

# Morrow County candidates gather for Judicial and Commissioner Forum Monday night

*-Continued from PAGE ONE*  
 an elected official. Consensus once again prevailed, as they advocated for remaining steadfast to the law and not succumbing to concerns about reelection, as it may lead to corruption. However, Judge Collins diverged from this view, affirming that the question implied that being an independent judge was inherently positive. He pointed out that judges had limited opportunities to be truly independent and were bound by the law and facts. Collins remarked, "We have to make the decision that is required by law given the facts as we find them and we can't worry about anything outside of that in coming to that decision and therefore, we're kind of a slave to the law, we're not independent would be my answer."

The panel concluded with a question from the audience, inquiring whether any candidate could not fulfill the 6-year term and what event, as stated in the Oregon constitution, would trigger the process for replacing them. Only Judge Collins provided an answer, revealing that he would turn 75 years old in 2026 and would be required to retire. Collins mentioned that an election would subsequently take place in 2026 to appoint his replacement. He expressed confidence in serving two more years, amounting to a total of eight years, believing that the county would benefit from his experience and investment in the state of Oregon.

The County Commissioner position #1 forum kicked off with the introduction of the candidates - August Peterson, sitting Commissioner Roy Drago, Kelly Doherty, and Richard Drake. As the candidates took the stage, each of them was given the opportunity to address the crowd and present their ideas on the top three priorities for Morrow County.

Drake, hailing from Heppner, wasted no time in making his presence felt. Drake declared, "I am in a prime position to make intelligent informed decisions for you, for our county, for our individuals." He swiftly delved into the nitrate issue plaguing the county for decades. Sharing his personal experience of being forced off his private well in 1985, Drake expressed his disappointment at the lack of action and seemingly fruitless investigations despite the money that has been poured into the issue.

Turning his attention to what he dubbed the "Amazon effect on the county," Drake raised concerns about corporations receiving tax abatements. He argued that

this favorable treatment has had a negative impact on the community, necessitating a reevaluation of the current system. The abandonment of the existing ASA plan was another pressing concern for Drake, as he emphasized the disruption it has caused. Commending the historical significance of the circuit court building, he lamented the idea of relocating it, stating, "I read in an old book somewhere that says do not move the ancient monuments, they're put there for a reason. This one has been here for over 120 years."

Up next was sitting Commissioner Drago addressed the multitude of issues that have been weighing on the current administration. Drago acknowledged that upon entering office, they were faced with a substantial workload. However, he emphasized that the commission has been diligently focused on tackling these challenges head-on.

Aware that not everyone may agree with their decisions, Drago assured the public that their primary objective is to resolve these issues as efficiently as possible. He emphasized the urgency and commitment by stating, "Nobody wants these issues behind us any more than we do. Nobody in this county wants a nitrate problem, nobody. Nobody in this county wants to have no ambulance. We're not here to be the enemy; we're here trying to do what we can do."

Drago highlighted his long-term residency in the county since 1980 and his involvement with the Port of Morrow docks, showcasing his experience and dedication to the community. He addressed the contentious placement of the Circuit Court building, acknowledging that not everyone will be pleased with the decision, but affirmed that he aims to keep it on the south end of the county. Drago emphasized the importance of this location, stating, "It's better off down here, I think Heppner needs it. As far as the courthouse itself is concerned, it's never gonna leave; it will always be here. We're talking about a circuit court, not the County courthouse that's up on the hill."

Furthermore, Drago outlined housing and childcare as the second and third critical concerns on their agenda. He admitted that housing development is more challenging in this area due to limited available land but assured the public that they are exploring innovative solutions. "We're working pretty hard on both of those right now. There are some good projects going on for housing. It's

a little more difficult in this end of the county because you don't have as much land to put more housing on. It's kind of difficult, but we'll think outside the box." Drago also mentioned efforts to improve childcare services, indicating that they are actively working on expanding options for families.

Peterson, a fifth-generation farmer, stated that he possesses degrees in both Agriculture science and Political science. His goal is to utilize his education to enhance his community. Peterson firmly believes that education has equipped him with the necessary perspective to tackle the myriad challenges faced by their county. He asserts, "My approach is rooted in collaboration, community engagement, and practical solutions."

Peterson identifies a host of issues plaguing the county, ranging from groundwater contamination due to nitrates to an alarming ASA crisis. Additionally, he acknowledges the rapidly evolving local economy as another pressing concern. However, Peterson views all of these challenges as stemming from a larger communication problem.

Kelly Doherty, a small business owner and member of the board of Port of Morrow has an academic background that includes an associate degree in general agriculture and general education, as well as a bachelor's degree in business and philosophy.

She asserted that the region is in desperate need of leadership that genuinely cares about Morrow County and recognizes its diversity. Doherty's believes her understanding of the differences between Boardman, Heppner, and Irrigon positions her as a voice for the people.

Doherty advocated for a "grassroots approach" to governance, asserting that decisions should be made by the people rather than imposed from the top down. Doherty expressed her belief that elected officials should not merely listen and make their own decisions but should prioritize the wishes and needs of the community.

Another pressing issue that Doherty highlighted was the rapid depletion of rural land resources. She expresses concern that these precious lands are being "gobbled up," calling attention to the urgent need for sustainable land management and conservation practices.

Lastly, childcare emerges as a significant concern for Doherty. Recognizing the indispensable role it plays in supporting

working families and fostering economic growth, she advocated for comprehensive and accessible childcare solutions within Morrow County.

Next was the issue of transparency and ethical concerns. Candidates were asked about the importance of these areas and how they would prioritize them.

Doherty expressed her belief that transparency and ethics are crucial to effective leadership. She acknowledged the concerns raised in various meetings, stating, "I think that's something that has been a concern... the transparency that we're finding from our boards and our leadership." Doherty further emphasized the significance of being held accountable and the need to educate oneself, remarking, "We're watching that play out now, decisions that were made that were not transparent, and now we're dealing with them."

Peterson echoed Doherty's sentiment, emphasizing the paramount importance of establishing trust in those who hold leadership positions. Communication, according to Peterson, is key to addressing ethical issues. "It does not matter how right you are in this realm," he noted. "If we cannot communicate why we are right to others as a leader, and as a leader, that falls upon you to make sure that you are getting out there and that you can present your message in a way that people can understand."

Furthermore, Peterson expressed concern that there is currently a lack of effort in helping individuals understand the reasoning behind key decisions. He believes it is the duty of leaders to bridge this gap of understanding and ensure that the public is fully informed about the rationales behind their actions.

Drago, emphasized the significance of ethics and transparency in public affairs. While acknowledging that there are certain details that cannot be disclosed due to protocol, but, Drago firmly asserts that public hearings are indeed transparent. He further argued in favor of creating more "public type forums," although he acknowledges the inherent difficulties in doing so.

Drago spoke confidently about their commitment to finding the best resolutions possible. He states, "We do the best we can with the information we have. Our sole purpose is to serve the county and ensure its progress."

While recognizing the limitations in complete transparency, Drago's insistence on public hearings as a means of engaging the

community showcases a commitment to providing a platform for the concerns and ideas of the county's residents.

Drake shed light on the importance of ethics in his previous line of work as a general contractor. Drake emphasized that trust and integrity are essential qualities that one should possess. "Ethics is utmost, if you don't have a word that people can trust, that's a problem," he affirmed.

Drake went on to express his desire for additional commissioners, seeking a level of "separation" within the team. "Rubbing shoulders" with his colleagues was not only important to him, but he also believed it was crucial for the success of their work. "We have one chance to get it right, and if we don't, it may never come back around again," Drake warned.

Furthermore, Drake stressed the significance of open dialogues between the public and the commissioners. He acknowledged that the public's voice was paramount in decision-making processes, and the commissioners needed to actively engage with their constituents.

All participants were in agreement about the paramount importance of ensuring the safety of the county. Among the key points discussed were the significance of infrastructure, the ASA plan, and the regulation of nitrates.

Drago, voiced his thoughts on the ASA plan, stating, "The county did what they had to do under the circumstances. We didn't stop the ambulance service; it was the ambulance services themselves that ceased operations. In response, we stepped in to provide interim service. Contrary to popular belief, we did not force anyone to quit operating an ambulance service. In fact, we even went as far as to offer a five-year contract extension with a potential reimbursement of up to \$1 million, but unfortunately, this offer was denied."

Drake expressed his dismay over what he thought was a lack of support shown by the commissioners towards the local health district, he stated, "From my perspective as a citizen, the health district went to the commissioners for \$600,000 and they said no. That didn't seem like a lot of support, especially after just a few months before passing by about 70% of the county to support the ambulance service as well as the hospital and clinics around. So, I'm not sure about your perception of that. Safety for Morrow County is just paramount."

They then spoke on the

location for the Circuit Court building. Drago, taking the floor first, expressed his disappointment in not yet having a finalized site. He cited the restrictive regulations as the reason behind the slim pickings. However, it was Drake who posed a question, wondering why the mill site had not been developed for this purpose. His desire was clear as he added, "I want the courthouse here."

It became clear that all of them are in agreement when it comes to the future location of the Courthouse in Heppner. Peterson stated, "We can find creative solutions to keep it in Heppner." This sentiment was echoed by another candidate, Doherty, who revealed that the POM board has offered the mill site as a potential location. Doherty emphasized the importance of finding a solution outside of the flood plain, stating, "Every week we ask [the BOC], let's get that out of the flood plain, let's get that work done." She further expressed her belief that progress is being made in that regard, saying, "And it's coming to fruition and I think we see that. Getting sewer and septic, I think that the port would be glad to have that done."

During the final question of the evening, the spotlight fell on concerns surrounding the new ASA plan.

When asked about his thoughts on the plan, Peterson said, "I have not read it in full detail," he confessed. But rather than providing a detailed analysis, he talked about a broader perspective.

Peterson seized the opportunity to propose a grand vision for the county. "Since we've blown this up since we've reached this point," he began, "let's take this as an opportunity to make sure that we move forward with a plan that provides the entire county with the best coverage and the best service that we can."

Both Doherty and Drake expressed their apprehensions about dividing the plan. Drake questioned whether the residents of the north end would be willing to shirk their tax obligations. He emphasized that it was our joint responsibility to ensure the welfare of the north-end community.

The forum concluded with a brief presentation by Peterson. To illustrate the impact of individual political votes, he utilized a visual aid in the form of rocks. Peterson displayed small, medium, and large rocks, symbolizing the significance of our local political participation. By displaying a large rock, he effectively emphasized the power attributed to a single vote.

## Successful MS Focus Walk in Heppner



MS Walk participants gathering at Les Schwab for photo. - Contributed Photo

April 20 was a perfect day to take a walk to help raise money and show support for Multiple Sclerosis Warriors. They are warriors because they fight this disease daily, hourly, in many different ways. There was no rain, no wind, and a pleasant temperature. There were upwards of 50 supporters for the MS Walk. There were dogs and strollers, runners, and scooters. Everyone had a good time as they walked and talked

to others showing their support for those with this awful disease. Black was the team color of the day for some walkers, starting with the team led by the MS Warrior, Heather Smith, and her Support Staff. Greg Smith walked with his wife Sherri and their canine. Greg even wore a picture of his warrior Mother so she could walk with everyone else vicariously.

Supporters joined the parade into town; some

joined along the way; some just took the short route to Bucknam's Tavern for brunch. Photo-ops were taken at Les Schwab's, Murray's, and along the way.

So far, MS Walk collected over \$5000. Online contribution totals are unknown at this time. Those of you who donated online, contact Barb Orwick to ensure that your donation counts for us. If you would like to contribute, please get in touch with Barb Orwick, at 541-256-0455. She will forward your contributions or talk you through the online process.

If you contributed hundreds of dollars or just a few or showed up, thank you for your support for MS Focus. Let's help these warriors maintain their health, safety, self-sufficiency, and personal well-being.

## Wranglers April 28<sup>th</sup> playday results

Stick-Horse Race: 3 and under- 1<sup>st</sup>) Sawyer Ham. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Sheldon Milligan. 3<sup>rd</sup>) Maverick Rhea. 4<sup>th</sup>) Klancy Fennern. 4 & 5 yr. olds- 1<sup>st</sup>) Oakley Bergstrom. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Rune Armstrong. 3<sup>rd</sup>) Blaney Jo Milligan. 4<sup>th</sup>) Iris Armstong. 6 & 7 yr. olds- 1<sup>st</sup>) Rhett Miller. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Lotus Armstrong.

Barrels: Lead- Line 1<sup>st</sup>) Maverick Rhea 37.04. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Rhett Miller 38.7. 3<sup>rd</sup>) Lotus Armstrong 39.5. 4<sup>th</sup>) Trell Knowles. Pee-wee Wranglers 7 & Under: 1<sup>st</sup>) Price Hines 30.2. Lil Wranglers 8-11 yr. olds- 1<sup>st</sup>) Karter Jo Hines 22.5. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Lydia Knowles 26.6. 3<sup>rd</sup>) EllieGene Fennern 28.5. 4<sup>th</sup>) Morgan Milligan 30.7. Junior Wranglers 12-15 yr. olds- 1<sup>st</sup>) KC Anderson 19.2. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Ashlee Knuts 22.6. 3<sup>rd</sup>) Brooklyn Hendricks 23.3. 4<sup>th</sup>) Cathrine Lindsay 23.6. Senior Wranglers 16 and up - 1<sup>st</sup>) Olivia Humphreys 20.7. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Saige

Jensen 24.1.

Poles: Lead-line - 1<sup>st</sup>) Rhett Miller 55.1. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Lotus Armstrong 55.2. 3<sup>rd</sup>) Trell Knowles 55.5. 4<sup>th</sup>) Rune Armstrong 57.4. Pee-wee Wranglers- 1<sup>st</sup>) Pierce Miller 62.5. Lil Wranglers- 1<sup>st</sup>) Karter Jo Hines 26.07. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Lydia Knowles 28.1. 3<sup>rd</sup>) EllieGene Fennern 30.09. 4<sup>th</sup>) Piper Miller 30.2. Junior Wranglers- 1<sup>st</sup>) KC Anderson 23.2. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Catherine Lindsay 27.6. 3<sup>rd</sup>) Brooklyn Hendricks 28.3. 4<sup>th</sup>) Molly McMurray 28.3. Senior Wranglers- 1<sup>st</sup>) Olivia Humphreys 28.3.

Steak Race: Lead-Line- 1<sup>st</sup>) Rune Armstrong 12.7. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Maverick Rhea 13.8. 3<sup>rd</sup>) Lotus Armstrong 14.4. 4<sup>th</sup>) Rhett Miller 14.6. Pee-wee Wranglers 7 and under- 1<sup>st</sup>) Price Hines 8.1. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Pierce Miller 17.5.

Put-N-Take: Lil Wranglers 8-11 yr. olds- 1<sup>st</sup>) Pearl Miller 24.1. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Morgan Milligan 26.9. 3<sup>rd</sup>) Lennon

Albrite 35.6. 4<sup>th</sup>) Piper Miller 40.8. Junior Wranglers 12-15 yr. old- 1<sup>st</sup>) Molly McMurray 20.0. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Ashlee Knuts 21.2. 3<sup>rd</sup>) KC Anderson 23.8. 4<sup>th</sup>) Mary Ashbeck 25.8. Senior Wranglers- 1<sup>st</sup>) Olivia Humphreys 27.1. 2<sup>nd</sup>) Saige Jensen 71.3.

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