

Capitol harassment complaint embroils former Keizer mayor

By ERIC A. HOWALD
Of the Keizertimes

A harassment complaint filed against the entirety of the Oregon Legislative Assembly, Legislative Administrative Committee and a former state senator also alleges that former Keizer Mayor Lore Christopher contributed to “generally hostile environment based upon sex” at the Capitol.

The complaint was lodged by Oregon Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian, the head of the Bureau of Labor and Industries (BOLI), with the agency he leads. The complaint, which stems from actions by a now-resigned senator as well as other employees, states incidents included “but were not limited multiple individuals in the Capitol to unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature.” Those subjected to the hostile climate fostered by the legislature and its employees included legislators, employees, lobbyists, and student interns according to the complaint dated Aug. 1.

Christopher, who is director of human resources at the Capitol is cited by name in several places throughout the eight-page complaint.

“I will absolutely participate in the investigation of the BOLI complaint but will

not release the identities of any of the courageous women and men who have participated in any of these investigations and provided information to me,” Christopher said when reached by email. “A true culture change relies on receiving information about misconduct. Information cannot be forthcoming without an environment of trust and confidentiality.”

She added that ensuring confidentiality is essential to ensuring victims do come forward and “I will not be a part of any harm caused to individuals who were seeking to do the right thing by reporting misconduct.”

The centerpiece of the complaint are allegations – dating back to 1996 – against Jeff Kruse, who resigned earlier this year in the wake of more recent harassment allegations from fellow legislators. However, Christopher had a more central role in other aspects of the complaint.

In April 2017, the complaint alleges one employee confided in Christopher and Legislative Counsel Dexter Johnson that a male intern had previously sexually assaulted her and one of her acquaintances prior to his employment at the Capitol and then inquired about

her current sexual relationship during his time as an intern. Recommendations from an investigation conducted by Christopher included cautioning the victim “about talking with anyone regarding this complaint ... as additional conversation or actions outside of the investigation could be construed as retaliatory.”

The alleged harasser’s internship was near its end and the victim was told she would be notified if he was ever hired at the Capitol again. About a year later, the victim found out the harasser had been hired by the Capitol, but was never informed by the human resources department.

While Christopher isn’t named in many of the specific incidents regarding Kruse, it is implied that inaction by human resources employees was one of the reasons that it continued for years.

Conversely, despite repeated complaints about harassing actions by Kruse, remediation attempts went unheeded by Kruse which culminated in a letter being sent by Senate President Peter Courtney to Kruse in October 2017, which read, “I was made aware that your behavior toward women in the workplace has also gone unchanged. You were instruct-

ed in March of this year by Lore Christopher, Employee Services Manager, and Dexter Johnson, Legislative Counsel, that you were not to touch women at work. Period.”

When Avakian tried to reach out to two student interns and a lobbyist to notify them of their rights in light of the climate at the Capitol, employees reneged on promises to forward letters to the victims. Eventually, Avakian was able to contact the students through their schools.

“The respondents have denied multiple individuals full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities and privileges of the Capitol based on their sex,” the complaint concludes.

Avakian announced he will be leaving BOLI in January 2019. Investigations of the magnitude suggested by the complaint will likely take months and it will likely fall to Avakian’s successor, Val Hoyle, to determine how and whether it proceeds.

Hoyle is a former member of the Oregon House of Representatives who won the race to be Oregon’s next labor commissioner with 52 percent of the vote in May.

Christopher is currently a member of the Keizer Public Arts Commission.



Pitching in

Novah Poteet assists his grandmother, Melissa Poteet, in a clean-up effort at Bair Park Saturday, Aug. 4. The project was organized by Farmers Insurance agent Mathew Poteet.

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