

Umatilla County sees early trickle of ballots

By JOHN TILLMAN
Hermiston Herald

Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock hopes to boost turnout for the 2022 general election in November.

“For some reason, which is difficult to explain, Umatilla County ranks 36th among Oregon’s 36 counties (in turnout),” he said Tuesday, May 3, in his weekly public officials update. “It’s embarrassing, and for those of us who treasure the right to vote in the first place, it’s also a conundrum.”

The Oregon Secretary of State’s Office reported turnout for the 2020 general election of 78.5%. Umatilla County’s rate was 72%. In the May primary, the state rate was 46.1%, and the county 36.8%.

The primary election is May 17. Umatilla County had 48,476 registered voters. County Elections Manager Kim Lindell sent out ballots April 27.

“I hope we reach about

27% turnout,” Lindell said. “There’s not a lot of interest in this election. I hope that some of the local races, as for commissioners, might increase interest.”

Dan Lonai, director of county administrative services, said midterm primary elections tend to have lower turnout. The 2018 primary, for example, he said, had a turnout around 31%.

Record low turnout for a recent primary election in Umatilla County was just 29% in 2014. For that primary, statewide turnout was 35.9%. The recent high in a general election was 58.3% turnout in 2008, when Umatilla County’s rate was 47.9%.

Turnout in Republican primaries is typically higher than in Democrat races. For 2020 in Umatilla County, Democrat voter turnout was 49%, while Republican was 59.6%. Turnout for nonpartisan ballots was 16.8%.

“In Oregon, unaffiliated voters generally lack interest,” Lindell commented. “They open their ballots, see so little to interest them, that they don’t bother.”

To enhance voter turnout, Oregon has changed the rules for mail-in ballots. Previously, elections offices had to receive all by 8 p. m. on Election Day. Now, the ballots just have to be postmarked on or before that day.

For voters who prefer to deliver their ballots in person, Umatilla County also maintains drop boxes in larger communities. Outdoor locations with drive-up ballot deposit boxes are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and close at 8 p.m. on Election Day. Umatilla, Hermiston, Stanfield, Echo, Pilot Rock, Pendleton, Mission, Athena and Milton-Freewater have drop boxes. Lonai said the county lacks staff to close a box in Ukiah at 8 p.m. in November.

Lindell said she doesn’t think the postmark law change will improve turnout much.

“It might bring in a few more ballots from procrastina-

tors,” she said, “but it will slow down finalizing the results for media and elections workers.” She also said Oregon using postage-paid envelopes so voters didn’t have to use a stamp to mail ballots didn’t seem to lower drop box use.

“Some older voters still like to drop their ballots off rather than mailing them in, since it’s more like voting at a polling place,” Lindell said. “But that’s declining.”

Lonai agreed, but thought that perhaps over time the change might improve turnout.

Since the ballots went out on a Wednesday, people had a weekend to vote.

“While doing their other

paperwork at the kitchen table,” added Lindell, “they might decide to fill out ballots as well.”

On May 2, the Umatilla County election office received a batch of 755 ballots — 1.6% of the total ballots the county mailed. Lindell said it’s not a good start, but maybe more would be in leading up to the election.

“They have to go to Portland first,” she said.

Interest is liable to be higher for the general election in November, whether the county’s voter turnout program succeeds or not.

— East Oregonian news editor Phil Wright contributed to this report

Voters decide on bonds

Hermiston Herald

Local voters decide on three ballot measures for bonds in the Tuesday, May 17, primary election, and the biggest by far is in Morrow County.

The Morrow County School District has proposed Measure 25-87, a \$138 million bond to remodel and improve existing educational facilities and build new ones. The bond also would allow the district to upgrade technological infrastructure and make facilities accessible for people with disabilities. The school district has a website with more information about the measure here: www.morrow.k12.or.us/page/bond-information.

The 20-year bond would cost \$2.67 per \$1,000 of assessed value per year. A home valued at \$200,000 would pay \$534 annually.

If voters pass the measure, the school district would receive a grant from the Oregon School Capital Improvement Matching Program of \$4 million.

The other two local measures are in Umatilla County communities.

Voters in Milton-Freewater consider a \$500,000 bond to improve recreational facilities. Helix voters weigh a \$1 million bond to install a new public pool and the Morrow County School District has proposed a \$138 million bond to improve its facilities.

Measure 30-150 in Milton-Freewater is asking voters to consider renewing a tax measure of \$100,000 a year for five years at a rate of 32 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value to replace or repair city recreation facilities, according to the “Umatilla County Voters’ Pamphlet,” including the Joe Humbert Family Aquatic Center, Yantis Park Playground equipment and city ballfields.

If the measure passes, the city would begin the capital projects in fiscal year 2024.

The Helix Park & Recreation District has proposed Measure 30-151 to raise \$1 million to design and build a new public pool, splash pad, pump house, improve the bathroom and exterior restrooms and pay the cost of bond issuance.

According to the bond information, Helix property owners would pay 37 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value. The bond would mature in 21 years or less from the date of issuance.

If the bond passes, the project needs another \$500,000. Park & Recreation is looking toward fundraising and grants to provide the funds.



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