



Dear Deschutes County Commissioners, Mayor Kebler, and Bend City Councilors:

Thank you for convening a joint meeting regarding homelessness. Coordination between jurisdictions, including yours and Deschutes County Sheriff's Office, are important and necessary. However, Deschutes County residents cannot wait for us to take action to address the risk of catastrophic wildfire in or near our cities caused by unsanctioned homeless camping on public land.

I write to you today to share how I intend to lead on this most pressing of issues if elected Deschutes County Sheriff.

Every day each summer, thousands of Deschutes County residents live under constant threat of catastrophic wildfire caused by illegal homeless camping. The threat became reality at least twice so far this summer. The Darlene III fire near La Pine and the Milepost 132 fire just north of Bend this summer led to mass evacuations. Major loss of property, and lives, was avoided only because our excellent firefighters raced to stop the flames just before they reached nearby cities.

Both fires were, thankfully, near-misses; both fires started in illegal homeless camps.

I have met with countless fellow Deschutes County residents who live near public lands inhabited by illegal homeless campers. I have stood in their kitchens as they explained to me the fear they feel for their families' safety. They are, rightly, terrified that our luck will run out soon. That the wind will blow the wrong way. That air tanker and other firefighting resources will be deployed elsewhere and unavailable to swoop in at the last minute to save the day. That our luck is running out.

The most immediate threat lies along China Hat Road southeast of Bend. There, in a tinder-dry pine forest a stone's throw from the largest city in our county, hundreds of people camp full-time. The land is owned and managed by the U.S. Forest Service, which prohibits permanent camping, in theory. In practice, increasing numbers of homeless people camp, build fires, drive and smoke in that forest.

It is an unacceptable risk that I believe we can no longer accept. As your next Sheriff, I will implement a strategy to stop permanent homeless camping near China Hat Road by the beginning of our next fire season. Here's how:

Because the land is managed by the Forest Service, the Sheriff's Office lacks the ability to unilaterally evict homeless campers even when they are in open violation of federal law that limits how long someone can camp on federal land. Those laws exist to prevent exactly what now exists near China Hat Road – the use of our forests as long-term housing. Only the Forest Service can enforce those laws.



However, the Sheriff's Office can enforce state laws on federal land. That means Sheriff's deputies can, and do, enforce laws against illegal burning, illegal use of firearms, assault and other dangerous activity in the camps.

Any strategy to end dangerous permanent homeless camping on federal lands requires cooperation with our local federal forest managers. I have worked closely for years with those managers, who sympathize with the urgent need for change, but must work within the confines of federal law and the decisions of their superiors in Washington, D.C.

Fortunately, circumstances are changing that should free their, and our, hand. First, local housing resources are coming online that provide more locations for people camping permanently in our national forests to go, instead.

Second, in a case brought by the City of Grants Pass, Oregon, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruling in *Martin v. Boise*, which had limited the Forest Service's ability to remove permanent campers from national forests. The Forest Service will now have a freer hand, legally, to address the situation on China Hat Road.

But that won't happen unless we take urgent action locally. As your next Sheriff, I will establish a dedicated homeless response team of deputies to meet and engage every camper near China Hat Road and guide them toward safer, sanctioned options, while keeping a watchful eye on illegal activity in the camps. If campers do not move willingly, we will engage our Forest Service partners to evict. The information our homeless response team gathers will give the Forest Service the detailed information they need to act.

This China Hat model can be duplicated throughout the county, and our community will be safer for it. I look forward to working with each of you, and our federal land management partners, to make this a reality.

William Bailey  
Candidate  
Deschutes County Sheriff