

Ex-mayor Sands says he has no regrets

Counts street paving project among successes

By Steve Tool
Wallowa County Chieftain



Dennis Sands

Former Joseph mayor Dennis Sands is breathing a little easier these days -- literally. After 10 years as Joseph mayor and council member, Sands resigned Nov. 1 at his doctor's request.

"I forgot how much it weighed on me," Sands said. Two weeks after his resignation, his blood pressure had already dropped 40 points.

"I can really tell the difference," he said.

Sands has long held an interest in politics. At 24, and after service with the U.S. Marine Corps, he ran as a Republican in a state representative race in a heavily democratic area of Portland. Though he won the primary, he lost the general election but gained valuable experience from the venture.

When he moved to Joseph in 2002, he began attending council meetings. He lost a three-way race for mayor in 2004 but didn't give up. After some council resignations, he again applied for a seat on the council only to get turned away.

In 2006, Sands ran for the city council part of a six-way race for three open council seats. He came in third.

"It was a landslide," Sands quipped. "I beat the fourth-place person by five votes."

A mayoral run in 2008 landed him the post he held for the next decade. At the time, the council was dominated by land

use issues. Particularly contentious was the piece of Marr Ranch property that became Iwetemlaykin State Park.

At the time, the property owner wanted to develop the land, and it was within the Joseph's urban growth boundary. The council fought, which Sands didn't think was fair since the property owner bought the land with development intentions. The state and Nez Perce Tribe eventually purchased the land.

Economic development had the highest priority for Sands throughout his tenure. He wanted more family-wage jobs. The city had an industrial zone with no water or sewer close by, which he thought made it unattractive to businesses.

"One of the last things I did was to secure that grant to get water and sewer down to the industrial zone," he said.

The Regional Solutions grant came to \$145,000, and that brought the water from Camp Street over to Sample Lane. That cost nearly \$200,000 with the city contributing around \$20,000 and

expecting about \$20,000 more from the county's lottery fund for economic development. Businesses within the zone are expected to pay a share.

Sands saw a number of changes in the city's demographic over his tenure. He noted population growth and an increase in retirees.

"The schools are finally picking up again, and that's a really encouraging sign," he said.

His challenge was trying to keep the council a unified body.

"There were times we were very united and times we weren't," he said. "Even though we may have differences, once we make a decision, we try to reach that goal. Sometimes it doesn't happen."

Most rewarding for the former mayor was the playground project at the Joseph City Park.

"It had citizen involvement, and it was basically citizen driven," he said.

Sands was on the project committee and had a significant role outside of his position as mayor. "The city, for an investment of \$2,500, received

a whole new playground worth \$265,000," he said. "It was one of the best projects I've ever been involved in."

Sands also noted the recently completed bike path from the south end of the city to the county park at the foot of Wallowa Lake, courtesy of the Oregon Department of Transportation.

"There was no investment by the city except attending design meetings," Sands said.

Sands also points to the paving of city streets as a high-water mark of his tenure. He initiated a campaign to raise the state grant allotments for small city infrastructure from \$1 million to \$5 million.

The mayor personally wrote letters and handed out sample letters at League of Oregon Cities meetings with instructions on who and where to send them. He also lobbied the legislators involved while on trips to Salem.

"Now, instead of getting \$50,000 every eight years, we get at least \$50,000 every two years for our streets," he said. Sands also noted that the

grant rules didn't prohibit the city from making more than one application annually. Consequently the state granted two separate applications for a total of \$100,000 last year. With carryover and other state programs, the city council approved around \$220,000 for road paving and repair.

"We ended up getting about 18 blocks paved this year," he said.

Despite some turmoil along the way, Sands has no regrets and wouldn't do anything differently.

"I basically enjoyed all of it," he said.

He added that the last two years have taken their toll, and he plans to spend more time with his small business advising role with Northeast Oregon Economic Development District.

Sands said he hoped he left Joseph citizens a legacy of working for their interests.

"I had no personal agenda," he said. "I always thought, 'What do the citizens want?' and I think I reflected that pretty well."

FIRE

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Wallowa County Emergency Services Manager Paul Karvosky confirmed that the local firefighters have contacted him advising they may be staying beyond their initial 14-day deployment.

They were on the front lines in the city of Paradise in the Sierra foothills 15 miles east of Chico, working with search and rescue, Karvosky reported.

"They've told me some horror stories that happened during the fire," Karvosky said. "What those residents went through at the time of the fire is just unbelievable. The fire came on them so fast — that's why there's going to be a death toll. The fire overran some, and they died in their cars trying to escape."

The official death toll had exceeded 70 Monday morning.

Karvosky said initially the fire was moving in eight foot leaps every minute with 50 mph. wind pushing it.

People were fleeing in their pajamas and escape routes were clogged with traffic.

Paradise had a population of approximately 27,000. Karvosky said he tells people that La Grande has a population of 17,000, so imagine if La Grande were simply wiped off the map.

"That's what firefighters were seeing at Paradise," he said. "They've sent me some photos, but they are tragic — not suitable for publication."

The fire camp at Chico Fairgrounds houses 6,000 people, Karvosky said.

"Oregon has the largest contingent of firefighters from the western states: 17 teams, 320 men and women," he said.

SIEBE

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and age, we have electronic medical records and everything is at our fingertips."

Wallowa County doctors now have the opportunity to confer, not only with other local doctors but with specialists from across the northwest — and even the nation if need be. Patients are referred to specialists in Portland, Boise, the Tri-Cities, Spokane and beyond.

"I think the care in Wallowa County is really good," Siebe said. "We're really proud of what has happened over the years."

Winding Waters CEO Nic Powers spoke glowingly of Siebe's impact on the development of care in the county, especially for children.

"We're really going to

miss Kathy here at Winding Waters," he said. "She's been instrumental in running our vaccination program and improving vaccination rates, she was really helpful in developing Teen Screen program and figuring out how healthcare needs of teens were different than children and adults; she was our 'go to' person for taking care of little kids and reassuring parents. Her years of experience and caring manner built confidence, especially in new parents."

Kathy's friend Kathleen Bennett, who worked with the original band of doctors back in the day, spoke of a magical method Siebe used in confidence-building.

"She developed relationships with every one of her patients," Bennett said. "In any room she goes into, if it is social or if it is medi-

cine, she has this uncanny ability to put you at ease. She's friendly without being obnoxious, she recognizes you, she remembers names, she's perceptive and intuitive and resourceful, she loves to teach ... and I think critical thinking ability is something that set both Kathy and Scott apart."

The Siebes also managed to raise three high-achieving children in Wallowa County, and Kathy served on the school board and volunteered in the community.

All three children attended school in Enterprise and then went on to Whitworth or Washington State University.

"They've all done really well out of our school system," Siebe said.

Daughter Kelly Fontein is a grant writer in Pullman, Wash., and has two chil-

dren with husband Adri who works for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

Daughter Amy Siebe Mork is an RN at Wallowa Memorial Hospital and has three children with husband Shawn who is a range management specialist for the U.S. Forest Service Wallowa Valley Ranger District.

Son Cory Siebe is an emergency medicine physician at St. Charles Medical Center in Bend and has two children with wife Ariel.

Siebe is looking forward to spending a lot more time with her grandchildren, she said.

"The main reason I'm retiring is to not have a schedule," she said. "Scott and I will do more things with the grandkids, more traveling, more enjoying the county and hiking, more skiing and golfing."

SENIORS

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She stressed the quality of the facility's staff and lauded their professionalism during the transition.

"This team was hungry and open to get support, policies and procedures that would enable them to succeed," she said. "I'm not walking in to fix what's broken. I'm trying to honor and elevate what's already so great."

Facility director Jennifer Olson also spoke. She said the district board made the right choice with Vitalita.

"I've watched my team blossom and grow under this management guidance, and what I love is that my residents are truly gaining from this," she said. "When you walk into that building, it just feels like home. It's amazing."

Olson noted that the facil-

ity, which provides both assisted living and memory care, is at its maximum capacity 29 residents and has a waiting list. Olson regularly fields inquiries about what the facility offers.

"We are people on the move," she said. "We are going places, shopping, spending money in the community and getting out there. It's no longer a place where it's just a bed and medication."

Hilty also answered questions about resident costs, which can run from \$4000 per month upward depending on the level of care needed. She also said that the facility predominantly accepts private pay and Medicaid payments as well as long-term care insurance.

She also noted the facility contributes to the local economy with its 33 employees.

Volunteer help is welcome at the center. A large volunteer pool is already in place as

several advocacy groups are involved.

"We really have some incredible hands on deck helping out, but we can always use more at this time of year," Hilty said. She added seniors can use help writing cards, making cookies and gift wrapping or shopping.

In response to whether more care beds were needed at more levels, Hilty responded that workforce readiness in terms of qualified personnel is an even bigger need.

"Our industry requires 24/7 coverage, and I can't put a 'closed' sign on the door because someone didn't come in," she said. "Our labor pool is really tight out here."

Olson added that Clackamas Community College will hold a 10-day workshop this spring to start people on the road to become Certified Nursing Assistants, which can potentially lead to employment at the center.

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Introducing Orthopedic Surgeon

Dr. Adam Heisinger

- Doctor of Osteopathy, Des Moines University, Iowa
- Internship and Residency completed in orthopedic surgery at Affinity Medical Center, Ohio; Fellowship in sports medicine completed at Orthopedic Research of Virginia, Richmond
- Served four years as flight surgeon, Langley Air Force Base, Virginia and Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina

Dr. Heisinger will be seeing patients at Wallowa Memorial Hospital regularly for clinic visits and surgery. Ask your physician for a referral today.

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