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ONE DOLLAR

## A day for kids, a night for innovation



Photos by Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Garrett, Anika and Bianna Parks visit David Frei and his therapy dogs, Grace and Angel, at the Seaside Festival of Trees.

## Clatsop, Columbia could link up transit

Options could improve regional bus service

By EDWARD STRATTON  
The Daily Astorian

Two of the region's bus transit networks are exploring the possibility of joining forces to improve service.

Sunset Empire Transportation District, the bus agency for Clatsop County, recently secured a state grant to study its options with Columbia County.

Those options could include expanding to oversee transit in Columbia County, contracting with that county or asking voters to create a separate transit district there.

The results of the study are expected early next year. Jeff Hazen, executive director of Sunset Empire since 2014, applied for the grant.

"They really struggle in Columbia County, because they are a county department," he said. "They don't have the tax base we do."

Columbia County Rider operates buses in the county and contracts with motor coach operator MTR Western to provide drivers. The study is looking at the operational specifics and tax rate needed to fund transit services in one or both counties, Hazen said. Changing tax rates or expanding a district would involve public votes, while contracting with Columbia County would require a competitive bidding process.

Sunset Empire sends two buses a day east on U.S. Highway 30 to Rainier and back. Columbia County Rider in turn provides buses to Portland and Longview, Washington.

"In Columbia County, funding can change year by year," said Michael Ray, transit director in Columbia County. "The advantage of being a district is your funding is dedicated to the district."

Sunset Empire has a permanent tax rate of 16.2 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value, along with timber tax revenue. The transit district receives about \$900,000 annually in property taxes, Hazen said.

Voters in Columbia County last year rejected a bond measure that would have created the Columbia County Rider Transportation District at a tax rate of 23 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value. The county also previously tried to pass a quarry depletion tax that would have aided transit.

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Sue Cody

Jeff Hazen has been the executive director of Sunset Empire Transit District since 2014.

## Hospital foundation gala supports emergency services

By R.J. MARX  
The Daily Astorian

SEASIDE — Innovation was the focus of Saturday's 20th annual Safeway Providence Festival of Trees at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center.

With a goal of raising \$175,000, donors at silent and live auctions tallied almost \$196,000.

The money will support programs at Providence Seaside Hospital.

"Our focus for tonight is to celebrate the last 20 years and look to the future and the need to grow and expand our services," said Kimberly Ward, executive director of the hospital's foundation. "This fund will allow us to focus on greater, more strategic projects. The first priority will be to help patients who use our emergency services."

Providence Seaside Hospital Foundation Chairman Gregg Freedman described it as "the most successful gala ever."

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Ornately decorated Christmas trees were on display over the weekend at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center during the annual Festival of Trees.

## 'A gift to each other'

Cannon Beach celebrates holiday season with annual lamplighting, holiday tea

By BRENNA VISSER  
The Daily Astorian

CANNON BEACH — During a notoriously busy time of year, Lori and Kathy Strombeck come to Cannon Beach as a way to start the holiday season in a more "peaceful and gentle" way.

"Coming here is a gift to each other — rather than buying fancy sweaters or something," Lori said.

The two sisters traveled from Corvallis and Eugene to attend the Cannon Beach Library Holiday Tea and lamplighting ceremony Saturday. Sitting by the library's fireplace with tea in one hand and homemade cookies in the other, Lori said they have been attending the town's holiday rituals for the past four years as way to start off a chaotic month of shopping and event planning.

"We like starting the season in a peaceful way. When the holidays start getting crazy and expensive, we go back to thinking about this day — the tea, the lamplighting, the music — and remember what Christmas is all about," Lori said.

The Strombecks were among hundreds who came Saturday to celebrate the 44th annual lamplighting ceremony in Sandpiper Square.

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## New Astoria school liaison provides family support

By EDWARD STRATTON  
The Daily Astorian

One thing Michael Olsen has noticed since joining the Astoria School District is how much teachers care about their students.

But they are often powerless to influence a child's life once he or she walks out of the classroom.

"That's a horrible feeling for a lot of these really caring teachers," he said.

As the district's new family and school liaison, Olsen reaches out to see what's going on with students who don't show up to school.

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"Just knowing what the conditions are at home helps inform how the teacher can approach the student in the school," he said.

A marriage and family therapist, Olsen came to Astoria a few years ago from Grants Pass, eventually setting up his own private practice. He recently heard about the new liaison position at the school district, funded by Measure

98. The state Legislature provided \$170 million over two years to enhance college and career-technical offerings, while cutting down on the state's dismal attendance and dropout rates.

Olsen operates out of an office at Astoria Middle School. He receives referrals from school counselors to contact families whose children aren't showing up for school or having other issues.

"A lot of times it's supporting parents," he said. "Parents are overwhelmed. I'm thinking of one family I'm working



Edward Stratton/The Daily Astorian

Michael Olsen is the new family and school liaison for the Astoria School District.

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