

After salary dispute treasurer withdraws from race

Gutierrez says ‘ultimate goal is to get rid of me’

By David Sykes

After 23 years as county treasurer Gayle Gutierrez is calling it quits. Elected six times by voters and serving since 1996, she told the budget committee last week that up until three years ago she enjoyed the job, but since then has been subjected to “bullying” which is affecting her mental and physical health so she is withdrawing from the race.

“The voters have had confidence in the job I have been doing as they elected me six times,” she said in a statement to the budget committee, which includes the three commissioners. “I have really enjoyed working in the treasurer’s position until the last three years. In those three years, I feel I have been subjected to passive/aggressive behavior and bullying. My mental and physical health is more important than any job,” she stressed.

Her years-long disputes with the commissioners about county financial matters came to a head last Wednesday when the budget committee met in a special meeting to consider cutting her salary by up to 75 percent. This was the second special meeting of the budget committee to discuss the treasurer’s salary. Following another special meeting December 11, Amanda Rea, who had earlier filed to run against Gutierrez, dropped out of the race citing the ongoing uncertainty about the salary. “May not be a full-time job which makes me nervous to give up my normal full-time job,” Rea wrote in her withdrawal statement. “It has been over a month since the conversation began and I needed to choose for the sake of my normal job.”

In stressing the importance of her job and that “every single penny that goes in or out of the county goes through the treasurer’s office,” Gutierrez told the budget committee that last year she handled over \$94 million in county money. County Clerk Bobbi Childers says now that no one is running if no one files for the position by March 10, a write-in could win the election in November general election, and they would then be in charge of handling those county monies.

Commissioners at first defended their action to review the treasurer’s salary saying it was routine and proper for them to oversee and keep an eye on all county salaries. But after a confrontational meeting last week voted to take no action in singling out the



Morrow County Treasurer Gayle Gutierrez quits after 23 years.

treasurer’s salary and just move forward with the normal budgeting process, which includes review of all county salaries by a special compensation committee and then going on to a regular budget meeting before sending the entire budget on to the commissioners for final approval. This action did not change Gutierrez’s mind however, as she announced her resignation and subsequent withdrawal from the upcoming election at the meeting.

Commissioners defended their review of the salary by saying maybe the position has been part time and drawing a full-time salary for many years. Commissioner Don Russell said 25 years ago the tax collection was taken out of the treasurer’s office and done elsewhere, and at that time the position may have become only a part time job. He said this is the reason the commissioners where now looking at the salary, and not a dispute with the current treasurer.

The assessor’s office currently handles tax collection and Assessor Mike Gorman was at the meeting and said around tax time between October and December it takes 100 percent of his staff’s time. Former assessor Greg Sweek was also in attendance and he said it was a good thing to have the collections done by the assessor instead of the treasurer since when there is “a problem with your tax bill you come to your assessor anyway. I think it’s a good thing.” “Tax collection fits with the assessor’s office. It’s very intertwined,” Gorman said. “I would recommend not moving it back (to the treasurer’s office),” he added. Gutierrez said she could not do the job of tax collection because she doesn’t have the staff, pointing out that she is the only one in her office. In her letter to the budget committee Gutierrez gave a long list of duties which she feels makes it a full-time job.

Commissioner Melissa Lindsay said the commission held the special meetings in order to settle what the treasurer salary was going to be so people filing for the position would know prior to running and before the election. Lindsay also provided copies of Oregon law which placed responsibility of setting elected officials’ salaries onto the county budget committee. In past practice, however, all county salaries are reviewed first by a compensation committee appointed by the commissioners, which then passes those recommendations on to the budget committee for approval before the final budget goes to the commissioners for adoption.

A comparison of treasurer’s salaries was provided, however most everyone agreed that because of the difference in counties it was difficult to make comparisons. “There is a saying that if you have seen one Oregon county, you have seen one Oregon county,” Russell said.

Budget committee member Linda LaRue said she was “confused” as to why the budget committee was singling out the treasurer’s salary for review. “Morrow County has had tremendous economic growth. That is why I’m confused why we’re redoing the treasurer’s salary?” she asked. “This is not about money. Why is this being considered?” LaRue also questioned why the commissioners were going outside the normal budgeting procedure and considering the treasurer salary alone. “Typically, it goes to the compensation committee, then comes to the budget committee. I would expect it to come from the compensation then to us on the budget committee,” she pointed out.

Commissioner Russell said he had faith in the compensation committee to do a good job of setting salaries of elected officials. “We have good representation across the county. I’ve only voted one time against the compensation committee, and that was when the commissioners wanted to raise their own salaries.” He said he voted against it but then the commissioners subsequently went on the following year to give each of themselves substantial raises.

In arguing it was a budget committee job to review salaries, Lindsay said the compensation committee when making decisions is not provided with the details and information of

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Local women’s vision becomes reality

Historical building saved from destruction now a community events center with open house Friday



Melissa Lindsay (left) and Kim Cutsforth in the state-of-the-art kitchen at the new Gilliam Bisbee community building in Heppner. The two were the major forces behind making this new facility a reality. -Photo by David Sykes.

By David Sykes

But for the vision and drive of two local women, a treasured historical building in downtown Heppner would have ended up a pile of rubble and turned into a parking lot. “We didn’t want to see that happen,” says Kim Cutsforth and Melissa Lindsay, the driving force behind an effort to save the historic Gilliam and Bisbee building and turn it into a first-class community events center with upstairs overnight suites ready for guests.

The historic old building was close to being lost forever as it was deteriorating, out of date, and losing its main tenant, and unless the owner, Morrow County, could find someone to buy it, there was talk of tearing it down for a parking lot. “We didn’t want that. We didn’t want a parking lot,” County Commissioner Melissa Lindsay says, but admits the county couldn’t continue paying for maintenance and upkeep, especially with the major tenant Community Counseling Solutions moving out. So the two women went to work, and

what they accomplished will be on full display for the public during an open house this Friday, February 7 from 5 – 7:30 p.m.

It’s been a couple of years since the two walked through the building thinking of what could be done with the old historic structure. “I wanted something that when you walk in you say ‘wow,’” Cutsforth said of her original ideas. She said she envisioned an area downstairs where special events could be held, and then while walking through the upstairs offices she got the idea for some suites where people could stay overnight for events like weddings and reunions.

One thing both she and Lindsay wanted was to preserve as much of the old historic look as possible. To accomplish the restoration, she enlisted the help of Engineering NW of Ontario to do the design and engineering work. And local builder David Allstott was brought on as general contractor to turn their dreams into reality. “He did a great job,” she says. “He knew what we wanted and made

it happen.” Construction on the project started about one year ago and today she says it is something Heppner can be proud of.

Cutsforth is the administrator of the Howard and Beth Bryant Foundation which gives out grants locally for projects just like the Gilliam Bisbee building. “Howard and Beth loved Heppner and would be proud of what they helped accomplish here,” Cutsforth says looking around the remodeled facility which the foundation gave about \$1.5 million to remodel. Knowing it would cost about \$250,000 to have the building torn down and removed, the county donated about that amount and the building to the newly formed Heppner Community Foundation, which took ownership of the facility.

The main doors open off of May Street in the heart of downtown. With a large hall and state of the art kitchen downstairs the facility is ready to seat up

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Heppner Community Foundation Board members Joe Armato, Kim Cutsforth, Sandy Matthews, Melissa Lindsay and Patti Allstott are ready to show off the newly remodeled building. -Photo by David Sykes.

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