

# The Blue Mountain EAGLE

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## Candidates air their views at commissioner forum

By STEVEN MITCHELL  
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — Contenders for the open seat on the Grant County Court made their case Wednesday, April 20, during the Blue Mountain Eagle's candidate forum at the county's airport.

During a 90-minute session moderated by the newspaper's editor, Bennett Hall, the three candidates answered questions on an array of topics, including how to fund policing in the county, how much commissioners should be paid and how they would dial down the animosity between the city of John Day and the county.

Nearly two dozen people attended the forum in person, and others watched a video of the event livestreamed on the newspaper's website and Facebook page.

The office of Grant County commissioner is a nonpartisan position. If none of the candidates gets more than 50% of the vote, the two highest vote-getters will move on to the general election ballot in November.

County commissioners are expected to work 13½ hours a week. They are paid \$2,380 per month with full benefits, including membership in the Public Employee Retirement System.

### Law enforcement debate

Hall kicked off Wednesday's forum by asking each of the candidates how they would address the law enforcement funding debate in the county. John Day and Grant County officials have been at loggerheads since October, when the John Day City Council voted unanimously to suspend operations of the city's police force and offered to pay the county \$300,000 a year to hire three sheriff's deputies to provide law enforcement services in the city limits.

As part of that deal, John Day City Manager Nick Green laid out a proposal for the county to give the city \$300,000 a year from its road fund to pay for street improvements to serve new housing developments in John Day, on the the-

ory that housing starts in the city would broaden the tax base for the entire county.

Although the Grant County Court has not formally deliberated on the city's proposal, court members have been steadfast in their opposition to the idea of linking county road fund money to police services.



Webb



Knepper



Rowell

At the April 13 Grant County Budget Committee meeting, Grant County Sheriff Todd McKinley requested funding for three additional patrol deputies and a secretary.

Mark Webb, a former Grant County judge and the executive director of Blue Mountain Forest Partners, a forest collaborative, emphasized that he would defer to McKinley about how to approach the issue. That said, Webb, a write-in candidate for county commissioner, added that based on conversations with people from outlying communities, policing differs from city to city. For instance, he said he hears from people in Monument that their main complaints are drunk drivers, while in Long Creek, it is people exceeding the speed limit.

The speeding issue, he said, could perhaps be addressed by installing a photo camera instead of having a full-time employee sitting on the side of the road.

"We do want to provide safety," he said, "but we want to do it in a smart way with the kind of budget that we can afford."

Webb said that would be how he would start the conversation. He said he would also approach the cities to determine their individual needs and see how the county might address them differently than it has in the past.

For his part, Scott Knepper, a Prairie City resident and retired postal worker, said the city of John Day needs to address the policing problem itself and put a measure back on the ballot to reinstate the police force.

Knepper said the Sheriff's

See Forum, Page A16

# PRIVATE PROPERTY VS. PUBLIC ACCESS

## Baker County tries to keep route into Elkhorns open

By JAYSON JACOBY  
and IAN CRAWFORD  
Baker City Herald

A total of 19 Baker County residents took their turn at a lectern and told county commissioners why the Pine Creek canyon west of Baker City is such a wonderful place to visit and why the county should strive to ensure the public has access to the road and to large swaths of public land it leads to.

The speakers, whose personal experiences in the Pine Creek area date back more than half a century in some cases, were among those who attended a public hearing called by commissioners on April 19 at the Baker County Events Center.

Commissioners were soliciting public comments regarding the county's effort to declare as a public right-of-way the road that follows Pine Creek to its source at Pine Creek Reservoir, high in the Elkhorn Mountains.

Although the road passes through private property for about 2½ miles, the reservoir itself is part of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, as is much of the surrounding alpine area that's popular among hunters, anglers and hikers.



Contributed Photo, File

David McCarty installed this gate across the Pine Creek Road at his property boundary during the fall of 2020.

A herd of mountain goats lives near the reservoir, and an unofficial trail crosses a ridge and leads to Rock Creek Lake, the largest (35 acres) and deepest (about 100 feet) in the Elkhorns.

The county's campaign to formalize public access on the road was prompted by a civil lawsuit that a Pine Creek landowner, David McCarty, filed against the county almost a year ago, on April 30, 2021.

In September 2020 McCarty bought 1,560 acres in the Pine Creek canyon, the largest chunk of private land through which the road runs.

Soon after buying the property McCarty installed a metal gate across the road,

with a lock, at his eastern property boundary, near the edge of Baker Valley.

On Sept. 30, 2020, county commissioners voted 3-0 to order workers from the county road department to remove the lock. That happened on Oct. 1, 2020.

After commissioners contended that the Pine Creek Road is a public route, including the section through McCarty's property, McCarty asked county officials to supply records documenting the road's status as public.

In the lawsuit he filed in April 2021, McCarty asks for either a declaration that the disputed section of the Pine Creek Road crossing his property is not a public right-of-way, or, if a jury concludes there is legal public access, that the limits of that access be defined and that the county pay him \$730,000 to compensate for the lost value of the land based on the legal public access and for other costs he has incurred as a result of the county's actions.

In his lawsuit, McCarty says that before buying the timbered property through which the Pine Creek Road runs, he reviewed the title report and other documents, none of which showed a public road through the land.

See Access, Page A16

**"IT'S A REAL SHAME THAT SOMEONE COMES IN AND SAYS I OWN THIS, AND TO HECK WITH THE REST OF THE COUNTRY. THAT'S NOT RIGHT. WE NEED TO DO SOMETHING TO KEEP IT OPEN FOR EVERYBODY."**

— Mike Thompson, speaking to Baker County commissioners about the Pine Creek Road



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald, File

The Pine Creek Road, in the Elkhorn Mountains northwest of Baker City, climbs to an alpine zone that includes views of Rock Creek Butte, upper right, at 9,106 feet the tallest peak in the range.

## John Day passes \$30.3M budget

### Lone 'no' vote cast over law enforcement funding

By JUSTIN DAVIS  
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — The John Day Budget Committee passed a balanced budget of \$30.3 million for fiscal year 2022-23 at its meeting on Tuesday, April 19, but not without some dissent.

Citizen committee member Sherrie Rininger voted no on the proposed budget, citing concerns the city wasn't allocating funds to the county to help pay for policing services provided by the Grant County Sheriff's Office to John Day.

Funds that could've been given to the county for that purpose were moved into the street fund after the City Council rejected the county's proposal for the city to pay for law enforcement services.

Rininger says John Day's residents

shouldn't have to suffer because the John Day and Grant County governing bodies have issues with one another.

The City Council voted unanimously to suspend the city's police department in October after years of struggling to fund the department. John Day's police force was comprised of four men and had an annual budget of \$450,000, which outstripped the \$300,000 the city brings in with property tax revenues by a large margin. A bond measure to provide additional funding for the department failed in August when it fell short of the election's double-majority requirement.

The county's proposed budget for the coming fiscal year includes a \$300,000 law enforcement contribution from John Day even though no agreement has been reached with the city.

Also passed at the city budget meeting was a property tax rate of \$2.9915 per \$1,000 of assessed property value as

See Budget, Page A16

## Grants fuel work of forest collaboratives

By STEVEN MITCHELL  
Blue Mountain Eagle

WASHINGTON — Five forest collaboratives in Central and Eastern Oregon have received word they will be getting upwards of \$11.6 million in federal funding.

The collaboratives, which bring together environmentalists, public and private land managers, and timber industry professionals, seek to find common ground on hot-button forestry issues.

The projects were selected by a federal advisory committee and funded through the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, which is intended to encourage ecological and economic sustainability and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires.

The Southern Blues Restoration Coalition, a joint effort of Blue Mountains Forest Partners and the Harney County Restoration Col-

laborative, received \$3 million. Both groups are forestry collaboratives, groups of diverse stakeholders formed to find solutions to stubborn forestry issues that satisfy environmental concerns while providing jobs in the woods and generating a steady and predictable timber supply to feed area lumber mills.

Backed by the two collaboratives, the Southern Blues Restoration Coalition has been supported by CFLRP money since 2012. The coalition was initially awarded \$2.5 million per year and received a bump to \$4 million per year in 2016.

Malheur National Forest program manager Roy Walker said a big chunk of the money they will receive would go toward prescribed burning. Some of the funding, he added, would go to pre-commercial thinning throughout the Southern Blues Coalition area.

See Grants, Page A16

