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Ethics commission investigates Silver Falls

Natalie Pate

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Oregon Government Ethics Commission is investigating possible open meeting and public records laws violations by members of the Silver Falls School Board.

The commission voted last week to begin investigating claims submitted by community member Chuck Sheketoff concerning incidents from 2018 and 2019. The 2019 incident was also addressed in a recent lawsuit, which the school district settled.

But Sheketoff argues the investigation will fail to hold some of the key players accountable, particularly the district's former superintendent, since he is not

listed as part of the school board.

Silver Falls School District, based in Silverton, had just shy of 4,000 students enrolled in the 2018-19 school year. The district employed about 16 administrators and 203 teachers the same year.

The seven-member school board is comprised of elected officials who take no pay for their roles in overseeing the district.

Claims made against members of the board and district administrators outline incidents occurring in May 2018 and May 2019, including alleged violations in executive sessions meant to evaluate then-superintendent Andy Bellando.

The Statesman Journal contacted the current school board members, as well as Bellando, former assistant superintendent Dandy Stevens, attorney Lisa

Freiley and the Oregon School Boards Association for comment on the alleged incidents.

Most did not reply or said they were unable to comment, with the exception of current board member Shelly Nealon and board chairman Jonathan Edmonds, who said he would wait for the conclusion of the investigation to comment further.

"(As) a newer board member, it is very difficult to understand all the nuances of executive session laws," he told the Statesman Journal. Edmonds was elected to the board in Aug. 2018.

"At the time of the meeting mentioned in the complaint (May 2019), I had not even been on the board a full year yet," he said. "If I am found guilty of anything,

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View of cars parked down Forest Service Road near Opal Creek Trailhead in.

Crowds spike in Opal Creek area

Zach Urness

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

There is nothing new about crowding in the Little North Santiam and Opal Creek area east of Salem.

The land of ancient forest and emerald swimming holes has lured ever-greater numbers for the past decade.

But even by its own standards, the area has been overwhelmed this year, as COVID-19 crowds and limited enforcement of parking rules have brought a roughly 50 percent spike in visits on peak weekends, and an 80 percent jump since 2018, according to data from the U.S. Forest Service.

On July 26, one of the hottest weekend days this summer, a whopping 1,523 cars and an estimated 3,000 to 4,500 people entered forest roads headed to Three Pools Recreation Site or Opal Creek Trailhead, resulting in miles of illegally parked cars and a spike in everything from garbage to trespassing, according to locals, police and land managers.

"We found diapers and Tupperware in the bushes, soap scum in the pools and food scraps everywhere," said Mary Pucher, who visited Three Pools on a busy weekend. "I have been coming here for years, and this really made me extremely sad and angry."

Pucher noted that a number of people have been injured and required rescue, but under the current circumstances, "no ambulance would have been able to get through."

With the hottest weekend on the horizon, and temperatures expected in the high 90s this Saturday and Sunday, the craziest could be yet to come. In other



Crowds have been thick at Opal Creek Trailhead this summer. Picture taken July of 2020.

PHOTOS BY KYLE MARTZ / SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

words, if you want to avoid crowds, the Little North canyon is not the place to visit.

'Perfect storm'

Three years ago, the U.S. Forest Service made an effort to clean up the Little North Santiam and Opal Creek area, which had devolved into a "booze infested party zone," rangers said at the time.

Bans on alcohol and campfires were issued, while parking on forest roads was outlawed around Three Pools and Opal Creek Trailhead in an effort to slow numbers. The moves seemed to work in 2018 and '19,

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2 inmates sue prison, officers for \$10M

Lawsuit: Women were victims of sex abuse

Whitney Woodworth

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Two inmates are suing the Oregon Department of Corrections, top prison officials and several corrections officers for more than \$10 million, accusing officials of allowing a sexually predatory employee to target and sexually abuse the two women.

The two civil rights lawsuits were filed in July and

August in federal court. The two inmates named in the lawsuits spoke to the Statesman Journal in early 2020 following the arrest of Richard Alberts II, a 31-year-old corrections officer, on drug trafficking charges.

He faces trial in September for allegedly trafficking meth and heroin into the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville.

The inmates said the drug trafficking was only a fraction of what took place at Oregon's only women's prison.

They said Alberts smuggled in a cell phone to inmates, brought in meth and heroin and sexually as-

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Farmers could receive money from NORPAC settlement

Bill Poehler

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Since NORPAC filed for bankruptcy a year ago, the farmers who owned the vegetable processing co-op feared they would never be paid for the crops they previously delivered to the company.

But the company has reached a settlement that could allow it to repay some of the money owed to its over 100 former owners.

Specifics of the agreement were not announced, but the co-op and its unsecured creditors told bankruptcy Judge Peter McKittrick they have reached an agreement, though it will have to be signed by most of the farmers.

Much of the \$156 million the parts of the former company were sold for is due to creditors with secured claims, but the farmers will now be able to collect some of the millions left.

"The debtor has a fiduciary duty to the unsecured creditors in the estate," McKittrick said.

What started as Stayton Canning Company in 1924 grew over the years to one of the largest vegetable processors in Oregon.

Citing mounting debts, the vegetable processing co-op filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in August 2019.

It sold its Quincy, Wash., processing facility, trademarks and inventory for \$107 million to a company owned by farm entrepreneur Frank Tiegs, and then sold the Salem, Brooks and Stayton processing facilities for \$49 million, with Tiegs eventually buying the Salem and Stayton facilities.

But CoBank, which financed the bankruptcy, had a secured claim for \$125 million, and was the first to be paid. Others with secured claims also have been paid.

NORPAC has been settling with other companies for reduced amounts, including H.M. Clause, which settled for \$1.1 million in June against its \$1.9 million in claims and one in July with Seminis Vegetable Seed, which will receive \$340,000 against \$973,000 in claims.

Settlement needs to be approved

In most years, the farmer-owners of NORPAC received a portion of the companies' profits.

While NORPAC was in the early stages of bankruptcy starting in August, farmers – including those who owned a part of the co-op – continued to deliver their vegetables to the processor with the promise of being paid.

NORPAC filed earlier this year against member farms that demanded payments for crops delivered in 2019, arguing they weren't entitled to money.

A group of unsecured creditors banded together to seek \$16 million from the member growers.

But the proposed settlement would instead let them be paid.

The settlement has to be signed by 85% of the farmers to be approved.

It must be submitted Aug. 18 and a hearing approving the deal is set for Sept. 11.

Settling suit with new owner

In a separate suit, the company that purchased the majority of the assets of NORPAC settled its suit for overpaying for products the company had in its possession at the time of the sale.

The Frank Tiegs-owned Oregon Potato Company purchased NORPAC's Quincy, Wash., processing plants and the fruits and vegetables in its possession in December 2019 for \$107 million.

But it alleged it overpaid by \$7.1 million for the value of products the company said it had on hand.

In its Aug. 3 settlement, the company agreed to settle for the \$2 million in the true-up escrow account.

That agreement also settled a potential lawsuit against Tiegs concerning his termination of an earlier agreement to purchase NORPAC's assets.

The company called North Pacific Canners & Packers has consolidated the former NORPAC processing operations at the Brooks facility.

Bill Poehler covers Marion County for the Statesman Journal. Contact him at bpoehler@statesmanjournal.com or [Twitter.com/bpoehler](https://twitter.com/bpoehler) Support local journalism by subscribing to the Statesman Journal.

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