

OREGON PRIMARY: County commissioners ballot measures hit political divide

Jackson County for All seeks to increase commissioner seats from three to five, make them nonpartisan, cut salaries to \$75,000

A political tug-of-war over three ballot measures that seek to transform the Jackson County Board of Commissioners is about to encounter its final battle on election day.

A volunteer, grassroots effort known as Jackson County for All qualified three measures for the May 21 primary ballot, but it has hit a wall of opposition from sitting commissioners and prominent local Republicans.

The measures propose creating a nonpartisan board of commissioners, increasing the number of commissioners from three to five and cutting commissioners' salaries to \$75,000.
denise krause 1

Jeanne Chouard, left, Denise Krause and Regina Ayars — all members of the Jackson County for All campaign to change the makeup of the county Board of Commissioners — look over signatures at the Ashland Public Library on Feb. 13.

Jamie Lusch / Rogue Valley Times
Measure 15-224

Measure 15-224 seeks to make the commissioner position nonpartisan. Of the 36 counties in Oregon, 29 are nonpartisan, including nearby Klamath, Douglas and Josephine counties.

Former Medford Mayor Al Densmore and Medford businessman Bill Thorndike both support a nonpartisan commissioner position based on their experience in government.

“That nonpartisan status kept us on friendly terms with people across the political spectrum,” Densmore and Thorndike said in the Jackson County voters’ pamphlet. “It allows a better, more cooperative spirit within the boards. Nonpartisan boards avoid most of the partisan rivalries that create bickering and logjams that we see in Salem and Washington, D.C.”

County Commissioner Colleen Roberts said that creating a nonpartisan board of commissioners is a veiled attempt to hide the party affiliation of the candidates.

“This is a small niche of people who seek to change the charter to benefit themselves: It’s an attempt to ‘pack the court’ and hide their party affiliation and agenda behind a non-partisan ballot,” she said in the voters’ pamphlet.

Apart from the commissioners, the other elected county officials positions are nonpartisan, as are many other local elected offices.

Supporters say Measure 15-224 would allow nonaffiliates — voters with no political party affiliation — to vote for a commissioner in primary elections. There are at least 20% more nonaffiliates registered in Jackson County than there are voters registered with either of the two major parties.

Barbara Klein, a leader of League of Women Voters Rogue Valley, said her organization has supported a switch to a nonpartisan board of commissioners for years.

She said it will give the largest voting bloc, the nonaffiliates, a voice in elections.

“It is a restructuring that will serve to represent more people in Jackson County,” she said in the voters' pamphlet. “Just as importantly, it will allow ALL our voters, including minor party members, ‘independents’ and non-affiliated to have a meaningful voice.”

Measure 15-225

Measure 15-225 seeks to expand the county Board of Commissioners from three to five.

Smaller counties such as Klamath, Douglas and Josephine have only three. Deschutes County, with a slightly smaller population than Jackson, also has three, but an effort is underway in Deschutes seeking to increase its board to five.

Larger counties such as Lane, Multnomah and Clackamas have five commissioners. Jackson has the sixth-largest population of the 36 counties in Oregon.

In the voters' pamphlet, a dozen supporters of Measure 15-225, such as Rep. Pam Marsh, D-Ashland, local government leaders and former commissioners Sue Kupillas and Dave Gilmour pointed out that the county had three commissioners when it had a population of 1,506 in 1853. The county's population is now nearly a quarter million.

“Adding two commissioners will not lead to bigger government. We already have ‘big government,’” they wrote. “Five commissioners will be better supervisors of the sprawling county bureaucracy, and provide more accountability.”

A number of other local leaders urged voters to reject having a larger board of commissioners.

Sickler1.JPG (copy)

Jackson County Sheriff Nate Sickler said in the voters' pamphlet, “These ballot measures seem to be driven by political motivation rather than the motivation to produce the best outcomes for our community ... The increase in cost to change our current Board of Commissioner structure will almost certainly have impacts on the Sheriff's Office budget. Adding more commissioners could reduce public safety resources.”

Measure 15-226

Measure 15-226 proposes cutting commissioner salaries to \$75,000 by 2027, essentially cutting two of the current commissioners' salaries in half. Salaries for commissioners Roberts and Rick Dyer are proposed to be \$150,009.60 by July 1, putting their salaries higher than similar commissioner positions in the other largest counties in Oregon: Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas, Lane and Marion.

Roberts, who became commissioner in 2015, initially campaigned on taking a reduced salary but has been taking the full amount for the past few years.

County officials say the salary cap, even if passed by voters, could be stricken by the courts due to a conflict between the county charter and state law regarding how salaries for elected county officials are set.

If the salary measure is rejected by the courts, five new commissioners could end up receiving the higher salaries.

Adding staff and remodeling offices to accommodate two new commissioners could increase costs, but supporters of the measures say the increased costs are overstated.

The county provided a rough estimate for adding two new commissioners, positing \$692,419.88 in the high range, but Jackson County for All presented a far lower estimate of \$45,480.98 by removing what it called “padding” from the county’s estimate.

Former Commissioner John Rachor, who initially was listed as a supporter of the ballot measures, has rejected the two measures that would decrease salaries and expand the board to five commissioners.

In particular, he took issue with accusations from Jackson County for All against county Administrator Danny Jordan who provided a breakdown of the costs of increasing the board from three to five.

“I strongly oppose ballot measures 15-225 and 15-226,” Rachor wrote in the voters’ pamphlet. “The misleading tactics utilized by the proponents of these initiatives have prompted me to speak out, especially in light of the unjust accusations leveled at the county Administrator.”

Former Commissioner Peter Sage stated in the voters’ pamphlet, “Jackson County commissioner salaries have gotten out of hand. That should not be a surprise. They set their own salaries in the budget committee of six people, three of whom are the commissioners themselves.”

Sage said the commissioners perform a somewhat similar role to state representatives and senators, who receive a \$39,206 salary.

“A \$75,000/year salary — plus great health and retirement benefits — still leaves commissioners being paid almost double the median wage in Jackson County,” Sage said in the voters’ pamphlet. “That’s enough to get good candidates motivated by public service.”

Commissioner Dyer, who is in his third term, denounced the salary caps for commissioners, saying they could invite costly legal disputes over conflicts with the county charter, not to mention adding support staff and remodeling offices.

“The estimations by the county administrator paint a bleak financial picture, suggesting that these measures could impose a staggering \$1 million cost on taxpayers in the inaugural year, with an additional \$500,000 burden annually,” Dyer stated in the voters’ pamphlet.

In a phone interview, Dyer said he considers the commissioner position a full-time job, a job that required him to close his full-time business.

He said the current salary is appropriate considering the county has an annual budget of more than \$600 million, 1,100 employees and 17 departments, including the Medford airport.

“It’s important to have a good basis of knowledge, breadth of knowledge and good critical thinking skills,” he said.

With a salary of \$75,000, he said the commissioner position would not attract as many qualified people.

“That certainly would be a factor ... against me wanting to run again,” he said.