



Port of WW commissioner plans to retire

Fred Bennett plans to call it a career -- mostly -- at the end of his term.

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By VICKI HILLHOUSE of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA -- Port of Walla Walla Commissioner Fred Bennett, a fixture of the economic development agency for 24 years, announced Thursday he will not seek re-election this fall.

Bennett, 79, said he plans to retire from the Port commission when his six-year term ends late December.

He said he and his wife plan to spend some time traveling to different parts of the country. However he does not expect to disappear completely from the projects that he's been entrenched in as a Port commissioner over the years.

Bennett plans to continue on a case-by-case basis as a contributor on various projects.

"I don't intend to step away completely," he told the Union-Bulletin. "I want to continue to stay involved."

His departure will leave an opening for a representative of District 3, the western region of Walla Walla County that includes College Place, Touchet, Lowden, Burbank, Eureka and Clyde -- portions of which have been the focus of transportation and business development by the Port in recent years.

Bennett's most recent term has been punctuated by work on community water issues and expansion of U.S. Highway 12 -- matters that were not only significant to Bennett given his background in engineering but also because they have been prominent in the district he's served.

Known as a tireless advocate for regional transportation solutions, Bennett leaves a starkly different Port of Walla Walla operation than the one he joined when he began his first term in 1980 beside then-Commissioners Larry Pepin and Morris Ganguet.

Back then the Port's operations were small enough that it shared office space with the Walla Walla Valley Chamber of Commerce on Sumach Street.

Ganguet's Port commission service ended in 1981; Pepin's in 1984. They were succeeded respectively by Ken Jantz and the late Wes Colley. Along with Bennett, that Port commission later hired then-airport Manager Jim Kuntz as the full-time executive director of the Port, a position Kuntz continues to hold 20 years later.

In his first two terms Bennett considered the retention of Key Technology in the Walla Walla Valley, as well as expansion of its employment base, to be just one of numerous accomplishments. Others included the Port's undertaking of the Walla Walla Regional Airport and development of the industrial park. Bennett served as vice president of the Washington Public Ports Association and was expected to become president of the group in 1992 if he had won re-election.

Instead he was unseated by Bob Petersen, who had previously served as a Walla Walla County commissioner and Columbia School District board member.

Bennett, also a civil engineering professor at then-Walla Walla College, served two years during that next Port term as president of Team Walla Walla, a private-sector business recruitment group that eventually turned over its files and economic development responsibilities to the Port in 1995.

In a 1997 rematch with Petersen, Bennett regained his Port commission seat, a position he held through the 2003 election when he ran unopposed.

In the two terms since he returned to the Port, the agency constructed the new airport terminal building, has acquired more land for future development throughout Burbank, welcomed the state-of-the-art Railex facility and its cross-country produce train as well as juice manufacturer Cliffstar and embarked on the expansion of U.S. Highway 12 from Burbank to Walla Walla -- a project numerous elected officials never thought would happen in their lifetimes and now is in its seventh phase. Bennett said he's also particularly proud of the Port's new water system in Burbank, a source of clean water in a community where water has been riddled with nitrate contamination.

Though the Port still has work ahead in building relationships with constituents, Bennett said relationships with other organizations and government bodies have been one of its greatest accomplishments yet. He said the Port has developed strong partnerships with city, county and state organizations, including the Washington State Department of Transportation. He also lauded the relationships of the commissioners themselves, which include Mike Fredrickson and Paul Schneidmiller.

"I think the (relationships) of the commissioners have been very solid all the way through," he said. "You don't always agree, but at least you agree not to disagree unfavorably."

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