

Tim Sheldon Makes No Apologies for Dual Roles



Sen. Tim Sheldon sits on the Senate floor between Democrats Paull Shin of Edmonds and Phil Rockefeller of Bainbridge Island. (Steve Zugschwerdt | For the Kitsap Sun)

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By Steven Gardner

Tim Sheldon has heard the question on the floors of the state House and state Senate: “What are we on that?”

It’s a question legislators ask one another to determine how the rest of their party plans to vote on a bill.

“I don’t do that,” said Sheldon, a Democratic Party legislator for 20 years and a Mason County commissioner for five years. Sheldon, at least publicly, doesn’t seem the type to ask “What are we on that?” about much of anything — including the fact that he is currently holding two elected positions.

A pair of bills introduced in the Legislature earlier this year would have prohibited an elected office-holder at the city, county or state levels from being elected to another such job. If those

bills had won approval, Sheldon would not have been able to run for re-election as state senator this year without resigning as county commissioner.

Neither bill [made it out of committee](#).

The House version, House Bill 2800, was sponsored by state Rep. Sherry Appleton, D-Poulsbo. “I don’t think you can serve two masters,” she said. “I think you cheat the taxpayer when you do that.”

State law says that legislator is a part-time job, but Appleton said that is hardly the case anymore.

“More and more our members don’t have other jobs because it takes too much of our time,” she said.

Voting in Olympia, Voting in Shelton

During the legislative session, Sheldon spends a lot of time on Highway 101 making the 23-mile trek between Mason County’s administrative building in Shelton and the state capitol in Olympia.

Feb. 22 was a good recent example: He attended a commissioner meeting at 9 a.m. in Shelton, drove to Olympia for a noon luncheon, drove back to Shelton for an executive session of the Mason commission, then went back to Olympia for a Transportation Committee meeting at 3:30 p.m. and for a session of the full Senate at 5:45 p.m.

Sheldon said he’s missed few votes in either Shelton or Olympia because of his dual commitments.

According to a Web site called [Washington Votes](#), Sheldon missed 20 out of 847 votes in 2009. That’s at the low end of the range in the Senate — Majority Leader Lisa Brown of Spokane missed the most (205), while Gig Harbor Democrat Derek Kilmer and Yakima Republican Curtis King were both present for every vote.

Sheldon’s presence wouldn’t have proved decisive on any of the votes he missed. Seventeen of them were on bills that passed unanimously and two were on bills in which only two senators dissented. Since 2005, the first year he was voting in both Olympia and Shelton, the closest Senate vote Sheldon missed was a 26-20 rejection of a 2007 bill dealing with overpayments at courts. In 2006 he missed one vote.

Still, not everyone thinks Sheldon is paying enough attention to both jobs.

Brenda Hirschi writes a blog called [Mason County Budget Watch](#) and casts a critical eye on all three Mason commissioners.

“I think that the record pretty much speaks for itself that he’s not there. The reason we’re not having a commissioner meeting on March 9 and March 23 is because we can’t get a quorum.

The reason we can't get a quorum is because the commissioners are off doing something else. Meanwhile we have 12 percent unemployment in Mason County," she said.

Hirschi's blog documents who is at meetings for how long in addition to what matters are discussed, particularly the county's budget. One of her chief complaints about all the commissioners is they get briefed by employees, but that's the extent of their leadership.

"What is going on within Mason County is our commissioners are spending Monday mornings with briefings or their staff and then they go off. And if you listen to their calendars they're at this meeting and that meeting doing all good work, I'm sure. But they're not running the county," Hirschi said.

A Popular Man in Mason County

If Mason County voters feel slighted, they haven't shown it at the polls so far.

When Sheldon ran for re-election as commissioner in 2008, all three of his opponents alluded to his two jobs by [promising to be "full-time" commissioners](#).

It didn't seem to be an issue that resonated with voters. Sheldon won by a big margin.

It could be an issue again this fall if anyone files to run against Sheldon for the Senate. But according to Sheldon it won't be an issue in 2012, because he doesn't plan to seek re-election as a county commissioner that year.

The Olympia connection for Mason County can have its benefits. In that morning commissioner meeting on Feb. 22, state Department of Transportation employees addressing county commissioners about a road project asked Sheldon directly about a proviso in a transportation bill. Sheldon's advice was more direct than you might get from someone who doesn't have a seat in Olympia. "If it escalates to tens and tens of millions of dollars it'll get shelved," Sheldon said.

On the capitol campus in Olympia that day, he was consistently stopped by lobbyists and constituents, including a pair of Mason County sheriffs deputies.

Sheldon's wife Linda said the same thing happens when her husband goes to the store. He can't make quick trips to the grocery anymore, she said, because "he knows everyone." Many of them want to stop and talk county or state business with him.

Home isn't necessarily a refuge, either. Constituents sometimes show up at his home to talk issues. In one case a man called his house at 3 a.m. when it appeared a bridge near his property was going to wash out, Linda Sheldon said. Tim Sheldon went to the site and communicated with transportation officials to help get the emergency handled.

Popular With Republicans, Not So Much With Democrats

While Sheldon is generally popular in his district, his party isn't always so enamored of him. When he ran for Senate in 2006, the 35th District Democrats [did not support him](#). He won anyway.

On the other hand, Republicans have shown no interest in unseating Sheldon in the Senate. Daniel Griffey filed with the Public Disclosure Commission to run against Sheldon as a Republican this year, then changed his mind to run for the House seat. Asked why, Griffey wrote in an e-mail, "I was told that the House had a greater need of my service than the Senate."

Randy Neatherlin, a Republican candidate in Mason County on numerous occasions, said he got a similar message in 2006. Neatherlin said a state party official told him and another potential candidate that if the district Republican party put anyone up against Sheldon, it wouldn't get any money from the state for the two 35th District House races. Nonetheless, Sheldon said he hasn't ever considered changing parties and that his role as a swing vote is a powerful position for his district. He said he identified himself as a Democrat because he admired John F. Kennedy.

Sheldon endorsed George W. Bush for president in 2004, but he supported Barack Obama in 2008 and thinks U.S. Sen. Patty Murray is good for Washington.

Neatherlin, a Republican who ran against Sheldon for commissioner in 2004 but won the senator's endorsement in the 2006 legislative race, said it would probably be a mistake for Sheldon to switch parties. "We are a weird people out here," Neatherlin said. "We vote Democrat but are conservative at heart."

Sheldon takes issue with reporters who write that "he voted with the Republicans." Sheldon said his decisions are never about which party came up with an idea. "I have to vote for my constituents and not the party," he said.

It is the same tack he takes when he defends his dual elected role. "It sometimes stretches your time, but it does keep you in touch with your local community," Sheldon said. "It seems to work for my constituents or they wouldn't have re-elected me in 2008."