

Fires: Tip line is 800-452-7888

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Fire Investigation Team, the Clatsop County District Attorney's Office and a representative from the Oregon State Fire Marshal's Office have been investigating. Officials have not announced suspects in the case and have declined to specify whether they have any leads.

Prior to this week, two houses sustained burn marks to the left of the front doors. One also had damage on the side after someone apparently tried to use an accelerator to light a gas meter, while the other was burned on two separate occasions.

The most recent incidents took place about 2:30 a.m. Tuesday and Wednesday. The Tuesday fire erupted inside a detached garage outside a home occupied by two adults and their two young children.

Matt Pierce, 37, was alerted by a neighbor before he hurried outside, turned a garden hose and fire extinguisher on the flames and called 911. By the time firefighters arrived, the blaze was almost completely contained. He and the rest of the family were unharmed.

"I'll never complain about having a detached garage again," he said. "It's been a hell of a couple days."

Because the door didn't work — and they were unconcerned about the motorcycle being stolen on the quiet street — the Pierces had left the garage open for years. Despite that and the timing, authorities told the family it's highly unlikely the fire was started on purpose. It began near a battery toward the rear wall and moved forward, and tampering with the battery to achieve that precise result is highly complicated.

"We are confident that that is not related to the others," Astoria Fire Chief Ted Ames said.

But several residents say the coincidence remains impossible to ignore.

"They were frustrated last night," Pierce said of the investigators. "They had a



Jack Heffernan/The Daily Astorian

More than 75 residents attended a town meeting Wednesday night on the Uppertown fires.

clear pattern with the scorches on the front of the houses, and the vehicle fires don't fit that pattern. As soon as the vehicles started getting destroyed, that's a clear escalation. They can't rule out arson, really, but they couldn't prove it was arson either."

While it's hard to disconnect the fire from other incidents in the area, Pierce said he trusts the official judgments.

"Of course we're all going to jump to conclusions because we're not trained on this. That's our job," said Pierce, a teacher at Astoria High School along with his wife, Rebecca.

A weary Pierce could not rest the following night either. He was sleeping on his couch as two neighbors across the street slept on hammocks in their front yard.

"I heard a 'woof,' like a gas grill lighting or a gas stove," Pierce said.

Yelling "fire!" as he exited his home, he grabbed a fire extinguisher and rushed up the street with the two men from across the street.

At some point during the commotion, Erik Burgher heard pounding at his door. He was asleep in his home near the corner of Harrison Avenue and 38th Street.

"My first thought is, 'Why are you knocking on my door?'" Burgher said. "I'm not happy."

When Burgher went outside, he saw flames tower-

ing above his red Ford F-150. When the fire was extinguished, the engine of the truck had melted and the cab was scorched.

"There is no natural cause for that one to occur. None whatsoever," Ames said. "If I was a betting man, which I don't like to do, I would say it was probably intentionally set."

A house farther west on Harrison Avenue from the scene had similar marks as the two other houses. Those burns likely were created the same night as well, a neighbor pointed out.

Burgher, a 49-year-old recreation specialist for the state Department of Forestry, joked about the improbability of this happening in Astoria, adding he was thankful no one has been hurt.

"It's usually pretty quiet at night and we're just living our lives," Burgher said. "You know, this is Astoria. Everybody's supposed to just be getting drunk or stoned."

Town meeting

Unnerved by the fires, more than 75 residents gathered inside Alderbrook Hall for a town meeting Wednesday night with city officials. Officers, some of whom will work overtime until the string of fires ends, guarded the neighborhood during the meeting.

"This is a situation that, believe it or not, is as scary

for me as it is for all of you," Ames told the crowd.

Interim Police Chief Geoff Spalding discussed ways to protect homes — buying items such as smoke detectors, security cameras, motion sensor lights and fire extinguishers. He also announced a tip line — 800-452-7888 — and a website for neighbors to connect and form a neighborhood watch — nextdoor.com.

Due to the commotion and concern, many residents have lost sleep. The Pierces even brought their two young children to a day care so they could take naps throughout the day.

Numerous residents Wednesday were either researching or about to purchase some of the items Spalding listed. Burgher said he would keep his shotgun nearby as he slept.

Goonies house

Neighbors have become accustomed to cars driving slowly on their street, but it typically involves people trying to find the Goonies house just up the road. Some took the opportunity at the meeting to make those long-held frustrations known as well.

"Maybe this is the time for us to step up and stop this insanity," one neighbor said.

The man said he encountered a man Wednesday morning who appeared to be homeless, wearing a backpack and surveying peoples' backyards. When he approached him, the man inquired about how to find the Goonies house.

"If I see a guy with a backpack trying to look into people's backyards, I'd doubt that they were looking for the Goonies house," Spalding advised the crowd.

Some detailed the fears their children have been experiencing and how they've been explaining the situation to them. One person asked, since no major damage has been sustained at a house, whether someone was attempting to physically harm them.

"Not so far," said Ames, knocking on a wooden mantle.



Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

Sea lions have taken over the docks at Astoria's East Mooring Basin.

Sea lions: NOAA study will inform future management decisions

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Upward of 1,000 pinnipeds were recorded in a single daily count at the mooring basin in 2015. While fewer sea lions returned this spring, plenty showed up in the fall and many have stuck around through the winter instead of leaving like they have in the past, said Janice Burk, marina manager.

The Port plans to install more low railing fabricated by students from Knappa along the docks in the spring. It has proved to be the one deterrent that seems to work. Sometimes.

"When there's large numbers of the animals out there, they kind of wiggle their way wherever," Burk said.

Farther up the Columbia River, controversial management decisions have sought to curb sea lions hunting for salmon below Bonneville Dam. Oregon and Washington state fish and wildlife officials are authorized to kill problem sea lions to protect endangered species of salmon and steelhead at the dam and Congress is considering broadening that authority to the Willamette River and its tributaries.

So someone's take on whether a robust sea lion population is a good thing or a bad thing "depends on where you sit," said Chris Yates, assistant regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries.

The NOAA study will provide a baseline for understanding the population and will inform future management decisions, he said.

The future

Researchers believe the sea lion population may have stopped growing. In recent years, it has actually declined slightly.

California sea lions are sensitive to environmental changes and the population

experiences "abrupt, significant declines" in years associated with El Nino events, the study noted. There have also been declines in 2009, 2010, 2013 and 2014. Warmer ocean conditions can dramatically affect the food chain and can be difficult for sea lions to weather.

The study's authors predict that if sea surface temperatures off the West Coast increase by 1 degree Celsius, it could halt the growth of the sea lion population. An increase to 2 degrees Celsius would lead to a 7 percent decline.

The sea lion population dropped between 2013 and 2014. It had reached a high in 2012 at around 306,220 animals. By 2014, that number dipped to just over 250,000.

Beginning in 2012, ocean conditions were particularly unfriendly for sea lions. A marine heat wave referred to as "the Blob" persisted off the West Coast and combined with an El Nino climate pattern. Thousands of malnourished sea lion pups stranded on beaches in Southern California.

"This is not just a story about continued growth of the population," said Robert DeLong, a co-author of the study and leader of California Current Ecosystems program at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center. "These last several years have brought new environmental stresses to the California current, and we've seen that reflected by the sea lions."

Ocean temperatures are expected to shift back toward normal, or even colder levels than normal this year, said Nate Mantua, a climatologist with NOAA's Southwest Fisheries Science Center. "But we'll have to wait and see."

Because, he added, very little in the climate has been doing the expected for the last three years.

Academy: Enrollment must increase to be more sustainable

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Four years after the closure of Cannon Beach Elementary School because of cost concerns and tsunami danger, the new school is battling an information gap and looking to evolve from community startup into a community staple.

"I think we were so focused on getting the doors open, we just assumed people knew who we were," Moore said. "Now we want to push forward with the message we are tuition-free public school, that you don't have to live in Cannon Beach to attend, and that we have small class sizes."

Traditionally, charter schools offer a choice in curriculum or program focus that a school district isn't already providing. Many have specialties, like the arts or sciences, or are driven by the desire to seek independence from a centrally-run school system.

But part of the confusion with Cannon Beach Academy is the fact it was not intended to be a charter school at the beginning, said board member Phil Simmons. The primary mission of the original task force was to keep a traditional public school in Cannon Beach.

"This started a year and a half before the school closed. Our focus at that point was to get a school district school in town. The only problem was that the school was in this bad location," Simmons said. "We wanted to keep the school and just move it. People would propose a charter school to me as an alternative, and I can tell you personally had no idea what a charter school was. I just knew we had a good school in Cannon Beach and wanted to keep it."

It was only after the final door was closed that Simmons started researching charter schools. His research dispelled his negative connotations when he realized char-



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Dawn Jay, right, teaches a small group of students at the Cannon Beach Academy.

ter schools are still tuition-free public schools, part of a school district.

"I can understand why there is some confusion, because I was similarly without knowledge," he said.

'Community-supported place'

Due to state requirements, the academy chose to offer a different curriculum and a bilingual element to differentiate from other schools in the school district. They chose Spanish as a way to build upon the number of native Spanish speakers who already live within the town, Simmons said.

Out of 22 students, seven come from Spanish-speaking families, according to Moore. Of those, six qualify for English language learner services, which is 27 percent of the student body. By comparison, 9 percent of students at Gearhart Elementary School and 22 percent at Seaside Heights Elementary School qualify for the help.

While parents have noted that the small class sizes and bilingual aspects add value,

the common motivating factor for many is still proximity.

Alberto Rodriguez, a parent of a kindergartner, works at the Ocean Lodge and Wayfarer hotels in town and is from one of the seven Spanish-speaking families the school serves. While he appreciated Spanish being incorporated, being close to his daughter is what drove his decision.

"I like it because my job is here," Rodriguez said. "It's easier to be around and involved."

For Colin Woody, a parent of a first-grader at the academy, having the school close to his work at the restaurant Castaways enables him to be more involved with his child's education.

"I think this school has had to go through so many hoops that it hasn't had a chance to define itself," Woody said. "But I see it as a positive place. A community-supported place."

Moore said the same reasons that make the charter school different from others are also crucial to success.

"Why we're here is why we're here. Choice is a part

of our mission, but this school is here because we wanted to bring community back to Cannon Beach," Moore said. "The essence of identity is tied to knowing our importance in the community while also providing choice to those who may not live in Cannon Beach."

'Information gap'

With the doors open, the academy now has access to grant money to help promote the school in a way that wasn't possible before, Moore said. In the past three months, the academy has invested in a new website, marketing campaign and a billboard to get the word out.

Enrollment must increase to be more sustainable, and Moore would like to see 50 students by next school year, she said.

"Our biggest barrier for this year I think was people being nervous about whether or not we will open and stay open," she said. "But we're looking to fix that information gap, and I think between demonstrating our academics is sound and educating why we are here, we will grow."

Program: Support dramatically improves academic performance

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mother, Sondra, but said he plans to use Upward Bound's tutoring services to help stay on top of his classes.

"I definitely want to go to an Ivy League school, because those are the best for law," he said. "But the great thing about this is it will show all of the different state schools here and community schools, which will help me with my undergraduate."

Aside from music, Annat has interest in newspaper editing and engineering, but said she isn't quite sure what direction she'll go.

"I think it will help me find out what other possibilities there are, different colleges I can possibly go to," she said of Upward Bound.

The additional support dramatically improves academic performance. Upward Bound students averaged a 98 percent high school graduation rate between 2013 and last year, compared to 75 percent or less overall at Astoria, Warrenton and Seaside. Nearly 80 percent of high school graduates in Upward Bound last year started college the fall after graduat-

ing, compared to 61 percent of Clatsop County graduates overall.

Jon Graves directs the federal TRIO outreach and student support programs for the college, including Upward Bound and a less-intensive variant called Talent Search, which serves 671 middle and high school students in the county each year.

Besides the academic success, he said, Upward Bound intermingles high schoolers from around the county. "It really breaks down the barriers in Clatsop County," he said.

New participants have two months to decide if they can meet all the program's requirements before the college begins tracking their academic progress over the next seven to 10 years, Graves said.

"We do track how many Talent Search and Upward Bound students graduate with either an associate degree or a bachelor's degree within six years of starting college," he said. "Currently, 41 percent of the Talent Search and Upward Bound students are graduating college within six years."