

Ballot organizers: County 'inflated' cost estimate for commissioners expansion

Jackson County for All offers alternative numbers at town hall

Organizers of three local ballot measures criticized a county cost estimate to expand the Board of Commissioners as “artificially inflated” at a town hall Tuesday night.

The county recently 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.”

Jackson County for All recently submitted signatures to the county elections office to qualify three ballot measures for the May 21 primary election that would increase the number of commissioners from three to five, make the position nonpartisan and reduce commissioner salaries.

The signatures are under review by Jackson County elections staff, a process that must be concluded by March 20 to qualify for the primary.

County officials and Jackson County for All have engaged in a back-and-forth over the past few months, culminating in Jackson County for All recently requesting the Oregon Secretary of State to investigate the county for alleged elections law violations.

A county staff attorney has refuted the allegations.

About 100 supporters and detractors of the ballot measures showed up at the Tuesday town hall at the Medford library. Among the supporters were Medford businessman Bill Thorndike and former county commissioners Sue Kupillas and Dave Gilmour.

Danny Jordan, the county administrator, had provided the estimated cost at a Feb. 15 meeting to increase the Board of Commissioners from three to five, offering different ranges depending on factors such as whether extensive remodeling might be necessary at the Jackson County Courthouse building at 10 S. Oakdale Ave.

At the low end, it could add \$212,619.88 for operating costs for two new commissioners, support staff and other services, not including any extensive remodeling, according to the county estimate.

In its own estimate, Jackson County for All maintained the county could make do with less extra staff. This, the group argues, would decrease by more than half the almost \$120,000 estimate released by county officials.

One of the biggest instances of “padding” claimed by the ballot organizers is the up-to-\$450,000 to reconfigure the commissioners' offices. Instead, they say there is sufficient space in the existing county building and other opportunities to share offices without going through an extensive remodel.

They say the existing auditorium could be altered slightly to accommodate five commissioners rather than require the remodel the county says could cost \$30,000.

Another “glaring” instance of padding, the group claims, is \$50,000 in dues for the Association of Oregon Counties. Jackson County ended its association membership in 2017.

“These numbers are artificially inflated,” said Denise Krause, chief organizer of the ballot measures. “This is just Danny (Jordan) giving some padded estimates.”

Jordan responded in a text message to the Rogue Valley Times, stating, “I stand behind the budget estimate I provided.”

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.

Jackson County commissioners have some of the highest commissioner salaries in the state, earning between \$112,382.40 and \$143,416.00, plus benefits. The new salary schedule under the ballot proposal 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.

Krause said a Board of Commissioners operating with an eye toward making its department more fiscally prudent could likely come up with more cost savings than the county's estimate and would also tie future potential salary increases to prevailing wages in the county.

Even if it ends up costing slightly more to run the commissioners' office, she said it would be worth it to get better representation for the county.

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She said that if voters approve the ballot measures, it would take two years for the changes to go fully into effect. In the meantime, salaries would continue to increase for existing commissioners, she said.

Krause, who ran unsuccessfully for commissioner in 2022, describes the existing commissioner salaries and expenses as “lavish,” pointing to the \$8,500 for an annual retreat for commissioners and another \$68,000 for travel and training.

Kupillas, who served as county commissioner for 16 years, said she supports a five-member Board of Commissioners to provide better representation for Jackson County's increasing population. 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.

Kupillas thought the Jackson County for All estimate of the cost of adding commissioners was more reasonable than the numbers put out by the county.

“Rather than have expanded offices at the (Jackson County) courthouse, I'd rather see them out meeting with the community and going out to town halls around the valley,” she said.