

Rural Roots Rising Episode 12: Blackberries and Ballot Measures -- Transcript

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Emma Ronai-Durning:

Welcome back to Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project. Rural Roots Rising is a monthly radio show and podcast created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy. My name is Emma Ronai-Durning, and I'm an organizer with ROP.

This month's show is a little different than usual. After getting advice and requests from community groups and radio stations across Oregon, we're going to break down what's on the ballot this election and how groups like the Blackberry Pie Society are taking action to advance democracy in rural Oregon. In case you didn't already know, the Rural Organizing Project is nonpartisan, and not affiliated with any political parties. If this episode inspires you to take action for democracy, we have a toolkit and more shareable election resources in both English and Spanish that go along with the episode. Find them at rop.org/democracy. You'll also hear public service announcements sprinkled throughout this episode that share information folks need to vote, including people impacted by fires, people who are currently houseless, and beyond.

music

PSA:

Did you know that even if you don't have stable housing, you can still vote? You can use a shelter, park, or the elections office as your official address to register to vote. If you're living somewhere temporarily. Because of wildfires or other circumstances, you don't need to re-register. Just tell election officials where to mail your ballot. You can pick up all of your mail, including ballots once they are mailed on October 14 at the post office that serves your permanent residence address. Visit www.oregonvotes.org or call your county's election office to register or change your mailing address. To learn more about what's on the ballot, check out the STAND Election Guide www.rop.org. This public service announcement has been produced by the Rural Organizing Project.

music

Emma:

If you're interested in sharing Public Service Announcements like this one on social media, or on your own radio show, or podcast, we have links to all of our PSAs in the show notes and at rop.org/STAND. There are a lot of misconceptions about what nonprofits and nonpartisan organizations like ours can and can't do, especially around election season. While we can't endorse candidates, we can and do support issues that matter to our communities, including ballot measures. We do want to make it clear though, that these positions are not necessarily endorsed by the station you are listening to this radio show on. To discuss how these ballot measures will affect rural Oregonians my coworker and ROP organizer Hannah Harrod called up Pam Reese, an ROP board member, and organizer based in Echo, Oregon, and Keyen Singer, a Rural Organizing Fellow and member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation based in Mission, Oregon. Let's listen in.

Hannah Harrod:

Hi there. My name is Hannah Herod and I'm an organizer with the rural organizing project. I'm really excited to be sitting down over zoom with Keyen Singer and Pam Reese to hear their thoughts on this year's statewide ballot measures. We did our best on Rural Internet. So thanks for bearing with us if it breaks up now and then. Could you introduce yourself and then we'll get started.

Keyen Singer:

Hi, my name is Keyen. I'm a rural organizing fellow and a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation living in Mission, Oregon. Thanks for having me on.

Pam Reese:

And my name is Pam. I'm an organizer from Echo, Oregon and an ROP board member and I'm glad to be here.

Hannah:

Thanks y'all. Can I know you were really excited about Measure 110 do you want to kick us off?

Keyen:

Well, Measure 10 would decriminalized possession of certain drugs and establish a statewide drug addiction treatment and recovery program funded by the state's marijuana tax revenue.

Hannah:

And what impact would that measure have on rural Oregonians like you and me?

Keyen:

So Oregon ranks 50th in the nation for drug treatment availability. Personally, for me it hits close to home. I know when I was 13 and my family was looking for treatment options where my mom felt safe. This made it really difficult to find some places that she could go for me and my siblings. It was hard separating from our only parent, but we knew it was important to help her feel better and be safe. Her treatment center was in another state, and we had to drive far to see her, which was hard for all of us. The cost of getting her there and visiting was a lot. It was worth it to help her. But overall, it should be easy to care for our family members when they need it.

Hannah:

Thanks so much for sharing that Keyen. And which measure are you most excited about? Pan?

Pam:

I totally agree that measure 110 would really benefit us but I'm really excited about measure 109.

Hannah:

Can you tell the listeners what that one's about? The ballot measure numbers can be really hard to keep track of.

Pam:

Yeah, absolutely. Measure 109 would create a new avenue of mental health care free from the control of pharmaceutical companies. It would legalize psilocybin treatment by creating the Oregon psilocybin services program under the Oregon Health Authority. As a longtime sufferer of depression anxiety myself, I would really benefit from this and will be the first in line for treatment if this ballot measure passes. studies from Johns Hopkins University and beyond show that psilocybin is an effective treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and end of life care. This made me very hopeful because the treatment actually treats the condition rather than the symptoms like antidepressants do. The other thing is that Measure 109 would permit patients 21 years and older to access this treatment after receiving a referral from a doctor and only through a licensed psilocybin service center under the care of a trained facilitator so we don't have to worry about misuse of the treatment or addiction.

Hannah:

Thanks, Pam, that's really interesting. Are there challenges to getting this passed?

Pam:

Yes, one of the stumbling blocks to passing this measure will likely be changing the perceptions about psilocybin that are remnants of the 1960s and 70s. Because it was freely used by the counterculture, there's a stigma attached. However, we as a society have to overcome that perception so we can see it as a legitimate treatment for people who desperately need it.

Hannah:

And since we're talking about potentially expanding health care access, can we also talk about Measure 108?

Keyen:

Yeah, I feel pretty conflicted about it, to be honest.

Pam:

Yeah, me too. So Measure 108 would increase taxes on tobacco products and inhalant delivery systems such as e-cigarettes and vapes. The money generated from the tax would help fund the Oregon Health Plan and other health care related programs, including those that prevent smoking and help people quit.

Keyen:

I mean, in my community, I know a lot of people are addicted to cigarettes and face serious health consequences from that but I'm just not sure that reason cost is the solution here. I know some people may say raising the cost would stop people from smoking. But I'm not just sure that's the case.

Pam:

Totally. I really see a problem with corporations being let off the hook here. As it is written. Now the tax applies to distributors, which includes anyone in the state who manufactures transports, or sells tobacco products. But we can be pretty certain that they will pass these costs on to the people buying

the cigarettes. So consumers may end up bearing the brunt of this instead of the corporations. On the other hand, though, access to health care is really important. And this measure would get folks more resources to prevent or quit smoking.

Keyen:

I'm definitely going to have more conversations with my family, friends, and community members about this one before I decide which side I fall on.

Hannah:

That sounds like a great idea. So the last ballot measure is 107. Keyen, could you explain this one to us?

Keyen:

Sure, Measure 107 would amend the state constitution to allow the state, cities, and counties to limit political contributions in spending. While still making sure candidates can get the resources they need to run campaigns. They would also require that campaigns disclose the source of all contributions and expenses, including political ads.

Pam:

Oregon is only one of five states with no limits on contributions, which allows special interests and corporations to contribute millions of dollars and sway our elections to support their own bottom line. Passing Measure 107 would help protect our elections from out of state interests and large corporations. I think this one will definitely make our democracy more people-centered. And I'm all for that.

Keyen:

Yeah, I believe that democracy should be by and for all people. And I just don't see how out of state corporations buying their favorite candidate is aligned with our democratic values.

Hannah:

Definitely. Is there anything else we should tell the listeners before signing off?

Keyen:

Yes, be sure to go to www.rop.org to find more information and endorsements on these four ballot measures in English and Spanish. And don't forget to make sure everyone that can vote participates in this election season!

Pam:

Vote, get your friends to vote and even if it takes a little while longer than we'd like, let's make sure every ballot is counted this November!

Hannah:

Thanks so much for breaking down the ballot measures for us. We really love hearing both of your perspectives on this. And we're also excited to keep the conversation going with folks all around the

state. So if you're listening, we'd also love to hear from you. Thanks so much.

music

PSA

It's almost time to cast your ballot, and it's important to know who represents you. At the federal level, we each vote for two US senators, and one us representative. At the state level, we each have one state senator and one state representative. And don't forget about the power of local elected officials too. To learn more about the roles of each of these positions and what's on the ballot this year. Be sure to check out the stand election guide at www.rop.org this public service announcement has been produced by the Rural Organizing Project.

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Emma:

We know that we're voting on more than just the ballot measures this year. And many people across the state are nervous that they need to start working now to keep temperatures low in their community both before and after election day. As rumors fly about who can and can't vote by mail, and threats to a safe and fair election escalate. Rural Oregonians like you are taking action to defend democracy, to count every vote, and to build a community where everyone's needs are met. We've compiled these plans into a defending democracy toolkit chock full of possibilities for making sure folks get to vote, support each other in exercising that right and are prepared to defend it by documenting and de-escalating any anti-democratic action at mailboxes or official voting drop boxes.

If you see anti-democratic activities in your community, call our ROP's Defend Democracy Hotline at 541-714-3257, email us at democracy@rop.org, or fill out our online reporting form and access the toolkit at rop.org/democracy regardless of your political leaning, everyone has a right to participate in democracy. And as Pam said, it will take all of us to make sure everyone who can vote gets their ballot in the box and gets their vote counted, fair and square.

PSA

Did you know that in Oregon, you can vote if you're returning to your community from serving time in prison or jail. Even if you have a felony record or are on parole or probation don't need to re register to vote after you're released from prison. Make sure you are registered www.oregonvotes.org. And learn more about what's on the ballot and the STAND election guide www.rop.org. This public service announcement has been produced by the Rural Organizing Project.

Emma:

Let's go now to another conversation. And this one is about ways that anyone can take action this election season. Regardless of whether or not you can vote. We know that no one candidate can magically make our vision of a thriving rural Oregon a reality overnight. But election season is a great time to figure out the priorities of our elected officials and, if needed, push them to refocus on the issues that matter most to our communities. ROP organizer, Paige Crenshaw interviewed Leslie Rubenstein and Cathy Bellavita of the BlackBerry Pie Society in Cottage Grove. You'll hear about their work

sending candidates running for all state and local offices a survey to respond to in order to earn their endorsement. Bear with us as the following conversation was recorded on zoom, and you'll hear some of the challenges of rural internet along the way.

Paige Crenshaw:

Hi there. My name is Paige Crenshaw, and I'm an organizer with the Rural Organizing Project. Today I'm sitting down with Leslie Rubenstein and Cathy Bellavia of the Blackberry Pie Society. Can you both introduce yourselves?

Leslie Rubinstein:

Thank you, Paige! I'm Leslie Rubenstein and I've been here in Cottage Grove for a little bit over 30 years and I'm the chairwoman of the Blackberry Pie Society which we often refer to just as blackberry pie.

Cathy Bellavita:

And I'm Cathy Bellavita and I am the secretary for the Blackberry Pie Society. I've lived in Cottage Grove for about 16 years and I have been involved with Blackberry Pie for eight-ish years.

Paige:

Can you tell me a little bit about what the Blackberry Pie Society is?

Cathy:

Well, we're a progressive group that supports progressive politics, local and beyond. And we help people figure out the issues, whether it's about legislation, elections, or civic engagement. And we have fun while doing it!

When they were trying to decide the names of the group, the idea of being as sort of American as apple pie, I think came up and they thought about being the apple pie society. But it turns out here in Cottage Grove, we have an antique store called the app called Apple Pie Antiques. And they did not want to get confused with that group. So someone and Leslie, maybe you know who it was, but it may not matter said, "Well, how about blackberry pie?" And that fits very well, because it, you know, blackberries are everywhere. And they grow uncontrollably here, they're prickly, but sweet, the fruit is there. And so it's sort of a good metaphor for our group as well.

Paige:

Leslie, can you tell me a little bit about how long ago we've been doing this?

Leslie:

We began 16 years ago in 2004. And since then, we've been doing candidate surveys, forums, we've met with elected and appointed officials, we put out palm cards with our election endorsements. We send out armchair activism alerts by email to our list of the over 200 local folks, and we also host parties to engage our friends in our activism.

Paige:

How did you all get started with surveying candidates?

Cathy:

Well, we asked the League of Women Voters to help us out. By showing us how to put on a candidate forum. When there was no one else in the community doing it, we learned the basics from them. We now hold them ourselves, or we partner with our local Chamber of Commerce.

Paige:

Leslie, in your experience, what have been the best ways to approach the candidates?

Leslie:

Candidates want to get their information out. So they tend to be quick to respond. We've emailed candidates with surveys, we've called to talk to them. And we've also met with them in person, they are generally quite willing, if they're running for office. And here's a case in point. And this is very recent. Cathy, you know, we were both involved with this. When the democratic Secretary of State candidates in Oregon were running in the Democratic primary, there were quite a few of them. Some went in, some went out. But we emailed all of them to say, you know, here's a questionnaire, we wanted to decide who we would endorse, and we emailed them. And then there were some follow up phone calls, because some of these candidates have a lot of emails, but we were able to get in touch with everyone, not everyone returned a questionnaire, all but one did. And then we had a party in February, at the start of the political season. And two of those candidates came, out of there may have been four at that point for statewide, I think ever for at that point, one had dropped out. So two of them actually came to our party in Cottage Grove, and they got to be introduced to the crowd. So I think we've gotten bolder, as we've been doing this longer, and we're just willing to write or email or call anybody and see what the response is. And often it's, surprisingly, a good response.

Cathy:

I would like to add to that too. The, again, to emphasize the rural part. When we had our party in February, which was our Political Party, we called it and we had the sense that people really wanted to get involved. But when you're living all over the countryside, you may think you're the only one, okay, because it's scattered, people are scattered, and you're not sure about your neighbor and all that. And so, but we had this sense that people wanted to connect. And we were right, because we had about 200 people show up. But I think rural people tend to live rural because they want to be rural, and they want to be... have space around them. But sometimes you want to connect and you don't know, how and this gives them a progressive rural progressive means to connect. And so once we realized that we could have a party and that many people would show up and we realized, Okay! There are people who want to participate this way this year in particular. So don't be surprised to find out how many people really do want to get want to know they're not alone.

Leslie:

And want to get involved with an organization that will give them opportunities to do things. And we all know working in politics that when you get a group together, you feel like you can do so much more than you can do on your own. And that helps to overcome some of the frustration and fear that and isolation that we experienced in rural communities.

Cathy:

Also, I'd like to add that all of this feeling of being part of a group has been achieved, even though we have not met at all. So um it, it may just be because of the times, you know, nobody can have large gatherings anymore. And we were lucky to have our large gathering just prior to the COVID stuff. But that the feeling of wanting to be involved in do something and so many people have just said I just want to be doing something does not mean they have to be gathered together. Although we have had offers of people say that, you know, if you can get together if we can, you can use my place or that sort of thing. So it doesn't mean the desire's not there. But you can achieve a lot of feeling of togetherness without actually ever being, really, face to face. And that's been, that's been surprising to me.

Paige:

I'm wondering if you can tell me some of the questions you all will be asking this year.

Cathy:

Well, our 18 question survey for the Cottage Grove City Council and mayoral candidate candidates have included some of the following questions:

What are the top three problems facing the city? And how would you fix them? Give an example of a recent time when you work collaboratively with someone with different opinions from yourself? How can Cottage Grove become a leader in addressing climate change in our community? Are there any community policing reforms you would like to see implemented by the Cottage Grove police department? How will you ensure the city communicates more effectively with citizens, it's also a way to kind of get them thinking about issues that we think are important. So to guide their thinking. And in some ways, it might be some of the most direct feedback they get from from people who are paying attention other than a forum. And this this year, I've noticed the candidates are each getting some time on the local radios station too, so that's a little back and forth.

Paige:

Yeah, I heard that you even had your survey questions publish? Could you share more about that?

Leslie:

Exactly. And one of the interesting things about that is that once you get involved in doing this kind of work, it's just your survey and you contact candidates. But when we did that, we put it in the main newspaper in Eugene, they ran it as, as an op-ed piece. And so anybody in the county could then read that. So our perspective because your questions carry a certain perspective with them. Were those that perspective was available for everyone to read, who read it and to consider for themselves the importance of those issues. So I think this work grows over time on and on each thing that you can, each thing that you do gives you more confidence to do more and more contacts that you have, the more likely it is you can have your voice heard, because since we've been around for a while, and we are somewhat known, and we have a kind of funny name that people you know, pay attention to, when we send a piece to the newspaper. They respond and say, "Yes, we'll run this." I'm not saying they always do. But we have had success doing that in the past.

music

Paige:

We're going to take a short break and we'll be back in just a minute to hear more from the Blackberry pie society. You're listening to Rural Roots Rising, a radio show and podcast created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy.

music

PSA:

It's almost time to cast your ballot and national elections aren't the only thing to vote on town, city, and tribal councils, as well as county commission's or county courts, decide how your money is spent and are responsible for the police department, water quality roads and hospitals, parks and libraries. School boards make decisions about curriculum and facilities. Schools are also the community centers we rely on when natural disasters strike.

District Attorneys, sheriffs, and locally elected judges oversee the courts, jails, and decide whether or not to work with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, also known as ICE, and other federal agencies. To learn more, be sure to check out the STAND Election Guide at www.rop.org this public service announcement has been produced by the Rural Organizing Project.

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Paige:

Welcome back. My name is Paige Crenshaw, let's get back to our conversation with Leslie Rubenstein and Cathy Bellavita of the Blackberry pie society in Cottage Grove. I asked Cathy and Leslie how people can get involved who've never taken action before.

Leslie:

In pre-COVID times I would have said grab a friend and ask a candidate or an elected official to sit down and have coffee with you. So now maybe it's a phone call. But if you start asking questions, you can progress to writing questions down emailing them and then asking questions at a candidate forum, which is probably a zoom forum these days.

Paige:

Cathy, can you tell me a little bit about what's keeping you going right now?

Cathy:

Well, the Black Lives Matter protests and young people getting involved in politics is really inspiring. Community mutual aid for our economic dilemma, and our wildfire disasters, and our migrant populations are also issues that we care about. Also, the need to combat the disgusting resurgence of white supremacist groups and vigilante militias.

Paige:

Sometimes people can get understandably frustrated with the voting process. But you all stay focused on the positive. Can you tell us more about this?

Cathy:

Well, I have. We've all searched for ways to affect different levels of politics and our civic lives. But when it boils down to it, all we have is our vote. And that is the thing that we have. And if we don't have that, then you've given your vote to someone else, you've had the effect of letting someone else vote for you. And so, you know, you can demonstrate and you can write letters, and you can do all of these things. But the vote is the thing you have. And if you don't use it, then essentially someone else does. And so they don't use your vote, but their vote is there and yours isn't. And so that's why I think voting is important, I think *[garbled]* and particularly in rural settings, where the numbers are very small. And I think we had a county commissioner miss a runoff by what was that seven votes or something?! I mean, it's quite, every vote really does count. And you can see it, you practically can see that was my vote. And so it really does matter. And like Leslie said, if you look at that level, and, you know, you realize that every vote does count, and matters.

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Emma:

You've been listening to "Blackberries and Ballot Measures" an episode of Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project: a monthly radio show and podcast created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy.

Ready to get to work organizing to defend democracy and make sure every ballot is delivered and counted this election? Find more tools and resources at rop.org/democracy and reach out to us at democracy@rop.org to share your thoughts, and get support for your organizing.

Special thanks to Josh Salsbury and Joanne Mina for recording public service announcements for community radio stations across Oregon. We featured music from the Road Sodas, Ryan Cullinane, and Ketsaa.

Rural Roots Rising is created by the Rural Organizing Project, a network of over 70 autonomous volunteer-run groups committed to advancing human dignity and democracy across rural Oregon. To learn more about the Rural Organizing Project, go to rop.org.

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Thanks for listening!

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