

Sparks fly after Oregon Supreme Court rules Kristof ineligible for governor

BY JIM REDDEN

Oregon Capital Bureau

Sparks continued to fly Thursday, Feb. 17, in the Oregon governor's race even after the state Supreme Court ruled earlier that morning that former New York Times columnist Nick Kristof couldn't run for governor.

The court unanimously upheld Oregon Secretary of State Shemia Fagan's January decision that Kristof is not eligible to run for governor because he will not have lived three years in the state by the Nov. 8, 2022, election, as required by the Oregon Constitution.

Kristof had been seeking the Democratic nomination

before Fagan ruled him off the ballot. Kristof's lawyers argued he was raised in Oregon and owns a farm in the rural community of Yamhill that he and his family live on every summer. Fagan argued his real home was in New York, where he had voted as recently as 2020 — an argument the court found convincing.

Kristof accepted the ruling during a press conference two hours after the ruling was released, but criticized the state's "political system" for not solving the problems he said motivated him to enter the race. They include the lack of affordable housing, the homeless crisis, the

lack of addiction and mental health services, and climate change, he said.

"Oregon is in a moment of crisis and it affects all of us. And far too many of our families and friends are left to struggle with the impact of those choices on their own because our political system believes their problems are too difficult to take on," Kristof said, adding, "I believe they're too difficult not to take on. And while I may not get the opportunity to take them on as your governor, I remain deeply committed to doing everything in my power to tackle these issues and build a brighter future."

Although Kristof said he would not challenge the ruling, Fagan took a shot at him a short time later during her own press conference. After praising the ruling for upholding her "objective" decision to disqualify Kristof, she accused him of previously making the kind of "baseless" accusations that undermine democracy by calling it politically motivated.

"Increasing harassment and attacks on elections workers here in Oregon and around the country often begin with empty allegations of bias or corruption. We are seeing an increase in harassment targeting elec-

tion workers and even death threats toward county clerks right here in Oregon," said Fagan, who is also a Democrat.

After Fagan first disqualified him, Kristof said, "As you all know, I come from outside the political establishment and I don't owe insiders anything. They view my campaign as a threat." When pressed by reporters if she was referring to that and similar statements by Kristof, Fagan said yes. But when pressed again about whether any of her employees had been threatened by anyone because of Kristof's statements, Fagan admitted no one had.

Commissioners

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Nichols said all he was asking for was the legal opinion on whether the changes he suggested could be made.

Christina Witham, who is a candidate to replace Bennett, who is retiring when his four-term term concludes at the end of 2022, asked Nichols why he is proposing, during a year when two of the three commissioner positions are on the ballot, to change commissioners' duties.

Harvey's current four-year term also expires at the end of 2022, and, like Bennett, Harvey is not seeking reelection.

Witham and Kody Justus have filed as candidates for Bennett's position.

The three candidates who have filed so far for Harvey's position are Joe Johnson, Dan Garrick and Shane Alderson.

"Five people have filed for commissioner seats so far as of today. I don't see how you can change the seat that they're running for before they get in there," Witham said.

Nichols replied that although he first broached the topic in November 2021, the commission did not schedule a work session to continue the discussion.

"We didn't get that chance to even discuss the possibility so everyone knew what I was attempting to do and the reason why," Nichols said.

He said he raised the subject again because he wants to give voters a chance to decide whether to distribute tasks more evenly among the three commissioners.

He said he has talked with officials from other counties that use a similar system and like it.

"They say it works much better. It puts more transparency in the hands of the commissioners because they learn more about the whole county because they're sharing duties more equitably," Nichols said.

Witham reiterated her concern that Nichols' proposal, if it comes to pass, would mean she and the other candidates would be vying for a job different than the one they believed they were seeking when they filed.

"That should not happen," Witham said. "If people are filing for that position, they should get that position as it is. Not changed by the time they get in there."

That discussion should wait until the two new commissioners are elected, Witham said.

Nichols emphasized that he believes the change he has suggested would improve the relationship among commissioners.

"I think all three commissioners will work better together that way," he said.

Rally

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Shelly Cutler, executive director of the Baker County Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Center, said that although she's disappointed that the rally is canceled again, she's optimistic that it will return in 2023.

"It's a hit to our summer tourism for sure," Cutler said on Thursday, Feb. 17. "It's an incredible event that brings a lot of revenue to the county and businesses. I do not expect another summer to go by without the rally."

She said she understands Dukes' concerns.

Cutler also points out that even without the rally, the roads that brought the event to Baker County more than 15 years ago remain an attraction for riders, and she expects many motorcyclists will visit the county this spring and summer.

That happened last summer despite the rally being canceled, she said.

"They still come to Baker, just not in the masses that we would see with the official rally," Cutler said.

Also on the positive side of the ledger, Cutler said all other major summer events are slated to happen as usual, including the



Kathy Orr/Baker City Herald, File

The Hells Canyon Motorcycle Rally, one of Baker City's major summer events, won't happen in 2022, the third straight year it's been canceled. The organizer hopes to resume the event in 2023.

Baker City Cycling Classic in June, Miners Jubilee and the Bronc and Bull Riding competition in July,

and the Shrine All-Star Football Game and Baker County Fair in August, and the Sumpter flea markets

during Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends.

Moreover, an event that also was canceled in 2020 and 2021 — the Baker City Memory Cruise car show — is back on the schedule for Aug. 20 in Geiser-Pollman Park.

A new event planned for the weekend of May 20 is the Chautauqua Music Festival in Richland. The event will include a variety of live music at the Eagle Valley Grange Community Park, as well as artisans selling handcrafted items and specialty foods.

"I think we still have a lot of good things going on," Cutler said.

Ready for influx of visitors

Cutler is optimistic that the 2022 spring and summer tourist season will be a busy one in Baker County, as people from across the nation, as well as foreign travelers, take advantage of the waning pandemic.

That was the case during spring break 2021, she said. "Last spring break was the busiest traffic I've seen in the six, almost seven, years I've been here," Cutler said. "People were so ready to get out, and I expect that trend to continue, as people are feeling safer."

Among travelers visiting the county this winter,

Cutler said about 40% were from the East Coast.

"People are still taking road trips," she said.

Cutler said very few people who call the Chamber's Visitor Center ask about mask or vaccine mandates. But she's still pleased that Oregon's indoor mask mandate will end no later than March 31, according to Oregon Gov. Kate Brown.

The Oregon Health & Science University this week forecast that the number of COVID-19 patients in hospitals would drop below the 400-person threshold for ending the mask mandate by March 20.

"We always impress upon people who call that Baker County is open for business and we're excited to have them back," Cutler said. "I think we're all excited to get back to normal."

Staffing challenges

Cutler said that although some restaurants and other businesses continue to struggle to find enough employees to maintain their usual schedule, she believes the situation is improving.

She thinks the tourist season and its influx of customers could be a great opportunity for high school students, including this year's graduates, to earn money for college.



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