

West Valley Fire levy on May 19 ballot

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

Despite the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, Oregon's all-mail elections continue and voters in the West Valley Fire District will be deciding on a five-year local option levy that would fund two firefighter/paramedic positions to staff the Willamina fire station and the purchase of a new ambulance.

Measure 36-203 is asking voters to approve the levy that would cost \$1.06 per \$1,000 of assessed value. A person with a house valued at \$150,000 would pay an estimated \$160 a year.

"The West Valley Fire Board of Directors determined that it is in the community's best interest to provide funding to hire at least two additional firefighter/paramedics, purchase a replacement ambulance and fund emergency medical operations," states a pro-measure flier. "The levy will provide West Valley residents with a more reliable response to emergency medical incidents, residential and commercial fires, motor vehicle crashes and other emergencies."

If approved, the levy would collect approximately \$350,000 annually starting on July 1 for an estimated five-year total of \$1.765 million.

"This added revenue would allow the district to continue to provide our community with the reliable



Photo by Timothy J. Gonzalez

A sign along Grand Ronde Road asks area residents to support the West Valley Fire District levy on the May 19 ballot.

and effective response capability that our citizens expect and deserve," said West Valley Fire District Fire Chief Fred Hertel in an explanatory statement included in the recently released Voters' Pamphlet.

West Valley Fire District has staffed the Grand Ronde Fire Station on Grand Ronde Road since it opened in June 2010.

Supporters of the measure point out that a 20-year general obliga-

tion bond was paid off in January 2019 and it reduced the tax rate by 59 cents per \$1,000 of assessed valuation. So property owners would only see a 47-cent increase in their property taxes if the new measure is approved.

According to the West Valley Fire District, about a third of the time the Willamina community does not have an ambulance staffed and must rely on units from other communities to respond, delaying

critical care for often seriously injured or sick patients. "A fast and reliable advanced life support paramedic response and transport to the emergency room is critical to survivability in the event of a stroke, heart attack, sudden cardiac arrest and significant trauma," the flier states.

The district's current ambulance, which is more than 15 years old, has more than 200,000 miles on it and is no longer reliable. Costs to repair and maintain it are increasing, district officials say.

The West Valley Fire District signed an intergovernmental agreement with the Sheridan and Southwest Polk fire districts effective July 1, 2019, that regionalized fire and emergency medical responses. The combined effort now covers 535 square miles and has eight stations, including West Valley's two stations in Willamina and Grand Ronde.

It is unclear if or when the three districts will officially become one entity. A vote of residents in each of the three districts would be required to finalize any such merger.

There were six supportive statements printed in the Voters' Pamphlet, including endorsements from the Willamina Chamber of Commerce and West Valley Fire Board. No arguments were filed in opposition to the measure. ■

19 Native American seniors being affected locally

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calls home or e-mails to parents and youth to check and see how they are doing," Barry says. "Staff are in direct contact with local school leadership on what assignments or other (projects) are needed to finish in order to graduate."

According to Barry, there are approximately 19 Native senior students in the Willamina and Sheridan school districts.

Typically, the Tribe's Education Department has an annual honors and recognition event in June to fete graduating high school and college seniors, but it is uncertain whether that will happen with COVID-19 restrictions in place.

"I think it all depends on what the state and the Tribal leadership decide over the next few weeks," Barry says.

So far, the Tribe has not determined a date for returning to normal government operations and Spirit Mountain Casino remains shuttered.

Willamina School District Superintendent Carrie Zimbrick says that no decisions have been finalized yet on end-of-the-year senior activities.

"We have a senior advisory group at the high school and they are contacting each senior student to get their input," she says. "We are also including the senior grad parent committee in the conversation."

Zimbrick added that, so far, several ideas have been shared including how to celebrate graduation and in what format.

"It is still in the planning stages," she added.

Sheridan School District Superintendent Steven Sugg also says how and where senior activities will be held is currently undetermined.

"Right now we don't have any formalized plans," he says. "We are hoping that we will be able to hold our ceremony in June, but will likely reschedule for later in the summer. We are bouncing some ideas around, such as a virtual graduation or drive-through graduation. We did elect students to Prom Court before school was closed so we are planning to put yard signs in the yards of the students elected."

Willamina High School senior and Grand Ronde Tribal member Iyana Holmes has been working hard this year to raise her grades and attendance. So, knowing that there will likely not be a normal graduation ceremony is disappointing.

"The thing I am sad about the most is my graduation and not being able to see the look on my family's faces when I walk up to get my diploma," she says. "I was so excited because I had done all this work just so I could participate in the graduation ceremony and make my mom proud that I did it."

At the beginning of the school year, Holmes was lagging in credits



Photo by Timothy J. Gonzalez

Iyana Holmes on the first day of the 2019 Grand Ronde Contest Powwow.

and faced potentially repeating her senior year.

"There was a big chance that I would not graduate on time with my class," she says. "I started doing online classes to catch up with my credits and was in a guided study class (as well)."

Holmes credits Kaylee Oaks, the Tribal Youth Education high school lead, for helping her keep her grades and attendance up.

"She made sure I was attending school on an everyday basis," Holmes says. "Attendance was a huge part of graduating."

A combination of online classes and making up school coursework resulted in Holmes going from potentially having to repeat her senior year to graduating early.

"I had a lot of help from Kaylee and my English teacher, Mrs. Shadden," she says. "Without their help

I would more likely still have to catch up. Thankfully, I completed everything I needed to and graduated early."

And her thoughts on potentially not having a prom?

"I actually was planning on not attending prom. However I am sad for my fellow classmates that were looking forward to prom because I know how important it is for some," Holmes says. "I am also sad I could not say goodbye to all my teachers and thank them for all they have done for me."

Holmes says her family is planning something to celebrate her graduation, but she isn't sure what that will entail. As far as post high school plans go, hers are undecided at the moment.

"I am thinking about going into the Navy just like my aunt and if not that then I want to go to college and become a nurse or an equine veterinarian so I can use my love for horses as a career," she says. "All I know is that no matter what I do, I hope it has something to do with the medical field."

Holmes is excited about going on family camping trips, attending powwows, dancing and hanging out with her friends when the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

"I think the most important thing I have learned from all this is not to take the little things for granted and that being able to spend time with my family and friends is most important to me," she says. ■