

Our View

Partisan politics the wrong play for city council

That La Grande Mayor Steve Clements is a Democrat is perhaps the least interesting aspect about who he is in terms of his public servant role. That also goes for La Grande City Councilors Nicole Howard and Corrine Dutto, who also are seeking reelection.

The local Republican Party and the challengers in these races want to make some hash out of the fact the three registered to vote as Democrats. Maybe that would matter in races for nonpartisan seats if there was evidence that Clements, Howard and Dutto pushed party politics in their roles on the council.

No one had raised any evidence of that. There are good reasons so many city councils — indeed, so many local governing bodies — are nonpartisan. The volunteers who serve as city councilors are there to represent the interests of the people of their community and often to make tough choices about how to allocate precious resources to better the community.

La Grande needs to improve miles and miles of roads, for example. There is only so much money in city coffers for that. Being a Republican or Democrat does not mean much when it comes to the hard reality of finite funds at the local level. (If you want to see what Clements and his challenger, Alex McHaddad, have to say about roads and snow removal and more, check out the feature on the front page of this edition.)

But why stop at political party affiliation? Perhaps it should matter as much, more even, what church any of these candidates attend or if they go to any church. What about civic groups? Maybe a better indicator of whether someone would make a good city councilor is the car they drive or the sports team they support.

Maybe the residents of La Grande indeed are focused on the party affiliation of local candidates, but we doubt it. Most folks are concerned about how their local officials serve the community rather than if they back a political party.

Any insistence that party politics or affiliation should be the deciding factor on who to support for a local nonpartisan race is wrongheaded. Dragging party politics into the La Grande City Council race or other races for nonpartisan seats harms the very nature of community governments, which is why they should eschew party lines.

Look at the voting records of local governing bodies and taxing authorities and you will see unanimous votes are common. It becomes news when they are not. City councils are just too small a space to become divisive over political ideologies, and the stakes for what that could mean to the community are far too high.

This is not an endorsement of any of the candidates, but the matter still is worth addressing in the days before Nov. 3.

And while this is an interesting play from the local GOP in the La Grande City Council races, most of us care much more about whether these public servants are putting the public first and keeping personal politics out of the council chamber.



This country needs newspapers

OTHER VIEWS



JADE MCDOWELL
EDITOR,
HERMISTON HERALD

A pet peeve among journalists is when people ask, “Why isn’t the media covering this?” about a topic that every major media outlet in the country has, indeed, covered with multiple articles.

I could write an entire column about why the “if anything important happens I’m sure I’ll see it on social media” method of news consumption is a terrible way to stay informed on matters of actual importance. But today, I want to talk about the times when people are right about something not being covered by journalists.

According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data, from 2008-19 news media outlets shed 23% of their newsroom jobs, from 114,000 reporters, editors and photographers/videoographers down to 88,000. Newspapers were hit hardest, dropping from 71,000 journalists to 35,000.

These layoffs all happened before the pandemic, when ad revenue plummeted sharply and thousands more were laid off. Most of the remaining journalists have had their pay cut this year, either through wage cuts, hour reductions or monthly furloughs. Some newspapers have closed altogether.

(As a side note, this is why you should trust someone who says “the

media” is profiting off the pandemic as much as you should trust someone who doesn’t know the difference between a steer and a bull to explain ranching to you.)

Thousands of missing journalism jobs mean thousands of stories that aren’t being told. Those of us left simply can’t be in three places at once, and often find ourselves weighing whether the public will be better served if we pursue a story that will take 12 hours of work or write 12 stories that each took one hour.

John Oliver, in his comedy news show “Last Week Tonight,” did a great segment in August 2016 explaining how newspapers are the bedrock of the information economy. Other places people get their news — radio, television, social media, blogs and late night shows, including “Last Week Tonight” — are often repackaging or building on news that was first discovered and reported by newspaper journalists.

Hasan Minhaj, in his show “Patriot Act,” this June did a segment in which he explained how local newspaper are “unmatched” in certain areas, including exposing sex offenders. Examples he cited included the Boston Globe’s uncovering of the Catholic church’s handling of priests who molested children, the Harrisburg Patriot News breaking the story of Jerry Sandusky, the Indianapolis Star exposing Larry Nassar, and the Miami Herald’s work uncovering the crimes of Jeffrey Epstein.

Much of the EO Media Group’s reporting may not have the same

national significance, but over the years we have provided a wealth of information about what is going on in local government that has gone way beyond what people can learn from reading press releases on social media.

I can promise you that if we went away, we would not be replaced by a news source of better quality. Some towns that have lost their newspapers are now relying on social media rumors and gossip among neighbors to know what is going on in their community. Others are being covered by low-quality clickbait sites written by people from out of town, or insidious new “pay for play” sites disguised as objective local news but are actually run by political operatives or corporate public relations firms, as recently reported by The New York Times.

Usually when a newspaper position is gone, it’s not coming back. But I am optimistic about the work EO Media Group is doing to rebuild our revenue streams that took a hit in the spring. I’m grateful to work for a family-owned company that cares deeply about preserving news coverage in Oregon communities, rather than one of the hedge funds that have been buying and gutting newsrooms to squeeze out whatever short-term profits they can.

This country needs newspapers. Don’t count us out yet.

Jade McDowell is editor of the Hermiston Herald, part of the EO Media Group.

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