

https://www.rv-times.com/localstate/initiative-would-expand-county-commission-to-5-lower-commissioner-salaries-and-make-the-board-nonpartisan/article_c24c73b8-1d9e-11ee-899f-fbbedc4931e0.html

FEATURED

Initiative would expand county commission to 5, lower commissioner salaries and make the board nonpartisan

By DAMIAN MANN for Ashland.news
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An effort is underway to change the structure of the Jackson County Board of Commissioners.

Rogue Valley Times / File photo

An effort is underway to ask voters in 2024 to increase the number of Jackson County commissioners from three to five and make the elected office nonpartisan. Voters would also be asked to reduce commissioner salaries, which are among the highest in Oregon.

Chat

“I haven’t run into any opposition whatsoever,” said Denise Krause, who has been gauging support in different communities and is one of the organizers of the Jackson County for All of Us petition campaign, jacksoncountyforall.org.

Former Jackson County commissioners including John Rachor, Sen. Jeff Golden, Dave Gilmour and Peter Sage have endorsed the idea.

The two main thrusts of the effort could potentially require different ballot measures in November 2024 to make the commissioner position nonpartisan and to increase the number of commissioners from three to five.

County commission races in nine of the 36 counties in Oregon are currently partisan, with Deschutes, Klamath and Douglas recently switching to nonpartisan.

Krause said a nonpartisan race for commissioner would allow the largest voting bloc in the county — the nonaffiliated voter — to participate in the primary elections. Nonaffiliated voters, who don’t register as a member of a political party, have grown in numbers over the years, outnumbering either Republicans or Democrats.

However, the creation of the districts would have to be done in a straightforward, nonpartisan manner, Krause said.

“We would have lines that would make sense to everybody,” she said. “There is so much diversity in our community. They each have their own unique personalities.”

Chat

Krause, a Democrat who lives in rural Jackson County outside of Ashland, expects to have a petition approved by election officials later this summer and then begin gathering about 10,000 signatures of registered voters to qualify for the November 2024 election. Organizers would have a year to gather the necessary signatures if the petition is approved.

Voters could also be asked to create an independent commission that would create five districts in the county to better reflect regional interests, similar to the four wards for the council positions in Medford.

Krause said many people she's talked to endorse a larger board of commissioners.

"They really want five because they want to feel they're being represented," she said.

Voters would also be asked to lower the salaries of each of the commissioners, who are currently at the top of the commissioner pay scale in Oregon with salaries that range from \$117,000 to \$136,000 a year. The idea is to take the combined salaries of the existing three commissioners and divide it up among the five new commissioners.

By comparison, Multnomah County commissioners earn almost \$125,000 a year, and the commission chair earns \$207,000.



Denise Krause is spearheading an effort to expand the county commission from three members to five and reduce commissioner salaries, which are the highest in Oregon.

Chat

One of the frequent concerns Krause hears is about the current commissioners' salaries.

“People think they get paid too much,” she said.

In the past, the commissioner salary has been something of a political football.

Jackson County Commissioner Colleen Roberts had denounced commissioners' salaries when she campaigned for her first term in office, vowing to accept a lesser amount of \$68,000. In her reelection campaign, she let voters know she would start taking the full salary if reelected.

In 2022, Roberts voted for elected official pay raises and cost-of-living raises.

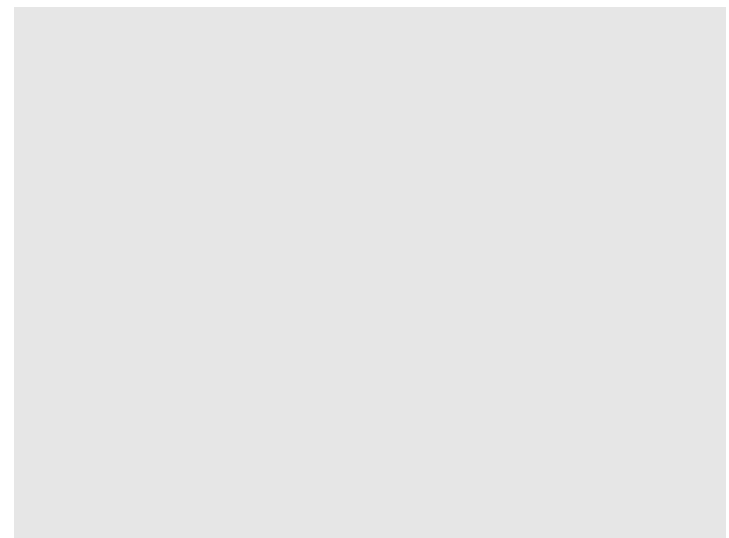
Various efforts have failed to gather steam over the years to create a nonpartisan board of commissioners or to increase the number of commissioners.

Gilmour, who was county commissioner from 2003-2010, didn't get much traction at the time from other county commissioners to make the change to a nonpartisan board.

Since Gilmour left office, no other Democrat has won a commissioner race in Jackson County.

Gilmour said that a nonpartisan commission would allow the nonaffiliated voters to participate in the primary election.

“It would improve the quality of our county commissioners,” he said.



A graphic of Jackson County's 160,525 voters shows Democrats (blue dots) with 27%; Republicans (red) with 31%; nonaffiliated voters (yellow) with 35%; and Others (gray) with 7%. Graphic by John Horvick of DHM Research

A three-member county Board of Commissioners has been around since the beginning of the 1900s, he said. Since then, the population of the county has increased from around 25,000 to almost 225,000.

Gilmour said his experience with having only three commissioners showed him that five would be better.

It can prove difficult at times to have all three commissioners at a meeting, and Oregon public meeting laws also make it difficult for two commissioners to talk with each other about any official business outside of public meetings

Two county commissioners could be construed as a quorum, or a majority of the board, Gilmour said.

Correction: This story was corrected to say that county commission elections in nine of the 36 counties in Oregon are currently partisan. It was also corrected to say that a nonpartisan commission would allow nonaffiliated voters to participate in primary elections.

This story first appeared at [Ashland.news](https://www.ashlandnews.com). Reach writer Damian Mann at dmannnews@gmail.com.