



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, far left, speaks with the audience after a town hall meeting Sunday in Warrenton.

Merkley: Touched on several topics

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Losing coverage

The Congressional Budget Office estimated that the American Health Care Act, which narrowly passed the U.S. House this month but faces long odds in the U.S. Senate, would cost 14 million additional Americans medical coverage next year, and 23 million by 2023. A recent state analysis concluded that more than 400,000 Oregonians would lose coverage under the bill by 2026. The state was an early adopter of Medicaid expansion under the Oregon Health Plan.

"If they were holding hands, it would stretch from the Pacific Ocean, here, all the way to the border with Idaho," Merkley said of Oregonians who could lose coverage, echoing a similar comment he's made at other town halls.

Merkley said the legislation breaks several promises about coverage, quality and affordability made by President Donald Trump, while raising the average monthly health care costs for a 64-year-old making \$26,000 a year from \$140 to \$1,200 a month.

Dr. Holly Barker, a surgeon at Providence Seaside Hospital, said she is concerned over the potential of the legislation to gut Medicaid and increase uncompensated care at the region's two critical access hospitals, already operating at the margin. "It's going to affect the hospitals to such a degree that we could be talking shutdown," she said, asking what safety nets the bill might have.

Merkley said the bill contains no safety nets. "It's why we've got to stop this bill. It's that simple," he said.

Getting involved

Barbara Linnett, a retired nurse from Astoria, asked Merkley how locals could get involved in national contests of consequence in the 2018 midterm elections, and in finding a strong presidential candidate to run in 2020.

Merkley, taking a non-partisan approach, said citizen engagement is key.

Republican senators are planning their own version of the health care legislation to be passed by reconciliation, a legislative maneuver requiring only a simple majority of 51 votes instead of 60, the number required to break a filibuster.

"We don't know what that plan will look like, but obviously I'm concerned about that," he said.

Merkley said voters flooding House legislators' email inboxes, phone lines and the streets is what defeated the first version of the American Health Care Act and almost stopped the second.

"It needs to happen on the Senate side," he said, urging people to reach out through their various professional, hobby and other associations.

Merkley touched on several other topics, prompted by questions and himself:

- Doug Thompson of Astoria asked why Merkley, a staunch progressive who has co-sponsored multiple bills to move the U.S. away from fossil fuels, has continued to support the controversial proposed Jordan Cove liquefied natural gas terminal. Merkley, who has remained neutral on the Jordan Cove project, said "Coos Bay should be able to make their case."

- Merkley said he has been calling since February for a special prosecutor to investigate claims of collusion by Russia and the Trump campaign during the presidential election. He said Russia has developed the biggest operation for interfering not only in the U.S. but in other elections worldwide, trying to undermine democratic republics, and that a bipartisan effort is needed to figure out what happened in November's election and build better defenses.

- Warrenton junior Maria Heyen said she is starting to look into colleges but is concerned about the rising cost of tuition and loans. Merkley said the U.S. needs a funding mechanism that makes higher education feasible for all, calling for the protection against cuts to the federal Pell Grant program and the lowering of student loan interest rates.

- Retired teacher Wendela Howie said her main issue is the right and access to public education. Merkley said Oregon, which has the lowest corporate tax rates in the U.S., can't support good public education without more revenue.

- In closing, Merkley said the fight needs to continue to overturn the Citizens United U.S. Supreme Court decision that has flooded elections with outside money.

Plovers: Chick is now 2 weeks old

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Rangers restrict access to the southern portion of the 4-mile-long sand spit that makes up Nehalem Bay State Park beginning in May and continuing through the entirety of the plover nesting season. Now with a confirmed hatchling on the beach, these restrictions had become even more crucial.

The park is located just below Manzanita, a town often overrun with tourists in the summer, and park rangers were expecting a crowd over the long weekend. Blackstone wanted to know where the chick was before the weekend hit, the better to warn people away from areas where it might be feeding or resting.

She had a hunch that the chick, now 2 weeks old and very mobile, may have moved northwards with its parent, looking for food outside the protected nesting area. Male plovers look after chicks once they hatch while females continue to mate and establish nests.

Dangers

If you are on a sandy beach littered with driftwood and broken sea shells, everything looks like a western snowy plover: that tan stone, those scattered puffs of sea foam, the pile of twigs and dried grass the wind just caught and stirred.

Blackstone moved slowly, shouldering a spotting scope on a tripod. She started out looking for tracks because where there were tracks there could be birds.

Plovers feed on small invertebrates. As they forage for food, they run in straight lines, pause, look around, then dash suddenly to the side to snag prey. The distinctive, slightly pigeon-toed tracks they leave behind reflect these sudden starts, stops and right-angle turns.

Last Thursday, Blackstone found little evidence of plover activity at the southern end of the beach where signs warn people away from plover nesting areas. She turned north towards Manzanita, stopping every few steps to scan the beach with her scope.

Sanderlings, another small, fast-moving shorebird, scurried along the wet sand. Up above the dunes, a crowd slid sideways on the wind, head questing from right to left. It sent a shadow rippling over waveprints in the dry sand.

Predators haven't yet figured out that the sparrow-sized plovers and their even smaller eggs — and now chick — are



Photos by Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Wildlife biologist Vanessa Blackstone searches the area for signs of the western snowy plover.

here, as far as Blackstone can tell. Elsewhere in Oregon, plover nesting grounds are a buffet for gulls, coyotes and corvids like crows and ravens. Wildlife biologists often sweep away their footprints after checking on plover nests to avoid leading predators right to them. In California and southern Oregon, the states and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have had to consider lethal options in controlling problem predators.

One western gull in southern Oregon figured out that plover parents will flee their nests when disturbed, hoping to draw predators away. They'll flutter down the beach, pretending their wing is broken: "Eat me! Eat me! I'm easy to catch!" The gull ignored them and pillaged 10 nests in a single day.

Home base

But crows and gulls aren't the only issue.

Snowy plovers see danger everywhere. A dog, sniffing around and oblivious to a nest — usually only a shallow scrape in the dry sand — can send parents scurrying. So can a beachcomber wandering among the dunes, or a colorful plastic kite fluttering overhead.

"One person, one dog, one kite, they'll get over it," Blackstone said. But when another person goes by a few minutes later, followed by another dog or another kite, plover parents are constantly hopping off eggs.

"So many nests fail because they get cold," Blackstone said.

"Certainly within the species you see a range of tolerance for disturbance," said Eleanor Gaines, a conservation biologist who works with the Oregon Biodiversity

Information Center. The center has tracked plover numbers since the 1990s when they first became federally listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. The center provides information to the different state and federal groups involved in snowy plover recovery efforts.

In Oregon, the beaches are relatively remote. In California, plovers nest on beaches heavily used by people.

"They rope them off (in California), but the birds do seem to tolerate more human disturbance than we see up here," Gaines said.

Plovers have what biologists call "site fidelity." Once they successfully nest somewhere, they tend to come back. It is part of what makes news of the chick in Nehalem so encouraging. If it survives to adulthood, it too will return someday.

North

Blackstone walked for more than an hour, slowly zig-zagging from where high tide had deposited a chain of beach debris then up to dry sand. She paused to look for tracks or to look through her scope, noting other bird species, puzzling over unfamiliar tracks.

Then: "Western snowy plover! I knew they were going to go north."

The adult plover was hard to see unless it moved. Blackstone pondered it through her scope. A sudden movement at the plover's side made her do a double take. Two birds? No: The chick!

Minutes later, the parent, spotting Blackstone and reporters from The Daily Astorian, would be running back and forth across the sand — "Eat



Wildlife biologist Vanessa Blackstone demonstrates how the western snowy plover leaves tracks in the sand on the beaches of Nehalem Bay State Park.

me! Eat me!" — and the chick would have disappeared, hiding somewhere nearby. But for now, the gangly hatchling covered in a patchy fuzz with its long legs and useless "little chicken wings" bobbed next to its parent.

"Only 1,000 yards north of where we want him," Park Ranger Ken Murphy would later sigh when Blackstone told him the news.

'Guided luck'

The chick, and the new nest, are not flukes.

"More like guided luck," said Chris Havel, associate director with Oregon Parks and Recreation. "With some tweaking of the ground and help from visitors, a traditional breeding ground can regain some of its former attractiveness."

"But you never can tell what will happen next," he added, "and this could be the start of a more wild, more natural Nehalem spit, or something could interrupt the process and we'll need to reset our sights on next year."

The work they've done, though, and the nests they've seen "improves the odds."

Laura Todd, field supervisor with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Oregon, began her career right before western snowy plovers were listed. She can say that she saw a species rebound from extinction.

Someday, she and others hope the presence of snowy plovers will again be unremarkable on Oregon's North Coast.

"The more and more birds that we get, the more pressures they can withstand," Todd said. "We're hoping at some point we can step back."

Conservationists are getting very close to their recovery goals, at least as far as some numbers go in managed areas in Oregon and Washington state.

It doesn't mean they're close to delisting, Todd said, "But it does mean we can breathe a little easier."

"There will come a day when it's, 'Oh, another nest at Nehalem,'" Blackstone said.

Volunteers: 'Seeing it change is really amazing'

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approach once dominated by Scotch broom.

"Seeing it change is really amazing," she said.

It has taken a combination of longtime volunteers and new volunteers like Rippey to bring about this change. Nothing against the plants, they say. In fact, the first time most of them saw Scotch broom, they thought, "What lovely yellow blooms!" In May, whole sections of the coast light up — like someone has swiped the hills with a yellow highlighter — as

Scotch broom transforms from a drab shock of branches and leaves into an attractive, highly productive flowering shrub.

It is a plant that flourishes in disturbed soil and quickly displaces native plants and trees, says Nadia Gardner, conservation manager with the North Coast Land Conservancy. Conservationists and watershed groups can track its rapacious growth in tangent with development projects: housing up in the hills of Seaside, on recently logged lands, alongside highways.

Once used to stabilize dunes

and as an ornamental along highway corridors, the Oregon Department of Agriculture now calls it "one of western Oregon's most widespread and costliest weeds." The North Coast Land Conservancy declares May "broom-buster month" and organizes extensive efforts to rid their acres of the weed.

For longtime volunteer Bob Lundy, Ecola Creek was right next door. As he entered retirement and began looking for ways to get more involved in the community, he figured tearing out Scotch broom was one

small way he could help.

"When I was thinking about what I was going to do after retirement, I said I don't play golf and I don't play cards so I'll probably have to learn to fish." Or surf, he amended. As it turns out, he said, "Cannon Beach will find lots of things for you to do."

Even as he has become more involved on boards and councils and committees, he continues to help with Scotch broom removal. "There are things that need doing. That are worth doing," he said.

— Katie Frankowicz

Muslims: 'He was just telling us that we basically weren't anything'

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Messages left at the home of Christian's mother were not immediately returned.

The attack occurred on a light-rail train on the first day of Ramadan, the holiest time of the year for Muslims.

Christian was being held on suspicion of aggravated murder, attempted murder, intimidation and being a felon in possession of a weapon. He was arrested a short time after the attack when he was confronted by other men.

One of the victims of the hate speech is sending her thanks to those who came to her defense, according to KPTV.

Destinee Mangum, 16, told the station on Saturday that she and her 17-year-old friend were riding the train when Jeremy

Christian approached them yelling what is described as hate speech. She said her friend is Muslim, but she's not.

"He told us to go back to Saudi Arabia, and he told us we shouldn't be here, to get out of his country," Mangum said. "He was just telling us that we basically weren't anything and that we should kill ourselves."

The girls were scared and moved to the back of the train while a stranger jumped in to help.

"Me and my friend were going to get off the MAX and then we turned around while they were fighting and he just started stabbing people and it was just blood everywhere and we just started running for our lives," Mangum said.

Alvin Hall said had just stepped off the train on Fri-

day when he saw a man bleeding from the neck, KATU-TV reported. Hall said his instincts kicked in and he went after the suspect.

"My first process was, 'What can I do? Where did he go?' and someone said, 'He ran over to the bridge,'" Hall said. "So I just took up running from the bridge up the stairs."

He said he met Chase Robinson and Larry Blackwell, and the three men confronted the suspect, who turned on them with a knife.

"The minute he saw me he started coming after me. He's like, 'You want some of me, you're a snitch, come on after me, you want some of this?' and started chasing me," Hall said.

Soon, police arrived and took the suspect into custody.

Christian will make his first court appearance in the case Tuesday, and it wasn't clear if he had an attorney. No one answered the phone at his Portland home.

Police identified the men killed as Ricky John Best, 53, of Happy Valley, and Taliesin Myrddin Namkai Meche, 23, of Portland. Mayor Ted Wheeler said Best was a U.S. Army veteran and a city employee. Meche earned a bachelor's degree in economics in 2016 from Reed College in Portland and landed a job with the Cadmus Group, a consulting firm in the area.

Police say Micah David-Cole Fletcher, 21, of Portland was also stabbed and is in serious condition at a Portland hospital. Police say his injuries are not believed to be

life-threatening.

Fletcher is a student at Portland State University and was taking the train from classes to his job at a pizza shop when the attack occurred. In 2013, Fletcher won a poetry competition, the Verselandia poetry slam, with a poem condemning prejudices faced by Muslims, according to The Oregonian.

Police said one of the two young women on the train was wearing a hijab. The assailant was ranting on many topics, using "hate speech or biased language," police Sgt. Pete Simpson said.

The FBI said it's too early to say whether the slayings qualify as a federal hate crime. However, Christian faces intimidation charges, the state equivalent of a hate crime.

The Portland Mercury, one

of the city's alternative weeklies, posted an article on its website saying Christian showed up at a free speech march in late April with a baseball bat to confront protesters and the bat was confiscated by police.

The article included video clips of a man wearing a metal chain around his neck and draped in an American flag shouting "I'm a nihilist! This is my safe place!" as protesters crowd around him. The Oregonian also had video from the April 29 march showing Christian.

Simpson confirmed the man in the videos was Christian.

On what appears to be Christian's Facebook page, he showed sympathy for Nazis and Timothy McVeigh, who bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995.