

# The Oregonian

## Flying across the ethical line

**Sen. Betsy Johnson failed to disclose her airport land deal while pushing a bill to create special access to rural airports**

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An experienced pilot and veteran lawmaker like Sen. Betsy Johnson ought to know her way around aviation security and Oregon's public disclosure laws for elected officials.

But Johnson seems to have blundered in both areas.

The Oregonian's Brent Walth and Harry Esteve reported Thursday that in late 2004 Johnson purchased, and then sold at a hefty profit three months later, 36 acres of farmland in her hometown of Scappoose next to the local airport. Before the land deal even closed, Johnson introduced a bill in the Legislature to promote special airport access for adjacent private landowners.

Johnson revealed nothing about the deal on disclosure forms required of legislators.

When reporters questioned Johnson about the deal this week, the four-term legislator admitted, "I made a mistake," and after the interview was finished, reported the deal to the Oregon Government Standards and Practices Commission.

Better late than never. But this is a serious ethical lapse by one of the Legislature's most respected lawmakers. Johnson has spent two terms in the House, is midway through her second term in the Senate and was one of two legislators to serve on a 2006 commission charged with proposing new ethical guidelines for the Legislature. Her name comes up in every discussion about likely candidates for governor and other high office.

This isn't a matter of ignorance or inexperience.

Here's what Johnson failed to disclose: In October 2004, Johnson and her husband, John Helm, purchased 36 acres of farmland next to the Scappoose airport for \$635,000. In January 2005, the couple sold the land to a developer, Ed Freeman, for \$754,950. That's a \$119,525 profit in three months.

In February 2005, Johnson introduced Senate Bill 680, which sought to require the state Department of Aviation to promote "through the fence" access at Scappoose and five other rural airports. Such access allows neighboring landowners to move airplanes through the security fence at the airport at will -- and enhances the value of land adjacent to rural airports.

Johnson and other supporters of the bill insist that it was meant to encourage economic development around rural airports. Johnson's bill was amended to make special access voluntary, and the bill identified only the Aurora airport and two rural airports to be named later. Scappoose was later chosen as one of those airports. When the bill came to the Senate floor, Johnson declared a conflict of interest, and voted for it, as Oregon law allows.

All this demands a full investigation by the ethics commission. There may be nothing more here than a failure to properly disclose the land transaction. Johnson insists that Freeman, the developer who purchased her property, would have gained special access to the Scappoose airport with or without her bill.

But such open access is controversial in aviation circles. The Federal Aviation Administration contends that special access raises serious security concerns. Ann Crook, director of the Klamath Falls Airport, said granting special access to public airports is "bad policy."

Johnson served as Oregon's aviation director in the late 1990s, and she's been a pilot for years. She's also one of the most capable lawmakers in Salem.

In this case, though, her sense of navigation failed her.