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Walking out of prison?

Governor meets with prisoners one-on-one for possible commutation

By NOELLE CROMBIE
The Oregonian

SALEM — Last month, a convicted felon about three years into an eight-year prison stint found himself face-to-face — via Zoom — with Gov. Kate Brown.

Brown was considering commuting Sean Pen's sentence for methamphetamine possession, allowing for his almost immediate release.

The governor impressed upon Pen, 33, that her decision would come with restrictions typical for anyone on probation. Violate them and he'd be back in prison to finish out his sentence, she warned.

In their brief conversation as Pen sat in an office at the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution in Pendleton, the governor talked with Pen about his life, his time in prison, his plans for treatment and what he'd learned from his experience behind bars.

Pen will walk out of prison next week.

His commutation comes as Brown undertakes an extraordinary — and ongoing — effort to reduce the prison sentences of dozens of people in Oregon's prisons.

She announced in October, for instance, that she would review more than 200 juvenile cases for commutation, in some cases making longtime prisoners immediately eligible to pursue parole. Earlier this year, she granted conditional commutations to 41 incarcerated people who helped fight historic wildfires last year.

In the meantime, her staff confirmed Thursday Nov. 11 that Brown has met quietly with a total of 11 incarcerated people over the past two months, all of them by Zoom.

Leading advocates for rehabilitation, including Pen's lawyer Aliza Kaplan, have praised Brown and recommended prisoners for her consideration.

Some prosecutors and families of crime victims have expressed outrage at what they say is the lack of forewarning and consultation.

The video chat with Pen floored the Union County district attorney and a longtime probation officer familiar with Pen's case. Neither were invited to the Zoom call, and both learned about Brown's decision after the fact.

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Competing interests

PUBLIC INPUT ON POTENTIAL MERA LOGGING PUTS PLAN IN LIMBO

Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Chuck Sarrett, a forester contracted by Union County to assist with planning an upcoming logging project, speaks to a crowd of people at the Owsley Canyon Trailhead at Mount Emily Recreation Area outside of La Grande on Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021. A number of residents, including volunteers who helped create and maintain the hundreds of trails along MERA, voiced their concerns.

By DICK MASON and DAVIS CARBAUGH

The Observer

LA GRANDE — The timeline for forest management work in the Red Apple portion of the Mount Emily Recreation Area is being pushed back due to the large number of people who expressed concerns about it at a public field review on Wednesday, Nov. 10.

Sean Chambers, parks coordinator for Union County, said that the deadline for proposals for the project from potential bidders, originally set for Nov. 15, will be set back. The delay, the length of which has not been decided, will be used to give Union County and its MERA advisory committee more time to consider public input.

"I think we have work to do in order to get everyone on the same page," Chambers said. "We need to work through this so we can do it right. We are not at a place where everybody is in agreement on the right path forward. We are working toward that."

Some who spoke at the public forum, held at MERA's Owsley Canyon Trailhead and attended by about 50 people, said they were worried that the logging would damage trails and wondered if the money raised from the operations would be enough to pay for repairing the trails. Others questioned whether the thinning work would reduce the



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Union County residents, including La Grande Mayor Steve Clements, center, city councilors and county commissioners, on Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021, attend a field review of a potential upcoming logging project at the Mount Emily Recreation Area.

likelihood of intense wildfire.

Chambers said he can understand why there are differing opinions on the MERA project.

"Everyone views forest management through a different lens," he said.

Many people at the forum said they did not know about plans for the forest management work until recently even though planning meetings open to the public had been conducted. Some of these people suggested that the forest management project, which is set to start in December, be delayed for one or two years so that more people have a chance to provide input.

Chambers said that this

remains a possibility, noting all options are still on the table.

"Some feel that this is a done deal. It is not. We are changing as we go," he said.

Chambers explained that the Red Apple area requires attention because for many years, dating back a century, it was managed only for timber production and not for forest health. This has resulted in the area being filled with inferior trees that are growing too close together. The stands are vulnerable to fire because they are so close together and are weak because they are competing for limited water, light and soil nutrients.

"This is not a timber har-

vest," said Chuck Sarrett, a forestry consultant contracted by Union County. "This is a salvage, clean-up and forest health issue."

Sarrett noted that the county estimates a \$150,000 profit from the project after paying off the loggers, which will be put back into funding for the Mount Emily Recreation Area.

"All of the revenue that we realize is going right back into MERA," he said. "It will address weed management, trail damage and further forest management."

Some at the forum suggested that forest management in the Red Apple area be conducted in smaller segments at a time over several years, but Chambers said he would prefer to do it all at once because this would result in less damage to trails over the long term.

The public wants a say

A major concern that most in attendance at the field review could agree on was not having a say in the decision making. Many in the audience, including La Grande City Councilor Nicole Howard, spoke up on behalf of delaying the forest management process until a full public consensus can be reached.

"I just think process is really important. I feel like a lot of the reason people are upset is because they feel left out of that process," she said. "It would be great if the

See, **Logging**/Page A5

Newsroom tax credit will keep a light on our democracy



HEIDI WRIGHT
OTHER VIEWS

Imagine this page was blank except for one question: "What if there were no local reporters?" That was the front-page question posed by our friends at Pamplin Media last week.

It's a good question, and regardless of how you get local news — by watching TV, listening to local radio or reading a story in the newspaper or on a news organiza-

tion's website — it's not hyperbole to say communities suffer when there is no local news coverage or when independently owned media companies are gobbled up by hedge funds that gut newsrooms.

And it's a timely question because there is a bipartisan provision in the federal budget reconciliation bill working its way through Congress that will give media companies a temporary payroll tax credit to hire and retain journalists. Oregon's Sen. Ron Wyden chairs the Senate Finance Committee that will have a great deal of say on whether this provision makes it

through to the finish line.

Wyden is a co-sponsor of the bill written by Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash. Being the son of a prominent journalist, he is a long-time champion of a free press. In a recent interview with the Seattle Times, Wyden responded to a question about the potential for some to dislike government helping the press. He said, "This is not the government putting its hand on certain types of speech. This is about generally empowering local journalism in a big way. By the way, there are plenty of local journalism outlets that span across the political

spectrum, left, right, center, you name it."

On the House side, the bill was co-authored by Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., and Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick, D-Ariz., and it is strongly supported by two key Oregon representatives — Peter DeFazio and Earl Blumenauer.

For anyone who follows the challenges of media companies and the reality of growing news deserts around the country, this temporary tax credit known as the Local Journalism Sustainability Act is a

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WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section

	Tonight 48 LOW Clouds, a shower		Sunday 59/50 Mostly cloudy
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Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
More contact info on Page 4A.



TUESDAY

LA GRANDE EYES SEWER REHAB EFFORT

Online at lagrandeobserver.com