

Walker drops out of race: Announcement reduces county commissioner races to 18 hopefuls

Front Page News

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Photo: Cherryl Walker

Josephine County Commissioner Cherryl Walker, a lightning rod for openly supporting a public safety bailout by the state, told the Daily Courier today that she has decided not to seek re-election.

Walker's decision to withdraw from the race was a bombshell that reduced by one an otherwise huge field of candidates seeking two seats on the three-member Board of Commissioners.

Tuesday was the filing deadline for the May 17 primary. As the county struggles with its public safety funding problems, a whopping total of 18 candidates are seeking to make the cut. That includes Walker's colleague, incumbent Keith Heck.

A large candidate pool is nothing new in the county, which fielded 14 candidates the last two times there were two open seats on the three-member commission, in 2012 and 2008.

"This is pretty common for a commissioner race," County Clerk Trisha Myers said Tuesday, after two last-minute filers entered the race.

Walker's withdrawal creates a wide-open race for her seat on the Board of Commissioners. Among the candidates are former Grants Pass City Councilor Lily Morgan and Bill Hunker, a retiree who led an unsuccessful effort to recall Walker in 2014.

The recall effort was one of several scrapes that Walker found herself in after a bruising campaign in 2012 that saw her win election over Bob Just by less than 1 percent of the vote.

Commissioner Simon Hare had previously announced that he does not intend to seek a third term, when his current term expires at the end of 2018.

Tuesday also was the filing deadline for persons who are seeking the offices of clerk, assessor, treasurer and surveyor.

With the exception of Myers, an appointee who is being challenged by retired lumber supply businessman James Rafferty of Selma, incumbents drew no opposition.

Here's the latest in the races for commissioner:

- Former Commissioner Sandi Cassanelli, 63, filed for her old job back on Tuesday. In 2011 she was recalled from office by 71 percent of voters, after being accused by recall organizers of

hindering economic development and not supporting public safety.

- Real estate broker and former commissioner candidate Bill Ertel, 73, of Williams filed Tuesday. He has a master's degree in business management, according to his filing.
- Oath Keepers member Joseph Rice, 53, of Grants Pass filed Monday. He is a helicopter pilot and an Army veteran, according to his filing. Last year, he campaigned against a proposed public safety tax levy and led an anti-government group that flocked to Josephine County in support of two miners involved in a land dispute with the BLM at the Sugar Pine mine near Galice.
- Merlin resident Virgil Marler pulled out of the race Friday, for health reasons, Myers said. Marler is retired from several management positions with the state of California, according to his filing.

In all, 10 people are seeking Heck's post, while eight seek the seat currently held by Walker on the Board of Commissioners, which holds the limited purse strings of the Sheriff's Office and other public safety services.

The Board of Commissioners also oversees a host of county departments — public health, airports, building safety, planning, emergency management, transit, forestry, fairgrounds and county parks — and serves as a conduit for state and local funding for mental health, public works and adult parole and probation services.

Heck is being challenged by Cassanelli, Rice, Toni Webb, Dale Matthews, Mark Kelsey, Nathaniel Duarte, Dan DeYoung, Paul Walter and Harriet Harris.

Those seeking Walker's seat are Ertel, Ronald Smith, Lily Morgan, Mark Seligman, Shayne Christen, Raymond Smith, Bill Hunker and David Martin.

Whoever wins the seats will inherit a worsening county financial problem, prompted by declining federal subsidies to the county, which has led in recent years to a nearly 50 percent cut in the number of Sheriff's Office employees and the closure of the county's juvenile shelter and detention facility.

People wishing to cast ballots in the primary have until April 26 to register to vote. The official voters' pamphlet for the primary is due to be published online in early April and mailed by April 27.

Candidate forums are being planned, but details are still being worked out. That includes forums sponsored jointly by the Daily Courier and the Grants Pass & Josephine County Chamber of Commerce.