

from the 1991 Zephyr Archives. An Interview with:

CHRISTY ROBBINS (WILLIAMS DUNTON)

Moab City Councilperson

This is the second in a series of Zephyr Interviews, that we have pulled from our archives and re-posted. We offer these interviews as a way of measuring the changes that Moab and Southeast Utah have experienced in the 25 years since The Zephyr's 'birth' in 1989. How did its leaders view the future back then and how did they plan to face the challenges and changes that lay ahead? Ken Davey conducted this interview with City Councilperson Christine Robbins (now Williams Dunton). Christy is now Program Director at KZMU Public Radio. Ken is Grand County's economic development coordinator.

Zephyr: What are the major things that have been going on in the city this winter?

Christie: Every time I come back into town and see a Minit Lube coming up right next to Wanda's Doll House, and who knows what kind of development rumors, like a six-story hotel happening, I see that Moab is changing very rapidly, and it's scary. And I think about what my responsibility is, to see that if it happens, it happens right.

Zephyr: What exactly scares you?

Christie: That we may not have the infrastructure to control it, to direct it in the way the majority of Moabites would like to have it change.

Zephyr: There are a number of businesses in town that have the perception that the city government is anti-business. Is that accurate?

Christie: Personally, I wouldn't classify myself as anti-business, or any other council person. What I know of them, we are just coming from the same basic premise that you want to go slow. Not say, here's the blank check, do what you will.

The little control that we have had has given results, but they aren't entirely satisfactory. I look at Main Street and I think about the kind of development we would have liked to have seen, and I'm not that satisfied. There are things I would have changed, that I might have if I could have had a little bit more foresight in passing some ordinances.

Zephyr: What ordinances does the city need now?

Christie: Some of the ordinances we are working on. I think the bed and breakfast one, while certainly a step in the right direction, was not a totally workable document, because of the short term rental situation in town. We don't have a lot of bed and breakfasts, but we do have a lot of short term rentals. So we need to have something that addresses that. And also the signage ordinance, and an overall building ordinance, perhaps a height restriction on buildings. Things that are going to take into account the kind of change we never could foresee, and never had to deal with 5 or 10 years ago.

Zephyr: But if someone came in and built a six-story hotel...

Christie: I would freak out.

Zephyr: But wouldn't that provide a number of jobs, and probably better paying jobs than working in small motels?

Christie: Yes, but it would be very strange. There would be people that I know who

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would be dressed as waiters, and you would have to call them a concierge. It would be a strange change to make.

Zephyr: Are you a big fan of the sign ordinance?

Christie: No. In general I'm not a big fan of any ordinance. They are dry and controlling and mean-spirited little units, but a necessary evil. And the sign ordinance is one that is going to have a big impact. I've always felt that Main Street as a first impression could be radically changed for the better by having some kind of common consensus on the part of the people of Moab about what they would like that image to say.

Zephyr: When has there ever been a common consensus among the people of Moab?

Christie: Well, that's a good question. Never, that I can recall. But I think on this one you can tell that there's more consensus than on other ones. The sign committee is composed of an even representation, and it came together. If you can take that as an indication, at least there's been some consensus.

Zephyr: One aspect of the sign ordinance is a provision allowing some form of compensation to sign owners who have to alter or remove a sign if it isn't in compliance.

Christie: I can only give you my personal opinion as far as that's concerned. And it's coming as a taxpayer. There's something that rubs me the wrong way about having to subsidize a merchant's advertising. Whether or not I was on the city council, if I heard

about that, I would say, "You mean I'm going to have to pay that guy for a brand new sign when he's had that sign I thought was ugly for 22 years?" I would think that's pretty lame.

There's something else I want to say about planning in Moab. There's something I've really grown to like, and that's the funk factor. The fact that everything isn't perfectly balanced and perfectly aesthetic, and perfectly earth-toned, what some people envision in a well-planned entity. I've really grown to appreciate the variety of it. If Moab were any prettier, only the rich and bloated would live here. I want Moab to be a place where the property values are not too high for people to be able to afford a cheap, sweet little rental, to be able to enjoy Moab and go out to do the things they enjoy doing here.

Zephyr: So isn't that a contradiction of what you were saying earlier?

Christie: Yes, It's totally hypocritical. That's why I wanted to bring it up, to show that things don't always turn out the way you plan them. On one hand I can see the value of wanting to bring things into compliance, and on the other hand, maybe what we have



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is just fine, thank you. And you don't realize until you've gotten your big, controlling fingers in there just what havoc you've wrought.

Zephyr: Differences over building inspection, police services, now arguments over how much the city should pay Grand County to hold prisoners in the jail. Why can't the city and county work things out?

Christie: That's been something I wondered myself before I got into the political realm of things. I was working at the radio station when Tom Stocks was getting himself elected. And it was worse then, it seems to me. There was a lot more name-calling, and not a lot of finesse, of negotiating. Now, maybe the same thing is happening under a veneer of negotiation, but I do sense at least the issues are coming out, what needs to be solved.

One of the difficulties is the nature of the county itself. For me, it's an issue of double taxation. And that things are expected of the city that I believe belong in the county's hands.

Zephyr: Give an example of double taxation.

Christie: There are a lot of them. Take the jail issue. I pay as a county person and as a city resident. It just seems clear that the city people are being stuck with the same bill twice. But the county comes back and says, look, the county is broke, and the reason Moab residents are paying for it is they are using it the most.

I think in terms of actually getting along, we're doing better. But in terms of solving the issues, we don't seem a lot closer than before.

Zephyr: Another issue being raised is the management of the Moab Dump. What's your view?

Christie: I look at it from an environmental standpoint. In terms of the city and county getting along, it's a matter of paying for it. We're at a point now that a little bit of foresight, 5 years down the road we could save a ton of money by getting a recycling project together. And putting some money, say \$30,000, into getting a good seeding of a recycling program county-wide, would cut the cost of the landfill question.

Zephyr: The council approved a sublease agreement between Canyonlands Field Institute and the Stuntman's Hall of Fame. It was a split vote, with some objections about off-street parking, and the fact that while the Hall of Fame gets \$285 a month from the deal, the city, which owns the building, only gets \$15 per month.

Christie: It was an issue that had gone on for a couple of months, and no consensus could be reached. CFI was in a time crunch, and the lease is for about 6 months, just

because there is no other suitable place to show the Canyon's Edge right now. As a CFI employee, I was glad they went ahead, because it would have put me in a crunch. That's why I didn't vote. But I was in favor of the sublease. I agree about the issue of off-street parking. Also, about the aesthetic non-value of the stunt stuff on the side of the building. But in this case, two struggling, non-profit organizations can mutually benefit from a city-owned building and survive a little longer than they could otherwise.

I'm the manager of the Canyon's Edge, and even though there is no money benefit either way for me, because I manage the show, I'll be the one coordinating with John Hagner for retail space. It smacked of conflict of interest and I stayed out of it.

Tom Stocks didn't want to be in the position of voting, and I was delighted that he was. It's only happened a couple of times, and it really makes his feelings on an issue clear. In fact, everyone on the council secretly delights in Tom having to vote.

Zephyr: When did you first get on the council?

Christie: When I was pregnant with Cody, in 1987. I was appointed. It was down to me and Clayton Allred. It was a split vote, and Tom pulled my name out of a hat. I went on the following fall to run against Clayton and some others, and I won.

Zephyr: What do you think of Mayor Tom Stocks?

Christie: Boy, he's changed a lot. I remember when I worked at the radio station, he was my nemesis, I thought certainly this guy would never get elected, he's far too bombastic. But he has done a fine job. How he struck me 8 years ago and now, I would say, yes, he has had the best interest of Moab at heart. He is well suited, personality speaking, to being a politician. I don't know what he will have to call himself when he answers the phone if he's not mayor. He's Mayor Tom, that's his personality.

Zephyr: What about the council members? Bill McDougald?

Christie: I think Bill is an excellent city council member. Many's the time I'm grateful he's there, both for his historical viewpoint and for the comic relief. Because he says some things that are so typically Bill, not realizing how hilarious they are. I don't know how to explain it, you have to hear it to understand. He's a quantum equation unto himself.

Zephyr: How about Dave Bierschied?

Christie: He surprises me often. I don't know what always influences his decisions. He's strong on the council, does a lot of homework on the issues. That takes dedication, he puts in a lot of time at city hall, and that wins him some respect from me, because it takes a lot of stamina to spend time up there.

Zephyr: Terry Warner.

Christie: At first glance you would assume that Terry and I would disagree a lot, but it's gratifying to feel like you are understood, and understand the other person's position. There have been those moments, although Terry and I disagree frequently. That's one of the best things about being on a council that's a little bit larger. And that's one of the reasons I think the county commission should be bigger. It allows a broader representation. And it's surprising what can happen when a little discussion occurs.

I've been described as a liberal feminist. I don't like to be stereotyped, but I think there is a contingent of people who are not necessarily served by the male old guard. So whatever that isn't, perhaps I am.

Terry and I both have been charged with not being around an awful lot. But I think that when we're there it counts.

Zephyr: And Dave Sakrison.

Christie: I think Dave is great, and I was really glad when he decided to run for city council. I felt I was being represented there. He's another on who surprises me with his decisions. I don't always agree. Sometimes, at certain points, all of them really make me mad. But I'm sure they feel the same way about me.

Zephyr: And you?

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Zephyr: What have been the biggest changes you've seen here in the last five years?

Christie: There have been shifts in the political spectrum, from right to left, and left to right. Especially in the county. Things have had a shift back to the right that I think is going to have an impact. From where I stand, it's a little bit of a narrower political view. In a community with as wide a variety of issues as Moab has, it could be detrimental.

There are some statewide issues filtering down, with taxes and property values, coupled with the rise in tourism, that may result in increased property values and the resale of houses. The difficulty of renting places may change the personality of the town forever. And make it so "rental trash" can't live here, and it will only be the rich and bloated. And that's when I leave.

I hope Moab retains a bit of its funk factor. Not to say I don't hope that it makes changes, but I think it would be better for Moab to retain its funkiness. Every desert oddball the place seems to attract, I hope it continues to.

Zephyr: Isn't the "funk factor" one of the things responsible for what many people consider the inadequate social infrastructure, the poor education, health care, and other services?

Christie: That's what you get when you use slang, you risk being misunderstood. Money is the thing. When you have a lack of money sometimes, it's great. You don't have

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certain things. You don't have women walking around in \$12,000 coats, skiing down slopes, and making you feel like a peon.

Zephyr: But a community that has women walking around in \$12,000 coats usually also has a tax base that can buy schoolbooks for the kids.

Christie: Exactly. I think that's one of the statewide issues that are trickling down. Moab is feeling the effect of a totally inadequate, antediluvian attitude about education in the state, and Moab is the last kid in line. Having a lot more money in Moab would give us those things, but I'm not sure that's a trade I'm willing to make.

Zephyr: What's your political future?

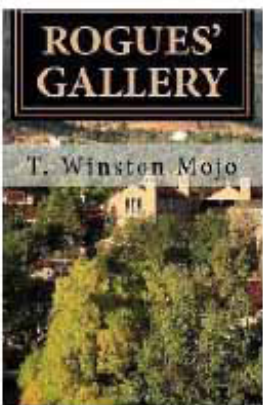
Christie: I just recently decided not to run again. Because of issues behind custody, it would be irresponsible of me to run for office when I may have to leave the community for a period of time right after that.

Plus, 5 years is doing good for being in office, and I don't think there should be any such thing as career politicians.

It's no big secret that I've gone through an enormous amount of change on a personal

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