



Photos by Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Steve Smith prepares to drive a bus route within the Sunset Empire Transportation District.

## Bus provider looks toward a prosperous new year

### New infusion of cash on the way

By EDWARD STRATTON  
*The Daily Astorian*

Director Jeff Hazen has a fairly sizable list of New Year's resolutions for the Sunset Empire Transportation District — track buses online, pay fares electronically, add weekend service in Astoria and improve connections with Clatsop County's neighbors.

And with a huge infusion of money on the way starting next year from the state, the bus agency looks poised to reach many of its goals as it continues to recover from the financial disaster of several years ago.

First up for Hazen is taking a proposal before Sunset Empire's seven-member board of directors next month to add online bus tracking for passengers through an app called Swiftly.

Doug Pilant, general manager of the Tillamook County Transportation District, said the agency receives 90 percent fewer calls from customers wondering where the bus is.

"The technology collects and stores actual route times in a database," Pilant said. "We used the Swiftly technology to update our route schedules on a stop-by-stop basis in an effort to improve on-time performance."

Sunset Empire is looking at a program called TouchPass for electronic fares, taking the lead for the rural agencies in the Northwest Oregon Transit Alliance. The program is already in use by the Rogue Valley Transportation District.

"I would like that to be in place by the end of June, ideally, if I can pull it off," Hazen said.

Hazen joined Sunset Empire in 2014 after retiring from Costco, where he said the motto is to see how little a product can be sold for.



Monique Gaudry and Christian Chiappetta ride a Sunset Empire bus in Astoria.

**'I'M EXCITED ABOUT THE CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY OF THIS NEW FUNDING SOURCE.'**

Jeff Hazen | director of the Sunset Empire Transportation District

In that vein, Hazen said, he is trying to lower the fare cost — fares make up about 15 percent of the transit district's funding — and move people toward buying bus passes instead of individual tickets.

"Ideally, I'll do this in conjunction with the e-fares," he said. "People can buy passes at the transit center or through

an app, so bus drivers can focus on driving people." Buying passes on the bus "really slows down the movement of buses, especially around the first of the month."

The \$5.3 billion transportation package recently passed by the state Legislature included an estimated \$1 billion for public transit through a 0.1 percent payroll tax starting next year. The state's Legislative Revenue Office projected more than \$695,000 would be collected in the first six months of the new tax in Sunset Empire's district by 2019, when the money would be available.

The tax, known as the State Transportation Improvement Fund, is estimated to add about \$8 million over the next 10 years, a sizable bump to Sunset Empire's \$3.5 million annual budget.

"It has to be used for improvement of service," Hazen said of the state's cash infusion. "They want to see improvements in service to the riders."

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## Helping those in need

'We're blessed to be able to give'

By BRENNA VISSER  
*The Daily Astorian*

SEASIDE — When community members started trickling slowly in for Christmas dinner at the Seaside American Legion Post 99, they passed a table filled with knitted hats and fleece gloves.

"How much?" one person asked. "Are these for me?" another inquired.

Behind the table fielding the questions was Marilyn Falker, a longtime member of the American Legion Auxiliary service group. To fight dropping temperatures, fellow volunteers knitted a variety of hats for free. Earlier Saturday morning, she swung by a thrift store and bought the pile of gloves to accompany them.

**'REACHING OUT TO OTHER PEOPLE WHOSE STORY WE DON'T KNOW IS SO IMPORTANT.'**

Marilyn Falker | longtime member of the American Legion Auxiliary service group

"Take whatever makes you smile," she said.

Each year, the Legion hosts a Christmas dinner, where volunteers serve hot plates of turkey and potatoes, all free and open to anyone who walks through the doors.

While the primary focus of the Legion is to serve veterans, on days like this their goal is to help whoever needs it, events coordinator Bud Thompson said.

It's a goal the Legion keeps in mind throughout the year, even after the holiday lights are taken down and Christmas music recedes from the radio airwaves. Falker is a volunteer who has made the goal a lifestyle.

When she's not handing out hats and gloves, she's judiciously restocking and checking the charity box the Legion maintains for the homeless with items like toothpaste, deodorant and coupons. About four times a year, she crochets lap robes for veterans.

The auxiliary's goal is to work on overcoming the hurdle of how to let those in need know that these resources are available to them, she said.

"It's about choice, empowering people to take what they need," Falker said. "But we have a hard time knowing how many veterans are around who need this help."

Falker's passion for the Legion started about 20 years ago after her husband, an Army veteran, died suddenly. She went all over town to

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## New Warrenton Grade School vice principal helps kids in transition

### Entire family spends days at the school

By EDWARD STRATTON  
*The Daily Astorian*

Sean O'Malley, who recently relocated from Brookings to take the job of vice principal of Warrenton Grade School, was his own worst nightmare as an adolescent.

"A lot of people go into education because they really enjoyed school, and we tend



to gravitate toward what we love," he said. "I did not enjoy school, was not successful, especially in middle school."

But certain teachers took him under their wing, found outlets in theater for his energy and eventually inspired him to be an educator.

"I wanted to be that pos-

itive influence for some kids that were going through those hard times," he said.

A native of Vancouver, Washington, O'Malley graduated from Hudson's Bay High School before earning a bachelor's degree in advertising at

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Edward Stratton/The Daily Astorian

The entire O'Malley family attends Warrenton Grade School, including, from left, first-grader Emmett, Vice Principal Sean, Educational Assistant Tessa and preschooler Nora.