

GUEST COMMENTARY

The story behind the Johnson story

BY SEN. BETSY JOHNSON

They say no good deed goes unpunished. And to that let me add, "especially in politics."

May 31, I opened my morning newspaper and read with disbelief a story intimating that I have been swindling old ladies out of their land in order to make a fast buck and sponsoring legislation designed to benefit developers, as well as my husband's business.



SEN. BETSY JOHNSON

On top of that, it suggested that I tried to cover it all up by failing to file the proper reports.

That *Oregonian* article and subsequent stories so grossly distorted the facts that, I have to admit, if I didn't know the truth, I'd wonder about me, too.

In the days that have followed, as I have been knee deep in the legislative session and working on committees hammering out details of the state budget, I have been contemplating how best to respond to the ongoing barrage without sounding like the craven weasel portrayed in the media.

There is, after all, nothing more suspicious than a politician proclaiming his innocence.

Nonetheless, I believe the best thing is always to tell the truth and let the chips fall where they may. So here goes.

Most people know that I'm a pilot and that my husband, John Helm, operates Transwestern Aviation at Scappoose Industrial Airpark. We founded Transwestern 30 years ago. The business services aircraft, sells fuel to pilots who use the field, provides aircraft parking, courtesy vehi-

cles for pilots and such. It's a small business and that's fine with us.

I have always believed that rural airports can be powerful economic engines in their communities, attracting high-quality companies with high-paying jobs. For years — long before I entered the Legislature — I worked to encourage that kind of commercial development at Scappoose Airpark. So several years ago, when a developer came along who expressed interest in doing a multi-million dollar project there, I jumped at the chance to help. Deals like that don't come along very often, as any rural economic development person will tell you.

We learned that an older couple we had known for years was interested in selling some of their farmland adjacent to the field. They wanted to sell to someone who would ensure it was used for a quality project, so they only wanted to work with us. I purchased the property in order to move things along. Then a few months — and a lot of transaction expenses — later, I in turn sold it to the developer. And, yes, we made a profit, though, after expenses, less than half of what was reported in the media.

To be clear, there is nothing either illegal or unethical in my buying and selling a piece of property. However, legislators must always report such transactions as part of the full disclosure process. I did that, but I screwed up. I reported it in the wrong year because, in my mind, that one transaction was part of a long, on-going process surrounding the developer's larger plan. I have no excuses. I made a mistake. I filed the report this past April instead of for the years I should have.

So, yes, it is true that I failed to file a timely report on that

land deal. It is not true that I delayed reporting it until after news reporters started working on the story in May. I filed my report a month before the first *Oregonian* story.

The recent news stories have also suggested that bills I have sponsored to encourage commercial development around rural airports statewide were designed to benefit developers or my husband's business or to make our property more valuable.

That suggestion would be laughable if it weren't so hurtful. John and I live for what we do, not for what we own. Our livelihood does not depend solely on the fortunes of Transwestern Aviation or on any land deals. I have been blessed in my life. The investments in Oregon that my family began making more than a century ago have allowed me to pursue my one true passion in life: working on behalf of the thousands of people in this state who have so honored me with their trust. That's what I think about every day, not our bank account.

The latest accusations to be leveled at me relate to 160 acres of land I own at the headwaters of the Metolius River in Central Oregon. The land has been in my family since 1904. It is a wondrous place of fragile natural springs, forests and meadows near the base of Black Butte. My parents cherished that land. I spent glorious days there as a child. My mother looked after each tree as if it were a personal friend. My father is buried there and my mother, who passed away recently, soon will be. Fifty years ago, my parents donated the headwaters of the Metolius and some surrounding land to the United States Forest Service to protect it and guarantee public access

to it in perpetuity.

Recently, I and 11 other legislators lent our support to a bill — SB 30 — proposed by Sen. Ben Westlund that would prohibit anyone from building a destination resort within 3 miles of the Metolius River basin to ensure that the springs and wildlands are left untouched. That bill has upset some potential developers who stand to make millions if their projects go through. But I am now being accused of supporting the bill so I can boost the value of my own property and somehow line my pockets.

Ridiculous! Frankly, if we were in it for the money, my family would have exploited that land long ago. Rather, ours has been a family ethic of stewardship and conservation.

At the the risk of sounding corny, public service is my joy, my reason for getting up every morning. Working with constituents, solving problems and helping communities in our district become economically strong and healthy for our kids, our families and the less fortunate is my passion. I can't think of a better way to spend the life God gave me. It's challenging, it's stimulating, it's fun and I think I do it well. Why would I jeopardize all of that for a couple of bucks?

As for my reporting error, I will gladly bear the consequences and accept any action taken by the Commission on Government Standards and Practices.

In the meantime, I intend to keep working for you every single day.

State Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, represents Oregon's 16th Senatorial District, which includes Clatsop, Columbia, Tillamook and parts of Washington counties.