

Morrow County commissioner candidates speak at forum

By ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

Morrow County commissioner candidates during a forum Tuesday, April 19, touched on several issues, including the distribution of revenue from Amazon and a pay bump for commissioners.

The five candidates are vying for two seats on the county board.

The candidates

Jeff Wenholtz is challenging Commissioner Melissa Lindsay for Position 2, which opened because Commissioner Don Russell is retiring. Lindsay holds the Position 3 seat, but her move to seek the open seat means No. 3 also is open, and three candidates are in that race: Gus Peterson, Mike McNamee and David Sykes.

All five met for the forum, which the Heppner Chamber of Commerce organized at the Gilliam and Brisbee Building in Heppner.

Wenholtz said his experience has prepared him to be a commissioner. He graduated from Riverside High School in Boardman, helped his father run Irrigon Motors and Irrigon Mini Storage and served on the Morrow County Solid Waste Advisory Committee and the Morrow County Planning Commission, among other groups.

Lindsay, a fifth-generation farmer, who attended Heppner High School, spoke of her family's Morrow County roots. Her grandfather, Gar Swanson, was a founding member of the Bank of Eastern Oregon and helped start the Port of Morrow. Lindsay has served on the county board since 2016.

Peterson said he is a fifth-generation wheat farmer who went to school in Ione and studied political science at Oregon State University. He said he was "the youngest person here by a number of years" but he is running in his ideas and integrity.

Sykes talked up his life experiences. He served in the Navy, attended the University of Oregon, met his wife, has operated businesses and owns the Heppner Gazette-Times.

McNamee said he "comes from a whole different angle from everybody else here." While he is an Oregonian like the other candidates, he has lived in big cities and has the benefit of knowing rural and urban communities. A businessman and rancher, he said he

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is "pretty conservative."

Answering questions

Candidates fielded questions on a number of topics, most coming from the forum moderator, including about the county's growth and each candidate's vision in the next 10 years.

Wenholtz said county policy should be good partners with the state and the Port of Morrow. Lindsay spoke of the need to consider health and other needed services.

Peterson said he was focused on housing, education and energy projects. Sykes spoke of jobs and employment diversity. McNamee said the county needs limited growth that does not outpace our infrastructure.

The distribution of money from Amazon to cities in the county raised some criticism from the candidates.

Wenholtz said "the communities that got it probably enjoyed the money" but it was not distributed correctly. Lindsay pointed out that there were many people who were not included in the distribution, as they do not live in a city.

McNamee said the distribution of cash was "a tough decision" but that it should have been "put away" rather than spent. Peterson said the money should have gone elsewhere, too. Sykes pointed out this "gift" will never happen again, so the talk was only a "philosophical discussion."

One attendee, a rancher, asked the candidates about approving data centers and their responsibility to pay their share of taxes.

Lindsay said companies should be paying into the community, as they are community members. Wenholtz said the data centers have not been driving up power rates. Peterson spoke of lowering tax abatements now that infrastructure is in place. Sykes stated data centers should not be "let off the hook," and more questions should be asked. McNamee said "we've been too easy" on these companies.

Staffing problems at the county health department also is a concern.

Wenholtz spoke of the need for competitive pay, and Lindsay said she has experience in this issue and

believes recruitment is part of the solution.

Peterson complained of the need to cut commissioners' checks and increasing nurse's pay. Sykes said further study is needed to find if local wages are worse than other counties. McNamee said money should be found in the budget, and the county should learn why people are not working here.

That led into a focus on a raise for Morrow County commissioners.

Lindsay said wages are studied, and there is a need to make pay competitive. Wenholtz said commissioners should be part-time and see pay increases with the cost of living.

Peterson said a commissioner's pay should be tied to the median wage of the county. Sykes said the commissioner's pay increase is "not a done deal" and it can be overturned. McNamee called the pay increase "too much."

When it comes to tourism, Wenholtz said groups, such as local chambers, need to promote the area's natural beauty and added, trail development could be helpful. Lindsay said in addition to the area's scenic views, there are excellent events and activities that can be expanded on. McNamee spoke of rivers, mountains and other features that could be promoted. Peterson stated port stations for electric cars and agritourism could help. And Sykes said local business is giving us good examples of success in promoting tourism.

Wrapping up

In closing statements, candidates each gave one final pitch.

Wenholtz brought up his experience, which has given him understanding of good governance. Lindsay said she is proud of her service as a commissioner and she wants to continue her hard work.

Peterson said he was "running to make a difference." Sykes said he has been to many commissioner meetings, and he will bring his experience to the office. McNamee said he is a community member who wants to help and that he wants big companies to pay their share.

Sudden wind storm wreaks havoc



Kathy Aney/Hermiston Herald

High winds damaged the Hermiston Cinema sign along Highway 395 during a storm on April 20, 2022. Winds picked up from 0 at 6:50 p.m. to 33 mph at 6:53 p.m., gusting to 52 mph, according to National Weather Service observations. The sudden storm brought down branches all over town and stopped a Hermiston High School track meet where the Dawgs were hosting Walla Walla and Kamiakin.

Umatilla robotics team returns Wednesday

Hermiston Herald

Confidential, the Umatilla High School robotics team, had "quite the experience," according to Heidi Sipe, school district superintendent.

The team was on its way back from Houston, Texas, where it competed in a competition that also included teams from around the globe.

The plan is for Confidential to be back in town Wednesday, April 27.

"They have worked hard and performed well," Sipe said. "Unfortunately,

they were the only robot fully functioning in most of their matches. They only had two matches the entire tournament with a full alliance of working robots."

The superintendent, who traveled with the students to Texas, added that the students "stayed operational throughout and scored each match."

"The morning had potential to be disappointing as the top six Chairman's teams were announced first thing, we were not one of them. Then, they didn't get picked for an alliance so they didn't advance to the

quarter-finals," she said.

In all, she said, it was a successful competition, despite not returning with top honors.

"They went to meet teams from across the world and learn what makes them special," Sipe said.

"They're hungry for next year and they're readying for the challenge. We're so proud of them. We love that they build robots, but we're really here to build humans and today, they showed their merit in that category beyond measure," she stated.

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