

# Turmoil: Assessment revealed serious challenges at Astoria 911 Dispatch

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## Frustration and disappointment

The city disclosed the conclusions of the independent assessment and the investigation — both dated Wednesday — to The Daily Astorian. The newspaper had pressed the city for records to help explain to the public why Johnston, who had been Astoria's second in command, unexpectedly left his high-profile job.

Over the past several months, the newspaper documented the strain that staff shortages have left on the police department. But the assessment, based on two days of interviews with police employees, unearthed frustration, disappointment and deep-seated low morale that had evolved and escalated over several years.

Asked what one word best described the Astoria Police, police employees used terms like "broken," "dysfunctional," "disarray," "unravelling," "lost" and "exhausted." The assessment found that the primary cause of the low morale and other problems rested with Johnston and his "leadership style, actions and inactions."

Police employees told the assessment team that their complaints to City Hall were ignored or minimized and often handed back to Johnston, who had the dual roles of police chief and assistant city manager. In a post on Facebook in July when Johnston announced he was resigning as assistant city manager, he called the two jobs exhausting for him and the police department. "The members of my department could not trust that I had their best interest in a primary position at all times," he wrote. "That is not a healthy position to put them in."

At the same time, though, police employees also described their pride in the police department, their dedication to the work and their loyalty to each other. Deputy Chief Eric Halverson, who took over Johnston's duties when the former chief retired, earned overwhelming appreciation and respect from his colleagues and was singled out as a clear leader.

## 'Not sustainable'

The assessment revealed serious challenges at Astoria 911 Dispatch, which was supervised by Johnston yet received "little or no leadership direction, mentorship, or responsiveness from him."

Dispatchers, according to the assessment, have worked between 30 and 100 additional hours of overtime a month over the past year. "This causes burn-out, agitation and decreased desire to come to work," the assessment found. "It is not sustainable in any 911 center."

The City Council last week approved the hiring of an operations supervisor who will focus on day-to-day functions at the dispatch center and allow Emergency Communications Manager Jeff Rusiecki to concentrate on technology, budget and subscriber relations.

The assessment recommended that the city re-evaluate the management, supervision and governance responsibilities of the dispatch center.

The assessment team was led by Blitz and included Kelly Dutra, the executive director of the Washington County Consolidated Communications Agency; Stuart Roberts, the police chief in Pendleton; and Peter Spirup, the police chief in Gervais.

Estes said he was impressed by the commitment of police officers and dispatchers and their sense of pride in their work.

"I would like to emphasize there is a great team over at APD," the city manager said in an email. "I believe in them as do the city councilors. The APD staff are extremely committed to their work. The department has and will continue to provide excellent service to the citizens of Astoria. This assessment provides direction how the department can continue to excel while we address issues which

have arisen."

Astoria Mayor Arline LaMear said the findings of the assessment were a surprise. The mayor said she had not realized the depth of the police department staff's frustration with Johnston.

"I'm sorry it got to the point where people were feeling so frustrated and I'm assuming that's the reason why some of them did leave," LaMear said.

"It sounds like we'll have to keep a closer look on the police department from now on," she said. "I think this was kind of an omen that we better make sure we know what's going on in the police department and that we have someone who the staff and the officers can communicate with and collaborate with."

City Councilor Bruce Jones, a former commander of U.S. Coast Guard Sector Columbia River, said he has confidence in the city's interim chief — former Beaverton Police Chief Geoff Spalding — and Estes' outreach with the police department and City Council.

"There seems to be a good sense that the police department is moving in the right direction," Jones said. "So I don't have any immediate concerns for public safety in the community, because of the fact that Mr. Estes has got a good handle on things and this new police chief seems very capable of coming in and listening to the police officers, hearing their concerns, and making good recommendations to Mr. Estes and to the City Council through Mr. Estes."

## Travel and ethics

The ethics allegation that Blitz investigated stemmed from Johnston's travel to a National Center for Missing and Exploited Children training course in Washington, D.C., in late May.

Johnston, in an email statement in June, explained that he left from and returned to Redmond because he planned a trip to see former Astoria Police Chief Rob DeuPree over the Memorial Day weekend. He said he personally paid for the airfare between Redmond and Portland for his flight to and from Washington.

Johnston said his return flight from Washington to Portland was delayed by thunderstorms, so he missed the connection to Redmond. He said he chose to rent a car on the city's account — at a cost of \$92.90 — and drive to Redmond because he was traveling on city business.

Blitz, however, found that Johnston was not entitled to claim reimbursement for the rental car, use a city credit card for the rental, or seek a government rate from the rental car company because it was a personal expense.

Blitz found that the former police chief violated city travel and ethics policies.

Complicating the situation was the fact that Johnston had faced previous tax consequences for using his police vehicle for personal reasons and family travel in central Oregon and Washington state. Blitz, who conducted an investigation into that matter in 2016, determined that Johnston did not violate city policy or state law but made "unfortunate mistakes which must be corrected."

## Provides cause

Given the two incidents, Blitz reported that the city had cause if it wished to fire Johnston. "Chief Johnston's choices demonstrate inadequate judgment; they raise questions about his integrity, demonstrated disregard for rules, policy and law, and trustworthiness," the attorney informed the city. "These are among essential qualifications of every chief law enforcement executive."

Had Johnston chosen to remain as police chief, he would have had to answer to Estes, and, likely, to the City Council, for the independent assessment of the police department and the city travel and ethics violations.

"It appears clear that there's an issue there," Estes said.

# Spalding: Will serve until city finds new chief

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City Manager Brett Estes announced Saturday that Spalding will temporarily replace former chief Brad Johnston, who retired suddenly this month after 25 years with the department. Deputy Chief Eric Halverson took over Johnston's duties and will continue in this role until Spalding arrives.

Though Halverson has not worked with Spalding before, he said he has attended classes Spalding facilitated and the retired chief's demeanor, personality and competence impressed him.

"I think it's going to be a positive thing," Halverson said. He added, "Of course, it's the unknown of, 'Here's my new boss.' But he's already reached out to me. He's very interested in getting to know all our people. He intends to spend one-on-one time with all of our employees."

Halverson was not interested in becoming the city's interim chief. There is still much he feels he needs to learn, he said, and he thinks Spalding will be a good mentor.

"We're in a place right now

where we need somebody with the level of experience that Chief Spalding has."

City Councilor Bruce Jones, a former commander of U.S. Coast Guard Sector Columbia River, said Spalding has a great reputation and is highly respected.

"I think Mr. Estes is just doing a great job handling this situation," Jones said.

The city tapped the Oregon Association Chiefs of Police interim leadership assistance program to help find Spalding. Known as the linebacker program, it helps cities fill short-term vacancies with seasoned leaders.

Spalding is not expected to apply for the police chief's position.

The city plans to cast a wide net to recruit a new chief. Estes also intends to look closely at the job description and recruitment materials to see if there are "specific functions, specific qualities, specific characteristics that we really need to find the appropriate person." It is a process he expects will take time, possibly up to six months or longer.

"I believe Geoff will be a great fit for the department and

in our community," Estes said in a statement. "His 39 years of law enforcement experience and relationship-building skills will be invaluable during this time of transition for the Astoria Police Department."

Spalding will serve as interim chief until the city finds a new chief. He will receive a monthly salary of \$8,639 — or \$103,668 annually. He will also receive a housing stipend. Johnston was paid a base salary of around \$103,000.

In addition to overseeing regular police matters, Spalding will also take the first steps to address concerns highlighted in an independent assessment of the Astoria Police Department that Estes had requested earlier this year. The assessment uncovered long-held frustrations, low morale and organizational concerns at the under-staffed department during Johnston's tenure as chief.

Estes hopes whoever he hires as the next police chief will develop a strategic plan to address these issues. However, Estes said Spalding can begin to undertake pieces of that process, such as working with staff to determine what quali-

ties they desire in a new chief.

"This is not something that's going to go on the back burner until we have a new chief in place," Estes said.

Spalding started his law enforcement career in 1976 and worked his way up through the ranks. He has managed the field training officer program, was a patrol watch commander, detective division commander and uniform division commander responsible for patrol and traffic personnel as well as the North County SWAT team. He created the first bilingual outreach coordinator position for the Beaverton Police Department while chief there.

Spalding is also past president of the Oregon Association Chiefs of Police and is a member of the Oregon Task Force on School Safety.

"I'm looking forward to working with the men and women of the Astoria Police Department, an agency that is well-respected in the community," Spalding said in a statement.

He and his wife, Diane, say they have always enjoyed Astoria, and Spalding said they are excited to spend time in the community.

# Regatta: Fewer floats in this year's parade

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in this year's celebration. Another staple is the Astoria Scandinavian Heritage Association, whose float took the parade as an opportunity to advocate for the City Council to support building a Scandinavian heritage monument at Peoples Park downtown.

One difference, however, was the lower number of entries in this year's parade, especially the number of floats compared to previous years, past Regatta president Dan Arnoth said. This year, Arnoth said there were 95 entries and about 3,000 people registered, when on average he usually sees around 110 entries. Of those, only a handful were floats.

"I think people are just getting busier than they used to be," Arnoth said.

For some involved in the parade, Regatta is less of a festival and more like a tradition. Before the parade, Regatta past president Nancy Kennell was retaping streamers to a wheelbarrow with a cardboard smokestack coming out the back, adorned with the sign "Admiral Liam 2050."

"Liam is my grandson, and he'll be fourth-generation Regatta. You have got to get a head start on getting them involved," Kennell said. The 5-year-old Liam was the star of the float which won first place in the Junior Parade Thursday, earning



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

**A participant in the Astoria Regatta Grand Land Parade hands out candy to children on Saturday. Find more photos from the Grand Land Parade online at DailyAstorian.com**

a place in the big parade on Saturday.

Kennell remembers Regatta entering her life early in her childhood, walking in the Junior Parade and tagging along with her mother, Betty Cunningham, who has been involved for the past 30 years in the Anchor Club. She remembers the fundraisers her mom would help put on for the Regatta Court, and the adrenaline of coming up with float ideas for the parade. That passion carried Kennell to serve as president in 2005, and passed down to Kennell's daughter, who became a Regatta princess.

"(Regatta) is a part of your heart and soul. It's cele-

brating such a special history and tradition of this place and inspires an incredible camaraderie in the community," she said.

But with the importance of tradition comes the responsibility of evolving to engage as many people as possible in this festival, Kennell said. Lower participation numbers are not new, and she said she could not overstate the importance of former Regatta Court members coming back to bring young blood into the program.

"Evolution is important. Even in small things, like being able to wear khaki's instead of white pants," Kennell laughed. "But mostly it

is important to be as inclusive as possible."

But 123 years later, people from all over the region, like Monica Rush from Clatskanie, are still excited to come out to celebrate Astoria's history.

"This is our first time here. We always loved Astoria, and our tiny towns don't have stuff like this," Rush said. For Rush's daughter, Riley, this was the first time she had experienced anything like the Regatta.

Six-year-old Riley, however, was less excited about the history and eagerly awaiting the candy.

"Also I'm excited it's not raining," she said.

# Flag: 'Please do not let our oversight reflect negatively on Astoria'

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Confederate flag on one of the many vehicles in the winning entry in this year's land parade and the offense it caused to so many attendees," the association said in a statement. "We stated earlier that the flag was not flown during judging. Yet, it appears that the flag may in fact have been in place. However, the vehicles were never part of the judging. The judging was for the memorial float portion of this entry only.

"It was a further oversight we missed Confederate flag stickers on the float itself during judging. We deeply regret the impression caused that Regatta in any way supports or condones the display of the Confederate flag. Moving forward, we will seek legal counsel to determine what limitations we may place on displays in the future.

"Please do not let our oversight reflect negatively on Astoria, or the many, many volunteers who give thousands of hours to create a positive community event each year. The Astoria Regatta Association will learn from this incident and continue working to create safe, posi-



Carlos Anaya/The Daily Astorian

**A Regatta parade float by Sons of Beaches featured U.S. and military flags, along with a Confederate flag decal on the trailer.**

tive community experiences for all."

Sons of Beaches, an off-road enthusiast group that also participates in community charity events and parades, constructed the float for the parade. Jay Pitman, the group's leader, said the float featured several bumper sticker-sized decals with Confederate logos as it had for the past several years. A red truck also followed behind with a Confederate flag.

Pitman said the float included several battle flags from throughout American history and that they

were intended to honor war veterans.

"We don't fly our flag with disrespect," Pitman said. "We fly it with respect to all of our veterans. We do not allow any personal political issues or personal agendas. We are non-biased, non-racist. We are about Americanism and supporting local law enforcement and first responders."

The timing of the display in Astoria was sensitive because of the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, on Saturday after demonstrations by white nationalists protesting the planned removal of a

statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. Confederate flags were flown by several demonstrators in Virginia.

Pitman said he was not aware of the act of domestic terrorism in Charlottesville before or during the parade. He said the group is now considering removing the flag from future parade events.

Laurie Caplan, the co-chair of Indivisible North Coast Oregon, said in an email Sunday night that several people were outraged by the display of the Confederate flag. "The flag has become much more a symbol of racism and violence than a token from the Civil War, which was an armed rebellion against the U.S. government," she wrote. "Some had friends who left in disgust after seeing the flag in the parade."

Astoria City Councilor Cindy Price posted on Facebook Sunday that "display of the Confederate flag is bigotry, hatred, and a readiness to commit violence, disguised as First Amendment protected speech. Let's have the wisdom to know the difference, and the will to prohibit it. And let's be kind to one another."