

Oregon's child welfare system fails federal standards

By HILLARY BORRUD
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon's child welfare system failed to meet all of the standards in a recent federal assessment, state Department of Human Services director Clyde Saiki told lawmakers in an email Wednesday.

The state fell short of federal goals from foster parent recruitment and retention, to ensuring "children are first and foremost protected from abuse and neglect," Saiki wrote, regarding the report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

He warned there is likely more bad news to come. The findings were only the first part of a two-phase review, and "it is very likely Oregon will meet the standards in the final report."

Oregon's child welfare system, operated by the Department of Human Services, has a history of problems and has faced renewed scrutiny by lawmakers and the public since Willamette Week reported last year the agency continued to send children to a troubled Portland foster program.

Theoretically, Oregon could lose some of its fed-

eral child welfare money if the state fails to meet goals for improving the system. In practice, that has not happened.

Gene Evans, a spokesman for the department, wrote in an email Wednesday that the federal government has not withheld any money from the state as a penalty for failing to meet such goals. Oregon's child welfare program has already been on a federal "program improvement plan" since at least 2008.

State Sen. Sara Gelser, D-Corvallis, said one of her takeaways from the report was the situation since 2008 has "gotten worse rather than bet-

ter ... The agency has lacked adequate leadership for a long time."

Gelser, who has criticized the department's failure to protect children and sponsored legislation earlier this year to force the agency take action when children are at risk, said it is time for the agency to clean house to remove employees who allowed the problems to grow.

"We need significantly new leadership at all levels of our child welfare agency and a culture change," Gelser said. "And I think Clyde (Saiki) is the right person to make that happen ... The governor has

made it really clear that is her priority and directive she's put forward."

Gelser said it was understandable the federal government had not withheld funds from Oregon because the program is already underfunded, and this causes problems such as overloaded caseworkers.

Oregon House Republicans suggested on Wednesday the agency could do a better job with its current budget.

"We must take action to demand accountability from our child welfare system and ensure that Oregonians' tax dollars are being handled prudently, and in a way that max-

imizes positive outcomes for children in our child welfare system," Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, the chairman of the House Republican Budget Committee, said in a written statement.

Meanwhile, Oregon has plenty of company when it comes to being on a federal "program improvement plan": states from Alaska to New York are also listed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as being on such monitoring plans.

The Capital Bureau is a collaboration between EO Media Group and Pamplin Media Group.



R.J. Marx/The Daily Astorian

Seaside High School and other buildings in the district will benefit from greater revenues.

New uptick in revenue brings robust Seaside schools budget

District will also present bond measure

By NANCY MCCARTHY
The Daily Astorian

SEASIDE — With an uptick in revenue through property taxes and stable finances, the Seaside School District will add a few more teachers next year and make essential repairs at all four schools.

The district's budget committee received its first look at the 2016-17 budget Tuesday night and will continue discussion on it May 17.

Oregon is experiencing a "full throttle rate of growth" in revenue from taxes and building permits, said Superintendent Doug Dougherty, and the Seaside district is experiencing the same phenomenon.

The budget includes a \$19.5 million general fund, with revenue coming mostly from property taxes and timber revenues. A five-year local option levy, approved by voters last November, also added \$1.2 million to the budget.

Because its property values are higher than the average throughout Oregon, the Seaside district does not receive state education funds.

While the receipts from state forest timber sales are expected to be lower this year, more sales are expected in 2017, so revenue could be higher than expected, Dougherty said.

In his budget message, Dougherty said the district's strategy next year is to "evaluate the current needs of our students, target areas that need enrichment and focus our resources to provide a well-rounded education."

Bond measure

Dougherty also said the district will place a bond measure on next November's ballot to relocate the district's schools out of the tsunami inundation zone. To prepare the ballot measure, including architectural and engineering fees and other services, the district could spend up to \$540,000. However, that amount depends on the proceeds received from the sale of district-owned property near Surf Pines. The district hopes to receive \$335,000 from the sale.

A \$128.8 million bond measure to relocate the schools on a hill east of Seaside Heights Elementary School failed in 2013.

The 4.5 full-time-equivalent personnel to be hired include a social studies teacher at Broadway Middle School; a full-time teacher to reduce class size; a

half-time curriculum director; a part-time technology support staff member; and a staff member who will serve as a full-time "teacher on special assignment" to provide management support to students, staff, parents and the community at Gearhart and Seaside Heights elementary schools, according to the budget message.

The budget includes a 2.25 percent salary increase for district employees.

Superintendent retiring

Although he is retiring in June, Dougherty will continue to stay on half-time to shepherd the bond measure through the November election.

Another \$798,885 is budgeted for repairs to the schools, which have an average age of 65 years. These include:

- New flooring at Gearhart Elementary School
- Roof repairs at Broadway Middle School
- Parking lot renovations at the bus garage
- Internal walls and doors at Seaside Heights
- Resurfacing the Seaside High School track
- Bringing the Seaside High School restroom to the Americans with Disabilities Act code with a shower
- Reroofing a section of the high school gym

Another budget expense includes a \$122,000 transfer to supplement losses in the school lunch program. The district is served by the Chartwells food service company, which also worked with the Astoria School District until that district dropped the company last year, complaining about the company's lack of communication and inconsistencies in the food served to students.

The joint contract the company has with Seaside, Astoria, Warrenton-Hammond and Ocean Park, Washington, is due to expire in June.

Orca tagging stops after dead whale found with fragments

By PHUONG LE
Associated Press

SEATTLE — Federal biologists have temporarily stopped tagging endangered killer whales in Washington state's Puget Sound after a dead orca was found with pieces of a dart tag lodged in its dorsal fin.

Researchers use a dart projector to fire the small satellite-linked transmitters into the animals to track where they go in the winter and how they find food. An initial exam of the 20-year-old whale found floating off Vancouver Island last month did not find a clear cause of death, but some advocates fear tagging injures the animals and say there are less invasive ways to monitor the small population of whales.

The transmitter is the size of a 9-volt battery and attaches to the orca's fin with two titanium darts about 6 centimeters long. It's designed to detach over time and leave nothing behind in the whale.

A necropsy of the dead orca found fragments remained in its dorsal fin when the tag fell off but "revealed no apparent localized or tracking inflammation," Canada's Department of Fisheries and Ocean said last week.

Though there were no signs of infection, veterinarians were investigating



NOAA Northwest Fisheries Science Center via AP

An orca whale known as L95 swims in the Pacific Ocean near La Push, Wash., shortly before being fitted with a satellite tag. Federal biologists have temporarily stopped tagging endangered killer whales in Washington state's Puget Sound after a dead orca was found with pieces of a dart tag lodged in its dorsal fin.

whether the tagging area may have provided a pathway for one, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said. A final report is expected in several weeks.

NOAA researchers were assessing what went wrong with the transmitter and how to prevent it from happening again, said Brad Hanson, an agency wildlife biologist who leads the orca tagging program.

The researchers' federal permit requires dart tagging to stop if the devices break, and tagging can't resume until NOAA authorizes it. Problems have forced a redesign of the device two previous times.

"Go back to the drawing board. Apply it less inva-

sively," said Kenneth Balcomb, senior scientist with the Center for Whale Research, who called the devices "overly barbaric." "It's injuring the animals, and they're leaving pieces of hardware stuck in them that festers and causes tissue damage."

Hanson defended the pro-

gram but said he understood the concerns.

"It's provided us with a tremendous amount of information in a relatively short amount of time," he said. "I personally am concerned for the whales, but we're also charged with providing the best available science for our colleagues to make management decisions."

Southern resident killer whales are listed as endangered in the U.S. and Canada. NOAA is considering whether to expand habitat protections for the orcas to include offshore areas from Washington to Northern California.

The male orca known as L95 was tagged in late February off Washington's coast. The whale appeared to be in good health, and researchers said they did not observe any breaking when firing the transmitter. The device provided data for four days before the signal was lost. Several weeks later, the animal was found dead.

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