

Northeastern Oregon vets air concerns at virtual town hall

BY PHIL WRIGHT

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Veterans in Northeastern Oregon raised a number of questions and issues Saturday, June 4, during a virtual town hall meeting to discuss possible Veterans Administration changes to delivering health care in the area.

This was the first of three virtual meetings Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, D, is holding for veterans to give input in the wake of vets at a recent Union County town hall expressing concerns over a proposal to move some VA health care services from Walla Walla to Spokane.

“The veterans who participated were particularly troubled about what they felt was the direct touch that’s so important for veterans health care was just going away from the rural part of the state,” Wyden told those attending the June 4 event.

Following the Union County meeting, he said, he contacted Dr. Teresa Boyd, network director for VISN 20, the VA Northwest Health Network, and Scott Kelter, medical center director of the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla, where many veterans in Northeastern Oregon go for services. They both agreed to participate in the three town halls.

Wyden said local veterans are “troubled by a whirlwind of hasty changes, involving a new electronic health record system,

delays in delivery of care and recommendations to move VA care further away from Eastern Oregon.” He added he was concerned Eastern Oregon veterans did not get enough voice in the changes and proposals, and he wanted to make sure the Veterans Administration was not making “some shortsighted cost cutting” at the expense of veterans.

Wyden then opened the floor to questions for Boyd and Kelter.

Staffing at center of delays

Veteran Ken McCormack, chair of the veteran advisory council for the La Grande community-based outpatient clinic, or CBOC, was first up with several matters.

Community care in La Grande can mean waiting on the phone 20 to 30 minutes for someone to answer because of short staffing, he said, and reimbursement for travel is backed up to last summer. He also said the call center in Walla Walla seems to drop messages and has to handle a larger area than in the past. He also said it took six months for the La Grande facility to hire a registered nurse and another month for the new hire to learn the system.

Kelter said most delays are due to staffing issues.

“We have been trying every hiring flexibility that is available to recruit staff,” he said, but the VA is competing with employers who can offer bet-



Linda Wondra/Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center, File

A veteran undergoes an eye exam in 2018 at the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center, Walla Walla. The Veterans Administration is considering moving its rehabilitation services from Walla Walla to Spokane.

ter pay and incentives. And coaxing people back to work after learning to work remotely due to the pandemic is another challenge.

Catching up on travel reimbursements, he said, also is about staffing and could come down to contracting that out. “Obviously that will be at higher cost to do that, but we are committed to getting those claims down,” he said.

Recruiting registered nurses “is challenging across the board,” Kelter said, and while the VA has made hiring incentives, applicants might pass because they can get on somewhere else faster. The VA also has cut down its on-boarding process, but the VA still has the obligation to ensure someone treating vets is safe.

A question from a Umatilla County resident also brought up delays. Shanna — no last name available — said her father is a vet and has hearing loss, so telehealth does not work for him. But she was not able to get him an appointment in person until the end of July. She said she was concerned about moving his care even farther away.

“We’re almost driving two hours round trip to get him seeing providers in Walla Walla,” she said.

Kelter said as a veteran himself and with a son and daughter in the military now, he is keenly interested in access to veteran care, and the delay in his care is a concern. He said he would follow up and look into the situation. He also said her father or whoever is with

him can record appointments to review later to help him understand what a provider said.

Discussion on AIR Commission recommendations

Boyd and Kelter also addressed concerns on the Asset and Infrastructure Review — AIR — Commission to modernize and realign the VA health care system. Boyd said at this point, changes to Walla Walla and other places are just recommendations, and implementation will take years. Between now and then, she said, there are going to be numerous steps for more input.

“It’s going to take all of us to come to a good implementation plan,” she said.

Kelter said the question comes down to how do we take the recommendations of the AIR Commission and make sure they have positive results, including balancing the use of technology and in-person care.

He noted this process does not take the place of smart decisions in the field, and when the recommendations ultimately come down, the VA is looking at some matters that will affect Eastern Oregon veterans.

The VA is looking at more telehealth care in Boardman and Enterprise, and Kelter said he wants to see a provider at those locations more often as well as a nurse.

“The staffing model that we’re pursuing there I think will help in those areas in par-

ticular,” he said, adding the VA also is looking at how it can best staff the La Grande clinic to meet veterans needs.

The AIR Commission is recommending to increase services in the Tri-Cities because the need is there, he said, but it remains to be seen what that means for Walla Walla.

“Just because we increase it in the Tri-Cities does not necessarily mean the demand decreases in Walla Walla to where we won’t support those services any more,” Kelter said.

He stressed the AIR Commission is about providing more and better care to veterans, not about cutting costs. And he said shifting Walla Walla’s rehabilitation treatment to Spokane is what is on the plate, but not other services.

One questioner pointed out Boise is closer to Union County than Spokane, so could Union County become part of veteran care out of Boise if changes in Walla Walla go through? That seemed to pique the interests of Boyd and Kelter. Boyd called the suggestion an “interesting thought” and worth looking over. Kelter said this fits with the AIR Commissioners looking at aligning service areas.

Wyden at the end said details will be forthcoming on the next two meetings, but his point in all this is making the government go the extra mile for veterans rather than making veterans go extra miles for their care.

High-profile candidates try to break Democrat, GOP control

BY ANDREW SELSKY

Associated Press

SALEM — A former lawmaker in Oregon who as a young woman flew a helicopter around an erupting Mount St. Helens is aiming to shake up state politics by running as an unaffiliated candidate for governor.

Betsy Johnson, who served in both the Oregon Senate and House and who once belonged to — and then quit — both the Republican and Democratic parties, sees a path to victory with the increasing polarization of the two major parties.

And so do candidates running as independents in major races in at least two other states.

In California, Anne Marie Schubert, the Sacramento County district attorney whose office led the prosecution of the Golden State Killer, is running as an independent for state attorney general, having left the Republican Party in 2018. She needs to survive California’s primary on Tuesday. The top two vote-getters move on to the general election.

“I’ve been told a million times that I have to be a Republican or a Democrat to win the race for Attorney General. I’ll say it a million more times: No I don’t,” Schubert tweeted confidently last month.

And in Utah, former CIA case officer Evan McMullin is running as an independent in a U.S. Senate race. Astonishingly, Utah Democrats are backing McMullin instead of one of their own in hopes of defeating incumbent Sen. Mike Lee, a Republican, in the decidedly red state.

Among Republican voters McMullin is wooing are those who don’t support former President Donald Trump. McMullin recently tweeted his opponent “aligns himself with Donald Trump time and time again. That includes working behind the scenes to help overturn the 2020 election and keep Donald Trump in power.”

The Republican and Democratic parties have dominated politics in America since the 1850s. These days, they’ve staked out sharply opposing positions on gun control, abor-

tion rights, policing, climate change and much more, leaving a lot of middle-ground opportunities for independent and third-party candidates.

As of one year ago, 31% of registered voters identified themselves as independents or members of third parties in states that allow them to indicate partisan affiliation on registration forms, according to an analysis by Ballotpedia. A total of 40% registered as Democrats and 29% as Republicans in those 31 states, Washington, D.C. and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

But when it comes to the ballot box, that slice of unaffiliated/third-party voters hasn’t translated into independents claiming many victories.

Trump’s election as president in 2016 arguably widened the divide between liberals and conservatives. But that didn’t cause large numbers of unaffiliated voters to abandon the two big parties in either the 2018 or 2020 elections in favor of alternative candidates, analysts say.

“What ends up happening with voters is they typically respond to surveys or in focus groups, talking about how they want somebody outside of the two parties, but then in practice they tend to vote and behave mostly like (Democratic or Republican) partisans,” said Jake Grumbach, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Washington.

There are only two independents in the U.S. Senate, Angus King, a former governor of Maine who won a landslide victory in 2012, and Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who was first elected to the Senate in 2006. Both caucus with Democrats.

Retired professional wrestler Jesse Ventura’s winning run as a Reform Party candidate for governor of Minnesota, in 1998, is a distant memory.

Former radio personality Cory Hepola made a stab this year at following Ventura’s footsteps, as part of Andrew Yang’s new Forward Party.

But Hepola dropped out of the Minnesota governor race on Wednesday, saying it is “unlikely that 2022 will be the breakthrough year.”

Johnson, though, is betting on dissatisfaction among voters to boost her run in Oregon. Her campaign has chest already tops \$8.6 million, including \$1.75 million from Nike co-founder Phil Knight. Her reported total was more than the Democratic and Republican candidates combined. Johnson has garnered endorsements from a former Democratic governor and from a former Republican U.S. senator.

Under Oregon election rules, Johnson could start collecting signatures last Wednesday. Her campaign must deliver at least 23,744 registered voters’ signatures to the secretary of state’s office by Aug. 16 to get her on the ballot.

Johnson said the volunteers are “ready to hit the ground running.”

“We have Betsy brigades in every county, and we will have chairpersons in those counties responsible for explaining the intricacies of signature gathering,” Johnson said.

Paul Rummell, who traditionally votes Democratic, is the Johnson chairperson in Clackamas County, near Portland, and sees her as a “great counter-balance between the two ideologies.”

“I’m looking for somebody that can help bridge the divide in our state,” said the 51-year-old, who works in the alternative fuels industry. “I think that, unfortunately, there’s a chasm ... between rural Oregon and the metro area. And I think that Betsy is the perfect example of a leader who can help lead the dialogue that needs to happen to repair that divide.”

If she gets on the ballot, the 71-year-old will be running against Democratic nominee Tina Kotek, a former Oregon House speaker and a staunch liberal, and Republican nominee Christine Drazan, a former House minority leader.

Johnson, who wears huge eyeglasses and colorful scarves, used to run a helicopter company that helped fight forest fires and got aerial shots for movies. Her company also set up seismometers at Mount St. Helens. On the morning of May 18, 1980, her head mechanic called to say the volcano was erupting.

“I jumped in my car and drove like a bat out of hell ... jumped in a helicopter and we were flying that day,” Johnson said, recalling risky flights over lava flows. “We were out of our minds, in hindsight.”

That maverick attitude is evident in her stances on issues that are front-page news again because of recent horrific mass shootings and the pending U.S. Supreme Court decision on Roe v. Wade.

To liberals who want more gun safety measures, she is unapologetically pro-gun rights. She sees even attempts to ban bump-stocks and high-capacity ammunition magazines as chipping away at Second Amendment rights on gun ownership. Kotek denounced Johnson’s stance, saying: “As the nation reels from one of the deadliest school shootings in history, Betsy continues to spout the talking points of the NRA.”

To conservatives who want to ban or restrict abortions, Johnson is unapologetically in favor of a woman’s right to choose.

Johnson is running against the odds — the last time an unaffiliated candidate was elected governor in Oregon was about 90 years ago. She could also be a spoiler for Democrats or Republicans, depending which candidate she draws votes away from.

Kotek could be vulnerable if enough moderate Democrats and unaffiliated voters go for Johnson. While Oregon hasn’t elected a Republican governor since 1982, Democrat Kate Brown — who’s now term-limited — edged Republican Knute Buehler by only 6% in the 2018 election.

James Foster, professor emeritus of political science at Oregon State University-Cascades in Bend, expects Kotek to win. But he’s not ruling out a Johnson victory or a spoiler. Foster said if inflation continues to soar, voters might become alienated from “status quo politicians,” giving Johnson some traction.

“A whole lot can happen between now and November in this crazy upside-down world we’ve got,” Foster said. “My wife and I listened to a speech by Betsy Johnson. She’s one hell of an orator.”



Karen Harris Bybee/Contributed Photo

Caitlyn Calaway of Baker City with one of the medals she has won while competing in swimming events at the Special Olympics USA Games in Orlando, Florida, from June 5-12, 2022.

Calaway

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She also competed in the 50-yard freestyle on Tuesday, June 7, and then was a member of Oregon’s relay team on Wednesday, June 8.

“What they do is they have them swim a preliminary for a time that puts them into a division based on their times,” Karen said. “And then they swim a final race in that division that then awards them medals and things like that.”

Between races, Karen said Caitlyn and the other athletes participate in team-building events, as well as visiting Disney World.

Karen said Caitlyn has been beaming the entire time. Though she doesn’t see her daughter for more than two or three minutes after each race, they text often.

“From what I’ve heard, her first day she was pretty nervous,” Karen said.

A lot of athletes were nervous to compete for the first time since COVID hit more than two years ago. After the first rounds, they began to cheer up and Calaway was beaming.

“When she swam her second round, she had her racing stance on before she came up,” Karen said.

Caitlyn is the first Baker County resident to qualify for the Special Olympics in more than 20 years.

“This is her first time getting to go and represent for nationals,” Karen said in an interview last month. “It’s a big honor. She is very excited.”

Caitlyn has been competing in Special Olympics since she was in junior high, and she’s been a competitive swimmer for about a decade.

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