



TIME TO STEP DOWN AFTER A LONG CAREER STANDING UP – John Stephens has retired from his last role, CEO of the tribe's didgwalič Wellness Center with the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community. His career spanned 40 years.

– Photo courtesy of Leon John

John Stephens' long Swinomish road ends with retirement

By Bill Reynolds

Few people enjoy as strong a command of language as John Stephens: In four decades of public speaking gigs representing the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, Town of La Conner, La Conner schools and Skagit Valley College he has been aptly described as a walking thesaurus.

Or, putting it in more modern terms, Stephens was Google before there was Google.

But more recently, in the week since his retirement from Swinomish, where he filled several administrative roles, Stephens is the one who has been deluged with words.

Words of praise, that is.

"He will be remembered as one of the greatest hires ever," former Swinomish Tribal Senate Chairman Brian Cladoosby said of Stephens, who arrived on May 15, 1980 – three days before the eruption of Mount St. Helens – with a degree in public policy and administration from Western Washington University plus prior experience working in the Whatcom County Planning

Department.

"The late Laura Wilbur, Laura Edwards, Agnes Charles and Helen Ross knew this was their guy," said Cladoosby, "and knew he would be willing to stick around. This was John's hiring committee. John left a big mark on Swinomish and we raise our hands and say thank you."

In hindsight, Stephens was the ideal choice to be engaged in planning and social services at Swinomish through a period that witnessed unprecedented tribal government growth and expanded relationships outside the reservation. He served as a metaphorical bridge linking both sides of the channel.

Not only did Stephens and his wife, Jane, commit to residing in La Conner, but he descends from Native (Haida) and early pioneer stock. One of his great-grandfathers, Stephens notes, was a cabin boy who jumped ship from an English man-of-war off Whidbey Island, thus establishing the family's foothold.

Now he and Jane are themselves grandparents and intend taking regular out-of-state trips to visit

their two sons' families, including three grandchildren.

"It's been a quick 41 years," said Stephens, "but now it's time for me to step back from full-time work and literally spend more time with family."

Stephens' family home was in Tacoma growing up. He attended Jesuit schools there and his course of study required him to take Latin for two years.

"I had a pretty solid foundation educationally," he told the Weekly News. "I was a science and math nerd but always interested in politics and history. I was involved with lots of sports – basketball, baseball and track."

His basketball skills served him well as he soon joined Allan Olson, Rusty Kuntze and other staff members for regular evening scrimmages at the tribal gym.

"I always beat Allan in hoops," Stephens insists, harkening back to an era not far removed from when Converse Chuck Taylor canvases was the gold standard of court shoes.

Stephens was encouraged to apply at Swinomish by Whatcom colleague Nick Zaferatos, who himself would become the tribe's planning director and later its general manager and is now a professor of urban planning and sustainable development at Western.

The group of elders Cladoosby cited had to decide between Stephens and another finalist.

"I was told much later that I was chosen because I 'would probably stay longer,'" said Stephens. "That elders group turned out to be right. I did end up with a lengthy tenure."

Stephens has participated in and provided leadership for numerous and often ground-breaking projects at Swinomish. A partial list includes:

- * The Tribal Employment Rights Program;
- * The Indian Child Welfare Program;
- * The Child Care Center and Program;
- * The Early Childhood Education Program;
- * The Tribal After School Program;
- * The Student Higher Education Scholarship Program;
- * The Dental Health Aide Therapy Program;
- * Creation and expansion of the Village Dental Clinic;
- * Development of the Village Medical Clinic, Tribal Youth Center and didgwalič Wellness Center; and
- * Twenty-five years of service on the Swinomish Housing Authority Board of Directors.

This does not include what Stephens refers to as his "external"

work, comprised of two years on the Town of La Conner Planning Commission, another two years as a Town Council member, four years on the La Conner School Board, a decade with the Skagit Valley College Board of Trustees and over 20 years as a Skagit Community Action Agency board member and officer.

"The work over those 41 years has been wide-ranging, challenging and rewarding," Stephens said. "I was able to work with so many leaders, colleagues and community members to do my contribution to the implementation of so many programs and projects."

Stephens eventually delved deeply into state, regional and national health policy development, specializing in Indian Health policy with the Health and Human Services department and Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services.

"I represented the 43 tribes of the Northwest in those arenas," he said, "and helped move forward a number of important long-lasting improvements in the relationship between the federal government, the state government and tribes."

Stephens said he had plenty of help along the way.

"I want to acknowledge being guided by three chairmen – Robert Joe, Sr., Brian Cladoosby and Steve Edwards," said Stephens. "During my tenure Swinomish became known for its national leadership in self governance/self determination and the protection of treaty responsibilities, including and especially in health."

He also lists more than a dozen late tribal elders – Laura Wilbur, Laura Edwards, Agnes Charles, Helen Ross, Dewey Mitchell, Chet Cayou, Sr., Robert Joe, Sr., Mike Cladoosby, Susan Wilbur, Ida Williams, Irene Siddle, Charley Paul, Elmer Cline and Theresa Willup – who over the years were instrumental in his career development.

"They were among the many elders who passed on," Stephens reflected, "with whom I had the privilege of spending time. I have had the pleasure of having the support and trust of so many Swinomish people over my career. That trust and support has allowed me to contribute in whatever way I could to a wide range of programs and projects. In the end, though, it's the people who make things possible."

"Without the support of many leaders, tribal community members and fellow staff members," he stressed, "I would not have been able to do my small part and fulfill my role to see these important services developed to improve the lives of Native people here at Swinomish."

Council . . .

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80 hours a month and a 10 minute response time, that there is a 10% increase in the cost yet the level of service is the same as for residents in unincorporated communities.

Hayes said the points brought up would be incorporated, ending the discussion. Law enforcement costs and the 2022 preliminary budget was not brought up by council or the mayor.

Council has a 35 page budget document and a 20 page draft package for the police contract and code enforcement position to wade through and respond to at its Nov. 23 meeting. The council, which had budget hearings in September and October, had little to say or question about the preliminary budget presented them in their packets ahead of their meeting.

Council unanimously approved an ordinance amending its rules for renting Maple Hall, following months of advocacy by residents Matt May and Russell Chandler for allowing the New Year's Eve dance fundraiser for the La Conner Live summer concerts to play music beyond 10 p.m. The resolution deletes the rental fee table, replacing it with council establishing rental fees for town facilities on a resolution basis. Apparently the time music must stop will also be set by council.

Leaver spoke for council flexibility and control and avoiding getting a reputation so no one will rent Maple Hall. Stokes said the hall was built for the town's residents to use, implying that the rules should not be onerous.

The council was also in agreement in approving an ordinance for the annual update of fee schedule for various land use and public works services.

Hayes noted that the council election opens Taylor's parks commissioner position and Rick Dole's planning commission position. Wohleb suggested they evaluate replacing them in January.

Council adjourned at 8:30 p.m.

Flood . . .

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vents had plywood sheets secured in front of them on the building across from the Skagit Valley Food Co-op.

The Co-op announced it was closing at 4 p.m. for the safety of customers and staff.

Monday afternoon La Conner Town Administrator Scott Thomas sent an email to the mayor, council members and staff, updating them with information from the Skagit County Emergency Operation Center. Thomas wrote "Our greatest concern is the stability of the levees, but the dike districts monitor their infrastructure very closely during events and the likelihood of an unexpected catastrophic failure is small." He advised "We are closely monitoring the situation, but do not expect to have any issues" and noted "Temps are expected to drop significantly, which will lower the snow elevation and minimize rainfall into the Skagit basin."

In town, Public Works Director Brian Lease reported, Thomas wrote, "that the new storm pumps at the end of Caledonia (Street) are working well, that the high tide has not caused problems and that we are well situated to ride this one out."

The La Conner school campus was closed Tuesday, with classes held remotely starting with a two-hour delay. Executive Assistant Cherri Kahns wrote in an email Monday afternoon, based on weather conditions and recommendations from Skagit County Emergency Management. After-school activities were canceled Monday and Tuesday. The middle and high schools choir and band concert was rescheduled for 7 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 18 in the high school gym.

Tuesday Fir Island was closed to thru traffic, Skagit County Sheriff's Office Undersheriff Chad Clark reported in an email. "Once the river level recedes to 28' it will re-open. The water continues to recede and we are hopeful the island will be reopened for thru traffic later today," he wrote.

Tuesday the Skagit County Emergency Operations Center recommended that Samish Island residents consider evacuating Samish Island or plan to shelter in place until the water level recedes. The concern: a high likelihood that when the Samish River crest

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