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### Commissioner's race becomes a real party

**By Charlie Bermant**

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One month after North Kitsap Commissioner Chris Endresen announced her resignation to take a job with U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, a varied field of candidates has emerged. Despite differences, all have ideas as to how to govern the county in the future. All have opinions about how to solve current budget problems. And by necessity, all say they are good Democrats.

As of this week, the Democratic Party said it has sent out 17 applications to candidates showing interest in the position. Not all of these candidates have decided to submit the application, nor have they made their intentions public.

The names will become public June 4, after the party's executive

committee completes a screening process. The candidates will have until June 18 to campaign for support among the approximately 90 precinct committee officers (PCOs).

The three top candidate names will be submitted to the county commissioners, at which time Central Kitsap Commissioner Josh Brown, a Democrat, and Republican South Kitsap Commissioner Jan Angel will select a replacement. Both Brown and Angel feel they will be able to reach a consensus.

"Jan and I have agreed a lot on our decisions lately," said Brown.

Angel, whose opposition to a candidate could force a decision by the governor, said that she would support either Kitsap County Treasurer Barbara Stephenson or Poulsbo City Councilman Ed Stern. She added that she liked County Spokesman Clarence Moriwaki personally, but was not as familiar with his capabilities as the others.

She said she is keeping an open mind about all candidates, but that any new commissioner "must have a firm grasp on budget issues."

Stephenson and Stern have both received challenges to their Democrat bona fides, Stern for his oft-declared political independence and Stephenson for views that some consider to be "Republican."

This week, both candidates made a point to underscore their party credentials. Stephenson called herself a "moderate" who won't necessarily appeal to the extreme party voices. And Stern said his Democratic history extends back to 1972, when he vigorously campaigned for presidential candidate George McGovern in California's conservative Alameda County.

If the budget is the most important single issue, then Stephenson's six years as treasurer gives her the best on-paper credentials for the commissioner's position.

"Right after I took office in 2003, we were coming back from some major budget cuts," she said. "We made some decisions then to ramp up on a number of programs. In my opinion, we should have eased into these actions and started to hold the line closer to where revenue was at the time. The best way to handle this in the future would be to carefully calculate revenues and expenses and match them as closely as possible."

Stephenson, 54, said that her office did not rehire many employees after the 2002 cuts, and has learned to operate more efficiently. She also opposes approaching the public with any non-specific levy lift in order to generate revenue.

"From the people I have talked to — those who are paying property taxes — I don't see any interest in paying for a levy lift simply to fund county government," she said. "We first must go through all expenditures with a fine-tooth comb and make sure what services we can and cannot fund. Only then do we go to the voters and ask for what we really need."

Stern, 53, who has more than 20 years of private sector financial management experience, is looking to change the system, to the point of redefining the commissioners' job.

"The budget crisis is not the problem," he said. "It's the symptom.

The system is fundamentally flawed. Commissioner's salaries need to be reduced, so they serve on a part-time basis. We need to create a larger board that is concerned with larger issues, with day-to-day issues handled by a county executive."

This sounds a little like the county charter initiative, defeated by the voters in 2001.

"It is a charter revision," he said. "But it needs to come from the commissioner's table, so the process is untainted."

County Spokesperson Clarence Moriwaki, 51, feels the county needs to redefine its image.

"Kitsap County has existed for 150 years," he said. "Sometimes it feels like its practices and traditions go back that far. A lot of people feel Kitsap is rural, but that is no longer true. We are an urban and suburban county with the problems that go along with this growth. Urban problems are here right now, not just headlines from Seattle.

"There is a lot of inefficiency in the way that communication is shared throughout the county," he said. "We need to make sure that we are all on the same page when it comes to information and sharing between departments. That way we can be more responsive to what citizens need and speak with one voice."

Planning Commissioner Tom Nevins, 67, pledges to solicit input and

participation from all citizens. He said he is not concerned about the projected budget shortfall.

"This is a problem, but it is not a crisis," he said. "We will solve it because there are no problems that you cannot solve. The county now has a surplus, and there is a bit of slack built in. We have forecast the problem, and as long as we keep an eye on these revenues we will recover."

Bainbridge Island activist Chris Van Dyk, 55, takes some of the credit for the defeat of the proposed Kitsap County NASCAR facility.

"I worked hard to stop NASCAR because I thought the economic benefit was overstated, that the job creation was minimal for the tax dollars the project required," Van Dyk said. "Its transportation and environmental impacts seemed both insurmountable and unnecessary. And there are better alternatives.

"As County Commissioner, I will work just as hard to put those alternatives — like the International Center for Environmental Research at Hood Canal and SEED — in place to create real family-wage jobs for real people."

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