

# Local candidates adjust campaigns due to COVID-19

By ALEX CASTLE  
STAFF WRITER

When a large part of political campaigns is about exposing yourself and your ideas to the public, a global pandemic isn't the most conducive environment to run one.

With Gov. Kate Brown ordering people to stay home and public health officials urging people to keep at least 6 feet between one another, traditional campaigning methods of candidates going door-to-door and holding events to meet the voters is no longer an option.

Ahead of the May primaries, candidates for local office in Umatilla County are adjusting to the new landscape with a stronger emphasis on social media and other means of communication while weathering the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their personal lives.

HollyJo Beers, a candidate for Umatilla County commissioner from Milton-Freewater, was recently



Maier



Dorran



Lopez



Gomolski



Beers

laid off from her job as a canvasser for the conservative think tank Freedom Foundation's Washington state branch, she said March 28.

"Well, I actually have more time to campaign now," she said.

Beers said she has a pension and would be OK, but noted the pandemic's economic impacts could limit some people's ability to contribute to a local political campaign.

Hermiston's Dan Dorran, another candidate for Umatilla County commissioner, finally was freed of his 14-day self quarantine the end of March, which he invoked on himself after traveling for 23 days in his work as an operations and sales executive.

"These are very interesting times," he said, laughing.

Dorran maintained his routine of completing an early morning run each day, but otherwise stayed inside and kept himself isolated even from his wife to not risk spreading something to her.

The restrictions on large gatherings has forced Dorran to cancel his campaign receptions and plans for daily door-to-door meetings with voters, which he'll potentially be supplanting with virtual town halls and one-hour presentations of different formats.

Mark Gomolski, another county commissioner candidate from Hermiston, said he's going to be calling voters, sending out emails and trying to set up some small-

group video chats to connect with the public.

Beers said some of the county commissioner candidates already participated in a candidate forum of sorts via a phone conference, which she'd like to see more of in the future.

"I thought that worked really well," she said. "It's going to be different, but you've just got to get your name out there however you can."

When asked, all five of the candidates for county commissioner were open to setting something up for them all to speak with the public, though it's unclear what exactly that would look like at this time.

While COVID-19 already has and will put a damper on

campaigning for the foreseeable future, Patricia Maier, a county commissioner candidate from Hermiston, is hoping her strategy of getting out to campaign early will pay dividends.

"I've tried to be identified with signs," she said. "My car is marked, I went to city council meetings and senior meals in the community."

Maier said she believes she was the first to get signs out in the community and that already meeting face-to-face with the area's senior citizens was valuable, especially with older populations more vulnerable to COVID-19.

But as the candidates move forward in the time of coronavirus, all acknowledged the power of social media in helping get exposure for them and their campaigns.

"I think Facebook is going to play a much larger part than even any of us were expecting," Dorran said.

All the county commissioner candidates are either

using their own personal Facebook page or have established one specifically for their campaign to try and share their message across the social media platform.

While spreading their campaign message is important, some of the candidates are also trying to spread information from government and health officials about the pandemic.

"I've been trying to help with people who need supplies and keeping people informed," said Jonathan Lopez, a county commissioner candidate from Hermiston. "I'm not trying to do it as a political candidate, but just as a person who cares."

Lopez has postponed or canceled all campaign events he had planned through May; he said he doesn't currently have plans for how to make up for those unavailable opportunities to speak with voters and fundraise.

"Everybody, whether we like it or not, is being affected right now by this," Lopez said.

# Umatilla County lags in census reporting amid COVID-19 disruption

By ALEX CASTLE  
STAFF WRITER

Census Day has come and passed, and Umatilla County is lagging behind the rest of the country in making sure they're represented in the 2020 U.S. Census.

"Had we not had the coronavirus situation going on, I think Census Day (April 1) would have probably been in the news more than we're seeing," said Bob Waldher, Umatilla County planning director and member of the county's Complete Count Committee.

As of Wednesday, Waldher said roughly 28.5% of Umatilla County residents had submitted their informa-



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

**The U.S. Census Bureau is relying on self reporting after having suspended all events and door-to-door operations until at least mid-April.**

tion to the census. That trails both Oregon, which has 38% of its residents reporting across the state, and the average response rate across all 50 states in the U.S., which is currently at 36%.

The once-a-decade count

has particular importance for Oregon, which could receive a sixth seat in the U.S. House of Representative in addition to the \$1.5 trillion in federal dollars that will be distributed based on the responses.

Umatilla County is par-

ticularly behind, but the COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges for the U.S. Census Bureau all across the country. While this is the first time in history that people can be counted via telephone or internet, the questionnaire wasn't rolled out until the middle of March, just when the crisis was escalating around the U.S.

Stay home orders and social distancing guidelines have hamstrung efforts to remind people about being counted by canceling events and plans for door-to-door knocking. The U.S. Census Bureau has already suspended all field operations until at least mid-April and

delayed starting counts for the homeless and people living in groups, such as dorms and nursing homes.

The deadline for self-reporting has also been pushed back from the end of July to mid-August, though Waldher said that's likely to be extended even longer. But while coronavirus is disrupting the census, the county is encouraging residents to take advantage of their new opportunities to be counted.

"Now is a good time, people are cooped up at home so it's the perfect time to fill it out online," Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer said.

In fact, both Shafer and fellow Umatilla County

Commissioner Bill Elfering said they submitted their info online earlier this week.

"It's a simple process for anyone to get online and take care of," Elfering said.

The Umatilla County Complete Count Committee, which was one of the first of its kind in the U.S. when it was formed in October 2019, is also looking for new ways to get the word out there during the pandemic.

With the help of Pac/West Communications, the committee is distributing materials about the census in lunch bags and homework packets that are being given to students with all schools switching to distance education for the rest of the year.

# Community hospice agency to pilot online grief support to tri-county area

HERMISTON HERALD

Walla Walla Community Hospice is offering teleconferencing grief support groups to Walla Walla, Columbia and Umatilla counties.

Hospice offers its grief support to every adult in its tri-county service region who has experienced a loss.

The individual does not have to have been a recipient of hospice services. At this time, the 10-week groups are facilitated by staff members and guided by "Understanding Your Grief," a book by grief counselor Alan Wolfelt.

The 10-week pilot group begins on Tuesday, April 14 from 5:30-7 p.m. In order to

create an intimate and safe environment, the group is closed to new members after the second session on April 21. To be able to participate, participants will need a computer, laptop or tablet with internet connectivity. A smartphone with the Zoom app can also be used. Some technical support will be offered.

All the support offerings are at no cost to attendees. To find out more, visit [wwhospice.org/griefsupport](http://wwhospice.org/griefsupport) or call 509-525-5561. Because the 10-week groups are closed to new members, it is suggested that people register by April 10 by calling the number above or by sending an email to [info@wwhospice.org](mailto:info@wwhospice.org).

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