

County commissioner ballot measures qualify for May 21 primary election

Voters will decide whether to expand board, lower commissioners' salaries and make positions nonpartisan

Three ballot measures that seek major changes to the Jackson County Board of Commissioners have qualified for the May 21 primary.

“We did it so fast,” said Denise Krause, chief petitioner for Jackson County for All. “We just had overwhelming demand gathering signatures. People were looking for us, saying, ‘Where do I sign? Where do I sign?’”

In reviewing the signature pages, the number of invalid signatures was relatively low for a ballot initiative, according to Jackson County Clerk Chris Walker.

The measures now have official ballot numbers.

Measure 15-224 asks voters if they want the Board of Commissioners to become nonpartisan.

Measure 15-225 seeks to increase the number of commissioners from three to five.

Measure 15-226 would codify decreasing the commissioners salaries into the county charter.

Each measure easily surpassed the 8,351 signatures needed to qualify for the ballot, according to the Jackson County elections office.

The nonpartisan commissioner measure had 10,209 signatures. The measure increasing the number of commissioners got 10,354. The measure that seeks to decrease commissioners' salaries had 10,134.

“We always expect to lose some signatures — that’s why we got the extra padding,” Krause said.

Over the next two months, Jackson County for All plans to hold five town halls in different communities to help get the word out.

Walker, who oversees the Jackson County elections, said her office did a statistical review of the signatures, reviewed the signature pages and made sure the rules were followed.

For each measure, the valid signature rate hit a percentage in the mid-90s, she said.

The relatively quick gathering of signatures for the ballot measures, she said, helped lessen the number of invalid signatures.

“The sooner you do it, the better the signatures are,” Walker said.

Over longer periods of time, you will have more voters who move to a different county or a voter registration becomes inactive, said Walker, explaining why some signatures are deemed invalid.

Also, in any ballot measure campaign, signatures are gathered from people who mistakenly say they're registered to vote, Walker said.

To qualify, ballot organizers needed to get about 10,500 signatures to allow for those found invalid.

Originally, Krause and other organizers targeted the November 2024 election, but in January they changed their goal to February when they were in sight of the 10,500 mark.

Organizers had expected it would take up to a year to qualify for the ballot when they started their campaign in September 2023.

Instead, signatures were gathered in less than five months.

During this process, the organizers of the ballot measures and county officials haven't seen eye to eye.

Jackson County for All recently requested that the Oregon Secretary of State investigate the county for alleged elections law violations.

A county staff attorney has refuted the allegations.

Jackson County commissioners have among the highest commissioner salaries in the state, earning between \$112,382.40 and \$143,416, plus benefits. Under the ballot proposal, the new salary schedule would spread the existing three salaries among five commissioners, lowering each salary to a level comparable to other similar-sized counties, according to Jackson County for All.

Jackson County Administrator Danny Jordan has said the ballot measure that seeks to lower commissioner salaries could create a conflict between Oregon law and the county charter regarding compensation, a matter that might have to be settled in the courts.

The three-member Board of Commissioners was created in 1853 when the county's population was 1,506; it is now more than 220,000.