

Land use, property rights top issues for Kootenai County commissioner candidates

Scott Maben/SR scottm@spokesman.com (208) 758-0260

Idaho's Republican primary is Tuesday. All voters in Kootenai County can vote for one candidate in each Board of Commissioners district race. More information on the candidates is available at spokesman.com/elections

Kootenai County voters in Tuesday's Republican primary are considering six names for two of the three county commissioner seats.

Their backgrounds and experience may be what separates them, as all six share fairly similar views on the issues that come up most, especially the steady push by the Board of Commissioners to strengthen the hand of property owners in rules governing land use and development.

District 2

Commissioner David Stewart, elected two years ago, is running for a four-year term representing District 2. A resident of Cougar Bay on Lake Coeur d'Alene, Stewart first ran to bolster private property rights in the county's land-use code, and he says that remains his top priority.

"The code is still too large. I would still like to see it cut at least a quarter of an inch," he said. "The more regulations we have, the more freedoms we lose."

The board has been crafting an interim code on land use and is launching into a similar update of the comprehensive plan, adopted in 2010. Stewart said he'd like to see the comp plan cut in half. Every type of land use should be allowed unless expressly forbidden by law, he added.

He favors eliminating a requirement for property owners to maintain a 25-foot "undisturbed natural vegetation buffer" on the lake – a regulation meant to absorb runoff and protect water quality. The vast majority of lake pollution comes from the rivers, not from the lakeshore, and property owners need the flexibility to clear native trees and shrubs along the lake, he said.

"When I hear 'smart growth' – a term for concentrating growth in compact centers to prevent sprawl – 'I hear socialism,'" he said.

Another high priority, Stewart said, is to continue efforts to improve the retention, morale and fair compensation of county employees. Last year's pay raise for sheriff's deputies was a

“success story,” he said. He also said he has brought forward personnel policy changes to reduce the county’s liability in employee claims.

Stewart, who owns automotive lube shops in Spokane, also touts his position on taxes, noting he voted for no property tax increase for the 2016 budget.

He says government should have “minimal reach into our lives and only provide the basic essentials.”

Chris Fillios, a Coeur d’Alene Realtor and residential appraiser, has served as an East Side Highway District commissioner since 2007. He also sought a Coeur d’Alene City Council seat three years ago.

On land use, Fillios said the county’s comprehensive plan is outdated and fails to provide clear direction for county growth.

“The residents of our county deserve a predictable set of policies and procedures as they make their plans, whether as individuals or developers,” he said.

Fillios applauds the effort to reduce redundancies and strike contradictions in the land use code. Likewise, the comp plan is too comprehensive and burdensome, he said.

But he disagrees with Stewart’s approach to regulating what can or can’t be built in the county.

“You can’t simply say all uses are permitted except otherwise indicated, because it’s not possible to anticipate every use or abuse,” Fillios said.

Most jurisdictions spell out permitted and non-permitted land uses as well as conditional uses. “It doesn’t have to be voluminous; it’s actually very simple,” he said. “I think we’re too busy trying to reinvent the wheel.”

Fillios also said he considers the 25-foot lakeside buffer reasonable to help prevent erosion, as long as owners are free to help maintain the vegetation.

Economic growth also is a priority for Fillios. Most people who move to the county are over age 60 and many are retired.

“They’re certainly welcome here, but they’re really not the job generators. ... We need to actually start recruiting people who have the ability to live and work anywhere,” he said.

Fillios said the county should team up with the cities, North Idaho College and Jobs Plus, the Coeur d’Alene Area Economic Development Corporation, to heavily promote the region’s outdoors and quality of life and attract professionals and highly skilled workers. That will make it easier to recruit good companies to the area, he said.

District 3

Incumbent Commissioner Dan Green is not seeking re-election. Four Republicans are running for a two-year term for the open seat.

Bob Bingham lives in the Spirit Lake area, where he and his wife are logging their 17-acre property and subdividing it into three lots.

He is founder of the North West Property Owners Alliance, a conservative property and privacy rights group, and resigned from its board two years ago. Bingham managed a 600-megawatt power plant before retiring from the energy industry. He also worked in construction and as a code inspector.

Bingham has spent over three years poring over county land use regulations and the budgets of local taxing districts. He analyzes and puts his “audits” online, and he submitted 60 recommendations for revising the land use code to define property rights more clearly.

“What have we done wrong to deserve more regulations on our land?” he said.

The county should keep its current zoning rules and just focus mainly on regulating health, safety and nuisance issues, Bingham said.

Asked about Smart Code, a land development ordinance template for planning and urban design, he said it stems from Agenda 21, the nonbinding United Nations resolution promoting sustainable development that some right-wing conservatives see as a plot to seize land and possibly guns.

Bingham also has spoken out on cybersecurity and privacy as well as the U.N. climate change treaty. He warns of the influence of U.N. initiatives and climate “globalization” efforts, as well as data collection by government and private companies.

Bingham crafted a 21-point “pact with voters” for accountability and transparency. “Part of my pact is to give you, online, what you need to look at to know what your government is up to,” he said.

Leslie Duncan, of Hayden, worked in law enforcement for 10 years and is an officer with Falcon Enterprises Inc., a remote television production company.

She chairs the Kootenai County Aquifer Protection District policy and budget committee and also serves on the Women’s Auxiliary Board for Union Gospel Mission’s Center for Women and Children in Coeur d’Alene.

Duncan said she has a good grasp of the county’s budgeting procedure, the same the aquifer protection district uses.

Her main issues are expansion of the county jail using county reserves, land use laws that defend property rights and keep rural areas rural, and improving employee morale. “Employee morale is related to the service the residents of Kootenai County receive,” Duncan said.

The land use code, she said, is too “over-regulated.”

“Our regulations need to be intelligent and they need to be useful, and they don’t need to be oppressive,” she said.

As for the lakeshore buffer zone, Duncan said “many people are very responsible in the way they use their land, and to prevent them from taking care of their land to benefit the lake that they enjoy, I think that’s sad.”

“Voting for me is a vote for morals, principles and skills,” she said. “I have no allegiance to any special interest groups. ... I’m here for the residents of Kootenai County.”

Fred Meckel, a member of the Rathdrum City Council since 2007, is a family mental health therapist. He works for ACES Community Services in Post Falls.

“I’m a professional listener as a therapist,” he said. “That’s what I’ll do as a county commissioner.”

Meckel is on the board of the Kootenai Metropolitan Planning Organization. He also has 12 years of military service. He is in the Army National Guard and spent five years on active duty, including one year deployed to Iraq as a medical noncommissioned officer working with wounded warriors.

“I truly believe we need to expand the jail,” Meckel said. “We need to stop paying over \$1 million a year to house our inmates” outside the county. “I compare it to having a high-interest credit card that just eats away at your savings every single year.”

He also believes detectives in the sheriff’s office are overloaded with cases. “I’d look at hiring new detectives to help them out, bring their caseload down,” he said.

Meckel said he has land-use and budgeting experience and leadership skills. He also serves on a group planning how Rathdrum city property should be developed on Rathdrum Mountain.

Regarding the land-use code, he said, “I’m for a lot less regulation.” He advocates for collaboration and local solutions. “You can solve your problems a lot easier if you just talk with one another.”

Meckel said he has worked on budgets and planning issues in over eight years on the Rathdrum council and has almost daily interaction with constituents.

“I want to continue the service I’ve done with Rathdrum and what I do on a daily basis with my patients, my clients, he said. “I love serving the community.”

Duane Rasmussen, a lawyer of 38 years who lives in Hayden, is a familiar figure at political and public meetings around the county and frequently captures community scenes with his

camera, posting the photos on Facebook and Twitter or sharing them on The Spokesman-Review blog Huckleberries.

He has served as president of North Idaho Republican Pachyderm Club and on the board of Crime Stoppers of the Inland Northwest-Kootenai County. He also has been involved with the Hayden Chamber of Commerce, Kootenai County Republican Central Committee and Idaho Education Forum.

He said he is “a product of Christian education” and has studied economics and property law.

Rasmussen said his knowledge of the law, including litigation experience, would be an asset on the Board of Commissioners. He worked for the Oklahoma Tax Commission and the Oklahoma Attorney General’s office, and has written briefs for appellate courts and the U.S. Supreme Court.

At a recent candidates forum he told the crowd he probably is the only candidate there “who has actually litigated Indians in federal court.”

Rasmussen was one of the lawyers involved in lawsuits against the Catholic Diocese of Spokane and against Morning Star Boys’ Ranch over sexual-abuse claims.

“I’m very concerned about property rights, and I feel that the less the government’s hand is on us, the better off we are,” he said.

Rasmussen said most of a commissioner’s responsibility is administering according to the law and “making things go smoothly.”

“Ninety-five percent of the commissioners’ duties are probably dictated by statute,” he said. “And so the amount of discretion a county commissioner has is not that high in a lot of instances.”