

Candidates vie for seats on Rogue Community College board

By Vickie Aldous of the Daily Courier

Voters in Josephine and Jackson counties will be choosing candidates for three spots on the Rogue Community College Board of Education during the May 16 special election.

One position is up for election in Josephine County, while two seats are up for election in Jackson County.

Elections to the seven-member board are staggered so they don't all occur in the same year.

Zone 1 (Josephine County)

Claudia Sullivan is seeking reelection to her position for Zone 1 in Josephine County, which covers the area north of the Rogue River.

In the nonpartisan race, Sullivan faces two Republican challengers — reflecting a rift among Josephine County Republicans about the direction of the party.

Sullivan is retired from a career in RCC's administration that focused on enrollment and registration. She was first elected to the board in 2015 and is seeking a third term.

"I'm really a supporter of student success. It's important on an individual basis and for the economy of our community," she said.

Sullivan said RCC enrollment is rebounding after a series of challenges, including the pandemic, 2020 wildfires in Jackson County that destroyed thousands of homes, and the failed implementation of a new RCC database that made it difficult for students to enroll.

"Our enrollment really tanked. Three things hit us at once," she said.

The board hired a new president with expertise in enrollment, she said.

Sullivan said RCC is focused on teaching students the information and skills they need for their careers, as well as "soft skills" like how to have a good work ethic, get along with others and be a team member.

"It's that combination of classroom skills and accountability our faculty work with students to understand. It's about how to get ahead and how to get along," she said.

Sullivan said RCC offers a two-year associate degree of core classes that is accepted by public universities in Oregon when students transfer to earn four-year bachelor's degrees.

She said RCC counselors and advisers work with students so they understand classes like automotive technology prepare them for careers, but don't transfer if they decide to pursue a university degree.

While some Josephine County Republican candidates have raised concerns about LGBTQ issues in school district and library board races, Sullivan said that is not a concern for her or other current members of the RCC board.

RCC cannot discriminate against a person because of LGBTQ status, disability, race, ethnicity or other classifications. It would lose federal funding, including financial aid needed by students, she said.

Sullivan said RCC is regularly audited to make sure it complies with a variety of laws and standards. She said she can't imagine an RCC board majority ever adopting a discriminatory policy.

"We would be audited and told, 'You can't have a policy like that,'" Sullivan said.

She said the board is focused on issues like preparing students for careers that pay family-wage jobs, plus making sure students have the skills businesses need.

RCC has advisory groups that work with different industry sectors, such as health care and manufacturing, to design paths into careers, Sullivan said.

She said she's seen ads around Josephine County urging people to vote for conservative candidates, but she doesn't consider the RCC board to be political.

"It's really focused on education. There are conservatives and liberals on the board. We put our politics aside because that's not really the subject of our work," Sullivan said, noting the board's tasks include passing a budget and hiring, advising and evaluating the RCC president.

"I can only hope if I'm not elected that the person who is respects the hard work of people who work at the college. They work every day to support students and the economy of our valley," Sullivan said.

Indra Nicholas, the owner of Udders ice cream shop in Grants Pass, has the endorsement of the Josephine County Republican Party and is part of a slate of candidates for various races billed as conservative.

A former high school teacher and RCC instructor, Nicholas said she isn't running for office because of LGBTQ issues.

"I'm for freedom of speech and thought and I want students to get all the information they can and make their own decisions from that. LGBTQ issues are not a huge concern for me," she said.

Nicholas said she talks with high school graduates at her ice cream shop who are taking RCC classes and don't feel the classes are harder than what they took in high school.

"Many of the students going to RCC want an education so they can get a great job and provide for their families. I don't think they're getting a great education. We need to challenge them more," she said.

Nicholas said RCC needs to raise academic standards, and then provide more individualized help to lift students up to those standards.

She said many business owners aren't getting applicants who can work effectively. She said too many people struggle with basics like showing up for work on time, engaging with people in a positive way and providing good customer service.

Part of the problem may be due to isolation caused by the pandemic and students spending too much time on cellphones and computers, Nicholas said.

"I feel like our students are not prepared to be in the workplace and to be a good employee," she said.

The other Republican in the race, former business executive Larry West, didn't submit information in time to be included in the voters' pamphlet but did speak at length to the Daily Courier.

He said the Josephine County Republican Party is run by a "cabal" of extremists who have divided local Republicans and fielded a team of poorly vetted candidates for school and library boards.

West said many good conservative Republicans have walked away from the local party leadership.

"I'm not going around with a big stick beating on people because they're LGBTQ. That's a central message of the local Republican leadership of the Republican Party," he said. "They talk about wanting to fight, fight, fight. I'm in the RCC board race because I want to be a member of a seven-person team."

West said local Republican leaders are spreading lies that he was recruited by Pat Fahey to split Republican votes and hand a victory to a liberal.

Fahey is on the RCC board but isn't up for reelection this year. He is, however, campaigning for reelection to the Josephine Community Library Board of Directors.

West said he decided to run after he came back from a trip to Arizona and saw an ad for the RCC board election.

At the time, Nicholas was planning to run for both the RCC and library boards, and West said he expected her to drop out of the RCC race and run only for the library board. Instead, she did the opposite.

West said Republican leaders are also claiming he wouldn't allow members of the Western Welcome Newcomers Club to recite the pledge of allegiance to the flag years ago, creating hard feelings that linger to this day.

West said as club president he was following the club's rule not to say the pledge or prayers. He said the club wanted to respect members whose faith forbade them from pledging allegiance to anything except God.

An email leaked to the Daily Courier written by local Republican Party leader Holli Morton outlined those claims and more against West and Fahey.

"It's total make-believe stuff and conspiracy theories," West said of the memo. "It's total disinformation that's being put out. I don't want to be a part of that."

Republican feuding aside, West said his top issue is making sure RCC has high academic standards and that credits transfer if students go on to four-year universities.

He said some students are confused and don't realize vocational training credits may not count toward university degrees. Students need help to figure out their career aspirations earlier — preferably in high school — and get on the right track.

West said he wants RCC to encourage students to finish getting their certifications in fields like welding, rather than leaving school early to get a job. He said professional certifications will help people for their whole careers.

West said he wants to build community relations with businesses so RCC is matching coursework to what various industries need.

He wants RCC to research developing fields like artificial intelligence.

"We need to identify what is coming so we're proactive," he said.

Zone 4 (Jackson County)

Compared to the dustup in Josephine County, the race for the Zone 4 RCC board position representing northeast Jackson County is a relatively peaceful affair.

Retired television producer Patricia Ashley is seeking reelection to the RCC board. She is the most senior member of the board, having served since 2007.

"Nobody is perfect and certainly RCC isn't," she said. "But it's one of the real gems of the valley and is working hard to serve both the students and the community as a whole, particularly business and manufacturing."

Ashley said advisory groups representing different business sectors play a key role.

"They are saying, 'This is what we need.' We try to supply the type of student who can fill those needs," she said.

Ashley said many students transfer successfully and do well at four-year universities after starting out at RCC.

"We're always very proud of our students who move on to universities and the grade point averages they are able to achieve at the university level," she said.

Ashley said RCC provides opportunities to a broad swath of community members, from young people just starting out to experienced workers who want training to launch new careers.

Challenger Jonathan Bilden helped found the Crater Lake Academy K-12 charter school and works there as the business manager.

He said the charter school focuses on helping students identify a career path early. Many graduate from high school with career certificates or two-year associate's degrees.

Bilden said RCC prepares students who want to move on to universities.

"I've been impressed with what RCC has done. Students who go through RCC and go to SOU or other state universities appreciate that level of rigor," he said.

Bilden said RCC has quality programs that train people for good jobs in a variety of fields, such as health care and diesel mechanics. He wants to help identify any gaps.

Biden, who has experience on the Eagle Point School Board and Eagle Point City Council, said he has become more and more involved in workforce development.

"Running for the RCC board really stood out as an opportunity. I want to be involved with an organization that's moving the needle on workforce development and help keep and retain graduating classes in our local economy," he said.

Zone 5 (Jackson County)

Retired teacher and school superintendent Gary Plano is running an uncontested race to win election to the RCC board after being appointed in 2022 to fill a vacancy created by the resignation of longtime board member Kevin Talbot.

According to his statement in the Jackson County Voters Pamphlet, Plano said RCC has a unique and important role in the community providing access to college courses and career certificates.

He said he's passionate about education and has helped students access opportunities they thought were closed to them.

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