

BONNER COUNTY COMMISSIONER DISTRICT 3

Profile of Dan McDonald



By Lyndsie Kiebert  
Reader Staff

*Editor's Note: Dan McDonald is running as a Republican for Bonner County Commissioner, District 3, a seat he currently holds.*

**Sandpoint Reader: Tell me about your history in North Idaho.**

Dan McDonald: I first came here in '79. My wife's family is from here, all born and raised. We were dating, we came here to visit, and I had the typical Long Bridge experience and went, "Oh my god, I have to live here." I lived in the Napa Valley, which is a beautiful area as well, but it didn't hold a candle to this. I wanted to find work here, but couldn't find work for years, and finally in 1996 I was recruited by a company, and they said I could live anywhere in

the country I wanted. We moved here literally almost overnight and planted roots.

**SR: How would you describe your experience as a commissioner? Has it been different than you anticipated?**

DM: When I ran for office I said I would learn the job before I took office, because so many people get elected and then they're thrown into it — it's like learning how to swim by being thrown off a boat. The job I had before (being elected commissioner) gave me a lot of free time, so I spent a great deal of time at the (county administration) building working with the commissioners, going through budgets, talking to department heads. I spent time on my own dime hanging out the year I was running so I could hit the ground running. So for the most part, I knew the job.

**SR: Your claim to fame so far is that you cut \$8.5 million from the county budget. Where did the lion's share of that money come from? I think it's easy to gloss over those things, but I'd appreciate if you'd use some more specificity.**

DM: The headline is, "We cut \$8.5 million without cutting a single service." There were some personnel that went away but for the most part it came from little nooks and crannies. I went through the budget line by line. There were little things like Road and Bridge had a diesel and gas budget of \$550,000 a year. But when you looked at what they had actually used over the last five years, they only used \$125,000 to \$130,000 a year. So every year that money was being spent on something else, as bureaucrats typically do. My goal was that the budget would be realistic, and to create some limits for department heads. We didn't do an across-the-

board 13 percent cut — although we did cut 13 percent — but it was more of, "OK, let's look at each item line by line to find out where the fat is."

**SR: There are some issues dominating the news in the county lately, like Scotchman Peaks Wilderness, the Newport smelter, the second rail bridge — where do you stand on these issues?**

DM: I'm opposed to (Scotchman Peaks Wilderness), and I'll tell you why. It limits the amount of people that can actually use it, and it also limits forest maintenance. If people don't like the forest fires we had, and all the smoke last year, look at where those generated from: wilderness areas. I'd like to see (the area) managed because management actually leads to healthier forest and habitat. Plus, it should be multiple use. I worked with a group to negotiate a compromise plan with (Friends of Scotchman Peaks) where we gave them a trail with no motorized or wheeled vehicles and then set aside the scenic peaks, but they wanted all or nothing.

With the smelter, I don't have a position. I don't like dirty air or dirty water, but what we've seen with the whole smelter discussion is we're putting the argument before the process. There is a legal process in place, which is to go through the permitting process. If we see that the individual or collective emissions are above acceptable levels, if the transportation plan isn't good, if the site line mitigation plan isn't good, then this board will stand opposed to it. However, if those things happen, we won't need to because the Washington Department of Ecology won't permit it — they've got a really hardcore track record for that. Part of the (smelter issue's) problem is it's become an emotional argument instead of a fact-based argument.

I am completely for the second rail bridge. This is another issue where misinformation rules the day. People say it will increase train traffic, but train traffic is driven by demand. Let's say they don't build the second bridge and demand increases — we're going to see more trains blocking roads, and more issues with trains sitting around idling in the county. When those trains sit and idle, they put out more emissions than when they just pass through.

**SR: You're really vocal on Facebook, and some see you as a bully or that you're trying to push views. Do you see it that way?**

DM: If you look at my posts, typically they are to correct the record. Facebook is both a blessing and curse. It's a good way to communicate, but it also allows misinformation to travel at a rapid pace. You can go through and look at my posts, and I don't think I've ever bullied anybody. Some people feel bullied when I actually state facts, but mostly people don't like me posting on Facebook because I'm stating facts that disagree with their opinion. I do a lot of research and reading, and I base my arguments on facts. I don't make emotional arguments. One of the things I saw with previous boards is no one communicated. It was something I committed to — I wanted to be accessible, and people love that. This is a 24/7 job.



**SR: Acknowledging the fact that you're the most conservative member of the current board, how do you separate your vocal personal ideologies from the job in order to represent everyone?**

DM: It's simple. I use facts and logic. Ideology really just steers my opinion, but it doesn't steer my decision-making process. A prime example is my support for the Schweitzer conservation easement. The people on the left were shocked that I supported it, but I looked at the facts. Traditionally, I'm against conservation easements, primarily because it keeps land from ever being potentially developed. But Schweitzer, specifically, I looked at the economic value of it. All the money Schweitzer will get from that easement, if they win it, will stay here. Now, conversely, I have people on the right coming after me saying, "Dan's gone to the dark side." The base ideology that I believe in is government should be efficient, and it shouldn't spend more money than it has.

Dan McDonald  
AT A GLANCE

**AGE:** 58, 59 in June

**BIRTHPLACE AND RESIDENCE:** Birthplace: Napa, Calif., Residence is 287 Esther Ln., off Sunnyside Road.

**GOVERNMENT SERVICE:** County commissioner. Prior to that no government service but a good deal of charitable volunteerism.

**PROFESSION:** County commissioner. Prior to that I was a commercial roof consultant and prior to that I ran a large company.

**EDUCATION:** Two years of college, Professional training in a number of discipline with respect to business operations, Auto CAD, blah, blah blah

**FAMILY:** Wife, three kids, five grand kids, three dogs and two cats.

**FUN FACT:** I'm a singer and musician. I also raced dirt bikes competitively back when I was younger. Hosted a political talk radio show for years here locally and was involved in the Big Boy Ballet Company.