

By Tina Kitt

The Wauneta Breeze

After nearly a full year of tackling budget issues, property tax protests, challenging road conditions and working to fill board vacancies, Chase County Commissioner Chuck Vette says he's developing a solid grasp on his new position.

Vette was sworn into office at the start of 2009 after emerging the winner of a five-man race for the District 1 position, determined in the Republican primary in May 2008. Having the outcome decided early gave Vette the chance to sit in on over six months of meetings and observe the process.

"All the staff up there at the courthouse have been good help, and the other two commissioners have been great," said Vette.

He makes a point of stopping by the county road department shop in Wauneta daily to touch base with his road crew and tries to drive over all the roads in his district once a week.

"We tried to get the roads gravelled this year but it just disappeared," said Vette, noting that while this year's abundant moisture has been a blessing, it's also created some challenges.

Some District 1 roads were also rebuilt this past year, but the wet weather also slowed that work down. A new bridge on a county road west of Wauneta was replaced this summer as part of an ongoing plan to replace all the county's aging wooden structures, some that are 80 to 90 years old.

Several new traffic signs will be put in place in the next two years, as mandated by the state, and old ones that have fallen victim to vandalism or roadway accidents will be replaced — at a significant cost to taxpayers.

"We'd really appreciate some help in stopping this vandalism and destruction," said Vette, adding that replacing signs is a big expenditure.

Supervising the roads in his district is just one aspect of Vette's duties as commissioner.

Overseeing the county budget and working to keep taxes down is one of the toughest parts of a commissioner's job, said Vette.

This fall, he heard property tax protests from a number of Chase County residents. While Vette said he agreed with what many of those protesters were saying, he has to follow state guidelines. He said recent sales of farmland at higher prices will likely up taxes.

Vette said he pleased with how well the Chase County Community Hospital is operating.

"I feel the hospital is working good now," said Vette. "It's running in the black and is one of the few county hospitals around that is not tax supported."

He said it's increasingly hard to find people willing to serve on local boards like the hospital board and zoning board, both of which currently have openings that remain unfilled.

Vette represents Chase County on the Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department board, attending meetings in McCook every other month on top of his twice-a-month commissioner meetings in Imperial.

A big project in the works for the county is the proposed construction of a combined ambulance barn and emergency management building in Imperial. The structure would house the ambulances used in Imperial, which currently share space at the Imperial fire hall, and would not affect Wauneta's EMT vehicles.

The proposed multi-use building would be built near the county shop in Imperial and would provide office and storage space and a meeting room for the county's emergency management

personnel.

“We’re just looking to have something real practical built, nothing elaborate,” said Vette.

Anticipating the county’s needs and future problems is perhaps the trickiest part of a commissioner’s job, said Vette.

State funding may be cut to help balance the state budget, but nothing is yet set. Water allocations to irrigators may also be cut, which in turn could also result in a loss in property tax revenue for the county.

Meanwhile, costs keep rising.

“It’s a challenge,” said Vette.

But the job also has its rewards. Vette said nothing pleases him more than being able to pass along praise for job well done to county road department employees.

“When someone calls and commends those workers, that just makes my day,” said Vette.