

Election: ‘I think it’s imperative to have a voice from the Native community’

Continued from Page A1

of the Umatilla Indian Reservation will continue to serve on the board.

“I think it’s imperative to have a voice from the Native community,” Eagleheart said while adding that he will serve all students while on the board.

Attorney Patrick Gregg won the Position 7 race against activist Briana Spencer. In an interview, Gregg said he was honored by the voters’ choice and was eager to start on the board.

“I’m anxious to get to work and share my talents and get things going in the right direction,” he said.

Spencer, who also is a member of the CTUIR, is already a member-elect of the Nixyaawii School Board. State law doesn’t allow people to serve on both a charter school board and the public school board that oversees it, but Spencer had committed to serving on the Pendleton School Board had she won.

Blue Mountain Community College Board of Education

Despite his best efforts, Echo farmer Kent Madison was elected to represent Zone 3 on the Blue Mountain Community College Board of Education.

After meeting with his opponent, health care worker Carrie Sampson-Samuels, after the filing deadline, Madison ended his campaign and endorsed Sampson-Samuels to take the seat, which represents south Pendleton, Pilot Rock, Echo and Ukiah.

But Madison couldn’t take his name off the ballot, and come the morning of Wednesday, May 19, he was edging out Sampson-Samuels 50.4-49%, with only 25 votes separating them.

Madison called it an “unfortunate success” and probably the result of the name recognition he’s built up over the years.

He said he still feels like younger people should serve on the BMCC board and he encouraged Sampson-Samuels to run again in the future, but he intends to fulfill the voters’ wishes.

“I was dumb enough to file for it,” he said. “I should fill out the rest of my term.”

In the other contested race, incumbent Kim Puzey handily defeated challenger Kipp Barron to hold his Zone 4 seat, which includes east Hermiston and Umatilla.

Puzey said he was pleased voters supported him so he could continue his work on the board. With another four years in hand, Puzey said his priority is hiring the right candidate to serve as BMCC’s next president.

Although Barron lost his race, it wasn’t all bad news for the rest of his family. Daughter Jubilee won a three-way race for a seat on the board for the Umatilla County Special Library District, while Barron’s son Josiah won an uncontested race for a spot on the Umatilla School Board. Another son, Caleb, lost a different race for a seat on the library board.

Cider maker Abe Currin won an uncontested race to fill the open Zone 6 seat, which covers Milton-Free-water, Athena and Weston.

Turnout watch

According to the Oregon Secretary of State’s Office, only 19.4% of Umatilla County voters turned out to vote in the May election.

That number wasn’t only well below the state’s 25.7% turnout rate, it also represents a dubious record.

“It’s the lowest turnout we’ve had in some time,” Umatilla Elections Manager Kim Lindell said.

Turnout is typically lower when federal or state elections aren’t on the ballot, but with several contested races across the county, Lindell thought turnout could be higher.

Lindell said one factor that may have hurt turnout was the lack of a voter pamphlet. While the county covers the cost of the pamphlets in primaries and general elections, the special districts themselves bear the costs of off-year elections. Lindell said it would take a significant number of districts willing to fund a pamphlet to get the county to print and distribute them.

Despite Umatilla County’s low level of voter interest, Lindell said Umatilla County’s turnout exceeded Crook County’s, which came in at 15.8%.

Difference: Helping LGBTQIA+ community

Continued from Page A1

Over the last 23 years the statewide CommuniCare program has granted more than \$1.8 million to 354 nonprofit organizations and school programs, according to the program’s website. The program is made up of 28 schools and 31 grant-making groups across the state. Locally, the program operates at Pendleton High School, Nixyaawii Community School and Hermiston High School, though Hermiston deferred participation for the 2020-21 school year.

Kelm and the other students involved in the program chose to focus on granting money to organizations focusing on accessible health care and immigration.

“The CommuniCare students at Pendleton High School will be granting money to organizations that believe in accessible medical and mental health care, services for refugees and immigrants, and addiction support in rural areas, focusing on Umatilla County,” their mission statement reads.

The group goes on to cite the COVID-19 pandemic for the focus it has brought to socioeconomic inequalities and mental and physical health issues as key in their decision to support these ideals.

The group distributed funds to Morrison Child & Family Services (the El Paso Program), Immigration Counseling Services, and Lines for Life for their work in mental health and immigration. Although all three organizations are based in Portland, the students selected them for the services they provide that directly impact Umatilla County.

The ability to distribute funds so widely was made possible by a higher amount of money ceded to the students to distribute from the organization, according to Kelm

“In terms of money we definitely have a lot more this year,” she said. “Usually we only have around \$10,000 or \$11,000 but it’s been super cool having more money and being able to help our community more and make a bigger impact.”

Pendleton senior Riley Brown added the club had given her the opportunity to learn more about the surrounding community and the work that nonprofits do.

“It can be pretty easy to get stuck and not know how



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Members of the Pendleton High School CommuniCare Club walk along Southwest Byers Avenue in Pendleton while filming B-roll for the CommuniCare Virtual Grant Awards Ceremony set to air on KGW in June.

to help and feel like you can’t have much of an impact,” he said. “But then actually doing the research and seeing the organizations around us was a rewarding experience.”

Building a community

Among those attending the April event was Jordan Schnitzer, whose parents, Harold and Arlene Schnitzer, founded the organization in 1997. Schnitzer reflected on the ideals his parents founded the organization on and how people help make a community what it is.

“My parents’ idea was that a city is just made of buildings right? Smaller town, small buildings, bigger towns, bigger buildings — but without the people, it’s just a bunch of bricks and mortar,” he said. “When you have people, that’s what adds character to a community.”

Schnitzer went on to add the program’s key goal is community involvement and spurring a desire to help your community at a young age.

“If you’re involved working with others in the community and you work some community good, it makes you feel good about yourself and then you’re able to go back to your own problems with a better perspective and have a healthier attitude about it and feel a greater sense of self worth and self respect, he said.”

Bringing philanthropy to the classroom

Unlike Pendleton High School, Nixyaawii Community School operates its CommuniCare program as a part of a year-long philanthropy class, according to

Zach Brandsen, the teacher in charge of Nixyaawii’s CommuniCare program.

“It’s definitely been a challenge like everything else in the world this year,” he said.

While students at Nixyaawii have been able to hold in-person classes and discuss their mission statements and grants, they began the year virtually and have had to do away with site tours and other in-person activities surrounding the grant-making process.

Despite the difficulties, Brandsen said the removal of fundraising requirements and the students’ hard work helped pull everything together.

“There’s this stereotype of high school students not wanting to get involved but that’s just not correct,” he said. “Every year we do this I’m really inspired by my students.”

One of those students is Nixyaawii senior Adilia Hart, who has been involved with the program since her freshman year. Hart said the program has changed her perspectives on what students can accomplish and her goals in life in general.

“Being able to give back and knowing that you’re actively doing something about the issues in the world really opened my eyes,” she said.

While Hart said she missed the site visits of previous years, this year’s program was structured differently, allowing her to be more involved in every facet of the grant-making process.

“I got to contribute more and be a leader to the other

students,” she said.

According to Hart, one of the most difficult aspects of the class, after developing a mission statement, is trying to stick to that statement and focus on grant making.

“There are students out there who are passionate about many different things and we want to help everyone,” she said. “But we have to look at how it fits and applies to our mission statement.”

This year’s Nixyaawii CommuniCare class focused on nonprofits that work to quash employment and education discrimination for people of color and people in the LGBTQIA+ community

“The grant makers of Nixyaawii Community School are deeply concerned about realizing justice for people of color and people in the LGBTQIA+ community who have experienced discrimination for far too long,” their mission statement reads.

The class went on to add it planned to prioritize grants to groups working to address these issues in Umatilla, Union and Morrow counties but would consider applications from other entities from around the state.

Nixyaawii students granted a total of \$15,000 across the Basic Rights Education Fund, Friends of the Children: Portland, College Possible and SMART Reading.

“I loved being a part of it and it really changed my perspectives on what I wanted to do in life,” Hart said. “I enjoyed leaving my mark and hope the younger classmen take my lead after us.”



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A pallet of playground equipment sits beside a concrete border for one of two new play areas at Til Taylor Park in Pendleton on Wednesday, May 19, 2021.

Budget:

Continued from Page A1

and donations to the parks program. The rest would be sourced from a grant from the Pendleton Foundation Trust, a nonprofit.

Between the Til Taylor project and an effort to move a Community Park playground to mitigate flood risk, Hughes admitted the trust fund would take a big hit this year, but with good purpose.

“That’s what the fund is

for,” he said. “We leveraged the money pretty well.”

With the new funding in hand, Hughes said the city plans to start work soon on building a fenced dog park. Parks and recreation also is soliciting donations for smaller amenities. Some of the money from the Pendleton Foundation Trust will go toward shade sails, and donors have already committed money to install benches and a water fountain.

Hughes said staff and contractors are working with urgency to complete the project this summer.

Masks:

Continued from Page A1

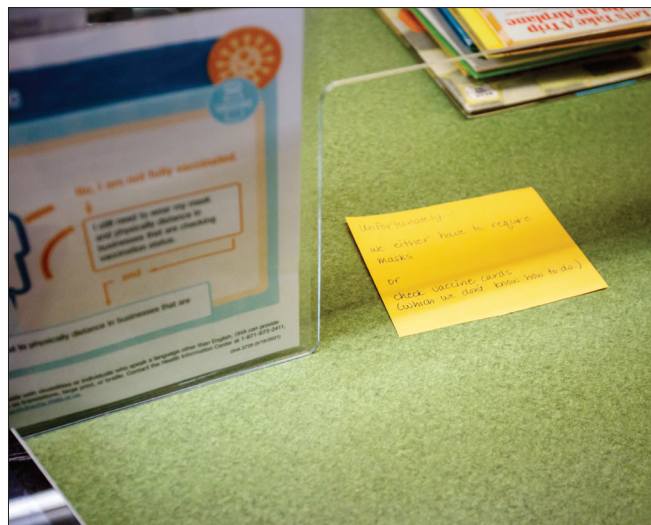
“These folks are confused, and I empathize and sympathize with them, because we’re just as confused,” he said.

Cheri Rosenberg, director of the Pendleton Chamber of Commerce, echoed Fiumara’s statement.

“The complete lack of clarity and how this will be implemented must be defined before we put this onto our business community,” she said.

Rosenberg said although businesses need to “understand the guidelines” the state has put forth, the state must understand that most people who will now be put in a position to check vaccination status are “frontline staff” who are “normally younger men and women.”

“To put this burden on them with the ever-changing guidelines creates a sense of uncertainty,” she said. “We want employers and patrons to feel safe in their interactions. I think over the past year it’s safe to say our businesses have gone above and beyond to understand and provide a safe space for patrons. To now ask that on top of all those measures, we’re not only adding more, but we’re doing it in a way that puts all liability on those frontline workers and small business owners.”



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A slip of paper lays out the mask policy on the counter of Neighborhood Books & Gifts in Hermiston on Wednesday, May 19, 2021. The card reads, ‘Unfortunately, we either have to require masks or check vaccine cards (which we don’t know how to do).’

The change comes as reported COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths have declined nationally in recent weeks. Meanwhile, vaccines are becoming more widely available and are reaching the arms of thousands of people, showing promising signs that the nation is turning a corner in the pandemic.

Fiumara said the move to lift the mask and physical distancing guidelines was “a step in the right direction,” but added he would have gone a step even further — removing the mandate and replacing it with a “strong recommendation” to alleviate confusion.

“It seems to me that this was used as a political win without accounting for how

things would be or work,” he said.

‘Another step towards normal’

Fiumara said he’s unsure how the verification process is enforceable. Like many others, he’s concerned that the rule “shifts more of the policing to the businesses.”

In addition, he’s concerned the new rule also could create a “black market” for selling counterfeit vaccine cards, saying “it doesn’t take much to make one of these” vaccine cards.

“I think you could have overall abuse of the system with some of your more honest people paying the price while trying to keep things in line,” Fiumara said. Concern also is growing

among Oregonians who say the move came too quickly, as large portions of the population have yet to receive the vaccine while case rates are still high. Scientists also say it’s unclear whether vaccinated people can spread the virus to others, though studies suggest vaccines may reduce transmission rates.

Umatilla County has reported the lowest vaccination rate and one of the highest COVID-19 case rates in Oregon, according to state health data. When asked whether lifting the mandate entirely would place the county under greater risk of outbreak, Fiumara said, “It could because of the low vaccination rates.”

“It’s not as quick as flipping a switch, unfortunately,” Fiumara said of the change.

For Bob Mullay, the owner of Hermiston Drug, he was glad to see masking guidelines lifted, calling it “another step towards normal.” However, “as the owner of a small business, I would hope that people would be honest enough to tell me the truth without having them show me the card.”

He, too, said the onus for checking vaccination status shouldn’t fall on the business.

“If they get sick, that should not be my responsibility,” he said. “People have to be responsible for their own actions. It shouldn’t be the business’ responsibility to police anyone.”

VISIT US ON THE WEB AT:

www.EastOregonian.com