

Whirlwind commissioner
By Kathleen Gorman
The Oregonian

Edition: Sunrise, Section: Metro West Neighbors

SUMMARY: Desari Strader hits the board running, impressing peers with her networking and political savvy

The first time Washington County Commissioner Desari Strader strode into a board meeting --in her trademark stiletto heels, no less --she created a stir.

Strader, divorced and single, was carrying her snoozing infant daughter. Whispers spread through the room. No one besides her closest confidantes knew the commissioner-elect had been pregnant.

In the year since that get-acquainted meeting, the 39-year-old Strader continues to surprise. Confident, funny and politically savvy, the Irish-Native American politician has created a new dynamic on the Board of Commissioners.

Her four fellow board members are male, white, deeper into middle age and, well, unlikely to draw on experience as a fire-baton twirler to lecture a constituent about fire dangers at his private park.

In her first year on the job, Strader and those who know her say she's been busy learning the issues and making connections. A newcomer to county government, she's been examining "the beast from the inside" and says she works 40-plus hours weekly as a part-time commissioner. She spends more than half that, she says, planning how the 800-acre North Bethany area should develop.

Friends say she's a tireless networker with a natural talent for bringing people together. Observers notice she's a quick study who seems unafraid to face controversy head-on. She, like the other commissioners, talks about the importance of collaboration.

But it sounds different coming from Strader.

"It does take a village --or a lot of Des," she says, with customary aplomb.

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At her January 2007 swearing-in, Strader seemed on the verge of tears as she looked out into the auditorium at her family and friends.

"Washington County is a great place to raise families," she said.

It's a refrain she often repeats. A Hillsboro native, Strader says she grew up fishing in creeks with neighborhood kids, practicing gymnastics and ballet after school and becoming a championship baton twirler.

A 1986 graduate of Hillsboro High School, she delights in rattling off the names of other "Spartans" involved in the county. She was a student government leader in Hillsboro and abroad, when her mother helped to open Nike's European headquarters in the Netherlands.

Even in high school, Strader was an expert networker, says classmate Scott Palmer, the artistic

director of Bag & Baggage Productions, a Hillsboro theater group.

"Desari was very popular," Palmer says. "She was very well known. I can't really recall a party or event where she wasn't involved or present."

Palmer remembers sitting with friends in the grassy pit outside the high school cafeteria and watching Strader work her way around it, talking to each student, one on one. At their 20th class reunion, Palmer was sitting with the same friends at McMenamins Grand Lodge in Forest Grove and the scene repeated itself.

"We saw Desari arrive, and all three of us recalled that," he says.

Strader introduced Palmer to the developer of the Venetian theater in Hillsboro --a connection that resulted in plans for Bag & Baggage to perform three full-scale shows each year once theater construction is done.

"I called her yesterday and said, 'Isn't there some kind of tourism grant going on?' " Palmer says. "And she said, 'Give me five minutes.' "

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After stints in marketing for athletic and public relations/lobbying firms including Nike, she worked for U.S. Rep. Darlene Hooley, D-Ore., and then state Rep. Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland.

At 5 feet, Strader often is the shortest person in the room. She favors fitted skirt suits for work and pulls her long hair back into styles with height. Toting a laptop, answering calls on a Blackberry and driving a BMW, she seems the perfect representative for the young, affluent families in her district.

As a part-time commissioner, she makes about \$24,000 and says she has relied on savings to supplement her income. She also is launching a nonprofit focused on sustainability and hopes to draw an income from that effort.

A resident of an older Bethany-area neighborhood north of Sunset Highway, Strader represents the county's northeast corner. She replaced John Leeper, an octogenarian who retired after six years on the board.

"She brings sunshine into a room," says Joan Evans, Hooley's chief of staff.

When she worked as Hooley's district aide, Strader was an effective liaison with business people across Oregon, Evans says. She was outgoing, hardworking, knew the issues and was eager to make a difference.

Greenlick says he considered Strader to be the best legislative assistant in the Capitol during the two sessions she worked for him.

It was rare, he says, to find her at her desk because she was always off meeting and working to draft and manage legislation, including a bill that dealt a blow to Beaverton's future annexation attempts.

Strader's own position about annexation is that it doesn't make much sense to keep talking about the county getting out of the urban services business. Instead, leaders should acknowledge that the county provides city-type services to 200,000 residents of unincorporated areas and figure out ways to make that entrenched system work.

"I have extraordinary respect for her political acumen," says Greenlick, in his third term in the

House. "She knows the political scene in Washington County like nobody else."

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Strader still keeps close tabs on the Legislature but says she has no interest in running for a House or Senate seat.

For now, she's focused on Washington County and the growth that runs like a thread through nearly every public policy discussion.

Her fellow commissioners say she is politically astute, easy to work with and smart.

Commissioner Andy Duyck, who at 47 is the closest to her in age, says Strader has impressed him. They come from different parties -- Strader is a Democrat, Duyck a Republican --but they often find common, almost Libertarian, ground on issues the nonpartisan board tackles.

They've gone target shooting together, too.

"Her youth is refreshing," Duyck says. "And --how do you put it --her energy to get going."

Duyck, Strader and Commissioner Dick Schouten voted together on a contentious question prompted by Measure 37, the property rights measure that was later dramatically reworked. Although the split vote --a rarity on the board --is basically moot because of the passage of Measure 49, Duyck says he admired her backbone.

"She understood the issue completely," he says, "and she was willing to take a risk."

In May, she chastised a developer for sparring with Chairman Tom Brian and going over the meeting's time limit for comments, saying she wouldn't have been as kind to him. In July, she lectured an owner of Horning's Hideout for what she saw as a lack of concern for his neighbors and the risks involved with the fire dancing planned for an upcoming concert. She recalled as a teen seeing another baton twirler setting fire to a football field.

"I would really like to see a true fire plan," she said sternly. "If something goes, it goes fast."

Mostly, though, she's been spending a lot of time in the past year listening to neighbors of North Bethany and trying to figure out what the future urban area should look like and how it should develop. So far, no clear idea has emerged of how to pay for an estimated \$250 million in roads and other infrastructure.

Strader doesn't have the answers but says she's working hard to find them.

Looking back on her first year, she says her biggest accomplishment might have been gaining the trust of her colleagues as she has carved out her place among them. She's gained some stature --and not just from wearing stilettos.

"I like to be a change agent," she says, "and not in a bomb-throwing way."

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