

# School: All Pendleton seats contested

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for reelection. McBee has held Position 7 since 2009, and two are vying to replace her once her term ends in June — attorney Patrick Gregg and activist Briana Spencer.

In the race to succeed Umbarger on Position 1, Beth Harrison, a homemaker and part-time medical biller at Harrison Family Medicine, is running against Rodney Thompson, a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve.

And the race for Position 4, the seat held by George, is split three-ways between Preston Eagleheart, the managing director at Cayuse Government Services, Chris Garrigues, a Hermiston High School teacher, and Joey GrosJacques, a Blue Mountain Community College administrator and a former Pilot Rock School Board member.

Unlike many municipal and county elections, school board candidates don't need more than 50% of the vote to win the election outright and avoid a runoff. Candidates only need a simple plurality to win the seat.

Earlier during the filing period, McBee thought the school shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic might keep potential candidates from jumping into a race. But several late filings ensured that wasn't the case, and although she doesn't know all of them personally, McBee said some "excellent community members" are running for school board.

McBee remembers plenty of years where most school board races were uncompetitive and records from the Umatilla County Elections Division bear that out.

This is the first time this century that every Pendleton School Board seat has been contested. From 2009-15, there were no competitive races for any of the school board seats. While there was one contested race in 2017, the school board hit a nadir in 2019 when no one filed for



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Staff greet students as they get off the bus at Washington Elementary School in Pendleton on the first day of in-person instruction on Feb. 22, 2021.

the open Position 6 seat. Julie Muller would go on to win the seat as a write-in candidate after mounting a post-filing deadline campaign.

## Multiple challengers file against Hermiston incumbents

The Hermiston School Board hit a low of its own in 2017, when no one filed for an open Position 3 seat. In a district that serves well over 5,000 students, Mark Gomolski won the write-in election with a total of 14 votes.

In 2021, only Position 2 incumbent Bryan Medelez is getting a free pass to a new term.

Gomolski didn't file to run for a second term, and Dain Gardner, a senior trooper with Oregon State Police, and Lili Gomez, a records specialist with the Hermiston Police Department, are running to take his place.

Karen Sherman, the Hermiston School Board vice-chair and 20-year veteran of the board, is facing a challenge from Caitlin Melhorn, a coder at Good Shepherd Medical Center, for Position 6. Brent Pitney, the incumbent representing Position 4, is facing a challenge of his own from attorney Sally Anderson Hansell.

Jim Green, the executive director of the Oregon School Boards Association and a self-professed "school board

elections nerd," said he's seen the same spike in interest for school board seats across the state.

The association has encouraged Oregon residents to run for their local school board for years, but he said this cycle may have seen a greater interest in educational policy following the extended school shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

McBee, the Pendleton School Board chair, said candidates run for a variety of reasons, but she felt the place where school board members make the most impact is in shaping the school district's policies.

"It is highly rewarding," she said.

## Other races

While some school districts, like Helix and Athena-Weston, also have multiple contested races, most of the county's school boards had the same noncompetitive status quo.

Beyond public schools, the races to govern the rest of the county's taxing districts are also noncompetitive, with a few notable exceptions.

With incumbent Heidi Van Kirk retiring, two candidates are vying for Zone 3, an area that includes south Pendleton and southern Umatilla County. Echo farmer Kent Madison will compete against Carrie Sampson-Samuels, a

project director for the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board.

Zone 4, which is based around west Hermiston, will see a contest between incumbent Kim Puzey and Kipp Barron, a "global security officer" from Umatilla. Abe Currin, a cider maker for Blue Mountain Cider Co., is running unopposed to succeed Tony Turner in Zone 6, which encompasses the Milton-Freewater area.

The Umatilla County Special Library District, which provides funding to about a dozen public libraries across the county, also has multiple elections. A board member resigning mid-term means the board will have two at-large elections: one election for one two-year term and another for a four-year term.

For the four-year term, county voters will select two from a field that includes incumbent John Thomas, BMCC instructor Sharone Pettus McCann and Caleb Barron of Umatilla. For the two-year term, voters will only select one candidate from a group that includes Fatima Machado, an assistant professor of library services at Columbia Basin College, Gaby Gonzalez, a Umatilla property manager, and Jubilee Barron of Umatilla.

Ballots will start going out April 28 for the May 18 election.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Pendleton High School student Kyndra Nelson looks away as Renay Monohan administers a dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine during a vaccination event at Wildhorse Resort & Casino on Wednesday, March 17, 2021.

# Vaccine:

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exhaled relief.

Nelson was one of more than 1,100 people who received a COVID-19 vaccine at a two-day clinic at Wildhorse Resort & Casino at the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation last week, as Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center, assisted by the Oregon National Guard, makes its final push to effectively immunize as many people connected to the reservation as possible.

Like the first clinic in February, the Tribes were assisted by local members of the National Guard to efficiently move hundreds of people through the vaccination process. It's the only time the National Guard have assisted a tribal entity with a mass vaccination effort in Oregon, guardsmen said.

"It still amazes me, the fact that it's gone as well as it has," said Lt. Matthew Booher, a seven-year guardsman from Hermiston, who was serving in his first operation in Umatilla County. "It took seven years, and I'm always concerned with my state, but now I'm actually serving my county."

This time, however, tribal health officials extended vaccine eligibility to school children in an attempt to bring area high school students back to in-person classes safely on Monday, March 29. In all, 80 students and 25 school teachers received a vaccine at Wildhorse, according to Yellowhawk officials.

"This pandemic has shut down everything, and I'm very tired of it," said Nelson, a senior at Pendleton High School. "I'm excited that progress is being made with treating it and taking care of it."

When Nelson heard that she was eligible for a vaccine, she knew she wanted to get the shot. She's headed to Eastern Oregon University in the fall, where she'll study to be a teacher, like her mom. Getting the shot was her way to help bring things back to normal, with hopes that by next fall, she'll be meeting other students in the dorms.

"I want to have a normal college experience, and I'm hoping this will get us at least part of the way there," she said.

## 'I don't want to give (COVID-19) to someone else'

Between the clinics at Wildhorse in February and March, Yellowhawk officials fully immunized more than 1,000 people against COVID-19, Indians and non-Indians, bringing the total number of people vaccinated on the reservation to more than 2,600 since December 2020, according to Yellowhawk officials. At the first clinic, 85% of those who received a shot were non-Indians.

"We want to make sure as many people in Umatilla County get vaccinated so we can start moving toward some normalcy," Yellowhawk Chief Executive Officer Lisa Guzman said. "So by us reaching out to Umatilla County, Pendleton and local areas, we would be making that contribution to the public's safety and get rid of this pandemic."

In response to a rise in COVID-19 cases reported among local teens, tribal health officials extended vaccine eligibility to area students over the age of 16 and educators. Guzman said the health center is already looking at how they can make plans to encourage more students to come out and get the shot.

"We had 80 youth, but it would have been nice if we saw higher numbers," she said, adding that the communication department is looking to reach out and educate more teens about why it's important to get the vaccine. "I think by developing (this) event so quickly, we didn't have the time to get out that educational awareness."

Among the students vaccinated were twin brothers Scott and Ron Train, sophomores at Pendleton High School. The brothers are goalies on the high school soccer team. Earlier this month, the team, along with the dance team, had a spike in cases and were quarantined. The soccer team missed four matches. "It was frustrating," Ron Train said.

On March 29, however, the Trains will be back at school with their friends, as Pendleton High School reopens with hybrid classes. They said they're excited to see friends and chat with teachers in-person, and they hope by getting the vaccine, they're helping keep others safe.

"I don't want to give (COVID-19) to someone else," Scott Train said. "I don't want to get it, hopefully, or when I do get it, it's not as severe. It's more safe for people."

## Moving back to normal

The clinic was a last effort to return tribal operations nearly to normal in the coming months, as officials have said tribal government and business operations are to reopen in April, aside from maintaining standard health and safety guidelines like mask wearing.

Guzman said the Tribe's Incident Command Team is monitoring the state of the pandemic to determine how the reopening process will go, since there have been several positive cases recently reported on the reservation.

Unlike Native American communities elsewhere, which have borne the brunt of the pandemic with disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 infection, hospitalization and death, the CTUIR has managed to keep case counts relatively low.

Since the pandemic began, 254 COVID-19 cases, 13 hospitalizations and one death have been reported on the reservation, according to data from Yellowhawk.

And aside from changing certain operations, some tribal enterprises have even managed to turn a profit in 2020, which officials have credited to the proactive approach of the Tribes.

"We're slowly moving toward the reopening," Guzman said.

Meanwhile, Yellowhawk officials are looking at reintroducing things like in-person visitation at the clinic, increasing transportation services, and potentially opening the senior center by May 1.

# Dogs: Working Dogs Oregon began in 2014

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perspective, the more weird (expletive) you can do with them, the better."

Pendleton police officer Cass Clark and K-9 Bali, as well as Union County sheriff's deputy Dane Jensen and K-9 Molly were in attendance. Other adjacent counties — Morrow and Baker — usually make an appearance if time permits.

The departments enlist the aid of two nonprofit organizations that specialize in training working dogs — Howling Creek and Working Dogs Oregon.

As the dogs were unleashed from the patrol vehicles — one at a time to keep chaos to a minimum — they made their way around greeting handlers, trainers and volunteers that had come in order to serve as bite or tracking targets. Bali, the K-9 with Pendleton police, jumped up to greet his former trainer Robbins just moments after his release from officer Clark's police vehicle.

Robbins had set up a quick



Alex Wittwer/La Grande Observer

Union County Sheriff's Office deputy Dane Jensen watches as K-9 unit Molly searches the area, as part of the joint training at Pendleton on Saturday, March 20, 2021.

interview station for the handlers and the dogs inside the warehouse — a way to bolster social media presence with quick one-on-one interviews that give insight to the life of K-9 units. Afterward, it was time to train.

Darin Campbell, owner of Working Dogs Oregon, was the first to don the bite suit before heading out to hide in the compound. The dense padding made him waddle like an 1980s arcade bad guy

through the gravel.

The comically large suits serve to protect the volunteers and trainers from serious injury. Other implements, such as fake limbs, provide a more real-life experience for the dogs, but the suit works well for quickly rotating volunteers through the training.

Molly was the first up, taking direction from Jensen before darting toward where Campbell hid. The two

officers approached with finger-guns drawn, and there was a sense of theater felt. Campbell's acting was convincing, playing a scared fugitive while Molly barked at the same man she warmly greeted moments prior.

Working Dogs Oregon was started in 2014 to train service dogs for veterans and psychiatric patients.

"Our original goal was to educate businesses on what they can and can't do (regarding service dogs)," Campbell said. "And then K-9 Mick in Portland was killed, and that got us thinking about the law enforcement side."

Mick, a German-born shepherd, was only a month into his career before he was shot and killed while attempting to apprehend a burglary suspect on April 16, 2017. His handler, officer Jeffrey Dorn of Portland Police, also was shot but suffered nonlife threatening injuries.

After training, the officers and trainers returned inside the warehouse compound to debrief on tactics and execution from the exercise.

# Bond:

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for the district to continue to meet the accompanying rise in demand for services.

"At peak service times, including summer fire season, outdated vehicles and equipment become a real concern," he said. "We need safe and healthy personnel to make sure we can protect the residents and property in western Umatilla County."

According to a news release, a citizen oversight committee would be formed to oversee use of the funds. Projects funded by the bond would include:

- Safety apparatus for responders, such as protective equipment and portable radio systems
- Fire station renovations that would create separate quarters for male and female personnel, new roofing, alert systems and expanded vehicle bays
- Upgraded engine exhaust systems to better protect personnel health
- Upgraded fire and ambulance vehicles

## Milton-Freewater seeks police bond

A lot has changed since the city of Milton bought its city hall in 1929, and not just eventual merger with the neighboring town

of Freewater.

The city of Milton-Freewater feels like its police department can no longer be contained in the historic building's basement and is asking the public to help fund a new building for the city's public safety operations.

The city of Milton-Freewater's \$7.7 million bond proposal will ask the city's voters to approve a property tax increase of 87 cents per \$1,000 in assessed value to build a new 7,544-square-foot police station across the street from Milton-Freewater City Hall.

Milton-Freewater City Manager Linda Hall said the basement is too small for the police department

and dispatch operations. For instance, residents who file police reports often have to speak with officers either in the parking lot or in a small alcove in the lobby because of a lack of private spaces.

"You're probably not having your best day if you have to file a police report," she said.

With the economic future still uncertain during the COVID-19 pandemic, some local governments have postponed campaigns for new taxes. But Hall said the city felt it was the right time, citing low interest rates and the development of several subdivisions of new housing that will allow the city to spread out the tax burden.