

WRITE-IN: Darth Vader, Elmer Fudd, Pedro each earn votes

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though challenger Barbara Dickerson will represent the Independent Party.

Barreto earned 127 write-in votes for the seat, beating out Union County Commissioner Jack Howard, who received 17 votes.

If voters aren't happy with their choices for a political race, or are confronted with a race where no one filed, they can leave those spaces blank on their ballot instead of writing someone in.

Lindell said that makes it easier for her office, because ballots without any write-ins can simply be counted by machine. Write-in names, however, must be recorded by hand.

"We would like for them all to be serious votes, because it does take time to count them," she said.

However, as the number of write-in votes for a seat are reported on election night, some people prefer to write someone in as a visible protest against a candidate. Others dislike seeing a blank space on their ballot for a race where no candidates filed, so they write in someone who they believe would do a good job in that position.

"They just want to put something," Lindell said.

She said in order for a write-in vote to count, a candidate must notify the elections office before official election results are released that they would like to be considered a write-in candidate. If a group of voters in Echo decided they wanted

Beyonce for their mayor, for example, she wouldn't automatically become the mayor of Echo just because she got more write-in votes than anyone else.

Misspelled names are counted, if they're clearly recognizable as an attempt to vote for an official write-in candidate.

May's write-in list from the Secretary of State's office is a mixed bag. Statewide, votes for president included Darth Vader, Elmer Fudd, Santa Claus, Pluto, Britney Spears, Sherlock Holmes, Clint Eastwood, Bugs Bunny, OJ Simpson, Mike Tyson, The Rock, Justin Timberlake, Pedro (presumably of Napoleon Dynamite fame), Jesus, Jon Snow, Kanye West, Donald Duck, Oprah Winfrey, Judge Judy, the Lorax, Ellen Degeneres, Willie Nelson, Bill Murray and Chris Pratt.

However, voters also seemed to be attempting to draft a number of viable political candidates, including Mitt Romney, John McCain, Paul Ryan, Ron Wyden and Joe Biden.

In Umatilla County, voters who received an Independent Party ballot cast 192 write-in votes for Donald Trump, 79 for Bernie Sanders and 35 for Hillary Clinton.

A total of 226 Umatilla County voters cast a write-in vote for president, and 264 left the space blank.

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HISPANIC: Idea has not yet reached city councilors

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Milton-Freewater City Manager Linda Hall said it's still too early to determine whether the city will start a committee or not, as the idea still needs to be discussed at a city council level.

Hall said the city has made numerous attempts to broaden its cultural appeal, including hosting a Cinco de Mayo festival, establishing a valley cultural awareness committee in the 1990s and co-sponsoring "MILTON," a bilingual play with Hispanic actors that toured through several Miltons across the country.

Still, Hall said a Hispanic advisory committee is an idea worth exploring.

"Anybody who says there's no room for improvement in government operations is crazy," she said.

At 43.1 percent of the population, Milton-Freewater is tied with Umatilla for the highest share of Latinos in Umatilla County. Hermiston's Hispanic population is 34.9 percent.

While Hall said the Milton-Freewater Downtown Alliance and the Milton-Freewater Unified School District have had success in engaging Hispanics, no Latinos currently serve on the city council or the school

board.

De la Cruz said Hermiston's Hispanic advisory committee succeeds because it has "110 percent" support from the city government.

The committee has been successful in turning advocacy into policy, from organizing Cinco de Mayo events and soccer tournaments to establishing the Umatilla Morrow Hispanic Scholarship Foundation.

Additionally, members have used the committee as a stepping stone to get more involved in local politics, including Clara Beas Fitzgerald, who was elected to the Hermiston City Council in 2014 and de la Cruz, who was voted onto the Blue Mountain Community College Board of Education last year.

The Hermiston Hispanic Advisory Committee was exemplified by the National League of Cities, which awarded it with the City Cultural Diversity Award in 2013.

De la Cruz thinks Hermiston's model could work in Milton-Freewater and beyond.

"My dream is that we establish HACs in every city in Oregon with a high Latino population," he said.

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COURT CLUB: No injuries reported

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Watkins used the light of his cellphone to look for club members and help them evacuate.

Mary Marsing, the office manager at the club, was sitting in her downstairs office when she heard popping noises coming from the upper floor. She heard a bang and smoke began rolling through the building. Marsing placed the call to 9-1-1.

"I love my job," said Marsing, who has worked at the club for 26 years. "What do I do? (The fire) makes me sick to my stomach."

According to Fire Chief Scott Stanton, the cause of the fire is still under investi-



Staff photo by Alexa Lougee

Steve Watkins, owner of the Columbia Court Club (front left in green shirt) watches as crews work to extinguish the fire.

gation. Stanton said there was "significant fire and smoke damage as well as water damage." He said the front end of the building as well as

the upstairs had incurred the most damage and guessed the cost to be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. More information on damage will

be available after a more thorough assessment.

There were no reports of injuries to anyone who was at the court club when the fire broke out. One firefighter working on scene did experience a heat-related illness.

Crews from the Hermiston Fire Department as well as Echo, Irrigon, Stanfield and Boardman were involved in the firefighting efforts. Umatilla Electric Cooperative was brought in to shut down electric power to the building.

The fire also closed one lane of northbound traffic on Highway 395. Crews remained on-scene through the afternoon, but all lanes of traffic had reopened.

HEAT: Practice blaze kept under control

Continued from 1A

Work GreenCorps program on the Umatilla National Forest. VetsWork provides environmental internships and hands-on training for veterans ages 19-35 interested in pursuing a job in forest and natural resources management.

Friday marked the final day of Northeast Oregon Fire School, where first-year firefighters from the Forest Service, Oregon Department of Forestry and Bureau of Indian Affairs spent last week learning the basics in preparation for the upcoming fire season. The first three days were reserved for classroom lectures, but Friday gave the chance to practice on a real blaze — albeit a small, carefully controlled burn, which was ignited along the Marcus Whitman Trail off Summit Road between Pendleton and La Grande.

About 90 seasonal firefighters took part in the exercise, including the veterans crew, which hiked off the gravel road and flanked their portion of the fire while the lead sawyer trimmed low-hanging branches.

Barnett said working with the crew has been a life changing experience.

"I was just going to college by myself," he said. "Being a veteran, it's hard to find people who think like me."

With the Navy, Barnett served on the USS Carl Vinson, launching air strikes over Afghanistan. Two months after Barnett was discharged in 2011, the body of Osama bin Laden was buried at sea off the deck of the ship.

Barnett later earned his associate degrees in



Staff photo by Kathy Ney

The Umatilla National Forest veterans crew, facilitated by the VetsWork GreenCorps program, heads to a practice fire Friday near the Marcus Whitman Trail off Summit Road.

general education and criminal justice from St. Clair Community College in Michigan, and said he would eventually like to work as a park ranger using what he's learned through VetsWork. In the meantime, firefighting is another way Barnett said he can help keep his country safe.

"I've always wanted to be a public servant," Barnett said. "I took the oath to defend this country from threats both foreign and domestic. That's an oath I live my life by."

Wildfires certainly posed a major threat across the West a year ago. The National Interagency Fire Center estimates wildfires burned more than 10 million acres in 2015, which is the most since at least 1988. Three firefighters were also killed while trying to escape the Twisp Fire in Washington.

State and federal agencies

collaborate every year on Fire School to show new firefighters what to expect and how they can stay safe, said Jeff Duke, a hand crew supervisor with the Umatilla National Forest's Walla Walla Ranger District. He said organizers do what they can to paint as realistic a picture as possible, so firefighters are ready for their first real emergency.

"It's always good to see them get a live fire exposure," Duke said. "It seems to hit home when you relate your fire school experience with your first fires."

The VetsWork GreenCorps program launched in 2014 as a collaboration between the Umatilla National Forest and Mt. Adams Institute based in Trout Lake, Washington. The goal is to help veterans transition back to civilian life through workforce development programs,

with a focus on firefighting and the environment. Paola Gomez, 23, said she first heard about the program online and decided to give it a try. Gomez served four years in the U.S. Marine Corps, including two years stationed as a radio operator in Okinawa, Japan. She said she's always wanted to be a firefighter.

"It's a physical job. Teamwork is needed. That's essentially what the military is," she said.

Gomez, who came from Gresham, said it's also healing to get out of the city and work in the forest. She said that once the first fires start, they will be ready.

"I think we have good leaders, and a good group of people who will do a good job out there," she said.

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