



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
Sharon Remillard counts ballots after removing them from their envelopes in the office of the Umatilla County Elections Division on Nov. 5.

Voters revise county charter, back ambulance service

By PHIL WRIGHT
 STAFF WRITER

Umatilla County's charter is getting a pair of updates. And an ambulance service in Milton-Freewater got a big lift in last week's election with a new service district and higher tax rate.

County voters approved measures to change the process to elect county officials and revise the charter's language on the sheriff's office. The results are not official yet, but the margins of victory in both are wide.

Measure 30-132 to revamp elections was passing 79.8% to 20.2%. The proposal asked whether voters would elect county officials in November and only require a May primary election if more than two candidates filed.

The answer was yes. The move cuts down on the number and thus expenses of elections. Kim Lindell,

county elections manager, said elections cost about \$1 per ballot, so for Umatilla County, around \$44,000.

Measure 30-13 to replace the term "department of law enforcement" with "sheriff's office" in the charter was passing 68.2% to 31.8%.

The change makes the county's foundational document consistent with the actual name of the law enforcement agency and reflects the sheriff is an elected office. It does not affect the department's operations in any way.

Both measures came out of the work of the county's Charter Review Committee. Michele Grable chaired the committee, which kicked the tires on the charter during a span of 19 months to recommend improvements. Grable called the outcomes "excellent" but described the measures as housekeeping. The change

to use "sheriff's office," she said, "has no substantive effect whatsoever."

Grable stressed the committee's most important recommendation never got before the voters.

That was the recommendation to adopt language in the charter requiring the county commissioners to hire a county manager. That was the "meat and bones" of the committee's work, she said, which garnered the support of Commissioner George Murdock. Fellow commissioners Bill Elfering and John Shafer, however, did not vote to place that proposal on the ballot.

Last week Echo voters also renewed an operational levy for Echo Fire District by a 146 to 26 vote. The levy is for \$30,000 a year for five years, costing property owners an estimated 38 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value.

Umatilla County Planning lowers fee for hardship

By PHIL WRIGHT
 STAFF WRITER

Umatilla County soon will give a fiscal break to folks enduring a hardship and needing temporary housing.

The county board of commissioners at its meeting Nov. 6 voted 3-0 to knock \$400 off the fee for a conditional use permit for a temporary hardship dwelling.

County Planning Director Bob Waldher told the board the permit fee is \$750, but his department wanted to reduce it to \$350.

"We felt like (it) aligns a little more closely with the work that is involved in that," he said. "And also a fair amount of these that come to our office, we

felt like the applicants are already in a bit of a hardship situation, and so reducing this fee should have a little benefit to them."

This would apply to temporary homes, such as mobile homes, someone locates on property that already has a home, Waldher explained, such as a sick family member who wants to live on the property and needs care.

Commissioner George Murdock praised the proposal, and Commissioner John Shafer added, "Clearly you guys have the county's best interest at heart."

The change to the lower price takes effect Jan. 1. All other conditional use permits will remain at \$750.

In other business, the board took the following

action:

- Adopted the planning department's code amendments to improve the aesthetic character and economic vitality of the Highway 395 North Corridor.

- Approved transferring the jurisdiction of a portion of Powerline Road to the city of Umatilla. The section is from Highway 730 to the end of the city's urban growth boundary and includes Dean Place. The county also is providing \$200,000 to the city for improvements on Powerline, including engineering studies.

Murdock said the transfer would help with residential development in the area. The Umatilla City Council also has to approve the deal.

Cold, windy harvest could affect Eastern Oregon potatoes

By GEORGE PLAVEN
 EO MEDIA GROUP

Farmers in Eastern Oregon are optimistic about the size and quality of this year's potato crop, despite cold weather during harvest that can lead to issues with starch content and bruising.

Mark Ward, who grows roughly 200 acres of Russet Burbank potatoes near Baker City, estimated yields are up 5% over the previous year, thanks in part to a more mild summer and much-needed reprieve from wildfire smoke choking out sunlight in the valley.

Ward said potatoes also benefited from a longer growing season, as the first field frost did not come until late September, giving potatoes more time to finish bulking underground. In the past, Ward said farmers could expect frost by Sept. 10.

However, Ward said, when the cold weather did come it was "one of the coldest, windiest harvests we've ever had," with temperatures not getting much over 50 degrees during the day and two below-freezing nights in the teens.

"It definitely affects the quality," Ward said. "With colder temperatures, the potatoes are going to bruise more."

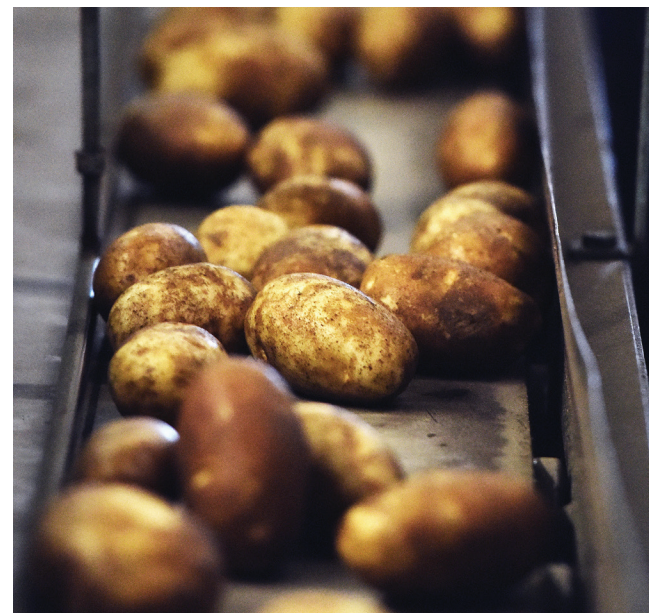
Ward, who serves as chairman of the Oregon Potato Commission, grows spuds for J.R. Simplot Co. that are used to make french fries for restaurants including McDonald's. Apart from bruising, he said colder weather can prompt potatoes to convert some starches into sugar, which makes for a darker colored, less appetizing french fry.

"That is not what the potato companies want," Ward said. "They want a white, very light colored french fry."

Mother Nature has been particularly unkind to potato growers in places like Idaho and across the Midwest, where early frost and freezing weather are forcing farmers to rush harvest or risk losing thousands of acres of spuds.

Though the 2019 harvest was challenging, Ward said the Eastern Oregon crop appears to have avoided disaster.

"We don't have a horror story to tell, but it's not perfect," he said. "I have



HH file photo
Farmers in Eastern Oregon are optimistic about this year's potato crop.

some concerns about quality coming out of the (storage) shed."

Oregon grows about 7% of all U.S. potatoes, with 46,000 acres statewide. More than two-thirds of those spuds come from Umatilla and Morrow counties in the Columbia Basin.

Greg Harris, farm manager at Threemile Canyon Farms near Boardman, said snow in March delayed planting by a few weeks, but otherwise he was very pleased with the growing season. The summer was more mild compared to recent years, Harris said, with fewer days of triple-digit heat stifling the plants' growth.

"We usually get a hot spell where the plants just shut down, and they quit growing for a bit," Harris said. "We didn't really see that this year."

Threemile Canyon Farms is a large, diversified operation with about 8,000 acres of organic and conventionally grown potatoes. The primary customer is Lamb Weston, which makes a variety of frozen potato products at its processing plants in Hermiston and Boardman.

Harris, who recently replaced Threemile Canyon General Manager Marty Myers on the Oregon Potato Commission, said cold weather at the end of September did impact harvest in the basin, as farmers waited for tubers in the ground to reach 50 degrees to avoid bruising.

"There were definitely some farms around that were experiencing lower bruise-

free when it got cold," Harris said.

Harris said he expects average to slightly above-average yields for potatoes. The USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service released its first production report for the 2019 crop on Nov. 8, said Oregon state statistician Dave Losh.

Last year, Oregon harvested 45,000 acres of potatoes at 60,000 pounds per acre, according to NASS. Average production nationwide was 44,300 pounds per acre.

The state's other big potato-producing region, the Klamath Basin, was bolstered by a wet spring this year that helped ensure full irrigation water supplies for farmers in both Oregon and California.

Dan Chin, who farms on both sides of the state line, said it was a stark contrast to 2018, when water uncertainty due to drought and lawsuits over fish conservation made it difficult to know what to plant.

"The year before, we didn't know we were going to get water until July," Chin said. "It's really hard to make a plan."

Chin grows 900 acres of conventional and organic potatoes for fresh markets. He said the growing season was cooler overall, and though some late season rains delayed harvest by a few days, farmers are pleased with yield and quality.

"We really produced a nice potato crop," Chin said. "I think we have the potential to make some money this year."

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