

# Gissel will lead county task force

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By D.F. Oliveria

Staff writer

COEUR d'ALENE — The Rev. Bill Wassmuth once joked that he was asked to be leader of the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations because he was single and lived in a brick house.

That was before a pipe bomb exploded at the rear entrance to his home on Sept. 15, 1986.

Coeur d'Alene attorney Norm Gissel isn't single and doesn't live in a brick house. But he, too, counted the cost before accepting his unanimous endorsement Wednesday by the task force board as Wassmuth's successor.

"I thought about the potential (for violence)," Gissel, 47, said after the 90-minute meeting at Wassmuth's St. Pius X Catholic Church. "The history of civil rights in America has been a history of violence.

"I understand that. My family understands that. Civil rights activities are foundational to American society. Matters have to be dealt with. A price has to be paid."

Gissel, though, said he doesn't expect any incidents like the bombing that propelled Wassmuth into regional and national prominence.

In mid-January, Wassmuth announced his intention to leave his post as pastor of the church for undisclosed reasons. Since then, he has guided an overhaul of the task force's bylaws to provide the loosely knit organization with a well-defined structure and orderly method for choosing his successor.

Wassmuth chaired his last task force meeting as president Wednesday.

"You've been without a doubt the most challenging group — in terms of energy, drive and self-initiative — and the most rewarding group I've ever been a part of," he told the 16 members of the new 19-person board who attended the meeting. "The hearts of this

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group are in the right place. You will be with me a long time, folks."

Three hands shot up immediately when Wassmuth asked for nominations for president. All three wanted Gissel, and North Idaho College instructor Tony Stewart successfully made a motion to have the nomination approved unanimously.

In like fashion, nominations for the three other elected positions on the five-member executive committee were approved unanimously: Stewart as vice president; Dave Peters, secretary; and Skip Kuck, treasurer.

Wassmuth automatically is part of the executive committee in his role as past president.

The terms are for one year.

Rather than passing a gavel to Gissel to symbolize the leadership transition, Wassmuth handed him a replica of a menorah, a candelabrum used during the Jewish festival of Hanuka.

"As leader of the task force," joked Wassmuth, "you're basically an undercover Jew."

Wassmuth, a German Catholic, may have been alluding to the claim made about him by Aryan Nations leader Richard Butler that he's an undercover Jew.

Later, Wassmuth said he had considered giving his friend a fragment of the trash can shattered by the September 1986 bombing of his home, but thought it too crude. The light-heartedness between the two civil rights leaders and the rest of the directors underscored the group's unity.

Gissel said he expects that solidarity to remain after Wassmuth leaves the area this June.

"This group has operated for a long time on a consensual basis," Gissel said. "The decision-making process has been going on for a long time with many in the group who comprise the current board.

to keep his high school open during the tournament, "but any teacher or student who wants to can come up."

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Even when their team doesn't make either the boys' or girls' 16-team field, some fans drive to Spokane for the tournament.

"I think the town's about empty."

This is an organization of ideas."

For that reason, he said, he doesn't foresee a change in direction for the task force.

At a February meeting, task force leaders listed future goals as a continuing emphasis on educating the region's youth against prejudice, attention to the needs of Native Americans, additional human rights legislation in Idaho and the Northwest, welcoming minorities who move here, and serving as a resource to other communities dealing with racial or religious prejudice.

Gissel has been one of the quiet forces behind the task force, traveling throughout the region to speak to a wide range of groups.

Those organizations range from an informal group of Montana residents concerned about young neo-Nazis called "skinheads" on the University of Montana campus to a prisoners' organization within the

Washington State Penitentiary at Walla Walla.

Gissel didn't immerse himself in the local fight for human rights until Wassmuth reactivated the task force three years ago. Previously, he did some work with then-City Attorney Dana Wetzel drafting the state's malicious harassment bill, which became law in 1983.

He long has been active in the Idaho Association of Retarded Citizens — which he calls the most powerless of minorities — and was instrumental in the 1960s in opening the Delta Tau Delta fraternity on the University of Idaho campus to Asian-Americans.

In January he stepped down from his role as chairman of the Coeur d'Alene Library board after seven years. In that time, he restored confidence in the library, which had been beset by resignations and subsequent controversy, and was instrumental in moving it to the quarters on Harrison Avenue.

Gissel said he wouldn't attempt to replace the charismatic Wassmuth.

"It would be foolish to try to fill Bill's shoes," he said. "We're going to set them aside and wait for him to come back."