



There was a cold breeze as I stood outside in front of the mailbox, ballot in hand, signed and about to be delivered. The dogs danced impatiently beside me, more than ready to continue our brisk evening walk around the block. I slipped the ballot into the box, turned on my booted heel and continued on into the bleak October skyline.

The following day I spoke with non-partisan county commissioner candidate, Kim Schmith, whose run against incumbent Wayne Fording is neither contentious nor heated. In a small farming community like Jefferson, this is par for the course.

The county commissioner's role is to manage money, but is also woven into the administrative workings of the county overall. "The county commissioner's job is to support other governments in place," Schmith explains. "That could be the Tribal Council [of Warm Springs] or the Board of Crooked River Ranch, or similar...and includes the communities that don't have any government. Crooked River Ranch has five-thousand people but is not considered a city."

As for the economic aspect of the job, "county commissioners approve budgets and county laws. They oversee the operation of county departments, manage county property---" a brief moment to allow for my preschooler, now bored of a protracted Blues Clues marathon, to run across the screen with demands for an elaborate Peppa Pig and Susie Sheep tea party -- *now, Mommy!* Zoom meeting problems, right? We take a break as I get the kids snacks to re-occupy them.

COVID-19 has plainly affected the way the economy functions and workers work. "Some areas are doing really well, such as construction, but others aren't. Our town bakery is really struggling. We have new mandates for masks—I actually feel odd talking to you through the screen without a mask on," Schmith laughs. "To deal with COVID I would lean on our public health department. We have one of the best departments in the state. I really respect Michael Baker and his team. I would trust public health to tell me what we need to do to keep people safe. I tell people to wear your mask to help our businesses stay open. Our numbers are lower than most states because we work hard."

The recent federal CARES act provided nearly two million dollars to Jefferson County. "That money is set aside specifically for what's been impacted by COVID," Schmith tells me. "Hiring contact tracers, getting PVP for public health employees, but there's so many other less obvious things [that could be applied to]. I'd like to see the money be used more for the average business owners instead of just the big corporations."

Internet access is not always reliable in rural counties like Jefferson, or the neighboring Warm Springs reservation. “Now they [the school district] gave away Chromebooks this year, that was a grant that came in, but again many families here can’t even use their laptops because they don’t have internet. High speed internet is important for school at all levels,” we go on to discuss how the interview wouldn’t have been possible without internet access, as our schedules likely wouldn’t have matched up prior to the deadline date. “As for businesses, I can’t even run mine without it.”

While working on the economy, and addressing the impacts COVID-19 has had on the working force in Jefferson County, is in large part of what the county commissioner addresses in their community, Schmith would also be taking care of the weekly task of leading community forums and discussions with the board of commissioners. “At nine o’clock you stop and formally open the meeting,” she explains, “and you allow for public comment. You can come in and have three minutes to speak, and if it’s a problem they [the commissioners] want to work on, they might choose to work on it longer.”

Schmith is involved in the community through volunteer work at the high school Key Club and as a local business owner. “These kids are amazing, their drive to help is amazing.” As for education I graduated here and then at Oregon State University. I have a master’s from the Oregon College of Oriental Medicine.” Schmith is a licensed acupuncturist. “My education is based on the body as a system--you need to understand how to solve one problem to solve the next one. That’s how I would relate it back to addressing problems in government.”

Schmith’s most pressing concerns are, like many of those running for office this election cycle, are COVID-19, reliable internet access, affordable housing, education, and the rural livability of Jefferson County. When asked what her favorite part about having lived and worked in Jefferson County most her life, Schmith replies, “this county is incredible. Even though this is a nonpartisan run, a lot of people get into the partisan fight. I refuse to join it. I get attacked by both sides, which is fair, but I’m not that way. I’ll say two things it.. First of all, our county is filled with fantastic, hardworking, down-to-earth people. Through this I’ve been able to meet people I’d probably never have met. I don’t know if I ever have met you otherwise.”

Schmith glances out her window, a view of Mount Jefferson and the sagebrush dotted valley framed in pixelated panels. “Two, our county is filled with such amazing, wide-open and stunningly gorgeous places. There’s camping, fishing...when I go walking with my dog, it’s so quiet. Do I smell skunk? Did a bird just fly by? Oh, was that an owl?” she pauses, looking away from the view. “I would work to protect that: our farms, our land, and our rural lifestyle.”

-Kaitlin Vosgien, 11/12/2020