

Winners, losers and...huh?

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Friday, 17 June 2022 03:58



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Late withdrawal creates chaos around District 1 Commission seat

Most of McKinley County's June 7 elections have clear outcomes, but the District 1 County Commission seat is still undecided – at least temporarily – and two candidates are still standing in the Sheriff's race.

The District 1 confusion arose because the winner, Ernest C. "Charles" Becenti III, withdrew from the race after the deadline for the county to submit ballot information to Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver's office.

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That meant his name was still on the primary ballot, and he won with 44% of the vote (1,266). Young J. Tom trailed with 30% of the vote (877) and Vincent Muskett got 26% (765).

Becenti did not return phone calls by press time. The deadline for candidates to officially withdraw from the General Election is Aug. 30, Oliver's spokesman Alex Curtas said.

"Becenti will need to submit a timely withdrawal before the General. Because his primary withdrawal was not timely, he has not officially withdrawn," Curtas said. "If he does so, the county central committee for the Democratic Party will nominate a replacement for the General ballot."

A spokesman for the McKinley County Democratic Party didn't respond to a request for information about the nomination process by press time.

Sheriff

James Maiorano III bested the other Democrat candidates for Sheriff with 36% among Democrats (2,198). Tallies for the other Democrat competitors were Francie L. Martinez, 28% (1,680); Matthew K. Hughbanks, 18% (1,113); and Paul R. Lucero, 18%(1,059).

In November, Maiorano will face off against the sole Republican in the race, Elreno C. Henio, who got 100 percent of the 1,071 Republican votes.

Maiorano, who is undersheriff at the department, said the core of his campaign will be to continue programs that have already begun – specifically internships, K-9 outreach, active shooter response training for schools, and a program that has jail trustees doing cleanups – to improve the quality of life for the community; then "educate the public" so voters can judge his performance.

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"I'll continue to educate folks to November, and they should be able to see that by example," he said.

He also wants to increase the department's presence at community meetings to get feedback, and do more to communicate how the department is responding.

"The feedback from the public is amazing. We see things from two different points of view," he said, but, "if they don't see change they will think it was a false promise or that nothing happens."

Henio, a former Navajo Nation police officer, has worked his way up to patrol lieutenant since joining the Sheriff's Department in 2004 and prides himself on being on the front lines in the community.

"That's why nobody knows me. I've always been on the front lines," he said. "That's my platform. I'm trying to be a sheriff out on the streets. [...] You can look at statistics and graphs, but by the time you read those, it's already changed."

He puts a high premium on adaptability and on de-escalation skills, especially in a tense world.

"There's a lot more violence in the world. Marijuana is legal now. Law enforcement has to be adaptive," he said. "Experience trumps everything. [...] The whole department, from patrol all the way up to the top, should get to know the community. It's not that hard from the inside. It looks hard from the outside."

Two races, District 2 Commissioner and Assessor, were effectively decided on primary day, either because the candidate was unopposed or because all of the candidates for that seat were of the same party. The primary winners become the presumptive winners, but their names will still appear on the November ballot as unopposed candidates.

County Commissioner, District 2

Walt Eddy ran unopposed for the seat and won with 100 percent of the 1,130 votes cast in the race.

Eddy's main concern is inadequate or deteriorating roads and bridges, he said. "Once I get into office and get to see the road department's list of priorities, that would be a start. I'm not privy to that information right now."

He plans to meet with all of the Navajo chapters within his district, as well as Zuni and Ramah, because "I need to make sure I have a good handle on what people in the community say they need fixed."

He's also concerned about the ongoing issues at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services. "Our hospital is very important to our community. [...] Just to live here we need the best medical care we can get," he said, adding that he has firsthand experience. "I had a horse fall down and [I broke] every rib on my left side once."

County Assessor

The Assessor oversees property in the county, including mapping, inventory and valuation for tax purposes.

Edward Becenti Jr. won the six-way race with 24% of the votes (1,501). Others in the race and their vote tallies were; Harriett K. Becenti (20%, 1,252); Danielle Notah (19%, 1,197); current District 2 Commissioner Genevieve Jackson (18%, 1,111); Paulinda L. Yazzie (12%, 759); and Anthony N. Begay (5%, 319). All contenders are Democrats.

Becenti, who is Chief Deputy County Clerk and has worked in that office for nearly 17 years, said he'd like to see more of the Assessor's Office staff trained as property appraisers. He also

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wants to emphasize customer service to make it easier for citizens to find the information they need.

“[Staff] know what to look for and what person to talk to. They know where the information is when they talk to a customer,” he said. “I tell my staff, ‘Always picture yourself on the other side of the counter.’ Some people think they know what they want but they have to do more research.”

Winners who are county employees will have to resign from those positions when they take office, County Attorney Doug Decker said.

“Edward Becenti Jr., once taking office as Assessor, will have to resign the employment position with McKinley County,” he said. “The same is true for Deputy Sheriff Officers who get elected to a county office. The swearing in will take place just prior to Jan. 1, 2023, the official day of taking office, and the resignation(s) will have to occur by Dec. 31, 2022.”

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