and Astoria School Board are expected to attend.

Position 1: Stormwater squabble turned into flare-up

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The two commissioners have repeatedly clashed over differences regarding staff and management, largely taking opposing sides on close 3-2 votes. Campbell, along with Commissioners Robert Mushen and John Raichl, have largely praised the performance of staff and Port Executive Director Jim Knight. Fulton and Commissioner Bill Hunsinger have been more critical, and are often on the losing end of votes.

Willing to question

Fulton, an Astoria native and project manager for Warrenton Fiber, joined the Port Commission after the 2013 election after serving on the agency's budget committee. Besides his work in Warrenton, he has a background in consulting on levee certification, international trade in the U.S., Canada and Asia and refrigerated rail transport.

Fulton has built a reputation for questioning the Port's finances and being critical of its administration and fellow commissioners. Accused by some of manufacturing conflicts and micromanaging, along with

Hunsinger, Fulton has said he is just trying to hold the agency and its staff accountable to the public. He has claimed the agency's bylaws are not being followed, and that the Port Commission is not receiving required updates from staff.

Fulton launched his candidacy last month with several allegations against Campbell, who he has painted as complicit with problems at the agency and unwilling to put the work in to be an effective commissioner.

"I feel that I am more willing to do the work necessary to protect the value that the citizens have vested in the Port of Astoria," Fulton said of why he filed against Campbell.

Among Fulton's allegations is that Campbell has a conflict of interest with the Port's bond measure in the May election at the Astoria Regional Airport, where Campbell hangs a plane. The Port is asking voters for \$1.96 million in bonds over three years to develop a southern portion of the airport for a new hangar being built by helicopter medevac service Life Flight, while readying several nearby acres for future development.

Campbell has said the bond

STEPHEN FULTON

Age: 63

Residence: Astoria

Occupation: Project manager, Warrenton Fiber Co.

Education: Bachelor's and master's degrees in business administration from the University of Oregon.

Length of time in Clatsop County: 50-plus years.

Prior Experience: Port of Astoria Commission; Port of Astoria Budget Committee; Warrenton Business Association.

measure is an inexpensive opportunity to put Life Flight in a better spot and add development opportunities at the airport. Although supportive of helping accommodate Life Flight, Fulton has come out in opposition to the bond, saying the Port should seek a cheaper alternative.

Fulton has also accused Campbell of condoning a private club nicknamed the "Man Cave" inside a private hangar at the airport. Fulton accused the owner of the club, retired dentist Philip Bales, of operating an illegal speakeasy inside the hangar, where he has a bar and kegs and holds gather-

JAMES CAMPBELL

Age: 83

Residence: Knappa

Occupation: Marine contractor

Education: Beaver (Oklahoma) High School

Length of time in Clatsop County: 61 years.

Prior Experience: Port of Astoria Commission; Port of Astoria Budget Committee.

ings. Knight has since asked the Clatsop County Sheriff's Office to investigate the accusations by Fulton. The commissioner has also suggested evicting Bales and using the pad from his hangar to relocate Life Flight, instead of the bond measure.

Stormwater squabble

Fulton sent a letter earlier this month to the Port Commission and local media outlets accusing Campbell and Commission President Mushen of not disclosing cost overruns on the Port's Pier 3 stormwater treatment system, which is over budget and several months behind schedule. The accusation turned into the most visible flare-up yet between the

two candidates.

Fulton claimed he wrote the letter out of concern for the Port's liability. The agency was recently fined \$27,000 by the state for not finishing the project by the prescribed timeline.

"Why don't you be honest with the public and tell them you're trying to make a political statement?" Campbell asked Fulton at a meeting.

"I don't think that's the case, Jim," Fulton replied, reiterating his argument that the Port needs answers about the overages.

"How long did it take your attorney to write this letter?" Campbell asked, in an apparent reference to John Nygaard, an attorney for Warrenton Fiber, Fulton's employer.

In the port business

Campbell, an Oklahoma transplant, has been in Astoria since the 1950s, when he served locally with the U.S. Navy. He first served on the Port Commission for three terms between 1965 and 1977, and in 2013 defeated incumbent Lawrence Pfund.

Campbell's background is mainly in construction. Since the 1980s, he has been the owner-operator of Campbell

Towing & Marine Construction, a contractor building port infrastructure and that helped dredge the Columbia River shipping channel.

"I think I have a pretty good idea of what it takes to make a port go, and how to maintain and rebuild a port," Campbell said. "I've always been interested in the marine traffic business. I pretty much know what makes that click."

Campbell's campaign has been decidedly less vocal and attention-grabbing. He has called Fulton's allegations against him ridiculous. "I think he's searching for self-notoriety."

Campbell has praised Knight's performance in moving the Port forward since the director started in 2014. He said the election is about creating an environment in which staff and the Port can succeed.

"It makes it very difficult for staff to get anything done when they have to respond to all these innuendos and accusations," he said of Fulton and Hunsinger's withering criticism.

Campbell said Fulton and Hunsinger seem to be on a mission. "Basically, I think their motive is to get rid of Jim Knight."

Position 2: Port is asking county voters for \$1.96 million in bonds over three years

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"I believe that the current professional management at the Port is doing a good job and well-regarded, but the Port Commission gives people pause," Rohne said during a recent radio interview with Joan Herman from Coast Community Radio.

Hellberg, a former Warrenton City commissioner, said he was spurred to run when the Port Commission declined to sign a letter in support of commercial gillnet fishermen before a state hearing on fishing in the Columbia River. He is a commercial fisherman and marine surveyor. Although supportive of commercial fishing, Port Commission President Robert Mushen said at the time that the Port should not take an official side in an issue that pits commercial and recreational fishermen against each other.

Rohne has said the issue is about fair access for both sides. "The fish belong to everyone."

Calming influence

During the joint interview with Herman, both candidates touted their civility while serving on past boards.

Rohne said that while there were disagreements during his time on the county board, nobody ever spoke ill words about each other, something that has become more common on the Port Commission. "In order to be effective, I needed to get along with these people during the meeting."

DICK HELLBERG

Age: 78

Residence: Warrenton

Occupation: Commercial fisherman, marine surveyor.

Education: Bachelor's in general studies and master's degree in science education from Western Oregon University; administrative license from Portland State University.

Length of time in Clatsop County: 70-plus years.

Prior Experience: Warrenton City Commission; Warrenton-Hammond School Board; U.S. Marine Corps, Alaska Independent Fishermen's Marketing Association; Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Fish Restoration and Enhancement Board.

DIRK ROHNE

Age: 41

Residence: Brownsmead

Occupation: Owner, Brownsmead Island Farm.

Education: Bachelor's degree in business and agriculture from Oregon State University.

Length of time in Clatsop County: 30-plus years.

Prior Experience: Brownsmead Diking District; Knappa Water Association; Clatsop Community College Board; Clatsop County Board of Commissioners.

Hellberg said that while serving on the Alaska Independent Fishermen's Marketing Association, he conducted orderly meetings between people with language problems and a lack of sophistication. He has served on a variety of governing bodies, from

the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Fish Restoration and Enhancement Board to the Warrenton-Hammond School Board.

"The disharmony on that commission kind of convinced me that I made the right decision to run," Hellberg said of the Port Commission.

Rohne and Hellberg both described the Port as an economic engine for the entire county.

The Port has world-class businesses such as Bornstein Seafoods and Englund Marine & Industrial Supply, Rohne said, but can't have clients' leases being threatened by members of the Port Commission. Rohne was referencing calls by Fulton to evict retired dentist Philip Bales' private hangar from land he leases at the Astoria Regional Airport. Fulton has accused Bales of housing a private club with alcohol that violates his lease.

"Fulton was out of line," Rohne said, adding that if the Port can stop that kind of behavior, businesses will feel more secure to invest in the region.

The Port is asking county voters for \$1.96 million in bonds over three years to develop a southern portion of the Astoria Regional Airport to accommodate a new hangar for helicopter medevac service Life Flight Network, while readying nearby properties for future development. Rohne has come out in favor of the bond measure. Hellberg, while supportive

of helping Life Flight, said he opposes the bond because of the attached speculative development.

Goals

Herman asked the candidates what their goals are on the Port Commission.

Rohne said his primary goal is to provide more stability, giving businesses at the Port more security to invest locally.

Hellberg said he would like to see more oceangoing

cargo. Among his many former jobs, including principal of the former Fort Stevens Junior High School, Hellberg has been a longshoreman and a warehouseman for a wheat-exporting operation at the Port.

Both candidates said rail access, although a long shot, would help the Port, and that endangered shipyard Astoria Marine Construction Co., which will likely shut down because of a pollution cleanup at its Lewis and Clark site, needs help moving, poten-

tially to North Tongue Point.

Support

While Hellberg has a candidate committee with the Secretary of State's Office, his account shows no contributions or expenditures. Rohne's filing committee includes contributions from several prominent locals, including state Sen. Betsy Johnson, activist Cheryl Johnson and Friends of the Astoria Armory Board Member Daniel Stein.

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