

Grant County commissioner announces US Senate bid

Sam Palmer seeks GOP nod in race to unseat Wyden

By STEVEN MITCHELL
Blue Mountain Eagle



Steven Mitchell/Blue Mountain Eagle
Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer listens during the Wednesday, Sept. 22, session of the county court.

JOHN DAY — Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer has announced his bid to unseat U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden next year.

Palmer, a Republican in his first term as a commissioner, said he was disillusioned with Wyden and fellow Democratic Sen. Jeff Merkley's River Democracy Act. The federal bill would add nearly 4,700 miles of wild and scenic rivers across the state, and Palmer called it the tipping point in his decision to run for the Senate.

The River Democracy Act has been met with criticism in at least three rural Oregon counties. County commissioners worry the proposal — which widens protective stream buffers from a quarter-mile to a half-mile on both sides — will lead to more significant restrictions for timber harvest, livestock grazing, and outdoor recreation that power their local economies.

Palmer told the Eagle that he and other county commissioners in Eastern Oregon were never contacted directly by Wyden's staff when his office solicited nominations from the public for proposed wild and scenic river designations in October 2019. The nominations were announced in February 2020.

In October 2020 — four months before the bill was introduced — Wyden sent

two letters to the Association of Oregon Counties seeking input from local elected officials. However, Palmer told the Eagle he and fellow commissioners on this side of the state deserved a more personal approach.

Palmer, a 57-year-old John Day native who works as a nurse, told the Eagle he is campaigning on four main issues: forest health, immigration, mental health, and working with local governments.

Forest health

On forest health, Palmer told the Eagle he wanted to stop the megafires that fill the air with smoke, which he said carries dozens of cancer-causing chemicals.

He said year after year, people's homes are burning up and people are dying. Palmer told the Eagle that the Canyon Creek Fire of 2015 was what prompted him to run for the commissioner seat two years ago.

He said he could not effect the change he would like to see from his county position.

Going back to the River Democracy Act, he said the bill locks up 3 million acres

of forest and could eliminate mechanical harvest of timber and forest thinning.

Wyden's press secretary, Hank Stern, disputed that claim, telling the Eagle that the bill aims to mitigate wildfire risk in riparian areas that haven't been prioritized until now.

Immigration

Palmer said thousands of children on the border are missing and an open border does not allow for a free nation.

"They're human trafficking, they're sex trafficking, they're drug trafficking, and there is migrant worker trafficking," he said.

Palmer also claimed that Wyden had smuggled an undocumented immigrant across the border. In contrast, Palmer said, he bought a Mexican national a pickup truck so he could go back to Mexico for two years — going from making \$20 an hour to \$8 a day and leaving his family — while he went through the naturalization process to become a U.S. citizen.

Palmer told the Eagle that there is a Youtube video of

Wyden smuggling the immigrant over the border.

While Palmer did not share the video with the Eagle, Stern said in an email that he is assuming Palmer is referring to a case from July 2019, when Wyden helped a woman who was eight months pregnant and suffering from life-threatening complications come to the U.S. for medical treatment.

Mental health and addiction

Noting that Oregon has one of the highest rates of teen suicide in the country, Palmer said Wyden has been in office for decades and has not meaningfully addressed drug addiction, homelessness and a "plethora" of other issues.

Palmer said he would work on the ground and talk with mental health professionals about what they need.

"We need a new set of eyes on these issues," he said.

Working with local governments

If elected, Palmer said he would improve communication with local governments, with staffers directly contacting county commissioners, city councilors or state representatives before attempting to push through sweeping legislation like the River Democracy Act.

"Whether you're Republican or Democrat," he said, "you want to be heard."

He also pledged to take a bipartisan approach in the Senate. He noted that he and Grant County Sheriff Todd McKinley have begun talks with the city of John Day to hammer out a transition plan and potential law enforcement contract after

voters in John Day rejected a levy to fund the city's police department.

He told the Eagle that he caught flak from the Grant County Republican Committee for meeting with organizers behind the Project Turnkey grant, a statewide program that converts motels and hotels to transitional or emergency housing.

In May, residents voted down the plan after an emotional — and at times hostile — public meeting. Organizers, which included Community Counseling Solutions and other stakeholders from various government agencies, faced criticism for a lack of transparency.

What's next?

As his campaign ramps up, Palmer said, he might have to "pick and choose" among his priorities as he heads into the May primaries and potentially the November 2022 general election.

While his county commissioner position is supposed to be 13 hours a week, he said he has been putting in 40 to 50 hours a week on average. And, in the early days of COVID-19, he put in 18-hour days at the Emergency Operations Center, which the county established to respond to the coronavirus. Palmer served as the center's public information officer and liaison from the Grant County Court before the EOC came under widespread criticism for overspending its \$125,000 budget by roughly \$75,000.

He said if the Senate campaign begins to impact his ability to carry out his duties as a county commissioner, he would step aside.

Black Butte Fire area roads reopen

Blue Mountain Eagle

The Malheur National Forest has reopened all boundary-area roads in the Black Butte Fire closure area, including Forest Service Roads 16 and 1675, the agency announced in a news release on Wednesday, Sept. 23.

Reopening the roads allows access to the North Fork Campground, an area popular with hunters.

Forest managers remind the public to be careful when recreating in the area. The Black Butte Fire is still burning in the southeast corner of Grant County. There will continue to be fire traffic for several weeks, and some public use restrictions remain in place.

For the most up-to-date information, check the Malheur National Forest website at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/malheur/home>.

Malheur National Forest eases fire restrictions

Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — Due to increased moisture levels, the Malheur National Forest is easing some restrictions on forest lands.

As of Wednesday, Sept. 22, fire managers have reduced public use restrictions to Phase B and commercial use restrictions to Level II across the Malheur, the agency said in a news release.

Fire danger remains high on the south zone (Emigrant Creek Ranger District) and is reduced to moderate on the north zone (the Blue Mountain and Prairie districts).

Campfires, charcoal fires and stove fires are still prohibited except within designated recreation sites on the forest.

Additional restrictions remain in place, including tight limits on smoking, using a chainsaw between 1 and 8 p.m., operating an internal or external combustion engine without a spark arrestor and driving off-road.

Grant Union High School adds four new teachers

By STEVEN MITCHELL
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — Grant Union High School has four more teachers, and enrollment is holding steady compared to last year.

Ryan Gerry, Grant Union's principal, said science teacher Jessica Suchorski and math teacher Jess Bigsby moved over from Hum-

bolt Elementary School. Meanwhile, Spanish teacher Marcus Teague and computers and business teacher Stacy Durych are new additions to the district.

"All four teachers have been a great addition to the staff here at GU, and we are looking forward to great things from all," Gerry said.

Gerry said the school had a busy summer with projects, such as making

sure every Grant Union student has a Chromebook device.

As a whole, Gerry said, he said he believes having a device in every student's hand will enhance participation and engagement while providing students with continual access to their courses.

According to Gerry, another project involved redesigning the special education department, resulting in

some room shifting.

As part of this project, he said the school has done a complete makeover on the school store, with a new living skills center and new kitchen.

Gerry said the next project in the works at Grant Union is a remodel on the school's computers and business classroom. That project is expected to be completed during the holiday break.

Student play Friday at Prairie City

Blue Mountain Eagle

PRAIRIE CITY — The Missoula Children's Theatre is returning to work with the Prairie City School District's elementary students. The Montana troupe has traveled to the area to work with local students a number of times

in past years.

A performance of "The Emperor's New Clothes" will be given at 6 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 1, in the new gym at Prairie City High School.

For more information, call the Prairie City School District office at 541-820-3314.



Eagle file photo
From left, Marty Wampler, Alexis Rindlisbacher, Jacob Wheeler, Michel Hitz and Devin Packard practice a song and dance for a performance with the Missoula Children's Theatre in 2007.

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