

Position 5

Jennifer Letz

OPB: How can the county address housing shortages and rents that are out of reach for many residents? What is your proposal for a long-term solution to the management of shelters and sanctioned camps?

Letz: Housing and rents question: Our land use system in Oregon is designed, in part, to house the majority of Oregonians within cities (versus urban sprawl, sagebrush subdivision, etc.). Therefore, cities take on the brunt of the responsibility of managing where housing is built and how much a community needs. Where counties can help with our collective housing challenges is in supporting the cities when they need assistance, like during urban growth boundary expansions, building or upgrading roads that access new development, and allowing County-owned parcels in or adjacent to cities to be developed. The County is also a pass-through entity for federal and state dollars, so partnerships with the County and cities should be strengthened to maximize funds coming in to support housing initiatives.

Shelters and camps question: One of the causes of our housing and sheltering crisis that few talk about is the systemic loss of mobile home parks in our communities over the last 15 years. Many parks were closed and sold when the land became more valuable than the rents collected from tenants. When people are displaced from mobile homes, they have very few options of where to go next. Instead of temporary managed camps, I would like to see the County and cities find ways to help build more permanent mobile home / rv parks for people living in functioning trailers and those without safe shelter. These parks would be staffed, secure, offer services, and provide normalcy and stability in the short or long term, depending on the resident.

OPB: What measures would you champion to address resident concerns about natural hazards like winter storms, wildfire and extreme heat? Please address each type of disaster in your response.

Letz: Natural disasters are not an “if” but “when” issue. Due to our diverse topography and ecosystems, the region experiences natural disasters on a regular basis. The County has a natural hazards plan that is updated every few years (it is being updated in 2026). In that plan, stakeholders from across the County participate in the review and updating of the plan. It ranks the probability and severity of natural hazard events – like extreme heat and winter storms - in each corner of the county and has recommendations on how to prepare and respond. As with any plan, the key is to not let it sit on a shelf after each update, but ensure it is reviewed frequently, as there is always some turnover in staff and elected officials.

One way to make sure these plans are living documents is to have the County host annual emergency coordination meetings with key staff from each of the cities and large destination resorts, where people are cross-trained on how to access and operate similar equipment and systems in other communities. During a disaster, important staff members may not be available due to having to evacuate their homes and take care of their families. Having access to personnel (and equipment) nearby ensures critical systems, like water delivery and wastewater treatment, continue to function.

Regarding wildfire, I am a former wildland firefighter and currently own a wildfire mitigation consulting firm with my husband (a retired wildland fire chief). This is an issue I am very passionate about and I could talk for days about wildfire impacts, response, funding, research, insurance, prevention and recovery. There is a lot of work that needs to be done in the prevention, response, and recovery phases of wildfire at the County level. However, the good news is that County efforts around fuels reduction and assisting Firewise communities have been very effective (and should be expanded.) The recent decision to adopt the R327 home hardening building code was very wise, and should be followed up with defensible space codes. And the level of coordination of emergency services across the region is envied by others, but needs additional support to keep up with population and tourism growth.

OPB: How would you approach applications to rezone parts of the county for denser development? How do you propose the county grows to accommodate a growing population?

Letz: I am a big fan of Oregon's unique land use laws. They were created to protect what makes Oregon special – our farms, forests, waterways, and wildlands – from poorly planned development. However, nothing is perfect and they deserve a fresh look for how we can make them work better in the 21st century.

Land use decisions are one of the most important and technical tasks Commissioners will see on a regular basis. I am always open to creative ideas that could help our communities, however once land is converted from its protected use to some form of urbanization, we can't turn back. To support that change, I would have to be very confident the gain is worth the sacrifice.

OPB: Where would you propose the county build a new solid waste facility and how do you propose helping the county reach the state's Department of Environmental Quality goal of reducing waste disposals in landfills to 45%?

Letz: I do not have a specific location in mind since I was not a part of the original selection process and not privy to all of the information shared and the discussions had on the topic. I will say it should be in Deschutes County and be in a location that minimizes transportation costs, impacts, and pollution from vehicles traveling from transfer stations to the landfill.

And as a sustainability professional by trade, I am very dedicated to reducing our waste to meet the DEQ guidelines. I have worked on many projects in the past around waste diversion, reuse, and recycling, spending uncomfortable amounts of time in dumpsters doing waste audits! Much like the housing issue, the solutions for reducing landfill waste must come from the state, county, city, and private sectors. One area I'd like to see have more support is the reuse sector, by which I mean thrift stores, outdoor gear resale shops, and consignment shops. These businesses are the unsung heroes of waste diversion and this sector is not only growing in popularity but with more coordination and funding could be a critical tool in meeting the DEQ requirements.

OPB: Do you support the district map going before voters in November? Why or why not? If not, how do you think commission seats should be apportioned? Why?

Letz: I do not support this map for a few reasons. I believe the question about districting should have waited until the new 5-member Commission took office. The responsibilities and procedures of the new 5-person Commission need to be established before a districting

conversation should be held. With additional members in place, there's an opportunity to have discussions around division of work like

There were also flaws in the districting process itself, like only using number of voters instead of the entire population to make the districts equal in size. This invalidates the needs of people who can't vote like children and those who aren't American citizens yet.