

# Preston wants common sense in justice court

By Richard Hanners  
Blue Mountain Eagle

Grant County justice of the peace candidate Harold Preston, 71, Prairie City, grew up in Grant County and graduated from Prairie City High School.

After a time in the Army, he attended college and graduated with a bachelor's in education at the University of Idaho and later a master's in education from the University of Forest Grove.

After teaching and working in the private sector, Preston went to Alaska in 1990. After working on a tugboat, he was hired at the state maximum security prison, where he worked for 13 years, rising from disciplinary sergeant to lieutenant.

He next worked six years as head of security and safety at a gold mine with 300 workers north of Juneau, followed by three years as head of security at the federal building in Juneau. Preston then retired and returned to Grant County.

Preston said it was important for a justice of the peace to keep an open mind and be fair, and to show compassion while using common sense. He said he grew up here and understands when someone is not paying close attention and accidentally speeds in their car.

"Those things happen," he said. "Of course, if it was a pattern, then we would need to treat it more harshly."



Harold Preston

Fining a person \$500 when they don't have the money and won't have it any time soon is a situation that calls for adjustment, Preston said. Requiring a person with financial hardships to complete community service just takes that person out of the job market,

he said.

"He's not getting paid and not being productive at putting food on the table," he said.

Preston said he'd prefer to talk to business owners who need workers to see if they could hire these people temporarily while they pay off their fines. A justice of the peace needs to use common sense when handling landlord-tenant cases, Preston said. He said he'd hate to see tenants thrown out, but if they're not paying rent or trashing the place, it's unfair to the landlord.

"If they're driving a nice new car and buying New York steaks, that would tell me they're deadbeats," he said.

Preston said he has the experience to handle the management requirements at justice court.

"I've never had an employee that complained about me," he said.

Preston said he decided to run to provide voters with a choice.

"Nobody should run unopposed," he said.

# Stinnett dedicated to justice system

By Richard Hanners  
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Grant County Justice of the Peace Kathy Stinnett, 59, John Day, is running for a second six-year term. She won a three-way primary race in May 2012 with 72 percent of the vote to succeed Terry Farrell as justice of the peace.

Stinnett grew up in Grant County and graduated from high school here with honors. She and her husband owned a plumbing business for 25 years.

"I'm a self-taught bookkeeper and business manager," she said.

Stinnett served on the county planning commission from 2000-2008. She served as a Grant County Justice Court Clerk from 2009-2013 and as Grant County Justice of the Peace Pro Tem from 2011-2012. She has attended the National Judicial College in Reno, Nevada, as required by statute.

"The office is unique in that a justice of the peace is both a state court judge and a county elected official," she said.

Justices of the peace pre-date Oregon statehood, she said. Justice courts are courts of limited jurisdiction that han-



Kathy Stinnett

dle violations, misdemeanors, small claims, evictions and other criminal or civil matters.

Stinnett said she spends about 40 percent of her time

handling misdemeanor crimes, about 30 percent on traffic violations and about 30 percent on small claims and civil matters. The court also handles city ordinance violations for John Day, Canyon City, Prairie City, Mt. Vernon and Long Creek, she said.

Stinnett also is serving her second one-year term as president of the Oregon Justice of the Peace Association, which seeks to preserve local court systems against a movement to consolidate courts.

"There is no guarantee we will have these court systems in the future unless we advocate for why counties need them," she said.

Currently, justice courts are independent of the Oregon Judicial Department and justices of the peace are elected locally, but that could change, she said.

"We are constantly having to be aware of changes that

threaten local court systems," she said. "It's our biggest challenge."

Stinnett said she works full time, "which means 24/7," while her clerk works a four-day week. As a result, Grant County Justice Court is closed on Fridays.

"It's a challenge to run the court the way it should be — professionally, fairly and serving the needs of the people," she said.

Stinnett said she recognizes the county's budget constraints, but the case load has increased and there is a need for the court to be open on Fridays.

"The county is bearing 100 percent of the cost of running Justice Court and receives only a portion of the revenue that is collected," she said.

Part of her job is educating people about the court, whether they're appearing in court on a charge or someone she meets in public.

"I am dedicated to providing access to justice for local citizens and passionate about preserving justice courts in Oregon," she said. "I want to continue to work on these things. I don't want to walk away from the goals I have set for myself."

## ELECTION

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staunch critic of the initiative but "you can't stuff it back in the bottle" and that he would support a tax if the initiative passes.

### Natural resources and conflicts

All the judge and commissioner candidates said they backed a 1999 ordinance in support of the county's culture and custom, but Larson said he had concerns about county laws challenging federal supremacy. Commissioners should look out for potential legal conflicts, and if people don't like a law they should follow the legal process to change it, he said.

Larson also said he had "grave concerns" about a county ordinance claiming jurisdiction over roads on federal lands. He said he got along with Malheur National Forest Supervisor Steve Beverlin and believed in the rule of law and the U.S. Constitution. He added that he believed he could advocate for people who disagreed with him.

Commissioner candidate Archie Osburn said he strongly opposed the creation of a natural resource adviser position for the county. He said he can work well with federal agencies and he'd rather see the funding used elsewhere.



The Eagle/Richard Hanners  
Grant County Judge candidates Scott Myers, left, and Jim Hamsher talk before the start of a candidate forum at the Trowbridge Pavilion in the Grant County Fairgrounds on April 22.

County court members should stay on top of issues, he said, adding that it could be a long time before the county found out if they hired the right person for the position.

Larson said he supported the position with limitations, citing concerns he had with similar positions in other counties where the position became too strong.

Myers said the position had become a "hot topic lately." Relations between the county and the Forest Service were much better than in the past, he said.

Several candidates objected to Elliott's suggestion that he was the only candidate with no conflicts of interest. Palmer noted that his brother was sheriff, but county budget decisions were made by a committee, and the sheriff's office rarely asked for a budget increase, so he saw no significant problems.

People in public office needed to recognize conflicts right away and determine their significance, Myers said. Hamsher noted that situations may arise as "perceived, actual or potential" conflicts, and public officials should always recuse themselves and always be transparent.

## Candidates

• **County judge:** Jim Hamsher, Scott Myers

• **County commissioner:** Tanner Elliott, Gordon Larson, Archie Osburn, Sam Palmer, Richie Colbeth

• **Justice of the peace:** Harold Preston, Kathy Stinnett

• **District attorney:** Jim Carpenter

## Ending divisiveness

Kathy Stinnett, the incumbent justice of the peace, said she was fiercely patriotic and proud of the oath she had taken, and she supported keeping local justice courts. Her challenger, Harold Preston, said he filed because he believed no one should run unopposed, and if elected he would be humble and educated.

Incumbent District Attorney Jim Carpenter, who is running unopposed, said methamphetamine use in the county has become a major issue. A shortage of police officers and passage of a bill making meth possession a misdemeanor was making the problem more difficult, he said.

Several candidates emphasized the need for the county to heal and for residents to

end their divisiveness. Palmer called the last election cycle "very disheartening" and "ugly," with threats that needed to stop.

Hamsher suggested that social media made it too easy for people to criticize each other.

Myers said he believed he could work alongside any of the other candidates. Above all, Myers encouraged everyone to vote.

Commissioner candidate Richie Colbeth was called away and didn't participate in the forum.

"It wasn't an emergency," Colbeth later told the Eagle. "It was at the point when I realized that I had absolutely no business even sitting at the same table with those gentlemen. I apologize and wish them well. Whoever wins, know that Grant County is in good hands."

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