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Three initiatives aim to shake up county commission

By BUFFY POLLOCK Rogue Valley Times
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Jackson County commissioners Dave Dotterer, left, Colleen Roberts and Rick Dyer. Commissioners approved \$26,400 Wednesday to cover the first year of a three-year contract for mapping software used to help plan evacuation routes. Jamie Lusch / Rogue Valley Times

Signatures will be gathered starting Monday for a trio of voter initiatives that could change the look and function of the Jackson County Board of Commissioners.

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One proposed initiative would increase the size of the commission from three to five, one would cut commissioner salaries, and the third would make the election nonpartisan.

Jackson County Elections Clerk Chris Walker authorized signature-gathering Friday for [the initiatives](#).

Denise Krause, an organizer for [Jackson County for All of Us](#), said volunteers would begin gathering signatures Monday with a goal to secure 10,000 signatures for each initiative.

One initiative will ask whether voters want the board of commissioners to switch from partisan to nonpartisan.

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 increased over the years, outnumbering either Republicans or Democrats.

Another of the initiatives would increase the number of commissioners from three to five. Krause said two additional seats would help increase efficiency under Oregon's public meeting laws.

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With only three members, if any two commissioners talk among themselves, Krause said, it's considered a quorum, and the public must be given notice that such conversations will take place.

She also said the change is required for a growing population.

"The main point here is that we've only had three since well before 1900, since the 1800s — when we had 13,000 people in this county," she said. "We still have three, and we have 223,000 people living in Jackson County."

The third initiative would slash commissioner pay. Commissioner salaries range at present from \$117,000 to \$136,000 a year, depending on tenure. Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek makes just over \$93,000 annually, Krause pointed out.

The plan, Krause said, is to total the existing three salaries and divide that amount by five. If the measure passes, the five commissioners would cost taxpayers the same amount as the current three.

"They make more than the governor of our state. And the Oregon Secretary of State was only making 70-something thousand. But our Jackson County commissioners, man, they take care of it," said Krause.

"Their salaries are so much higher than the median income here. In a recession, average workers suffer, but our commissioners keep getting more and more. How is that right? We're just trying to set up a fair system."

Dave Gilmour, a former Jackson County commissioner, is in favor of the measures.

Gilmour, who served from 2003-2010, was the last Democrat elected to the Jackson County commission. During his tenure, Gilmour urged that the commission be changed to a nonpartisan board.

"The nonpartisan part of this is really important. With the exception of the people that we elect to go to Salem, all other elected positions are, and should be, nonpartisan," Gilmour said. "The sheriff, the clerk, the assessor, the mayors,

all the city council members ... they are all nonpartisan, with the county commissioners being the one exception."

"It's a historical throwback, and I'm not sure why it's held up, because it really doesn't make any sense. ...

And when it comes to the primary, when voters determine who goes to the general election, that right now is dominated by the Democrats and Republicans, when there's a whole third of our registered voters who get no say. They're pretty much frozen out, even though they're paying taxes to run the election."

Commissioner Rick Dyer said he had concerns that the proposed changes could bring unintended consequences. Dyer said an increase to the number of commissioners, even with lower salaries, would not bring a significant cost savings.

Dyer said he worried, too, that lower salaries would attract less-qualified candidates.

"They talked about reducing salaries so it doesn't cost more. ... Well, that's a fallacy, because if you increase it from three to five, you have to build two more offices. You have to hire that much more support staff. There's travel, training. ... We have an independent salary review committee to set the salaries at what they think is going to attract and retain the most qualified individuals for the job," Dyer said.



Former Jackson County commissioner Dave Gilmour, right, holds the door for Denise Krause as they exit the Jackson County Courthouse Friday, where they received the go-ahead to begin gathering signatures for three measures aimed at reforming how county commissioners are elected and paid.

Andy Atkinson / Rogue Valley Times

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“Essentially, with reduced salaries, it will cost more money to have five lower-paid, less-qualified county commissioners.”

As to the issue of partisan vs. nonpartisan, Dyer said being able to identify the party from which the candidate is affiliated is helpful for voters who do no more than glance at their ballots on election day.

“Partisan works in this position. People, if they don’t know a lot about a candidate before — maybe they’ve never served or ran — a partisan election gives you a pretty good picture of where that person stands, what their principles are, what their values are,” he said.

“The proof is in the pudding. The way we have it set up has served our county very, very well for many years,” Dyer said. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

Signature-gatherers will aim to collect 10,000 signatures for each of the three initiatives. The statutory number of valid signatures required for an initiative to make the ballot is 8% of the votes cast for governor in the previous general election, or 8,351 valid signatures. Walker said signature gatherers are advised to attain 20% to 25% more than the required number to make up for signatures that cannot be verified.

If the signature effort is successful, the initiatives will appear on the ballot in November 2024. The signatures have to be submitted 90 days prior to the election.

“We have less than a year, but I think we want to get it done as quickly as possible,” Krause said.

“We have a tremendous amount of support, and this has been a long time coming.”

Signature gatherers plan to begin their campaign outside the Ashland Shop'n Kart on Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays, and at area growers markets. A complete list of signature-gathering locations will be added to the Jackson County for All of Us website, www.jacksoncountyforall.org/.

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Buffy Pollock is a news and features reporter for the Rogue Valley Times. A Florida native, she began her journalism career at the Tampa Tribune before moving to Southern Oregon in the summer of 2000. She reported on community news for the Mail Tribune for 23 years.

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