

THE REGISTER-GUARD'S NEW OWNER

Eugene's only daily newspaper faces an uncertain future as part of a chain

The Register-Guard has been tight-lipped about what's in store at Eugene's daily newspaper in the wake of last week's stunning news that the corporate chain GateHouse Media has bought the locally owned company and will take over operations next month.

Publisher Logan Molen, whose openness has been a breath of fresh air at the usually reticent *RG*, declined to say much when *Eugene Weekly* emailed several questions last week.

"There's not a whole lot I can say because the terms of the contract are confidential," he wrote. "GateHouse isn't scheduled to take over until March 1, so until then there's not a lot they likely will say, either."

Molen said the purchase was not finalized until Jan. 24, the day before it was announced to the *RG* staff and to the public.

"Our staff is anxious about the future, which is completely understandable," Molen wrote. "We'll do what we can to make a tough transition as smooth as possible, and communicate what we can as quickly as we can."

The staff may have reason to be anxious.

GateHouse, a private equity firm that owns 130 newspapers around the country, has been known for substantial layoffs at papers it's bought, outsourcing everything from page design to printing.

One thing that remains unclear about the *RG* sale — and one of the questions Molen declined to answer for *Eugene Weekly* — is whether the purchase is of an operating company or an asset sale, meaning that GateHouse can re-open current union contracts. It appears the latter may be the case.

"They [GateHouse] like to come in and sell off physical assets," said Bernie Lunzer, the national president of the NewsGuild-Communication Workers of America, the union that represents about 64 of the *RG*'s 240 full- and part-time employees. "They tend to strip things down to the basics."

About 20 *RG* workers are represented by the Teamsters union.

Perhaps the most damning criticism of GateHouse came in a lengthy article published in December by Robert Kuttner, co-founder and co-editor of *American Prospect*, and "Hildy Zenger," the nom de plume of a journalist working at a small-city newspaper owned by GateHouse.

The article, headlined "Saving the Free Press From Private Equity," offers such chilling observations as this:

"Its pre-GateHouse staff has been cut by 70 percent, and those who remain have not had a raise in almost 10 years. The paper had its own in-house production and printing operation, and had won design awards, but GateHouse shut down and sold the press and fired the entire production staff."

In a column published in the newspaper Sunday, Jan. 28, Molen said the *RG* will retain the ability to "drive the journalistic and business mission" in ways appropriate to the community.

The *American Prospect* story paints a bleaker picture of life at a GateHouse newspaper.

Take the website. "Although GateHouse management claims to be aggressively pursuing a 'hyperlocal' digital ad strategy," the article says, "its newspapers' websites — all with close to identical design — are stunningly ugly, hard to use, and filled with dated, soft feature stories of zero local interest."

In his Sunday column, Molen confirmed that the newspaper's website will soon "migrate onto the ... template that GateHouse uses for its newspaper websites nationwide."

TNG-CWA's Lunzer, though, said GateHouse is not among the worst of the private equity firms that have been buying up newspapers around the country as collapsing advertising revenues have pushed them towards insolvency.

GateHouse, he said, "still claims to have a commitment to journalism."

TNG-CWA has successfully negotiated contract issues at about a dozen papers the corporation owns and has found GateHouse amenable to negotiating non-economic issues such as union recognition.

"In our relationship with GateHouse we are trying to educate them about why journalism is so important and why it matters to the community," Lunzer said. "There's this myth out there that newspapers are dead. That's not true." ■

Eugene Weekly Arts Editor Bob Keefe worked as a reporter at *The Register-Guard* for 30 years before retiring from the paper in 2013.

SLANT

- We heard Oregon House Majority Leader **Jennifer Williamson** talk to a gathering of Eugene Democrats last summer after the 2017 legislative session. Williamson said the accomplishments of Oregon progressives are known all over the country, but hardly known at all in Oregon. So isn't that what the media should do, tell Oregonians what their elected representatives did? *EW* asked **Diane Dietz**, a highly respected journalist who covered the session for the *Statesman-Journal* last summer after a long career at the *Register-Guard*, to give us her take on the success or failure of the progressive agenda, plus a forecast for the 35-day 2018 session starting in February. Read the story of government working in our little democracy, the state of Oregon, in our legislative package this issue.

- As of March 1, ***Eugene Weekly* will be Eugene's only locally owned independent major newspaper.** That's the day when GateHouse Media out of New York state, one of this country's largest chains, officially owns *The Register-Guard*. After 90 years of family ownership, the Bakers sold it for an undisclosed amount. We have poked at the *RG* and they have poked back, although their editors mostly tried to ignore this free upstart on the streets for the past 37 years. But we are sad to see the Baker family giving up the institution they worked so hard to establish and maintain. As their masthead says, their daily paper has been a good "citizen of its community" and the

Bakers have been good citizens as well. What happens next? Logan Molen, present publisher of the *RG*, already has written that the paper will shrink. The crucial number is GateHouse's debt of more than \$300 million and what they must do to service it.

- We left the City Club of Eugene meeting Jan. 26 even more convinced that we need **single payer health care** in this country. Ryan Kounovsky, a staffer to Rep. Phil Barnhart during the 2017 legislative session, talked about what's next for the Oregon Health Plan. Certainly, Oregon is trying hard to take care of the medical needs of its residents, but a "Medicare for all" plan from the national level makes the most sense. It seems unlikely with the present control in D.C., but that will change.

- The Eugene City Council is looking to refer a **competing city auditor measure** to the May ballot, but it will be drafted by the anti-auditor city manager and city attorney, so expect it to have an inadequate budget at best, and correspondingly little impact. Citizens for Sensible Oversight, who kick-started this effort, complain that Measure 20-283 already on the ballot is too expensive and would cost taxpayers "nearly \$700,000 every year," but Eugene Police Auditor Mark Gissiner notes in a recent *Register-Guard* op-ed that his budget is \$530,000 "or less than 1 cent per capita per day." The Measure 20-283 auditor and his or her staff would have vastly more responsibility and impact than the police auditor. Eugene is becoming a real city and we need well-funded and substantial independent auditing of all city departments. Police auditors cost money; city auditors

with the right resources can save taxpayers millions. City Accountability has a fundraiser, Blues for Ballot Measure 20-283, planned for 7 pm Friday, Feb. 2, at Tsunami Books.

- Eugene Symphony's former conductor and music director **Marin Alsop** has long been a superstar on the international stage. Since leaving here she's become the first woman music director at a major U.S. symphony orchestra — the Baltimore Symphony — and the first woman to conduct the BBC's prestigious Last Night of the Proms in London. Now Alsop has been named artistic director of the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra in Austria — and yes, that's another musical first for women. Brava!

- **Oregon Bach Festival** is mum on why it invited a guest conductor who had been previously fired for using a racial slur at a rehearsal to perform at this summer's festival, just months after OBF sacked its artistic director, Matthew Halls, amid vague suggestions of racism and sexism. Cellist and conductor Jaap ter Linden was to conduct OBF's Berwick Academy July 3; he was let go from a guest slot by the Oberlin Conservatory in 2015 after students complained he had used the slur, according to news reports confirmed by a conservatory official. Ter Linden's name disappeared from the OBF website the day after *Eugene Weekly* posted a story online Jan. 26 about the incident; requests for comment to the festival and the University of Oregon drew no response by press time. Ter Linden has reached out to *EW* on the topic, and we'll post an interview with him on our website.