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GUEST COLUMN: Partisanship keeps candidates from running

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Guest Column

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A recent Rogue Valley Times [editorial](#) noted that no Democrat has yet announced a plan to run for a position on the Jackson County Board of Commissioners.

The editorial hints at a real problem. Why aren't we getting lots of good candidates rushing to file for the position?

Part of the answer is partisanship. Partisanship makes the office unattractive to many people of good will. The Jackson County for All citizen committee is addressing that problem. The committee includes Democrats, Republicans, and nonaffiliated voters.

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The Jackson County for All petition drive makes the commissioner job nonpartisan — just like every other county official. The second of the three ballot measures cuts commissioner salaries approximately in half from the current \$143,000. The third increases the number of commissioners from three to five.

Three commissioners was the number set in 1853 when the county census showed fewer than 4,000 people.

A stated goal of the Jackson County for All volunteer group is to allow the county's unaffiliated voters to participate equally in choosing county leaders.

Nonaffiliated voters are the largest group in Jackson County. Using 2021 figures, there were 54,121 nonaffiliated voters and only 45,515 Democrats and 49,285 Republicans. There were also 8,363 Independent voters. Independent is a registered party and are in addition to the nonaffiliated.

Under the current primary system, nonaffiliated voters don't get to participate in choosing finalist county nominees in Democratic and Republican primaries. Choosing finalists are sometimes where the most consequential choices of candidate gets made.

The initiatives attempt to catch up to the modern reality that a great many people don't like this era's nasty partisanship, so they call themselves nonaffiliated. It's the fastest growing group.

Plus, there is the point made in the Times' editorial. Who wants that job?

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Making the commissioner job nonpartisan will likely increase the potential pool of good candidates, people who are running for office out of a spirit of public service.

I understand why people of good will are reluctant to file for a partisan office. The moment a person files as a partisan candidate a third of the public has an instant aversion to them. Teams of people organize and raise money to pay for negative advertising to demonize that person.

One becomes a target. One is also drafted into being a soldier in the national battleground of red and blue. We saw the transition with a local officeholder. As a nonpartisan Medford mayor, Randy Sparacino was broadly popular from what I heard — a nice guy, generally acceptable to everyone. I didn't hear mean things said about him. I didn't hear him say mean things about other people.

But when he became a candidate for a partisan office — state senator — his campaign thought it necessary to spend over a million dollars in this tiny media market with ads demonstrating that he was a loyal Republican at war with half the people in his district. That is the partisan game. What sane person wants to be part of that?

The issues commissioners face aren't partisan. Commissioners, if they are doing their jobs and not busy protecting themselves from a primary election challenge, address issues with no partisan skew.

Don't Democrats and Republicans want a working animal shelter? Are conditional use permits on rock quarry hours of operation a partisan issue? Are road grader maintenance schedules partisan?

We need not try to make the Jackson County commissioner job attractive by overpaying them. Instead, we should remove the partisanship that diminishes the effectiveness of commissioners in office and makes the job unattractive to people who think of themselves as citizens, not partisan warriors.

Don't we want people in office who get along with nearly everyone, people comfortable and on good terms with a wide variety of people? I sure do.

Chat

Peter Sage of Medford, a former Jackson County commissioner, is a supporter of and financial contributor to the Jackson County For All campaign. A version of this piece first appeared at peterwsage.blogspot.com

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