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Kotek enters race for sheriff

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By WENDY REUER

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OWATONNA — The fifth man to enter the race to be sheriff of Steele County — former Owatonna Police officer and Dakota County Sheriff's Deputy, Herb Kotek — said he has always enjoyed being a public servant and would relish the opportunity to do so again.

"It would give me an opportunity to give something back to the community, if they would be accepting of me. I have background in law enforcement, and I have experience and levels of expertise that have developed over the last 30 years. I have familiarity with aspects of it. Obviously there are new aspects of it but I've always been an inquisitive individual and I would like to learn."

Kotek — who, at age 53, is currently semi-retired working part-time in private business — began his career by graduating from the Alexandria Technical Program. He followed that up with classes and credits through the University of Minnesota at various campuses along with different private colleges.

Kotek has 15-plus years of classes that he said he took to continue his education.

He started his law enforcement career in a rural community — his first full-time position was as a sheriff's deputy in Goodhue County. Kotek then served as police officer in Lonsdale, Minn., and then with the Owatonna Police Department before

moving on to be a sheriff's deputy with Dakota County. After more than 27 years in law enforcement, he left the profession in 2004.

Kotek said he began thinking of throwing his hat in the ring for election as former sheriff Gary Ringhofer announced he would retire.

"I started to think I was young, still had a little bit of zip left in me to accomplish a few things within my chosen profession, and in order to do that it would have to be an elected position," Kotek said.

Kotek was formerly heavily involved with youth activities, church-oriented organizations and volunteerism, but he said he has stepped back from those services for some time.

A passion for empathetic policing is what Kotek said he would like to bring to the office.

"I certainly can't take credit for the wording of it, but another officer made a public statement that service needs to be done with empathy, and I concur with that immensely. And, service needs to be done with the intensity of the situation, what is necessarily required for that particular moment," Kotek said.

Kotek said he has some experience with grant writing from early on in his career, which he would absolutely try to incorporate. Although not familiar with the current sheriff's budget, Kotek said he would be creative.

"I think it's pretty well stated by all the other candidates which is pretty much a common thought: Keep their people updated, keep them well trained, be able to have the equipment and technology. The field of public safety has been a continual change, and as always budgetary concerns have been a major deterrent," Kotek said. "There's never been enough money to do everything people want to do.

(I would) work with what they have and be creative to take care of situations that arise. I like being creative, I like coming up with other possibilities and answers for situations."

If elected, Kotek would also oversee the Steele County Detention Center as sheriff. He said the jail seems to be running smoothly and has a high reputation within the state Department of Corrections. He said he was not aware of any internal problems within the jail.

A community-wide approach to the sheriff's office jurisdiction is the approach he would like to take.

"Obviously, they respond to calls they receive, regardless of where they are at," Kotek said. "They are county officers so they have county-wide jurisdiction and they have a responsibility to the residents of the county not just any area or subdivision of it."

Five men have filed for the office of sheriff: Steele County Chief Deputy Milo Dahlin, Sgt. Lon Thiele, Investigator Troy Matejeck, and Gold Cross Ambulance Director Rick Ellingson.

A primary election on Aug. 10 will narrow the candidates down to two before the November election.

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