

# Hermiston School Board candidates make their case

## LOCAL ELECTIONS 2021

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — As decision-making about students returning to the classroom during the pandemic has elevated interest in school boards across Oregon, the race for Hermiston's Board of Education is no exception.

Hermiston voters will see seven names on the May ballot for four school board positions.

### Liliana Gomez

Liliana "Lili" Gomez, running for Position No. 3, is a Hermiston native and a records specialist for the Hermiston Police Department. She said she has always had an interest in education, including serving as a tutor during her teenage years and teaching English overseas. She is on the Hermiston School District budget committee.



Gomez

Now that students have returned to school full time, Gomez said she believes it is important for the district to focus on students' mental health and be proactive about having resources available for students as they return.

"We all know that this took a toll on every single person, adults included, and no doubt this took a toll on students," she said.

Gomez said if elected, one of her goals would be to help break down barriers to student success and parent involvement, including linguistic and cultural barriers. Another would be to help the district stay on sound financial footing.

While more than half of Hermiston students are Hispanic or Latino, Hispanic students as a group have still seen lower average test scores and graduation rates than the student body as a whole. When asked how the district can close the achievement gap, Gomez

— who was in the district's English Language Learner program herself in elementary school — said it must look at getting the best return on investment for programs to help any group of students that may be struggling.

"I know that these programs are in place, and I know that they work," she said. "But can we do better? Yes, we can always do better."

### Dain Gardner

Dain Gardner is also running for Position No. 3 on the school board, against Gardner. The incumbent, Mark Gomolski, is not seeking another term.

Gardner, an Air Force veteran who says he attended multiple schools "all over," is a senior trooper for the Oregon State Police's Fish and Wildlife Division. He said he decided to run for school board because of his two children in the district, and the difficult experience they have had during the pandemic.



Gardner

He said he is glad students are back in school full time, but thought the district should have "pushed back" against state regulations sooner. He would like to see the district fight for more local control in the future, not only over what school looks like during the pandemic, but also over curriculum and other aspects of students' education.

"There are some things being shoved around the country that really don't apply necessarily to Hermiston like they do, maybe, in some of these other places," he said.

Gardner said it is important for the school district to do all it can to get parents involved in their children's education.

"When it comes down to it, schools are extremely important, but so are the parents," he said. "And I think they need to be involved as much as we can get them involved."

### Sally Anderson Hansell

Sally Anderson Hansell is running for Position No. 4 against incumbent Brent Pitney. Anderson Hansell is an attorney at Anderson

Hansell PC and an owner of TCH LLC, a farming company. She has past experience on the Hermiston School District Bond Oversight Committee in 2008 and other boards. She graduated from Hermiston High School.



Anderson Hansell

Anderson Hansell has three children in the district, and said she is deeply interested in the success of the school district. She said after such a challenging and "deeply concerning" year during the pandemic, she has devoted a lot of time and energy to understanding the school district's decision-making.

"The amount of time I've spent advocating, as well, I decided I needed to step up and volunteer," she said.

She said she would like to see more transparency and communication from the district, and better oversight of administrators by the school board. She shared a letter she sent to the school board on Feb. 1, stating the district had a "severe public relations problem" during the pandemic, and said in an interview that although the pandemic was an unprecedented situation no one at the district had signed up for, she thought there were ways the district could have handled the situation better, particularly communication with parents.

"I think there were a lot of missed opportunities," she said.

### Brent Pitney

Brent Pitney is running to retain his seat at Position No. 4 after he was appointed to the Board of Education out of five candidates who applied for an open seat in 2018.



Pitney

Pitney, a life-long Hermiston resident, is vice president of Knerr Construction and has a child in high school and one who graduated last year. He said he is running again because he has learned a lot during his service on the board so far and

would like to continue that work. He also feels his background in construction can be useful to the district as it begins construction on projects funded by the 2019 bond.

"I feel that our kids are our future and I want to be a part of helping them excel," he said.

He said while the pandemic has been a "terrible time in our lives," in hindsight there are things the district probably could have done better. He said it is also important to keep in mind that often the board's hands were tied by state rules, and the district did achieve its end goal of bringing students back full time.

### Karen Sherman

Karen Sherman is running to retain Position No. 6 on the school board. While she does have an opponent on the ballot, Caitlin Melhorn told the *East Oregonian* that she was dropping out of the race due to the time commitments she already has.



Sherman

Sherman has served on the Board of Education for 20 years and is a retired teacher with several family members also in education, including a daughter who works for Hermiston High School as an instructional coach. She also volunteers in other capacities, including membership in Altrusa International.

Sherman said right now, the school board's number one priority should be the safety of staff and students during the pandemic. Her other top goals if reelected, she said, are boosting academic achievement, maintaining good financial stewardship and doing more community outreach.

2020 for hybrid learning before being told by the state it wouldn't be allowed.

"All of us were in a situation where the unknowns were incredible," she said.

She said the district spent a lot of time looking at the state regulations and the area's COVID-19 metrics, and she is pleased students have been able to return to full-time school at a time that is safer, from a COVID-19 standpoint, than any other time since school was closed.

### Bryan Medelez

Bryan Medelez is running unopposed for Position No. 2, a seat he was first appointed to in 2019.

Medelez is operations manager for Medelez Inc., a Hermiston trucking company, and serves on the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce's board and as vice president of the city's Hispanic Advisory Committee. He was born and raised in Hermiston, and has two children in the school district, with a third who is currently too young.



Medelez

He said he is running because he has always been dedicated to serving the community, particularly to help Hermiston's youths. He said his goals for the school board include making sure the district has the right superintendent to lead the district in the right direction, seeing students in the classroom full time and helping the district be the best it can be.

"I want to see our school district at the top of the list when it comes to school districts across the state," he said.

He said there was a lot of frustration at the district during comprehensive distance learning, and as a parent himself, he could sympathize with how difficult it has been, even though the district was often under state mandate.

Medelez said he believes district staff are doing the best they can to close achievement gaps for different groups of students, and said he would like to see the district continue to work to hire more bilingual teachers.

## Volunteers remove 1,660 pounds of river trash

By **KATHY ANEY**  
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Volunteers plucked almost 1,700 pounds of trash from the banks of the Umatilla River during the city's Spring River Cleanup on Saturday, April 17.

The haul eclipsed the amount of debris gathered in 2019, the last year the event was held, when volunteers gathered 1,500 pounds. Participants found the usual bottles, cans and fast food remnants, but also picked up an eclectic list of items: a set of Press-On nails with jewels, a bag of four cooking wine bottles, the top of an umbrella, one sock, blue Easter egg shells, a wagon axle with wheels, twisted pieces of metal, a brake drum, a computer monitor, one pair of pants, an 8-by-10 rug, twisted rebar, a 2018 newspaper, a pepper spray container, a 4-foot-long angled iron bar, a shredded blanket in a tree and a plethora of other debris, including many face masks.

Participants masked up to gather near the River Parkway before spreading out on both sides of the river. *East Oregonian* owner and organizer Kathryn Brown gave guidelines to the exuberant group, which included 64 adults and 30 youths. They set out wearing gloves and carrying trash bags. Parks and Recreation employees hauled and weighed the trash that was collected.

Volunteers found three homeless encampments, two upriver from the Bedford Bridge and another under the old bridge next to Trailhead Park. Per instruction, volunteers left the encampments alone.



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

**Volunteers Briana Spencer and Vanessa Algarin-Benitez remove trash from the banks of the Umatilla River during the SURE 2021 Spring River Cleanup on Saturday, April 19, 2021.**

Brown seemed ebullient about the strong turnout of volunteers despite last year's cancellation due to the pandemic.

"I was grateful to see so many longtime river cleanup volunteers attend, but also many people who were there for the first time," she said.

The cadre of volunteers included contingents from Lost & Found Youth Outreach and Pendleton High School's ASTRA Club.

After the cleanup, some volunteers jotted down wildlife they had seen on a paper at the registration table. Wildlife included a brown snake, butterflies, osprey, robins, crows, a lesser goldfinch, a white-crowned sparrow, a violet-

green swallow, a great blue heron, mallards, buffleheads, a northern flicker, squirrels, a garden snake, a frog and spiders.

In 2022, organizers hope to revive the usual volunteer appreciation barbecue, scrubbed this time because of COVID-19 restrictions.

A number of organizations teamed up to organize the cleanup. They included the Stewards of the Umatilla River Environment (SURE), the Umatilla Basin Watershed Council, the *East Oregonian* and Pendleton Parks and Recreation. The Pendleton Tree Commission, the Umatilla National Forest and Pendleton Parks and Recreation gave away free native plants and trees in conjunction with the river cleanup.

## LOCAL BRIEFING

### Senate approves easing pharmacy access

SALEM — Oregon would join all states west of Texas that allow pharmacists to fill prescriptions and provide services via telephone and electronic devices, under a bill approved by the Senate on a 29-1 vote Monday, April 19. It now goes to the House.

Senate Bill 629, sponsored by Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, would build on lessons he said have been learned out of the pandemic.

"The pandemic has made us realize that many services we depend on can be provided online or over the phone," he said in a statement after the vote. "We can leverage these tools to expand access to health care for rural, elderly, and disabled Oregonians. This is a chance for Oregon to evolve in our delivery of health care."

Hansell said many rural towns do not have a pharmacist, requiring long distances for patients to get prescriptions filled. Most states in the West, with long distances between medical facilities, already allow for wider use of telephones and computers to relay information to fill prescriptions. Oregon still limits the authority of pharmacists to communicate electronically



Hansell

with pharmacy technicians and customers in order to fill orders.

### Owls poached near Helix

HELIX — The Portland Audubon Society is offering a reward of up to \$1,000 for information leading to an arrest in the case of two great horned owls that were poached near Helix, according to a press release from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The birds were discovered in a ditch by local residents, according to the press release. The residents contacted Blue Mountain Wildlife, a nonprofit rescue organization that rehabilitates birds, and Lynn Tomkins, the executive director, responded and later determined that the animals had likely been shot.

"People think of poaching as involving big game animals, fish and upland birds. But these raptors are protected," said Yvonne Shaw, the coordinator for the ODFW Stop Poaching Campaign. "They are environmentally and culturally important. Poachers steal from all Oregonians. This poacher removed a treasured experience from residents, not to mention a valuable aid for farmers."

Officials ask that people with information contact the Oregon State Police Fish and Wildlife Division through the Turn in Poachers line at 1-800-452-7888 or email TIP@osp.oregon.gov.

— EO Media Group

## Sponsor List:

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