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## Group promoting county commissioner ballot initiatives now targets May primary

By DAMIAN MANN for the 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

An accelerated timeline could send a trio of ballot measures to the May primary election to increase the number of Jackson County commissioners, reduce their salaries and make the positions nonpartisan.

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**Jackson County for All of Us** said it has gathered 75% of the 10,500 signatures needed to help qualify the initiatives for the ballot after four months of canvassing voters.

With just 2,500 signatures remaining, organizers think they have a chance of getting the rest by Feb. 20 to qualify for the May 21 primary.

“If it’s possible, we might get it done,” said Denise Krause, one of the chief organizers. “If we don’t, then we have until November.”



Organizers had expected it would take up to a year to qualify when they started their signature-gathering campaign in mid-September.

There are **three ballot measures** that organizers are asking voters to consider:

The first would change the makeup of the Board of Commissioners from partisan to nonpartisan, allowing nonaffiliated voters, or those who don’t belong to any party, to cast a vote in primary elections.

Former Jackson County commissioner Dave Gilmour, right, holds the door for Denise Krause as they exit the Jackson County Courthouse in mid-September, 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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Out of 36 counties in Oregon, nine, or 25%, remain partisan. Klamath County changed its commissioners to nonpartisan in 2013, while Douglas County did so in 2006.

The second ballot measure would increase the number of commissioners from three to five. The three-member board was created in 1853 when the population was less than 4,000. Now it's 223,259, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

The third ballot measure would take the total pay of the three existing county commissioners and divide it among the five new commissioners.

Jackson County commissioners have some of the highest commissioner salaries in the state, earning from \$112,382.40 to \$143,416.00, plus benefits. According to Jackson County for All, the new salary schedule under the ballot proposal would spread the existing three salaries among five commissioners, lowering each salary to a level comparable to other similar-sized counties.

Krause, who previously ran for commissioner as a Democrat in 2022, said organizers have seen lots of support for the changes but acknowledge it will be a heavy lift to get the remaining 2,500 signatures in just over a month.

“We call it the fourth and final and hardest quarter,” she said.

Krause said she is not concerned about the impacts on the ballot measures from a strong Republican turnout in the November election, which will include a presidential race.

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“Not for this,” she said. “This is popular no matter what party you’re in.”

A May ballot measure would avoid the political “noise” that will confront voters in the November election, she said.

According to Krause, the only strong opposition to the ballot measures comes from four Republicans: the three current commissioners and Randy Sparacino, Medford’s mayor who is running for the seat being vacated by outgoing Commissioner Dave Dotterrer.

As of Monday, Jackson County for All has gathered almost 8,000 signatures, but elections officials recommend they gather 10,500 in case of disqualifications, such as someone not being a registered voter in Jackson County.

The actual number of signatures needed to qualify is 8,400.

Krause said the Feb. 20 deadline gives organizers a chance to gather the signatures and to prepare paperwork to give to the Jackson County Elections Office by Feb. 21.

“There’s no guarantee we’re going to make this,” Krause said.

Even if about 125 volunteers don’t meet the Feb. 20 deadline, Krause said they’ll have plenty of time to gather signatures for the November election.

Many of the volunteers who were busy over the holiday period are now back in action.

“They’ve pledged a bunch of new signatures,” she said.

John Rachor, a Republican and former county commissioner, said he takes a somewhat different view of the ballot measures.

He said he's not surprised by how quick organizers have collected signatures.

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“Any time you do something like this that punishes people, people seem to support it,” he said. By "punish," Rachor said he is referring to giving the current county commissioners a pay cut, though he cites additional administrative costs to support the expanded commissioner board.

Rachor, who is listed as a supporter of the ballot measures on the Jackson County for All website, said he can understand how parts of the county, particularly toward Ashland, don't feel adequately represented by the current makeup of the board.

At the same time, he said he thinks the three Republican county commissioners are all “good, quality people.”

Rachor said he's also not sure that having five county commissioners will improve the situation or provide a better financial outlook for the county. He said he thinks the county has done a great job with its budget.

“What improvements do we need to make in the county that we don't have now?” he said.

Rachor said he's told organizers of the ballot measures, “If the public supports it, I will support it.”

**Editor's note:** This story has been clarified to explain the salary range for Jackson County commissioners.

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