

2023 OCAPA Winter Workshop



Betsy Johnson

Former State Senator/Gubernatorial Candidate

Betsy Johnson served in the Oregon House and Senate for more than 20 years, retiring as Chair of the Joint Ways and Means Committee in 2021 to run for governor as an unaffiliated candidate, loyal only to the people of Oregon. She has a well-earned reputation as a fierce advocate for her constituents, a fearless crusader for fiscal accountability, and as a no-nonsense maverick willing to buck convention to find bipartisan solutions. She's always been known as an independent minded, pro-jobs leader proudly serving the working people of the northwest coast. Betsy has described herself as "an equal opportunity pisser-offer."

Born in Bend, but raised in Redmond, Betsy developed her deep connection to Oregon's land and people through her family. Her parents gave their property at the headwaters of the Metolius to the United States Forest Service. As Betsy says, her parents loved the land so much, they gave it away to protect it. Her father Sam served in the Oregon House, and her mother Becky served on the State Board of Higher Education and many other community organizations. Betsy graduated from Oregon Episcopal School in 1969 and earned her undergraduate degree from Carleton College. Betsy worked for the Multnomah courts while earning a law degree attending night classes at Lewis & Clark College. Betsy's father taught both of his daughters to fly airplanes, fueling their lifelong passion. Betsy's sister became an aerobatic pilot, flying competitions all over the world. Betsy herself represented the United States in the world helicopter championships in Vitebsk, USSR in 1978. She founded her own aviation business that flew helicopters, including many of the flights over Mount St. Helens after the 1980 eruption. Her company also performed mountain rescue missions and worked on movie projects, including flying Benji the dog into the wilderness to be filmed in heroic action. Betsy was asked to manage the Aeronautics Division of the State Department of Transportation. In 1999, as Director of Legislative Affairs for the Oregon Pilots Association, she helped pass legislation creating the Oregon Department of Aviation.

In addition to serving in the legislature, Betsy has served on the boards of numerous local, regional, and national organizations, including the Oregon Health Sciences University (OHSU) Foundation, Doernbecher Children's Hospital, Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) Foundation, and the High Desert Museum in Bend. She is currently on the Board of Visitors of Northwestern School of Law and serves as President of the Samuel S. Johnson Foundation, named for her late father. Betsy and her husband John Helm have been married 35 years and have worked side by side in both business and public service. They live in Scappoose.