

An Opinion: Election 2016-Big Decisions

By Scott Laird

The Primary Election ballots have arrived and Columbia County and Vernonia voters have some big decisions to make. Here is a look at two positions up for election on the County Board of Commissioners, and two tax levies being proposed.

Measure 5-253 Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District (VRFPD) Five Year Levy for Emergency Services Training and Operations

The VRFPD has proposed this levy as a solution to dwindling volunteers and increased call volume, and for the community of Vernonia this is a "must pass measure." The situation at VRFPD is reaching a critical point for Chief Dean Smith and his Board of Directors and this plan to hire a full time Training Officer to maintain and expand the training program for volunteers would relieve some of the stress.

The training captain would work with volunteers to help them obtain and maintain needed certifications, respond to emergency calls, and develop a Cadet Program to involve youth in the local program and offer career exploration opportunities.

Current resources at the VRFPD are stretched to the breaking point, and if the community rejects this \$0.32/\$1,000 levy, I'm afraid the volunteers will just give up. In less than 20 years the number of volunteers has been cut in half from 26 to 13, while during the same time period call volume has more than doubled from 250 in 1997, to 548 in 2015.

This is a five year levy and I think we owe it to Chief Smith and his volunteers to give them this chance to see if a full time Training Officer can solve the issue of a shrinking volunteer base. If in five years things have not improved then the VRFPD will have to find a new solution or ask for additional time in the form of a new tax and voters will have the chance to decide again.

We already ask so much of these dedicated individuals, who give their time, energy and passion to protecting all of us. It's time we gave back to them. Vernonians need to make a choice, either approve this plan and give the VRFPD the funding they need, or reject it and potentially watch our emergency protection services crumble. I guess, there is a third choice if you don't want to do your part and pay to help

the VRFPD - you could join up and volunteer yourself.

Please join me in supporting the VRFPD and vote YES on Measure 5-253

Measure 5-251 Columbia County Formation of CC Rider Transit District

While I believe a public transit system is vital to Columbia County, and a dedicated and secure funding source is required to operate any transit system, I'm having a hard time getting on board with this proposed tax levy.

This measure would create a Special Transit District which would be governed by an elected seven person Board of Directors, and establish a funding mechanism of \$0.23/\$1,000, raising approximately \$1 million each year to operate the transit system separate from the county government.

When funding from the county was reduced in 2015, CC Rider missed an opportunity to receive matching funds from the federal government and the transit service as a whole experienced a 64% reduction in services. CC Rider trips from Vernonia to Hillsboro were reduced to just three days a week with just two trips a day at 6:15 am and 4:30 pm. The system overall saw a drop in annual ridership from over 100,000 to under 85,000.

Our youth, senior citizens, commuters and those citizens without a drivers license depend on the CC Rider public transit to get to school, appointments and work each and every day. The county needs a reliable transit system to attract new business and industry, and meet the needs of its citizens.

Yet, there are several reasons I can't support this ballot measure. First, the Board of Directors who will be elected are all running unopposed and were hand picked to run for these positions; the general citizenship were never given an opportunity to run. Second, CC Rider staff have not done a good job of explaining exactly what services would be restored or expanded if voters approve this tax - in other words, we don't really know what we're voting for. Third, there are questions about how the county has managed Special Districts in the past and I'm not sure another one is the best solution right now. In addition, the management at CC Rider has not engendered a feeling of

confidence. County Commissioner candidate Brady Preheim called for the county to hire a Transit Director with professional experience, and I tend to agree.

Columbia County needs a transit service with stable funding. I would like to see the county come up with a clearer and more transparent plan, put together by a professional management team, before I will support a new tax proposal for operations.

County Commissioner Position 1 Susan Conn, Margaret Magruder, Wayne Mayo, Brady Preheim, and Joel Yarbor

I don't think you could find five more different candidates for this open seat than the group assembled here. Each have their own strengths and each their own weaknesses.

Susan Conn seems to be the candidate to stand up for the common man. She has served on the St. Helens City Council, the St. Helens School Board and the Columbia County Commission for Children and Families and also has experience with economic development, CASA, Head Start, and community health centers. She also helped lead the effort to fund the jail and keep it open two years ago. Less assuming than some of the other candidates, she has quietly earned my respect with her opinions and her background.

Margaret Magruder is also an experienced candidate with a background with the Lower Columbia Watershed Council, 5J School Board, Columbia County Budget Committee, and several other civic groups, as well as in farming and agriculture. Magruder sounds like she would fit right in with the current Commissioners and seemed to agree on their policies surrounding economic development, law enforcement, transit and other key issues. She has been unable to separate herself from the other candidates or use her vast experience to bring forward any new ideas, proposals, or critical changes.

Wayne Mayo has always tried to establish himself as the outsider who would shake up county government. He brings passion and business experience and a willingness to speak his mind. He once again is proposing an increase on the aggregate depletion fee as a funding source for the county, an idea rejected by voters in 2014. Otherwise, Mayo hasn't really offered anything new.



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One year subscriptions
(24 issues) \$35

Vernonia's Voice is published
on the 1st and 3rd Thursday
of each month.

Vernonia's Voice, LLC
PO Box 55
Vernonia, OR 97064
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www.VernoniasVoice.com

Brady Preheim is an outspoken critic of just about anything the county has done in the past, and has loudly attacked the jail, special districts, county investment at Port Westward, the Columbia County Economic Development Team, the CC Rider management, and the manager at the Port of St. Helens. Preheim is not a career politician and has not been afraid to offer opposing views. He says he will bring transparency and accountability and restore trust in county government. While I applaud his passion and willingness to challenge the system, I have to question his ability to work along side the Board of Commissioners he has been so critical of in the past.

Joel Yarbor served as a County Commissioner from 1995-1998 and says

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