

Umatilla County again discusses hiring a professional manager

By JOHN TILLMAN
Hermiston Herald

Talk is on the table again for hiring a professional manager to administer the day-to-day operations of Umatilla County. That's a move Commissioner Dan Dorran favors.

Dorran was a member of the Umatilla County Charter Review Committee in 2019 that recommended the county move off having a board of commissioners run the county and bring on a manager.

"After hours of testimony from staff, past staff, past commissioners, local community leaders, outside county administrators and others, the charter review committee brought back a recommendation to put a county administrator on the ballot along with other recommendations. Although the commissioners at the time did not put the recommendation on the ballot, they did make a commitment to further the discussion. Although four years have passed, we are having those discussions now."

Since Dorran's 2020 election to the county board, he has led the effort to reconsider the issue. He

will become commission chair in January.

Dorran convened a meeting on March 22 to revisit the committee's recommendation to employ a county manager. He reminded participants of its conclusion.

Commissioners George Murdock and John Shafer were there, along with county counsel Doug Olsen, who staffed the charter review process. Two of the original members of the charter review committee, Sally Anderson Hansell and Jerry Baker, also attended, as did Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann and City Manager Byron Smith. Looking on as well was Bill Grable, husband of Michele Grable, who chaired the committee.

At the meeting, commissioners agreed to discuss the issue further with a veteran county manager, who has yet to be identified.

"Umatilla County has grown in population, revenue and complexity," Dorran argued. "With this



Dorran

growth and complexity, the commissioners' ability to effectively and successfully manage, participate and advocate for the best advancement of Umatilla County becomes a challenge." Several others present concurred.

Umatilla County's budget last year was almost \$124 million.

Impending changes in the composition of the commission make this a timely topic. While there were no votes at the meeting, there was a suggestion to hold off hiring a manager until the November election, should the county even decide to go that route.

The makeup of the commission in 2023 will be different. Murdock is retiring, and six candidates are running for his position. Shafer is seeking reelection and has two challengers.

In the meantime, the county plans to hold discussions with an outside expert.

"To further this discussion and decision, it is important for the commissioners to have the ability to listen, question and have a conversation with a professional county administrator consultant to have our options and parameters

defined," Dorran said.

Oregon counties employ various administrative systems. Gilliam, Sherman, Wheeler, Crook, Grant, Malheur and Harney still use county courts, with a judge and two part-time commissioners. Such judges serve as chairs of the county boards of commissioner. Their judicial authority extends only to juvenile and probate matters. These activities are secondary to their primary administrative duties as county heads.

Umatilla is among those with three, full-time, co-equal commissioners. Some counties with far fewer than Umatilla's about 82,000 residents hire professional managers, including Morrow, Hood River and Clatsop.

Umatilla's population ranks 14th among Oregon's 36 counties, but is 14,000 higher than number 15 Klamath's. Number 13 Polk's is only slightly higher.

Administrators are the norm in larger counties, including Washington, Clackamas and Marion. Multnomah County elects an at-large chair and four commissioners from geographical districts.



Antonio Sierra/Hermiston Herald

Kevin Headings, speaks Thursday, March 31, 2022, during a public interview at the Pendleton School District administrative offices.

Pendleton School District names Hermiston principal next superintendent

By ANTONIO SIERRA
Hermiston Herald

The Pendleton School District stayed local with its pick for superintendent.

At a special board meeting on Saturday, April 2, the board unanimously voted to enter into contract negotiations with Kevin Headings, the principal of Hermiston's West Park Elementary School and the former superintendent of the Stanfield School District.

Headings had been vying with Kim Casey, a high school principal from Grandview, Washington, to replace Superintendent Chris Fritsch, who is retiring after five years in Pendleton.

Both introduced themselves and fielded questions at a community forum Thursday, March 31, before meeting with the Pendleton School Board behind closed doors. The board deliberated its choice well into the night, but held off on making an official decision until the minute-long special meeting on Saturday.

The board expects to come to an agreement with Headings later this month. Contract pending, Headings will start the job on July 1.

While candid board discussion on the two candidates remains private, Headings and Casey previously made a public case for their hiring at the community forums.

'My strength is doing the work'

During his public interview, Headings assured community members this was not the best format to speak to him in.

"I don't really interview well at all," he said. "My strength is doing the work."

Following stints working in public and private schools in Kansas, Salem and Lebanon, Headings arrived in Eastern Oregon to work in the Stanfield School District, first as a K-6 principal and then superintendent. During that time, Headings said he worked to make the district more transparent and improve its perception in the community.

While he went from superintendent to principal when he took the job at West Park, he said he made the move so that he could learn to lead a larger district under the tutelage of former Superintendent Fred Maiocco and former Assistant Superintendent Wade Smith. Nearly nine years later, Headings

said he was ready to return to the top job.

Headings said he plans to be out and about in schools and the community as much as possible.

"I don't enjoy sitting in my office," he said. "I don't enjoy office work."

Both Stanfield and Hermiston have significant Latino populations and Headings was asked the same question Casey was about what he would do to help them in Pendleton. While Headings didn't want to implement anything before further studying the situation, Headings said Stanfield had some success with Hispanic family nights at the schools to increase trust and participation in the Latino community.

The runner-up

Casey spent the early parts of her introduction spotlighting her rural bonafides.

She said she grew up in Ellensburg, Washington, in a farming family that spent plenty of time on horseback and in the combine.

"You can solve a lot of things with baling wire and baling twine," she said.

Casey started her career in business, including a stint working in Chrysler's Portland office, but switched tracks to education after getting a divorce. Casey said her career move encouraged other women in her family to go back to school and was hoping she could "break the cycle" with students in Pendleton.

Casey said she could get creative in recruiting and retaining teachers, having hired a math teacher through a job ad on Craigslist and working hands-on with first-year teachers to find them housing in Grandview.

"We really need to think outside of our box," she said.

Grandview High School is a majority Latino school and an audience member asked what she did to serve that student population and she might implement those ideas in Pendleton, where Latinos are a small but growing population. Casey said it's not just about translating school messages into Spanish, but also about understanding Latino culture and incorporating it into how the school approaches students and families. She said a similar, culturally-sensitive approach also could be used for students from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

County commissioner candidates give their spiels

By PHIL WRIGHT
Hermiston Herald

Umatilla County commissioner candidates during a forum Thursday night, March 31, generally agreed homelessness, drug addiction and mental health are key areas to improve in the county.

The seven candidates on the stage at the Pendleton Convention Center also expressed near identical stances on a number of issues, including universal support for Umatilla County as a 2nd Amendment sanctuary, which voters passed in 2020, legal immigration and opposition to moving from a board of commissioners to a county manager.

Incumbent John Shafer is vying against two challengers: conservative activist HollyJo Beers and former Umatilla County employee Rick Pullen. Six candidates are running for the open Position 1 seat on the board: Business owners Bob Barton of Hermiston, Jesse Bonifer of Athena, Susan Bower of Pendleton and Cindy Timmons of Milton-Freewater participated in the forum, but Alvin Young, a Hermiston store manager, and David Nelson, former state senator of Pendleton, were no-shows.

The format allowed a minute for some answers and 30 seconds for others. Sometimes, then, responses from candidates were like a puzzle — wide but not very deep.

Shafer touted his work spearheading the move for the county to not renew the contract with Lifeways Inc. for mental health services and instead bring on Community Counseling Solutions. The new nonprofit has been handling County mental health and addiction treatment since December 2021, and Shafer said there has been significant improvement in services.

"Now we go to where you are when you are in crisis," he said, instead of telling someone they should go to a hospital.

He also said communities and organizations are making some headway dealing with homelessness, pointing to the work of Community Action Program of East Central Oregon to revitalize a former

hotel in downtown Pendleton as the Promise Inn, homeless shelter and transitional housing project.

But the county has work to do when it comes to recharging aquifers in the west side of the county, he said, in critical groundwater areas.

Beers said she is the Eastern Oregon head of Oregon Three Percenters, a right-wing group. She said she is a constitutionalist and would "bring a constitutional approach to county government." She said she would push for more accessibility and transparency in county government if she wins and make fighting drugs a priority.

She and several candidates said the county has to take on the increase in drug use and addiction in the wake of the passage of Measure 110, the law that decriminalized the personal possession of small amounts of hard drugs.

Pullen said Umatilla County is his home and talked up his 10 years in county management and 20 years in government overall. He also is serving a three-year term on the Tillamook County Fair Board, which expires June 30, 2023.

He said he would make improving county roads a priority. While some are fine, others are in serious need of repair.

"They look like they're on the moon," he said.

And the county needs to be ready to help farmers due to the 2022 Legislature passing a bill to establish overtime pay requirements for agricultural workers in Oregon after 40 hours per week. He said that bill is going to have devastating effects on local farmers and the county needs to get ahead of what is coming.

Barton, owner of Barton Laser Leveling Inc., said his

decades in business give him the skills the county board needs. He said he considers homelessness a major hurdle for the county, which faces challenges to increase housing and providing enough services.

In a similar vein, he said, the county needs to find a way to confine people suffering from mental illness to protect them and the public. He also said he wants more for the county's youth, such as a virtual recreation center.

Umatilla County, he said, afforded him the opportunity to have a good life, and he wants to pass that on.

Bonifer said as commissioner he would take hard stances against state mandates for masks and vaccines.

"We are a charter county. We don't have to listen to the state," he said.

He also said he would cut "unnecessary" county jobs to free up more funds to help with mental health and homelessness.

Bower said as commissioner she would focus on the roll the county plays in regional economic development and working on ways to improve mental health services, perhaps through grants but also through private-public partnerships.

The county's organizational health also is of importance, she said, and voters need to support commissioner candidates who have professional backgrounds. That way, she explained, the county would not have to go down the road of hiring a professional manager.

During a question about what the candidates know on the defunct Blue Mountain forest management plan, Bower said as a commissioner, she would not have to know the ins and outs of that

kind of sweeping plan, but she has to know who the experts are to call about the topic.

Timmons touted her work serving on the Blue Mountain Community College Foundation and as vice-chair on the Umatilla County board for CAPECO.

"I think it's important to be involved because that's how you have the thumb on the pulse of the community and know what's going on," she said.

As commissioner, she said, she would want to take on homelessness as well as push for helping local businesses keep their doors open while recruiting new businesses to the county. The county also needs to address the rising use of drugs, she said, and focus on elder care.

Beers, Pullen and Bonifer admitted they knew nothing of the Boardman to Hemingway transmission line, the project to build a massive 500-kilovolt line across from Boardman to Western Idaho.

The Umatilla County Republican Party hosted the forum at the Pendleton Convention Center, and Vance Day, a former Marion County Circuit Court judge, served as moderator. Day was on a swing through Eastern Oregon campaigning for a seat on the Oregon Court of Appeals. Perhaps as many as 50 people were in the audience when the event began at 6 p.m.

The Oregon primary election is May 17. The last day to register to vote in the primary is April 26. For more information about voter registration, visit bit.ly/38lxaHk.

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