

# Cityscope

Twisp Mayor Soo Ing-Moody

Q&A

## Will of the Twisp

Mayor Soo Ing-Moody talks about how evaluating a town's weaknesses can be a source of strength.

INTERVIEW BY KIRSTEN DOBROTH

**You were born and raised in Niagara Falls, Canada, and earned dual master's degrees at Germany's Freiburg University. What brought you to Twisp?**

I met my husband while working on a project for the German government in Mongolia. He's from Twisp, and we decided to move back there [and open a bed-and-breakfast] because I loved the area, and it just felt like home to me.

**What got you involved with local government?**

Initially, I didn't run for mayor. I ran for council because it was a time in my life where I felt like I could contribute

more and volunteer, and the town needed people to step up for service. Nine months after I was chosen for the town council, I was appointed to the position of mayor by the rest of the council in 2010.

**Since then, Twisp has been designated as a high-risk area for future wildfires.**

We've been identified by a recent Forest Service study as one of the most wildfire-vulnerable communities in Washington state, and as one of the dozen most wildfire-vulnerable communities in the US, because **CONTINUED ON P.12 ►**

## Q&amp;A

of climate change predictions and the fuels we have around us for fire.

**The 2014 Carlton Complex Fire and the Twisp River Fire, which was part of the much larger Okanogan Complex Fire that killed three firefighters in 2015, are obviously incredibly devastating examples of that.**

It was a miracle our town survived. New fires would flare up even as the known ones were not yet out—all while the power was out, radios were down, and cell service jammed when it was needed most... There's nothing like a disaster to make you step up, regardless of where you are or how large your community is: you suddenly realize that there's another level of responsibility. The health and well-being of your citizens and making sure that no harm comes to them is no. 1. I don't think that even as a mayor you become as acutely aware of that until you're in that position.

**What was Twisp's biggest takeaway from that experience?**

The one thing I can say for all municipalities is that your community's weakest link is going to be one of the paramount impediments to your ability to manage through an emergency.

**What was the weakest link in Twisp?**

Communications: the emergency operations center was identified as a facility that was critically missing in our area... We couldn't even communicate properly about evacuations the first year. We literally had to go door to door. The biggest lesson was



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that when times are good, all communities should be assessing where their respective weaknesses lie—and in doing so, focus on how to improve those areas prior to any kind of event.

**For Twisp, that means starting construction next year on a \$3.3 million Civic Building/Emergency Operations Center. How did you make that happen?**

Through an accumulation of grants and four state capital appropriations—including \$1.25 million from the budget the state Legislature just passed—and years of working together with legislators at all levels of government.

**Speaking of legislators, you were honored in 2015 as a Woman of Valor by Senator Maria Cantwell.**

Senator Cantwell came to our community in 2014 as the fires were still raging and the power was still out in our area, and I held an economic forum for all affected communities that had been impacted by the Carlton Complex Fire. Chaos really stretches you to be innovative as a manager, since you have no choice but to manage potentially life-and-death situations with no modern tools and very limited staff. We had just barely been through our second wildfire disaster in 2015 when I got the phone call.

**Why should leaders at the statehouse and the US capitol pay attention to local electeds?**

Local government is the one closest to the people, and ultimately we're the ones who see and experience the

impacts of policy, so we need to be at the table, along with other stakeholders and economic drivers at the region, county, and state levels. And outside of emergency management, that leads to even greater collaboration and growth in times of community health.

**How does that empower small, rural communities like Twisp?**

Even though we come from different towns and municipalities, we're all really connected. What's happening with my neighbor affects me, and vice versa, and I truly believe that we have to lift each other up. Being small often means we are used to doing a lot with very little—usually we have no choice but to give our all if we are going to make anything happen. 