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## **GUEST COLUMN: Commissioners structure outdated, exclusive**

BY BILL THORNDIKE JR.

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# Guest Column

ROGUE VALLEY  
**TIMES**

As a lifelong valley resident, I have watched the Jackson County Board of Commissioners with interest.

In my adult life, I have participated on a great many boards, including Asante, Southern Oregon University, SAIF, the Port of Portland, the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, multiple charitable foundation boards and the Jackson County Budget Committee. When being introduced, people joke that I have a lot of board experience.

I support the proposed changes to the Jackson County Board of Commissioners.

Chat

The three-commissioner structure, established in 1852, does not allow sufficient representation for a county of 223,000 residents. Good governance recognizes that a wider range of representation improves the quality of policy decisions and better represents all the county residents.

Who is not represented on the board lessens its ability to be the best county government.

My experience with boards is that frank communication in committees is where the real work gets done. Back-and-forth communication between board members fleshes out the opportunities. The Oregon Public Meetings law forbids communication in a three-person board, because any two commissioners are a majority.

This means that an intermediary — the county administrator or someone reporting to him — is a middleman in every interaction between commissioners. That is a formula for a weak board and a structure that pushes real decision-making into the county bureaucracy where it is less visible.

Commissioner Dotterer [warned in an op-ed](#) that five commissioners rather than the current three would require hundreds of thousands of dollars of new office space. With five commissioners, they could now share an office or utilize unused office space in a county building or a home office with meeting rooms available in county buildings.

Chat

I have long been an independent, non-party-affiliated voter. I want less partisanship at every level of government, and I especially want less partisanship in local government.

County issues like jail space and jail bonds, homeless encampments on the Bear Creek Greenway, and operation of the animal shelter are not partisan. Republican/Democratic labeling is divisive and inappropriate.

Moreover, making the offices nonpartisan would mean that the now-largest group of voters — nonaffiliated ones like me — can finally participate in choosing the finalist candidates. The current structure locks us out.

In addition, maybe by making the position nonpartisan, we will get different, possibly better candidates coming forward. Many well-qualified, public-spirited people retract from getting involved in partisan politics, where one automatically embitters opponents. It makes no sense for a local office.

Jackson County should recognize the new reality: We have a strong-administrator form of government. We need a county governing structure and salary structure that recognizes this.

Let's not pretend commissioners are operational managers with operational management salaries. They are our representatives. So, let's have enough of them so that they can do that job better.

In fact, commissioners have one additional job — oversight and supervision of the county administrator.

Chat

A three-person board, required to make significant communications about the administrator by translating it through that very administrator, is hobbled at best, and some would argue ineffective.

I don't blame the commissioners personally. It is the structure, so let's fix the structure.

Make the office nonpartisan. Get control of their salaries by paying them like representatives, not hands-on-managers. Increase the number from three to five.

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