

La Grande City Council candidates discuss economic development, Quiet Zone, housing crisis

By **Cherise Kaechele**
The Observer

Three La Grande City Council candidates participated in the Union County Forum on Monday, expressing their views on the Quiet Zone, economic development and the housing crisis.

Incumbent Justin Rock is being challenged by Ashley O'Toole for Position 7. The pair were joined by Jim Whitbeck, who is running unchallenged for Position 6 but wanted to give his input on pressing issues and to introduce himself to the community.

The candidates were asked to list two issues that La Grande is facing and to give examples on how they would solve these problems.

Rock started the forum by stating he is proud to have been raised in this community. He is a local business owner who has served on the city council for one term and sat on other committees previously.

Rock said his two priorities are the Urban Renewal Agency and road improvements.

"The URA has been in place for 20 years," he said. "As with anything in life, priorities change."

Rock said he'd like to see a review of the regulations and priorities of the program. He would also like to continue to underlevy the URA to put more money back into the city's general fund. He also plans to prioritize businesses that would have return on investments during the Call for Projects.

"We need more positive growth," he said. Additionally, he said he'd like to make roads a bigger priority for the city.

Infrastructure is what shows how healthy and vibrant a community is, he said. The problem La Grande faces is funding to help with the roads. He would like to hold a work session with relevant road construction committees to make a plan of action for needed repairs as well as long-term road maintenance.

O'Toole said he is originally from Missouri but has been in La Grande for years and immediately fell in love with the place.

Since moving here, he has co-founded the annual Eastern Oregon Beer Festival and organized La Grande's New Year's Eve Block Party. O'Toole also currently sits on the Union County Chamber of Commerce Board and the City of La Grande's budget committee.

He said he has been hearing from voters about their concerns and, if elected, he would make sure the peoples' opinions are heard by the council.

"I'm a father and a small business owner — I'm not a politician," he said. "I will be offering an outsider's opinion. I'm not from this area, but I've lived around the world."

O'Toole said a fresh perspective would be beneficial to the council.

"I won't make decisions based on how things have always been," he said.

He said his two main goals would be to increase the inventory of affordable housing and advocate for fiscal responsibility on the council.

"La Grande has been blessed with natural beauty and (family wage jobs)," he said. "Those jobs attract people to the community and we need a place to put them."

O'Toole, who also works

as a Realtor, said his real estate expertise will be beneficial in discussing the housing crisis.

"I hope to be a part of the solution," he said.

Whitebeck said he moved to the area four years ago.

"I spent most of my professional career in corporate consulting and (Human Resources)," he said. "I decided to start my own business."

Whitbeck, who owns Blue Mountain Outfitters, said the community has been very kind to him and he's tried to pay back La Grande as much as possible.

He's sat on committees like the La Grande Planning Commission and the La Grande Main Street Downtown.

Whitbeck also believes the housing crisis is a top issue.

"Being on the planning commission, (I've seen that) there's a systemic issue on all levels (regarding the housing crisis) in La Grande," he said.

The City of La Grande recently received funding to conduct a study that will help determine whether the shortage is among low, middle or high income housing. Whitbeck said that will definitely help the city.

His other priority is economic development. He said there's an ideal balance to

be found between attracting businesses on a large scale while also ensuring the downtown area remains vibrant.

One question posed to the city council candidates was the possibility of extending the urban growth boundary to help with the housing crisis.

O'Toole said there's still land that has not been used within the urban growth boundary and there are "quite a few" vacant lots.

"Within city limits there's room left," he said. "The issue we're having is to incentivize (contractors) to get them to build here. We've got a solid planning department. They do what they can to get a 'yes' to build the house or apartment building."

Whitbeck deferred to O'Toole's answer by saying O'Toole understood the topic better, but said there are opportunities to expand the boundary.

"Having served on the planning commission, I have been very impressed with (its) service. The staff and those involved are doing everything they can to get more (people to build)."

Rock said the best thing to do right now is wait for the housing study to be conducted.

"We know we need housing, but what kind? Mid-level, low or high?" he

said. Finally, the Quiet Zone came up as a topic for discussion. The candidates were asked how they felt about implementing a Quiet Zone at railroad crossings in La Grande.

Whitbeck said he fully supports having a Quiet Zone because the current noise level produced by the trains' whistles impacts local businesses.

"Look at the Yelp reviews for local hotels and you can see they're being affected by it," he said. "The challenge is it's extremely expensive to put in barriers required for it. Some people feel it can make things more dangerous. Personally, I think we should move forward."

O'Toole said he also supports the Quiet Zone because it will improve property values.

"I'm a believer in the Quiet Zone, and it needs to happen sooner than later," he said. "This past spring, I was on the budget committee and was one of those who voted to fund (the Quiet Zone)."

Rock said he is not against having a Quiet Zone, but he's against paying the \$250,000 to fund it.

"We don't have the money to spend," he said, adding the funds could go toward the roads or other projects the city needs more.

Judges tout experience in candidates forum

■ Judge Mona Kay Williams and challenger Wes Williams answer voters' questions

By **Max Denning**
The Observer

In one of the most contentious races in Union County, sitting Circuit Court Judge Mona K. Williams and her challenger Wes Williams (no relation) answered questions from constituents during the Union County Candidates Forum.

The first question, which came from the moderators, was to identify the two most pressing issues facing the circuit court judge position, which covers both Union and Wallowa counties, and how they would address them.

Mona said one of the main issues she has seen in the courtroom is individuals within the criminal justice system that have serious mental health issues.

"Those people are ending up in jail, when really they don't belong there," Mona said. "They belong in some sort of treatment program, and in those treatment programs they could get what they actually need, which they don't get in jail. The problem is we don't have the programs and facilities locally to deal with that. I propose we do a collaborative resource inventory with the Center for Human Development, law enforcement agencies, the DA's office (and) with the courts and look into that problem."

Mona also said financing and access to justice was another pressing issue, stating as a judge she would be in the community helping people understand what the justice system was all about.

Wes said the most pressing issue facing Union and Wallowa counties is drug abuse.

"There are two ways the circuit court can get involved: First of all, we need to have real and serious consequences for those who violate our drug laws. Secondly, something we could expand is something Judge Russ (West) started years ago, and he did a great job with

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