

Commissioner Wants Positions to Be Non-Partisan

By April Bamburg

Are barking dogs problems or the condition of county roads issues where a county commissioner's political affiliation really has an impact?

Columbia County Commissioner Earl Fisher doesn't think so, and on January 13, initiated the process to change the three-member Board of County Commissioners to a non-partisan office where the individual's political party status is not a consideration in their participation in an election.

Fisher said he began considering this idea when he was running for election in 2008. In town hall forums and conversations with citizens during the race, Fisher said that he found people were concerned with practical issues, instead of ideological issues.

"People were concerned about the execution of county government," Fisher said. "They were sick and tired—at all levels—of the partisan bickering that goes on."

Citizens wanted to know how candidates were going to get the roads fixed, what to do about the barking dog next door. "They didn't see any difference between Republican, Democrat or whatever [party] affiliation the candidates were."

Columbia County would not be alone in the switch to a non-partisan board.

Two years ago, voters in Tilla-

mook approved the non-partisan option.

"We weren't sure how it would go, but it passed overwhelmingly," Tillamook County Commissioner Mark Labhart said.

Labhart is in his second term as a county commissioner, and has run both as a partisan candidate and as a non-partisan candidate.

"Word on the street was that people were tired of the partisan races," he said. "We deal with what I call 'mom and pop' issues: land use, roads. People just don't see our positions as partisan ones."

At the Association of Oregon Counties, Communications Manager Eric Schmidt said that the switch from partisan to non-partisan is a growing trend within the state. "More and more counties are going to non-partisan races," he said.

What would it mean?

To put it in the simplest terms, Schmidt said that instead of only Democrats and Republicans running in the general election, anyone would be able to run for the office of County Commissioner, no matter their political affiliation. Every registered voter would be able to vote for a candidate, not just those registered in the two larger parties.

Fisher is also of the opinion that a non-partisan board would allow more people to participate; he also supposes that it could reduce the candidate's costs for elections.

"[There is] a certain amount of a poisonous atmosphere in partisan races, and this removes some of that. It opens up the possibility of more people being able to stand for an election, which would have a positive impact," Fisher said.

As far as cost reductions, in the current system, candidates have to run two races, in the primary election, against members of their own political party affiliation, and later, the winner of the primary must run again against a member of another political party. "With non-partisan, it doesn't have the same kind of fervor," Fisher said. If one candidate gets 50 percent of the vote, or more, there may be a need for only one election.

Scappoose resident Bob Ekstrom is a Constitution Party member, who thinks the switch could be a good thing.

"I think it could be good, I think it could improve the county government. Too often, voters do have a knee-jerk reaction [and vote within their party]," he said. "For any candidate, the hardest thing you'll have to do is persuade voters who agree with you (but are of a different political affiliation) to vote outside their party affiliation."

Current commissioner Rita Bernhard said she's curious about how this will turn out. "I can see good and bad to this option," she said.

While it could open the door for

more diversity in candidates who may not have been able to run in a partisan election, Bernhard said that party affiliation can sometimes make the process easier for voters. "Party affiliation [can make it easier for voters] to understand a candidate's platform and views," she said.

"We really don't make partisan decisions. People expect us to, or think we do, but we don't," Bernhard said. "I'm anxious to find out what the general public thinks."

When could this take effect?

County Counsel Sarah Hanson is currently drafting the ordinance that will start the process to change the partisan status of the office. She said that the change must be referred to voters for approval. There is no timeline for the process at this time.

This change would not impact the election for Commissioner Rita Bernhard's position on the board. Fisher said that it would likely take effect in 2012.

The county will hold public hearings on this issue once the ordinance has been drafted and approved by the Board of County Commissioners.

This article has been published at April's website <http://www.examiner.com/x-19696-columbia-county-buzz-examiner>.

Emergency Food and Shelter Program Awards Columbia County \$47,606

Columbia County has been awarded Federal funds under the Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program for Phase 28.

Columbia County has been chosen to receive \$47,606.00 to supplement emergency food and shelter programs in the county.

The selection was made by a National Board that is chaired by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and consists of representatives from The Salvation Army; American Red Cross; United Jewish Communities; Catholic Charities, USA; National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S. A.; and United Way of America which will provide the administrative staff and function as fiscal agent. The Board was charged to distribute funds appropriated by Congress to help expand the capacity of food and shelter programs in high need areas around the country.

A local Board made up of representatives from the VFW, American Red Cross, Salvation Army, Community Churches, Homeless and other community representa-

tives will determine how the funds awarded to Columbia County are to be distributed. Under the terms of the grant from the National Board, local agencies chosen to receive funds must:

- Be private voluntary non-profit or units of government
- Have an accounting system
- Practice nondiscrimination and provide a copy of their policy.
- Have demonstrated the capability to deliver emergency food and/or shelter programs within Columbia County.
- If they are a private voluntary organization, they must have a voluntary board.
- Organizations must have a permanent Columbia County presence.

Qualifying organizations are urged to apply for a portion of the \$47,606.00. Completed applications must be submitted by Friday, March 1, 2010.

To request an application contact the United Way of Columbia County call 503-556-3614 or email uwcc@hotmail.com. Send applications to Attn: EFSP Board, PO Box 538, Rainier, OR 97048.

Friends of Fox Creek Annual Banquet in Rainier

Friends of Fox Creek, the volunteer stream restoration group in Rainier, will hold its Annual Banquet on Saturday, February 20th, at 6:30 pm. The public is invited.

The event will take place at Rainier's Old Hall, the "Big Green" building behind City Hall, at 103 C Street. The banquet is catered by the legendary Shay Benson of Rainier.

Reservations for the dinner may be made by emailing Bill Vilardi at reservations@vilardi.net or calling him at (503-396-0967) by Friday, February 12th. The price per person is \$22 (cash or check), payable at the banquet.

The annual meeting of Friends of Fox Creek will be held at 7:20 pm after the meal and will include the election of three members to the board of directors, a brief financial report and the reports of officers.

The program for the eve-

ning, slated for 7:50 pm and free to the public, will be presented by Mike Houck, Executive Director of the Urban Greenspaces Institute at Portland State University. His topic: Connecting People to Nature with Urban Parks, Trails and Natural Areas. Mike has been Urban Naturalist for the Audubon Society of Portland since he created the society's Urban Naturalist program in 1980. Houck is a nationally recognized leader in the preservation and integration of natural areas into urban and suburban planning and design and the value those areas hold for both fish and wildlife and the residents.

The mission of Friends of Fox Creek, organized in 1991, is to restore and enhance Fox Creek and Nice Creek in Rainier for the benefit of education, community recreation, wildlife habitat and flood protection. For more information please contact Darrel Whipple at 503-556-9838.

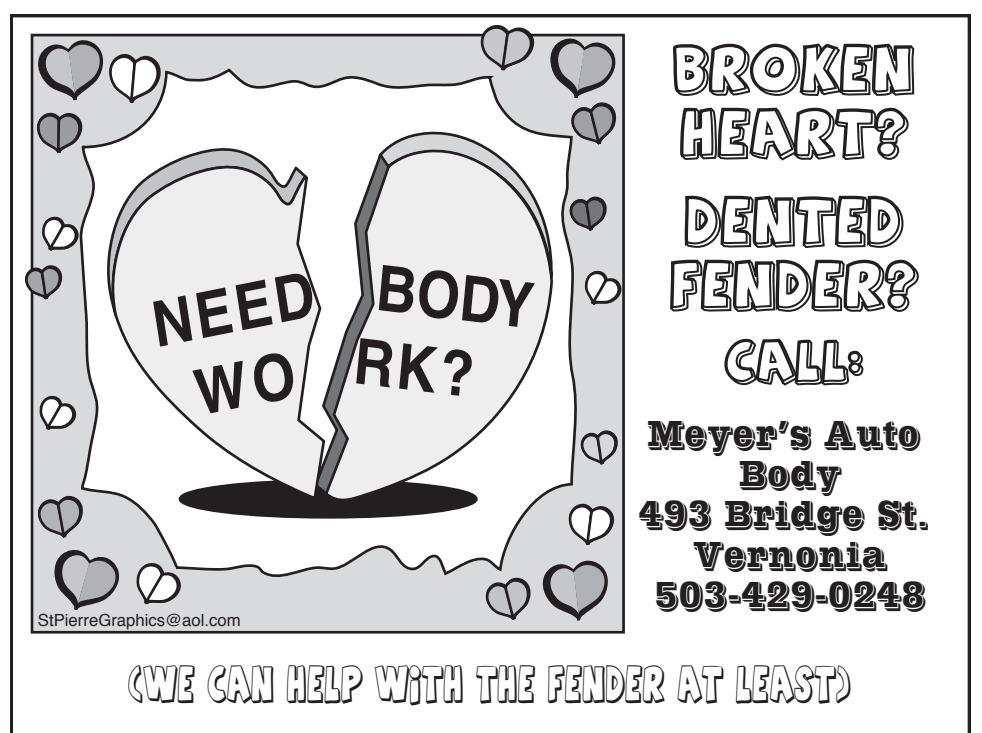


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