

Five vie for county commissioner



Richie Colbeth



Tanner Elliott



Gordon Larson



Archie Osburn



Sam Palmer

Colbeth: keep costs down

Will bring eclectic experience to the table

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Commissioner candidate Richie Colbeth, 79, John Day, grew up in New Jersey and retired from the Air Force as a non-commissioned officer in charge of administration and personal affairs after 20 years in the service. He's worked as a school bus trainer, a union representative, an airport security screener and a paralegal.

Colbeth moved to John Day about 10 years ago and currently owns and operates John Day Taxi. He has degrees in administration, electronics and theology and hosted the "Cowboy Chapel Chaplain Richie" radio show on KJDY for seven years.

He's served on numerous boards and committees, including the John Day Budget Committee, Republican Precinct Committee, Senior Citizen Advisory Board and a local ministerial association. He's volunteered at the Grant County Historical Museum, the Grant County Ranch and Rodeo Museum, Grant County Hospice and the Grant County Chamber of Commerce.

"I've been a very busy boy," he said.

One of Colbeth's top concerns is the kind of proposals coming from John Day City Manager Nick Green. He wanted to know who will pick the vegetables in the city's "greenhouse on a swamp."

Providing broadband internet to the county is not an important issue, he said. He said he's happy with the fiber optic cable Ortelco ran to his house on Seventh Street.

When asked about whether 911 dispatch should be kept local or outsourced to Frontier Regional 911, Colbeth replied, "Send it to Condon." Maintaining dispatchers with local knowledge is not important, but keeping costs down is, he said.

Colbeth opposed the idea of establishing a natural resource adviser position to advise the Grant County Court. In addition to costing money, the position would likely become political.

"I don't like it," he said. "Environmentalists would end up steering it."

His vision for the future is to grow the timber industry, which would benefit the entire economy and help reduce fire dangers.

"Let the loggers loose," he said.

He also opposes legalizing marijuana, which alters people's minds, and he wants more security at school entrances, but no armed guards inside.

"I'm the most qualified because I have the most eclectic experience," he said.

Elliott: economy is No. 1 issue

Offers 'youth, idealism and fresh ideas'

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Commissioner candidate Tanner Elliott, 18, John Day, is a junior at Grant Union Junior-Senior High School and serves on the county's Planning Commission and 4-H Advisory Council.

He was elected freshman and sophomore class presidents and is the current vice president of the high school's Associate Student Body. He is a 4-H county ambassador and member of the Future Business Leaders of America program. He has worked in lawn maintenance and as a lifeguard.

The big issue facing Grant County is the economy, Elliott said.

"We're going the wrong direction and lack leadership," he said. "While the U.S. economy is booming, ours is shutting down."

The county needs more job diversity and a better education system. When people consider moving to Grant County, they look at schools, health care, opportunities for work and cultural or recreational amenities, he said.

Elliott said he opposes a government-owned broadband network because it will lead to higher prices and poorer service. He cited similar networks that failed in Burlington, Vermont, and Provo, Utah. Private companies should provide broadband, if at all, he said.

"We don't have the economy here to support broadband," Elliott said. "We don't need it to survive. It's not a top priority."

Elliott said he'd prefer to keep 911 dispatch local, but if the county can't afford to do that, then it should accept the offer from Frontier Regional 911 for contracted services. He also said he'd like to see the county's natural resource adviser position filled.

"It would be good to have an expert to advise the county court on minerals, timber, grazing and water," he said.

Elliott didn't believe the position was a political issue.

"We have a ton of natural resources here, and we need to put them to use," he said, adding that he wanted to see them used properly.

Elliott's vision for the county is to bring back another timber mill, which would lead to bigger schools, more jobs and more competition between existing businesses. He said he supports the Initiative 12-71 to legalize recreational marijuana in Grant County because it will create jobs and provide tax revenue to the local community.

He believes he can be an asset to the county court.

"I have youth, idealism and fresh ideas," he said. "I'm self-funded and not owned by anyone. And I have no self-interest conflicts."

Larson: economy restored

Offers lengthy experience in government

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Commissioner candidate Gordon Larson, 54, Canyon City, grew up on a dairy farm in Scappoose. He was in the National Guard when he was recruited by the Oregon State Police in 1987.

Larson retired from OSP in 2014 after serving on a gang strike force and a multi-state drug task force, as the outpost commander in John Day and as a regional commander based in La Grande.

He served on the Grant School District 3 board for 12 years, 10 years as chairman. He now runs a ranch south of Canyon City.

The foremost issue facing the county is economic decline, but positive trends can be found in recent state statistics, he said. The divided community is also a major issue.

"It's been slow to heal following the Canyon Creek Complex fire," he said. "Neighbors no longer wave to neighbors. People view each other through a political prism rather than if they are good neighbors."

Larson supports the county court's decision to join the Grant County Digital Network Coalition, which is one piece in a larger solution to an ailing economy. As for the government's role in the broadband project, he compared it to the Pony Express, interstate highways and rural electrification.

Noting his lengthy experience with emergency dispatch, Larson said he supports keeping 911 dispatch local and not outsourcing it to Frontier Regional 911.

"Seconds matter," he said. "It's critical to have local dispatchers providing this service."

He was optimistic that the dedicated first responders at a recent 911 User Board meeting, which he attended, will resolve the dispatch question.

Larson sees merit in creating a natural resource adviser position with the county, comparing it to the county court providing funding for a federal animal damage control agent. He said it's critical the adviser does not make policy or speak for the court, but he saw benefits coming from a well-trained and well-educated person in the position.

Larson said he'd like to see the local economy restored to its 1950 level, with more than 8,000 residents and a diversified economy that was more resistant to downturns. He wants to explore the options, including providing broadband to attract telecommuters.

He said he offers more than 20 years with executive-level leadership experience. He's served on numerous boards and committees and has testified in the legislature and helped write legislation.

"I want to capitalize on these experiences," Larson said. "My heart is in Grant County."

Osburn: diversified economy

Rancher opposes natural resource adviser position

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Commissioner candidate Archie Osburn, 61, Monument, has been working on his family's ranch for most of his life. He graduated from Monument High School with honors and attended Blue Mountain Community College for a time before returning to the ranch.

"I've had the same address since 1967," he said.

Osburn's ranch employs eight people. He also operates a wild-fire support business and an agricultural trucking service.

He was elected and served for several terms on the boards for Monument School and the Monument Soil and Water Conservation District. He's also served on the Farm Service Agency since the 1980s, which handles disaster relief funds for fires and floods, and loans for conservation projects, student education and 4-H projects.

"Through my ranch and fire-fighting business and my work on the Farm Service Agency, I've brought several million dollars into Grant County," Osburn said. "No other commissioner candidate can say that."

The biggest issue facing Grant County is jobs, he said.

"We need employees who are qualified to do the jobs that already exist here, and we need to diversify the local economy to attract skilled workers," he said.

It's important that Grant County holds onto the skilled workers who live here now, but there is a lack of opportunities. Bringing broadband internet here is one thing that will help achieve that goal, he said.

"Broadband access is necessary — it's our new highway," Osburn said, adding he believes access will eventually branch out from John Day to the rest of the county.

"Lack of good internet access has stopped economic development in Monument," he said.

Osburn also supports creating a countywide special district for 911 dispatch in Grant County to protect existing dispatcher jobs and to ensure calls are handled by people who are knowledgeable about local geography and people.

He strongly opposes the creation of a natural resource adviser position for the county. He said he leases large tracts of land in two counties from the Bureau of Land Management, and he didn't want anyone interfering in his relationship with the agency.

"I've put my whole life into working with them," he said.

Osburn said his 45 years of business experience would be an asset for the county court.

"I don't feel like any other candidate has that kind of experience," he said.

Palmer: impact of unemployment

Suicide and child abuse rates far too high

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Commissioner candidate Sam Palmer, 53, John Day, was born and raised in John Day and is a graduate of Grant Union High School and Blue Mountain Community College.

He's been a registered nurse for 30 years and worked locally and around the U.S. in "frontier medicine," including a stint as a flight nurse in Las Vegas. He works three days a week in Burns and will retire in about a year.

Palmer sees three main issues facing Grant County — a lack of jobs, a high suicide rate and a high child abuse rate. They're interrelated, he said, noting that Grant County and Harney County have been No. 1 or No. 2 in unemployment among Oregon counties for 35 to 40 years.

"Now they have the highest suicide and child abuse rates," he said. "Those are my issues because I care. I've done well here, and I want to give back."

Palmer said he has some concerns about the current proposal to bring broadband to Grant County — hanging a main fiber optic cable on power poles doesn't seem secure, and evolving technology could make the proposal soon obsolete.

"Grant County needs something," he said, noting that his new home on Marysville Road doesn't have good internet access and he's trying to take classes online. Wireless might be the solution, he suggested.

Palmer said he favors keeping 911 dispatch local in order to protect jobs, but as a team leader on the county's Search and Rescue team with extensive experience in the forests, he doesn't believe the argument that local dispatchers are needed to help first responders locate incident sites.

At a public meeting, he proposed putting 911 dispatch under the Grant County Sheriff's Office and then contracting service with local cities and users.

Palmer strongly supports the idea of establishing a natural resource adviser position with the county. He said it's not a question of whether to establish the position but how to fund it. The adviser would help bridge the gap between county, state and federal governments, he said.

Palmer's vision for the economy is growth. Burning down forests and locking up forest roads will not lead to prosperity, he said. Instead, he'd like to see biomass-powered generating plants in Long Creek, the John Day Valley and around Seneca to power new industry.

"I bring open-mindedness," he said. "I listen to all sides before making a decision. As a trauma and emergency nurse, I deal daily with conflict resolution. I want to be a servant of the people. I'm not in it for personal gain."

PRIMARY ELECTION RULES EXPLAINED

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Rules governing how county candidates win primary elections have changed over the years in Grant County.

Here's how the winner is determined, according to Grant County Clerk Brenda Percy.

In the case of the county treasurer, county clerk and sheriff, the winner cannot be determined by the May primary election. If there are two or less candidates, their names do not appear on the primary ballot, and the winner

Rose withdraws from commissioner race

Dave Rose, Canyon City, has withdrawn from the Grant County commissioner race. He cited unexpected circumstances for his decision.

is determined in the general election held in November. That's the case this year, as Percy is running unopposed for re-election.

If there are three or more candidates for

treasurer, clerk or sheriff, their names will appear on the primary ballot, and the top-two vote-getters will compete in the general election, where the winner is determined.

For all other county positions, a candidate can win in the primary election by garnering 50 percent of the total vote plus one vote more. If no candidate meets that threshold, then the top-two vote-getters go on to compete in the general election.

In the case of this year's races for Grant County judge and Grant County justice of the peace, it's likely one of the two candidates will earn more than 50 percent of

the vote and win the race in the primary election.

That's not the case in the race for Grant County commissioner, where five candidates vie for a single seat and winning half or more of the vote could be more difficult. So it's likely the top two commissioner candidates will face off in the fall election.

Unlike statewide elections and some Oregon counties, all county races in Grant County are nonpartisan. The county commissioner race was the last to change to nonpartisan, Percy said.