

Teenage mayor Ben Simons prepares to govern

By Max Egner

The (Roseburg) News-Review

Sure, it's been a busy fall for Yoncalla's 18-year-old mayor-elect, Ben Simons.

But the Umpqua Community College student, current city councilor and volunteer firefighter said he hasn't been overwhelmed by the wave of national and state media attention since the election.

News of Simons' win sparked a wave of stories and interviews from Roseburg to the United Kingdom.

The hype of being elected the youngest mayor in Yoncalla's history has died down, and school has paused for the holidays, Simons said, which has allowed him to think more about how he will lead his town.

His mission is to increase town pride and bring people together, he told the News-Review. He has ideas to increase transparency within city hall and build trust between the public and local government. He said a key component of that goal is to get residents more involved in the decision-

making process.

Simons won by 25 votes over two other candidates. Three-hundred and seven people voted in the town of one thousand people. But residents are confident in Simons.

"He'll be a good mayor," said Tammy Eveland, manager of the Yoncalla Deli, as Simons paid for his chicken sandwich, fries and coke a few hours before a city council meeting.

Simons is a regular at the deli, according to Eveland.

"It depends on how busy I am up the street at city hall," Simons said of his lunch attendance.

Simons is putting Yoncalla back on the map with all the media coverage he has received, Eveland said.

Earlier in the day, Simons participated in a training as a volunteer for North Douglas Fire and EMS in Drain. The department now has two mayor-elects; first responder Justin Cobb was elected mayor of Drain.

"A lot of people give (Si-

mons) a hard time over his age," Cobb said.

"But that kid has a really good sense of city issues. He has that natural charisma about him. I think he's going to be good for the City of Yoncalla."

Cobb said he looks forward to collaborating with Simons on issues facing the two towns, which are 5 miles apart.

Despite his age, Simons has public service experience.

When he was in eighth grade he started attending school board meetings with his mother, a high school math teacher. An audit of the Yoncalla High School building, which was built in 1949, revealed it was in urgent need of structural improvements.

The city didn't have the money to make the improvements. Two bond measures failed to pass. As a sophomore in high school, Simons sat on a planning committee to figure out what improvements to prioritize if the school district did find funds.

"That was the start of my participation in government,"

Simons said. "Sometimes there was a lot of discontent with each other over what should be prioritized."

The district received a seismic improvements grant from the state, which helped support other improvements to the building.

The experience sparked his interest in public service. He said it taught him an important lesson about working with tight budgets: Prioritizing can be everything.

As a junior in high school, Simons ran for school president and won. He also won his senior year. "Usually only seniors are elected school president," he said.

"My leadership teacher was very adamant about policy and procedure," Simons said. "We tried our best to make that a real working government even though it's just at the high school."

He and the student council followed a constitution and listened to the concerns of his peer-constituents.

"I tried my best to always be accountable to everyone,

and I hope that's something I can carry over into the city," Simons said.

The default attitude toward local government of some residents has been distrust, he said. After the two school bonds didn't pass, Simons said people told him they voted no because they weren't sure the district would spend the money responsibly.

He thinks the best remedy for that skepticism is a commitment to transparency. This summer he was appointed to fill the vacancy of a city councilor who stepped down. He already has some ideas about how to increase city hall's transparency.

Simons wants to update the city's website, which he said is half-completed, and make it serve as a hub for all government action. "I'd really like to see advertisements of our meetings going up to more places in town than just the post office and city hall," Simons said. He hopes he can get them put up at local businesses or noted on

people's water bills.

Residents rarely show up to city council meetings. He said, however, people have been telling him about city issues such as crumbling roadways more frequently since he was elected. He listens, but encourages them to voice their concerns at city council meetings too.

Although Simons' public service resume continues to grow, he doesn't foresee a career in politics. After graduating from UCC with an associate degree, he plans to study business administration at the University of Oregon.

He hopes he can show other young people that they too can be elected to public office and be effective leaders. He has been contacted by people his age across the country who either ran for elected office or want to.

"I've been really trying my best to do this the best way possible so that this is opened up for people in the future to take my case as precedent," Simons said. "Who knows where it goes from there."

Idaho test reactor is pivotal in US nuclear power strategy

The Associated Press

IDAHO NATIONAL LABORATORY, Idaho — A nuclear test reactor that can melt uranium fuel rods in seconds is running again after a nearly quarter-century shutdown as U.S. officials try to revamp a fading nuclear power industry with safer fuel designs and a new generation of power plants.

The reactor at the U.S. Energy Department's Idaho National Laboratory has performed 10 tests on nuclear fuel since late last year.

"If we're going to have nuclear power in this country 20 or 30 years from now, it's going to be because of this reactor," said J.R. Biggs, standing in front of the Transient Test Reactor he manages that in short bursts can produce enough energy to power 14 million homes.

The reactor was used to run 6,604 tests from 1959 to 1994, when it was

put on standby as the United States started turning away from nuclear power amid safety concerns.

Restarting it is part of a strategy to reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by generating carbon-free electricity with nuclear power initiated under the Obama administration and continuing under the Trump administration, despite Trump's downplaying of global warming.

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, 98 nuclear reactors at 59 power plants produce about 20 percent of the nation's energy. Most of the reactors are decades old, and many are having a tough time competing economically with other forms of energy production, particularly cheaper gas-fired power plants.

Some nuclear plants have closed in recent years, and Illinois, New

York and New Jersey have approved subsidies in the past two years to bail out commercial nuclear plants.

Officials in some areas are considering carbon taxes on coal and natural gas to boost nuclear power.

U.S. officials hope to improve nuclear power's prospects. They face two main challenges: making the plants economically competitive and changing public perception among some that nuclear power is unsafe.

Biggs said Japan's Fukushima nuclear disaster, caused by a 2011 earthquake and tsunami, was a primary reason U.S. officials restarted the test reactor in Idaho. The cores of three reactors at the Japan plant suffered meltdowns after cooling systems failed.

But what if, researchers say, nuclear plants produced energy with accident-tolerant fuels in reactors designed to safely shut themselves

down in an emergency? That's where the Idaho lab's test reactor comes in.

Dan Wachs, who directs the lab's fuel safety research program, said only three other reactors with fuel testing abilities exist — in France, Japan and Kazakhstan. He said none can perform the range of experiments that can be done at the Idaho lab's Transient Test Reactor, also called TREAT.

"The world is suffering from a very acute shortage of testing that TREAT fills," he said.

At the Idaho test reactor, pencil-sized pieces of fuel rods supplied by commercial manufacturers are inserted into the reactor that can generate short, 20-gigawatt bursts of energy. Workers perform tests remotely from about half a mile (0.8 kilometers) away.

The strategy is to test the fuels

under accident conditions, including controlled and contained meltdowns, to eventually create safer fuels.

The tiny fuel rods, including those that melt, are sent to the lab's Hot Fuel Examination Facility, where workers behind four feet of leaded glass examine them. Additional work is done a short walk away at the Irradiated Materials Characterization Lab, where powerful microscopes can examine the fuel at the atomic level.

Wachs and his team of about 15 scientists get the results and consult with both the fuel manufacturer and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which licenses nuclear fuel.

The 890-square-mile Energy Department site that holds the test reactor, about 50 miles west of Idaho Falls, also is the proposed location for an energy cooperative's small modular reactors.

OREGON IN BRIEF

From wire reports

Woman arrested after allegedly stabbing 2 people

PORTLAND — Police arrested a 33-year-old woman in Portland after she allegedly stabbed two people.

KOIN reports an ambulance took the male and female victims to a hospital for treatment after the stabbing early Sunday. They are expected to recover.

Investigators believe the victims were involved in a disturbance near the alleged assailant's tent in southeast Portland.

The accused was found inside the tent and was arrested without incident. A knife was found near the tent.

She faces a second degree assault charge and is being held on \$250,000 bail.

Sea turtle rescued from Oregon beach, taken to aquarium

PORTLAND — Authorities have rescued a sea turtle

from an Oregon coast beach for the second time in a week.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reports the Oregon Coast Aquarium in Newport is caring for both turtles.

A couple walking along the beach in Waldport spotted the second turtle Saturday and called the aquarium. State parks ranger Doug Sestrich carried the animal to safety.

The aquarium says the turtle is in good health.

Caretakers plan to transfer the turtles to SeaWorld San Diego for treatment until they're ready to be released back into the wild.

The first turtle was found Wednesday.

Portland police investigate shooting that injures man

PORTLAND — Portland police are investigating a shooting that critically injured one person.

Officers responded to the

Division Heights PDX building in the Hosford-Abernathy neighborhood at 2:30 a.m. Sunday after gunfire was reported.

Police searched the area and didn't find any suspects. But hospital personnel told them a man linked to the incident had just arrived and was critically wounded. He remains at the hospital in Portland receiving treatment.

Officers say they found evidence of gunfire on Southeast Division Street and in a parking lot near Division Heights PDX.

Police are asking witnesses to contact Portland police.

Oregon library halts book-discard effort after list revealed

SALEM — A public library in Oregon's capital city has halted its campaign to discard underused books after a list made public revealed it included books by former Oregon Gov. Mark

Hatfield, former president Jimmy Carter and popular scientist Carl Sagan.

The Statesman Journal reports the Salem Public Library will only remove books that are worn beyond repair until after a Jan. 9 Library Advisory Board meeting.

City Librarian Sarah Strahl says the list also includes books that are missing that were moved to the discard list as part of a database cleanup.

City officials say the library gets some 30,000 items into its collection each year and the effort to get rid of underused books is meant to free up space.

Former teacher convicted of sex abuse involving student

PORTLAND — A former substitute teacher at an elementary school near Portland has been convicted of first-degree sexual abuse.

KPTV-TV reports 54-year-

old Dale Buckendahl abused a third-grade student at Alder Elementary School in 2008 while working as a substitute teacher, according to the Multnomah County District Attorney's Office.

The student years later reported to a school counselor that Buckendahl in 2008 put his hand up her skirt and touched her in a sexual manner.

Evidence presented at trial showed the offense occurred while the victim was seated at a table in a classroom with other students.

Buckendahl was indicted on two counts of first-degree sex abuse. In court on Friday, he was acquitted of one count.

His sentencing is set for early January.

Officials: 360,000 spring chinook die at aging fish hatchery

ROSEBURG — Oregon wildlife officials say 360,000

young salmon and eggs have died at a western Oregon fish hatchery.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in a news release Friday said the spring chinook died at the aging Cole Rivers Hatchery due to not getting enough oxygen.

Officials say a buildup of algae and failing equipment allowed silt and debris into the hatchery's water supply.

Officials say the loss represents about 15 percent of the hatchery's inventory of eyed eggs for spring chinook, and that about 1.9 million eggs remain.

Hatchery coordinator Ryan Couture says the facility should be able to meet production goals but final numbers won't be known until late spring.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers owns the hatchery it built in 1973 and continues to fund.

PESTICIDE

Continued from Page 5A

engineered crops in Jackson County — have turned farmer against farmer, Liskey said.

It's much better for neighboring growers to work out problems among themselves, such as agreeing to plant buffer crops between their fields, he said.

Exactly how the ODA could help resolve the issue remains

to be determined, but the resolution doesn't change Oregon Farm Bureau's policy of coexistence among crops, said Mary Anne Cooper, public policy counsel for the organization.

The Farm Bureau's board of directors will consider the resolution at its meeting in February and then decide whether to take any action, she said.

Under current law, ODA doesn't have the authority to establish a

control district — which would be necessary to regulate where marijuana is grown — unless it's due to pest and disease risks associated with a crop, said Scott Dahlman, policy director for the Oregonians for Food & Shelter agribusiness group.

Oregonians for Food & Shelter would oppose any legislative action to expand ODA's control area authority beyond pest and disease risks, he said.

"We'd be disappointed to see a move toward that because we believe in coexistence," Dahlman said.

Raising the allowable detection level for certain pesticides on marijuana could endanger public safety, as there's no scientific data about potential safety hazards for the crop, he said.

Currently, Oregon regulators require no detectable pesticides on marijuana tested with standard

laboratory equipment, he said.

A pesticide that's been found to be sprayed on an apple, for example, may become dangerous when it's burned and smoked along with marijuana, Dahlman said.

Wine grapes are similarly a high value crop that's sensitive to herbicides, which is why neighboring growers take careful measures to avoid drift, he said. "If that's your situation as a grower, you need to be extra cautious."



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