

Tension over charter proposal at meeting of Jackson County commissioners

By Casey Valentine of the Daily Courier

MEDFORD — Ballot measures that would restructure the way government works in both Jackson County and Josephine County, taking political parties out of the equation in the process, have been the subject of growing attention in recent weeks.

On Thursday, there was plenty of tension at the Jackson County Board of Commissioners meeting, with the county's top manager insisting the proposed rewrite of the county charter will prove costly, and proponents of the charter change accusing county commissioners of partisan shenanigans.

The majority of those in attendance were supporters of Jackson County For All, the organization that is trying to put a trio of measures on the May ballot that would make the commissioner positions nonpartisan, increase the number of commissioners from three to five, and decrease the pay rate for the commissioners.

On the agenda was an item listing the financial impact of the ballot measures for discussion. However, county Commissioner Rick Dyer informed those in attendance the meeting was for staff only and the discussion of the charter ballot measures was strictly among the commissioners and County Administrator Danny Jordan.

There would be no outburst, reactions or comments from the audience, Dyer warned.

Unspoken was the context that last week, Denise Krause, campaign manager for Jackson County For All, filed a grievance with the county accusing the board of violating Oregon's public meetings law.

Jordan, who manages the county for the commissioners, disputed the charter group's claims regarding the commissioners' salaries and the hoped-for cost savings involved with dividing three salaries among five commissioners.

"Salaries are only part of the compensation," Jordan said, adding, "If we add two commissioners, we'll need to add another support person. Commissioners need a support person. That person does everything from records retention, to scheduling meetings and meeting minutes. That costs more money."

Jordan also presented data to the commissioners, along with some conceptual drawings showing adding offices for two additional commissioners.

"We can't just put two commissioners out in the hall. ... We do remodels all the time and these are our facilities maintenance estimates and this is the least expensive option at \$350,000 and this one is \$400,000 and this is a one-time cost."

"When you add this to the operating costs, in year one, on the low end, this will increase the cost of commissioners about \$600,000 to \$700,000. To say that it won't cost more is not true. It will cost more. These are my estimates. It's not my job to say whether this passes or not, but I have to prepare the budget."

Dyer, meanwhile, accused Jackson County For All petitioners of misleading people about the costs during signature drives. He specifically mentioned Krause, his opponent for his seat in 2022.

"There has been a lot of misleading information that people have heard, that made the decision to sign, and the press should be asking if it's true," Dyer said.

Last week Krause filed a grievance with the county that accused the board last month of improperly discussing the attendance of Dyer and fellow Commissioner Dave Dotterrer at a recent Jackson County Republican Committee meeting, as well as the ballot measures and a partisan strategy against the measures.

"They were discussing partisan strategy during a public meeting, and this isn't the first time this has happened," Krause said. "This is a perfect example of why these positions need to be nonpartisan. The commissioners need to work and represent the people of Jackson County, not the party."

Of Thursday's meeting, she said the county has not shared financial information with the charter group, adding, "It is still inaccessible to us."

"Our ballot measures are very straightforward, yet they don't address the lack of representation for our growing county that is the whole point of our initiatives," she said. "Today's meeting was about timing and they invited the press for a reason."

The Jackson County charter proposal is similar to one in Josephine County, but different in some important ways.

The Josephine County charter proposal, which will be on the ballot as Measure 17-116, increases the size of the Board of Commissioners from three full-time commissioners to five part-time, reduces their pay in the process, enshrines that all county offices are nonpartisan, and adds a professionally trained county manager. It would also make the jobs of county legal counsel and surveyor by appointment instead of elected.

The key difference between the two proposals is that Jackson County commissioner candidates are currently partisan, meaning candidates run as either Republicans, Democrats or some other political party.

Josephine County's commissioner races are not partisan, but there has been talk in Republican circles of making those races partisan too.

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