

## Election: Nou elected San Juan County sheriff; first new sheriff in 24 years



Deputy Rob Nou, candidate for San Juan County sheriff.  
Scott Rasmussen / September 2010

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Rob Nou was elected the first new sheriff of San Juan County in 24 years Tuesday.

Nou, a sheriff's deputy and former Oregon police chief and administrative sergeant, received 4,113 votes to Lead Detective Brent Johnson's 2,183. County Auditor F. Milene Henley said Nou had 64 percent of the vote and didn't expect that to change.

Before the polls closed, Elections Supervisor Doris Schaller said 6,941 of 11,590 ballots mailed out had been received. She said 6,822 of those ballots were processed and ready to be counted. If County Auditor Milene Henley's prediction of a 75 percent voter turnout holds true, then 1,751 more ballots could be counted before the election is certified.

The campaign was viewed widely as a contest between equals; Nou and Johnson have served as administrative sergeants, have written and administered law enforcement programs funded by grants, and have been involved in their communities. Both received endorsements from within their department and local media.

But Nou had an edge: He had served as a rural city police chief and director of a county 911 dispatch center, and graduated from the FBI National Academy. Eight deputies endorsed him, saying they viewed him as "forward-thinking and progressive, enabling us to deliver the kind of policing service the county needs and wants well into the future."

Nou joined the San Juan County Sheriff's Department as a deputy after four years as police chief in Burns, Ore., and has 29 years of law enforcement experience, much of that as an administrative sergeant with the Yamhill County, Ore., Sheriff's Department. He's managed or supervised drug-abuse awareness programs, a multi-agency traffic accident investigation team, traffic safety enforcement grant projects, and a city police department.

Nou moved to Lopez Island in 2008 and has been active there as an EMT and with the Lopez Island Prevention Coalition. He worked hard to become known to voters on other islands, presenting himself as being "thoughtful, reasoned, and prepared to do the job."

Nou said the biggest concerns expressed to him by voters, particularly on San Juan and Orcas islands, were related to drug use, especially among youth.

"Another favorite question was, 'Are you moving to San Juan Island?' Which, he said, he will.

Before the votes were tallied, Nou said he felt "very positive and comfortable" with the campaign he ran.

"I tried to put myself out there so people had an opportunity to decide (between two candidates). That instead of being this largely unknown person, they could get to know my professional background, my values and goals.

On his mind now that the election is over? "A really big sigh of relief the whole campaign is over with and done, then gearing up to start working toward a smooth transition," he said.

Nou said that he will meet with Sheriff Bill Cumming to become familiar with the budget, get to know the key players in the community, and "get to know the staff better within the sheriff's office."

"I know who everybody is, but as far as on a deeper level, not really," he said, referring to his having been stationed on Lopez Island. "I want to get a sense of what resources we really have within the Sheriff's Office — people's skills, abilities, training background, special interests, goals, and figure out how to accomplish a smooth and orderly transition."

Once he takes office, he will start a strategic planning process to develop a "roadmap to the future" for the next five years. "That needs to happen fairly quickly," he said. "One of the biggest things is trying to establish good lines of communication within the organization."

Johnson has been the county's lead detective the past eight years, is a Firewise program coordinator, and is chairman of the county Veterans Advisory Committee.

Tuesday, Johnson was handling routine tasks — among them, investigating a report of a barking dog — and said he planned to spend a private night at home with his family.

He was pleased with the campaigns he and Nou led.

"At the last League of Women of Voters forum, people approached me and said, 'Thank you for the campaign you guys put together.' One of the members of the League came up to my car window and said, 'I could tell you guys weren't faking it. You were cordial toward each other and you could see that.' It was a positive campaign. We didn't hate each other."

Johnson, a former police sergeant in Albuquerque, N.M. who joined the San Juan County Sheriff's Department in 2002, said voters he talked to were most concerned about drug and alcohol enforcement. "Also, the idea of training and evaluations and professionalism within the department."

If elected, Johnson said one of the first things he planned on doing was meeting with Undersheriff Jon Zerby and the sergeants to develop a strategic plan for the department, set up evaluations and training for the coming year, and start to review the department's Standard Operating Procedures. The transition period would be spent meeting with the outgoing sheriff regarding the budget.

Reflecting on his campaign, Johnson said he had no regrets.

"We did a good campaign. We talked a lot of places. We answered a lot of questions. Hopefully, people looked deeper than just what was said on certain things. I think they did."

Johnson said early Election Day that he would accept the voters' decision and would work with the new sheriff. "We're going to accept what people say and move on. We're going to do all right."

#### **Sheriff-elect will attend state meeting**

The transition in the sheriff's office will begin shortly after the election.

Sheriff Bill Cumming, who chose to retire after six terms, said he and his successor will attend the annual meeting of the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs, Nov. 16-18 at Campbell's Resort, Lake Chelan.

He expects that the time between the election and when his successor takes office will be a time of orientation. "I will be totally available. He will probably be in and out of my office very frequently ... We will be going over the budget in detail, how we arrived at certain numbers, what to expect. And I'm sure he will be strategizing how to operate within that budget."

The sheriff serves a four-year term and earns \$97,514 a year. The sheriff manages a staff of 36 full-time employees and a budget of \$2.3 million, which includes: \$719,219, dispatch; \$472,888, Enhanced E-911; \$398,920, jail; and \$209,615, Emergency Management.

Looking ahead to his last day on the job, Cumming said he expects an anticlimactic end to his tenure. "I will probably have to ask for a ride home."

— **ONLINE:** [San Juan County election results.](#)

[State and federal election results.](#)