

Josephine County Democrats

General Meeting Hybrid

January 11, 2022

A short business meeting centered visits from two candidates for the Democratic nomination for governor. During the business meeting, the minutes from the last meeting were approved and Treasurer Colette Storms reported we made money last month because of generous donors and a grant from the DPO for a texting campaign. The current balance is \$10,601. Chair Dorothy Yetter thanked those who contribute regularly and those who give larger donations when they can. All will be needed for the upcoming election season, she said.

Environmental Caucus Chair Joe Stodola gave some interesting facts about mining in Josephine County, promising to do a presentation on it to expand upon some of his finds. Josephine County has a history of mining but currently the only mining that pays is of sand and gravel, he said. The issue came to the Environmental Caucus's attention because a company, called American Mining Research, has been pestering the Josephine County Board of Commissioners about tellurium mining. Caucus members looked into this, and at first thought it was a scheme to mine for gold, as tellurium is a byproduct, but after consulting with a mining engineer, they learned there isn't much gold left in the county. They now think the only mining AMR may be doing is of investors. Joe said more details are still being pursued.

The Gun Owners Caucus is also looking into the recent "Gun Sanctuary Ordinance" proposed by county commissioners, and a meeting regarding the development of an Urban Campground for the homeless was announced for Jan. 19, noon, Bethany Presbyterian Church on 4th Street in Grants Pass. Lynda Spangler announced an Education Forum for Wednesday, Feb. 9 with guests from the schools who will give a report on how kids in Grants Pass are doing. Brian Clark announced a highway cleanup Sunday from 11 am to 2 pm.

The first candidate to speak was Patrick Starnes, a woodworker, who appeared in person at the meeting. He said he had a meeting earlier with Sen. Jeff Golden and Rep. Pam Marsh that was informative about issues in the area. He said he and Golden believe campaign finance reform is a big issue in Oregon. He has set an individual donor limit for his campaign at \$1,000 or less. Campaign financing affects how things get done in the state and said an overhaul is needed. He said another of his top issues is public transit as a way of reducing emissions and is in favor of a Healthcare for All plan paid for by taxing junk food. He also favors including everyone in PERS, a PERS For All plan, so everyone who works, not just public employees, can have a decent retirement plan. He conceded his junk-food tax is "controversial" but it makes sense to him to pay for health care that way since heart disease, diabetes and obesity add to health care costs. Health Care should also have its own fund and not be part of the general fund and should include vision, mental health and dental care, he said.

Starnes, who was on a school board for ten years, said Republicans are using Critical Race Theory and COVID as an organizing tool to fund-raise for the mid-terms and we should be wary of that. When it was time to take questions, the first one was what he thinks of Travis Boersma's

lawsuit against the state Gambling Commission regarding his racing development in Grants Pass. He said indigenous people should have their say and this should spark a discussion about gambling in Oregon. “Do we want to be another Nevada?” he asked. However, he added that since Portland Meadows was allowed the same kind of gambling machines that Boersma wants, there should already be an exemption for that.

On homelessness, he said we need block grants to help build shelters and talked about restoring abandoned houses for the poor. Starnes said he restores old mossy abandoned places himself and keeps a running county of “zombie” houses in the Eugene area where he lives.

On drug overdoses he said Canada has a good program but didn’t go into specifics. If they can succeed the US has no excuse he said. A tax on advertising could help pay for better addiction care, he proposed. On the environment, he said Oregon needs a Department of Ecology like Washington State has and on carbon emissions legislation he said more mass transit can help.

The next speaker was former Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek who represents the North Portland district. She said she’s been in the House for nine years and has the experience and skills as a progressive leader to get things done. “I know this state,” she said. During her years as a Food Bank advocate, she traveled throughout Oregon and learned food issues are from a shortage of income, not a shortage of food. By the time some people pay their rent, child care, medical bills, insurance, they have to get a food box because there’s nothing left. Kotek said in the state legislature she’s been an advocate for affordable housing and has pushed several pieces of legislation through to improve the housing situation.

On the illegal marijuana problem in Southern Oregon, Kotek touted recent legislation providing money for law enforcement to help combat the proliferation. “You are ground zero and we will try to provide you with the tools you need to deal with the illegal grows,” she said. She will also tap federal resources for help and not just for the grows themselves but for dealing with the illegal workers brought in then left stranded. This is going to need a team effort, she said.

On the lack of a fire district for half the county, Kotek said she supports having a district to deal, not only with putting out fires but mitigation efforts to help prevent destruction, such as brush clearing and rural housing standards. Forest clearing got about \$500 million from the state legislature and studies to help prevent the next Phoenix and Talent disaster.

On carbon emissions, she said the legislature made progress in 2021 with the Climate Action Plan and she expects it will move forward with transit and other ways to reduce the use of fossil fuels. Kotek got a question from a young man who was with Starnes. He asked if she favored lowering the voting age to 16. She said “to be honest, I don’t know where to stand on that. I see value in their concern because it is their future and I’ve seen ideas about allowing them to vote in local elections first, but I’d have to think about this more.”

On economic development for rural areas that doesn’t involve extraction of minerals or timber, Kotek said Josephine County looked to the legalization of marijuana to help its economy but instead is in a “weird place” as illegal grows, for now, have diluted that possibility. On the other hand, she sees a great opportunity in organic produce as more people are demanding untainted

food. She also said rural areas really need improved broadband if they want to have more options for employment and help to pay for that broadband when it does get out there. Concerning the Flying Lark and Boersma's dilemma, she said she has spoken with him and hopefully an agreement can be reached that addresses tribal concerns as well as his business.

The same young man who asked Kotek about voting at age 16 also asked her if she supports campaign finance reform. She said she does and got a bill through the House in 2019 that called for reform but it didn't pass in the Senate. However, she said until everyone plays by the same campaign finance rules, she has to stay competitive by not putting limits on her campaign. She pointed out that many large donors, such as unions, are actually a number of small donors who have pooled their resources to support a candidate.

When asked how Democrats can survive in a county as conservative as Josephine, Kotek said it is important to put a challenger on the ballot for every Republican who runs for office. She said this gives you a voice and forces Republicans to talk about issues they may not want to deal with. Also, she said you can support Democrats in more competitive areas of the state and help them win elections.

Kotek wrapped up her Zoom visit by saying she is planning to get on the road and campaign in person once the COVID spike recedes and people start getting out again. It was mentioned that a Democratic motel owner in Grants Pass will be happy to hear that.