

ELECTION:

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the ring and I hope you keep being involved,” Drotzmann said.

“I promise I will,” Gomolski replied.

Gutierrez thanked Gomolski as well, saying the tight race encouraged the councilors to really get out in the community and campaign.

Voters may have had interesting down-ballot races to consider last week, but discontent with America’s choices for presidential candidates was evident in a rise in third-party votes, write-ins and voters who turned in a ballot with the presidential section blank.

Umatilla County was no exception. More than 10 percent of voters chose a third-party candidate or wrote in a name instead of choosing the Democratic or Republican nominee. Another two percent left the section blank.

In 2012, when voters faced a choice between Republican Mitt Romney and a second term under Barack Obama, only three and a half percent of Umatilla County voters chose a third-party or write-in option and less than one percent left the section blank.

The choice to not support a major-party nominee seemed to hurt Clinton the most.

Sixty two percent of Umatilla County voters chose the Republican nominee in both 2012 and 2016, but only 28 percent of voters chose Clinton compared to 34 percent who voted for Obama.

Contact Jade McDowell at 541-564-4536.

IRRIGON HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT JOINS CITY COUNCIL

High school senior elected to position

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Staff Writer

Marlina Avila Serratos had no choice but to grow up quickly.

Born in Hermiston and raised in Irrigon, Avila Serratos was 12 years old when her mother was deported to Mexico. Her father, Juvenal Avila De La Paz, worked long days as a farm laborer, which left Avila Serratos in charge of cooking, cleaning and taking care of her 9-year-old sister after school.

Now 18, Avila Serratos said her abbreviated childhood gave her a strong sense of independence and maturity. It has served her well at Irrigon Junior-Senior High School, where she joined the National Honor Society, Key Club and started her own group to help first-generation college students learn about financial aid and resources. Avila Serratos also works two jobs, at Oregon Potato Company in Boardman and Washington State University’s GEAR UP mentorship program.

After the Nov. 8 election, her next challenge will be representing her peers on the Irrigon City Council.

“I can’t believe it. It’s like my body’s numb,” said Avila Serratos, reacting to the news between classes at IHS.

Avila Serratos is still a senior at the high school and is planning to become a registered nurse. Winning a seat on the council came as a surprise, she said, but is something where she feels she can make a positive difference.

“I want (Irrigon) to be a place where people said it grew so fast, and became a



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Irrigon High School senior Marlina Avila Serratos won a seat on the Irrigon City Council and will be sworn in to her new position in January.

place where people could bring their kids,” Avila Serratos said.

Out of four council seats up for election, four candidates — including Avila Serratos — ran on the ballot, meaning she was essentially unopposed. Incumbent Mayor Sam Heath, councilor Darren Strong and councilor Ken Matlack were also re-elected. Avila Serratos will fill the position vacant since Christine Sorenson died in January.

Councilors are elected to four-year terms. Avila Serratos will be sworn in at her first meeting on Jan. 17.

“To me, it’s going to be scary,” she said with a nervous smile.

Avila Serratos said she openly wondered whether she would be able to withstand the pressure of the job. But her father encouraged her to use her voice as a young Hispanic woman to speak for those in the community who

can’t speak for themselves.

According to the 2010 census, nearly a third of Irrigon’s population is Hispanic or Latino. The town currently has 1,826 residents.

Don Eppenbach, who served as Irrigon’s mayor for 18 years during the 1970s, ’80s and early ’90s, said he can’t recall another Hispanic councilor having served the city. Barb Huwe, longtime community volunteer and businesswoman, said she was glad to hear Avila Serratos will be joining the council.

“We need the Hispanic culture to get involved here in Irrigon,” Huwe said. “We need to get them out to help our city grow.”

Avila Serratos said she became interested in applying for the position earlier this year, while helping her dad move their mobile home from one property to another. They made numerous trips together to City Call, where

she met and became friends with Aaron Palmquist, the city manager.

It was Palmquist who introduced her to the concept of city government.

“I thought, maybe it’s time for a change,” Avila Serratos said. “I’ve been told, ‘Maybe you were meant to do this.’”

Palmquist said he is looking forward to working with Avila Serratos and believes she will bring new ideas to the council.

“From my perspective, she’s going to bring some freshness coming from a younger generation,” he said. “She also has connections to the Hispanic community. We look forward to that.”

Avila Serratos isn’t the only young newcomer to city government in Morrow County.

Cody High, 31, was also elected mayor of Heppner on Tuesday, defeating incumbent Skip Matthews.

High, who works as the assistant manager at Heppner’s only bar, Bucknum’s, said he hopes to turn the city into a more suitable place for young people to work and live.

“If we want younger people to stay in our towns, they have to have a personal stake in it,” High told the *East Oregonian*.

Avila Serratos said Irrigon could appeal to more families if they focus on improving their schools and creating more community events that get young people active and engaged.

The job will not be easy. But Avila Serratos, who still visits her mother and sisters in Mexico, said she has received some sound advice.

“Nothing is impossible. You can do it. Don’t let anything hold you back,” she said.

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BUS:

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“This is a great start,” city councilor Rod Hardin said. “It’s something that’s been needed here for years.”

The city expects to spend \$125,000 on the first six months to get the system up and running, then apply for federal 5311 transportation funding that CTUIR planning director J.D. Tovey told the council he doesn’t “see any reason” would be withheld. If those funds come in and other projections hold true the city expects to spend an estimated \$150,000 per year to subsidize both the bus system and the city’s taxi ticket program for senior and disabled residents.

Mayor David Drotzmann said fiscal conservatives might question why the city would not charge for bus rides. But Tovey said Kayak Public Transit currently has a ridership of 80,000 per year and has calculated that it would not be cost-effective to charge riders until it hit 250,000 per year due to the rules of the tribal transit grant that funds the majority of the system.

“Any income we take in counts against that grant,” he said.

He said routes and schedules will be found on the CTUIR’s website for now, but they are also working on a separate website and a mobile app that would allow riders to use GPS to track where the bus is and when it will next arrive at a stop.

Assistant city manager Mark Morgan said the city would love to add more hours to the bus schedule but for now this is what it can afford. He said some people had questioned why the route did not start earlier or end later to accommodate the work day, but pointed out that many Hermiston residents without cars do shift work. The Wal-Mart Distribution Center, Hermiston’s largest employer, runs shifts from 5 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 3 p.m. to 1 a.m. for example.

He said the city has surveyed taxi ticket riders the past three years and has discovered that more than half of their rides take place in the afternoon, and two thirds of rides are either to Wal-Mart or Good Shepherd Medical Center.

Morgan said one in five Hermiston residents live in a “food desert” at least one mile away from a grocery store, and those people are disproportionately Hispanic residents living on the

west side of town. The bus system can help them get to the store without carrying groceries more than a mile.

Councilors and the mayor said they were excited to see the system finally come to fruition after years of work. Doug Primmer said gathering input from the community and working with the transit advisory committee that put together the recommendation was “the best process I’ve ever been involved with.”

“Where else are you going to get this much bang for this much buck?” he asked.

The council voted unan-

imously to approve the contract with the CTUIR. A survey asking for opinions on names for the new bus system is still open at www.hermiston.or.us until Nov. 28.

hermiston.or.us until Nov. 28.

Contact Jade McDowell at 541-564-4536.

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