

OUR VIEW: Election enters a new phase, and so does our letters policy

As we have from time to time, during this first year and change as a news outlet, the Rogue Valley Times has sought to keep you informed about how it is we go about our operations — here in the Opinion section, and within the Times as a whole.

So it is again.

The Jackson County Elections Office is in the final weeks of verifying signatures for candidates and proposed measures that might appear on our ballots for Oregon's Primary Election on May 21.

The role of the Times' Opinion section in this process is the same one that newspapers traditionally have played — to provide a forum for the voices of the community to be heard, as long as the points expressed have an underlying foundation of fact-based accuracy and fairness.

This service, however, is a two-way street.

We are providing a revision to our process for receiving, accepting and eventually publishing submissions to the Times regarding election issues and races.

Therefore, to accomplish this objective, today we are providing a reminder of our process for receiving, accepting and eventually publishing submissions to the Times regarding election issues and races.

As always, our focus is on being a news organization focused on local, state and regional issues. Letters on national political races will not be published.

Election-related letters, unlike those on other topics, will be held to our previously established 150-word limit. Guest Opinions on election issues, meanwhile, will not be published.

Those familiar with our Opinion page — either in print or online — no doubt have seen letters longer than 150 words, and four Guest Opinions, appear regarding the three ballot measures proposals that, if ultimately approved by voters, would restructure the Jackson County Board of Commissioners.

It has been our stance that prior to the initiatives actually being on the primary ballot, discussion of their inherent issues fell into a grey area somewhere between promoting a cause and an actual "election" subject.

That is no longer the case. The advocacy group Jackson County For All has submitted to the County Clerk's office far more signatures than required and — barring a highly unlikely circumstance that would cause the disqualification of a host of signatures found to be invalid — it appears probable that all three measures will be certified for inclusion on the ballot.

Letters on those measures will now fall under our word limit.

Meanwhile, although we might be a young news organization, this isn't our first time around the block.

Our editors, for instance, are well-versed in the markers that identify certain submissions as being those from a letter-writing campaign. We already have seen the same talking points, with similar phrasing, submitted multiple times.

We will be more vigilant on tracking that well-worn political tactic. And, if it appears we are reaching critical mass on letters about any election issue, we will refrain from publishing additional submissions.

This is all, though, about more than counting to 150 or spotting an organized campaign. Election letters in this Misinformation Age are as prone to unproven claims and inaccuracies, perhaps more so, as those on other topics.

There has been a substantial back-and-forth regarding the financial implications and other details of the ballot measures, a debate that has trickled into the letters which we have published to this point.

We readily admit that, as a growing, start-up local newsroom, we do not have the resources, the staffing, nor the time required to fact-check each claim contained in letters about the measures on the commissioners, or on other political issues.

If it is a choice between running such letters unvetted or not running them at all, we will choose the latter. Letter-writers making claims that aren't able to be fact-checked easily and quickly should expect such submissions to go unpublished.

The Rogue Valley Times, as we have since the beginning, will cover genuine news developments as they happen — from wherever they emanate — in regards to the Board of Commissioners ballot measures.

Those unfamiliar with the proposals and actions of Jackson County For All can find out more at the group's website: jacksoncountyforall.org. And as ballots are mailed out May 3, the actual wording of the initiatives will become available through the official voter's pamphlet.

If all this gives the appearance that we are “taking sides” ... well, we are.

We are coming down on the side of the factual, accurate and balanced practice of democracy here in Southern Oregon — in order to serve the best interests of our readers and local voters who, after all, will be those deciding the direction of our community.