

INDEPENDENT PARTY FOR CITY MANAGER

Eugene City Manager Jon Ruiz, the region's most powerful local government official, has changed his voter registration from Republican to the Independent Party, according to Lane County Elections records.

Voter records from Fresno showed the former Army colonel hired for Eugene's top job two years ago had registered as a Republican in California.

But a few months after he moved to Eugene, a city that votes about two-thirds Democrat, Ruiz changed his registration to the Independent Party.

The Independent Party has become the fastest growing political party in Oregon, some say because of confusion. "There's widespread belief that many registered Independents don't realize they're in a political party," *The Oregonian* reported last month. Many voters may have thought they were registering as small 'i' independents or unaffiliated voters rather than joining a political party.

The Independent Party was formed by Dan Meek, a public utility activist and Ralph Nader supporter, but doesn't appear to have much of an official political platform beyond campaign finance reform and increasing ballot access for third parties.

Voter records show Ruiz voted in two local elections after registering but didn't cast a ballot this past May when John Kitzhaber won the Democratic nomination for governor and the county Extension Service levy failed.

Ruiz will never have to face voters in an election. He was backed by conservatives and hired by a 5-3 Eugene City Council vote. Under the Eugene charter, the manager controls all city contracts and more than 1,600 city employees. — *Alan Pittman*

WOLVES GET REPRIEVE

Wildlife Services has temporarily called a halt to what local conservation groups are calling the "state-sponsored hunt of two of Oregon's 14 endangered wolves," thanks to a lawsuit filed by Cascadia Wildlands, Oregon Wild and two other groups.

Wolves in Oregon are protected under the state Endangered Species Act.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife issued two permits to the USDA's Wildlife Services to kill two uncollared wolves from the Imnaha pack. ODFW also issued seven permits to ranchers to kill wolves that are caught in the act of wounding, biting or killing livestock and those permits allow the killing of collared wolves. The alpha male and female, which make up the breeding pair, are among the four collared wolves and are currently believed to be raising a litter of pups. The alpha male has since gone missing.

The temporary halt on the wolf hunting permits is "a much-needed reprieve for the budding wolf population in Oregon while the case is briefed in the courts. Wildlife agencies must do all they can to ensure the survival and recovery of the gray wolf in Oregon," says Josh Laughlin of Cascadia Wildlands.

Laughlin says with only 14 confirmed gray wolves in Oregon right now, and possibly 13 if the alpha male of the Imnaha pack is dead, it "underscores the need to safeguard this population."

Oregon's Wolf Management and Conservation Plan allows for the killing of gray wolves that attack livestock in eastern Oregon, where the wolves have reentered from neighboring states.

Laughlin says that in addition to the federal suit against Wildlife Services, Cascadia Wildlands and other groups are about to file a lawsuit in state court this week against ODFW. The lawsuit accuses the state of for failing to properly implement the Oregon Wolf Plan. Ultimately it was the state of Oregon that authorized the ongoing hunt, the groups say. The wolf advocates believe that ODFW isn't following its regulations with regard to lethal action. The wolf-killing reprieve ends July 30. — *Camilla Mortensen*



Oregon wolf just released after being fitted with a radio collar in May 2009

PHOTO: OREGON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

news Briefs

AVOIDING \$2.5 BILLION IN DEFICITS

State Rep. Phil Barnhart at a Bus Project Brewhaha panel last week (see news story, 7/1) said Oregon could be facing a \$2.5 billion deficit in the 2011-13 biennium. In a follow-up this week he said "the \$2.5 billion number is a reasonable marker, but the actual amount could easily be higher or lower than that." Barnhart is a Democrat and chair of the House Revenue Committee. His numbers are from the Legislative Revenue Office.

Barnhart says state does have some reserves left, and revenues will "probably be up, but not enough to make up for the fall since the recession started in late 2007." The state received \$1.6 billion in stimulus funds from the federal government in February 2009 which had to be spent in three years or less. "That leaves no fed stimulus for 2011-13 and very little reserves."

Barnhart says the last revenue projections in May showed a \$577 million shortfall which led the governor to use his allotment authority to make across-the-board cuts of about 9 percent. Those cuts apply to funds left to be spent in this current biennium.

"When the final decisions get made about the cuts that are happening now, we will be able to tell better how much more will have to be cut next time in the Current Service Budget to balance with revenues," he says. The next legislative revenue projections will be announced in late August and again in November. Oregon's overall two-year budget is currently about \$18.2 billion.

"A key issue for me," says Barnhart, "is that we not be in the position the Republican Legislature was in 2003. The state had to borrow nearly half a billion dollars to close out '01-'03. We are still paying that back now and will be for a couple more biennia."

Barnhart says borrowing reduces funds for current programs in future years and "also risks our bond rating, potentially costing us higher interest rates and millions more dollars of taxpayer money."

"One sign of successful budget management will be that we do not have to borrow to close out '09-'11," he says. "The cuts the governor has ordered are very painful but also necessary." Barnhart is

also calling for reform of our state tax system, including modifying the kicker law to build state reserves. "Oregon families pay their taxes, but fat cats do not," he says at www.philbarnhart.com "If we stop spending our tax dollars on corporate loopholes adopted during the 16 years of Republican control, we can make our tax system fairer and have more funds to pay for essential services without raising taxes."

Republicans in the House are not calling for tax reform or fixing the kicker but are rather blaming the crisis on growth in state hiring in recent decades, along with relatively high government salaries and expensive benefits, such as PERS. Oregon is in such "dire straits," according to Rep. Dennis Richardson in his latest newsletter, due to "unsustainable growth in government expenses." The southern Oregon Republican says "It is time for state workers to pay their 'fair share' of their retirement and health benefits."

Oregon lawmakers are still debating whether or not to call a special session to deal with budget cuts. A May 26 vote to set a special session failed with a tepid response. Lawmakers in both parties appear to want to avoid a risky and contentious debate in an election year.

— *Ted Taylor*

DOWNTOWN COPS OUT

The city of Eugene said in a press release last month that it purchased a new building for a police headquarters for \$10.2 million, but a purchase agreement shows the city's purchase cost could be \$500,000 higher.

The agreement requires the city to deposit \$500,000 in an escrow account for seismic upgrades and tenant relocation costs. If the building upgrades and relocating a dentist tenant cost the city less than \$500,000, whatever is left "shall be paid" to the seller, the agreement specifies.

The city plans to spend "up to \$5.8 million" beyond the \$10.2 million to renovate the building in north Eugene for relocating the police from downtown in early 2012, the press release states.

The move represents the worst blow to downtown jobs in decades. Downtown will lose about 300 employees plus visitors to the police station. By comparison, the city has pledged about \$8 million to subsidize a new LCC building downtown bringing about 50 more employees in addition to planned housing for students.

The police presence driving through downtown will be reduced at a time many are complaining of crime problems from a lack of police downtown. The city has said it may open a police kiosk downtown, but has not said how it will pay to build or staff it.

lighten up

Folks unhappy about the renaming of Beltline after Randy Papé should just be grateful that his name wasn't Randy Wolfeschlegelsteinhausenbergerdorff.

— *Rafael Aldave, Eugene*