

Health: County hopes to issue proposal requests by end of February

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New contracts in July

Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, a private non-profit, is the county's long-term mental health contractor. The agency expanded over the years to also provide the county with addiction treatment and care for people with developmental disabilities. The contracts expire in June.

The county hopes to issue requests for proposals by the end of February and close the bidding by the end of March. After the bids are scored, county commissioners would review the proposals and award new contracts effective in July.

"CBH is welcome to, of course, apply, and encouraged to apply," Steele told county commissioners. But she said "it's good to make sure that we aren't being stagnant and just letting somebody assume that they will always receive a contract renewal."

The county — the local mental health authority — will likely demand timely access to information about staff and operational matters as a condition of the new contracts.

"My vision is to make sure that we won't have the same situation happening now, where we don't have any information whatsoever, and it's really hard to

get anything out of them," said Michael McNickle, the county's public health director, who has oversight responsibility. "I want it to be, when we first start, the expectation is going to be that I'm a partner in this from the very get-go."

The partnership behind the crisis respite center — the county, Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc., Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria and Providence Seaside Hospital — will also likely put the contract to operate the respite center up for bid, Steele said. Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare has operated the respite center since it opened in 2016.

Several county com-

missioners are alarmed by the mental health agency's secretive approach given the history of management dysfunction and the life-and-death nature of crisis intervention.

Baker arrived in 2016 after three top administrators left and the agency was hobbled by staff defections and legal disputes. Many in the county believe Baker has made progress, although the agency still struggles with high turnover and administrative challenges.

"Am I the only person who sees an elephant in this room?" Commissioner Pamela Wev said of learning about Baker's leave from The Daily Astorian,

rather than county staff.

Unsettling

The mental health agency's board sent an email to staff last week acknowledging that recent events have been unsettling.

The board said Baker was on administrative leave pending an investigation.

"The board has not assumed any wrongdoing because of this and nor should you," according to the email. "It is our duty as your board to assure the investigation occurs as thoroughly and quickly as possible and it would be inappropriate for any of us to comment further at this time."

The agency's board also defended the decision to name Ben Paz, the crisis services manager, as interim executive director. Several staffers on the agency's leadership team had signed a letter to the board with concerns about Paz's appointment, support for Baker, and questions about the process the board followed in placing Baker on leave, a source familiar with the letter explained.

"Our hope is you will keep your focus on what's most important right now, our clients and providing excellent services," the agency's board told staff.

Abuse: 'Mr. Hagnas, you are a wolf in sheep's clothing'

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Hagnas' access to children — largely due to his likability and occupations, and despite a 1986 sex abuse conviction — was a common theme Wednesday.

The victims' families and others said Hagnas tried to groom their children. Some of the tactics included obtaining the cell-phone numbers of children and attempting to spend time alone with them.

"Mr. Hagnas, you are a wolf in sheep's clothing," the mother of the victim from the 1990s said. "You manipulated your way into people's lives for the sole purpose of molesting their children."

The first crimes were reported in 2005, but investigators at the time did not find enough evidence, beyond hearsay, to pursue charges. But 10 years later, an unusual encounter would eventually strengthen the case.

When Hagnas visited the family of the two more recent victims, the girls typically would rush to greet him. One time, though, one of the girls darted toward her room, raising the suspicion of her grandmother, Deputy District Attorney Dawn Buzzard said. The girl eventually reported the abuse to her grandmother.

With the additional allegations, investigators conducted more interviews and arrested Hagnas in 2017.

In the two decades since the first incidents, the victim developed a drug addiction as she coped with the trauma, her mother said. She described her daughter's struggle with normal physical contact.

"You make me uncomfortable and scared around guys," the victim wrote in a statement read in court. "I don't want you to hurt anyone else like you've hurt me."

Buzzard said Hagnas has repeatedly denied committing the crimes, claiming that family members may be responsible and that the girls forced themselves on him.

"For once in your life, Mr. Hagnas, tell the truth. These girls deserve it," the mother of the first victim said.

Later in the hearing, Circuit Court Judge Cindee Matyas asked Hagnas if he wished to make a statement.

"Not a word, your honor," Hagnas said.

Matyas said the girls were brave to report the abuse by a family friend.

"In my generation, there was a lot of abuse going on, but we weren't sure about what to call it," Matyas said. "We've thought we've evolved and can recognize that special kind of suffering, but I think we've got a long way to go."

The grandmother of one of the children Hagnas allegedly tried to form a relationship with said he probably thought he "pulled the wool over" her eyes.

"I had a long time to not say things because I knew he would be arrested," the grandmother said. "You may be able to fool some of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time. Many people have been affected for a lifetime because of your cunning ways."



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Markers on a map at Gearhart City Hall indicate the location of vacation rental properties.

Airbnb: Homeowners could unknowingly be breaking Gearhart's ordinance

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Brewer, the city's finance director, said after sending a series of emails, Airbnb responded and agreed to start collecting local taxes in October.

Writing an ordinance that aligns with state law does make the process smoother, Johnson said, but she feels it is ultimately Airbnb's responsibility to reach out to local governments — not the other way around.

"If you're going to take rental money from the community, you have to pay taxes due in that community. You are required by law to file," Johnson said. "(Airbnb) needs to reach out to those cities and make sure they are complying with local tax laws like any other company."

Part of what makes the situation difficult is that many of the taxing districts affected are smaller and can't leverage pressure like a large city or county might. The biggest taxing districts in Oregon, like Portland and Washington County, have voluntary agreements with Airbnb and are already receiving money, Johnson said.

"Short of lawsuit, how do (smaller cities) enforce?" Johnson said. "(They) can't afford to go toe-to-toe with Airbnb in court."

Local impact

With only about 80

rentals in Gearhart, and only some using Airbnb, Sweet expects the amount of taxes the city would get from the platform would be relatively small.

The lack of reporting, however, interferes with the section of Gearhart's short-term rental ordinance that requires a permit holder to prove they are actively using their home as a rental. They do that by showing they've paid lodging taxes.

But if Airbnb is not collecting and paying the taxes to the city, like some would assume under the new law, homeowners could unknowingly be breaking the city's ordinance.

"If you're relying on (a) third party, you expect they are following all the rules," said Peter Watts, the city's attorney. "People not getting taxes paid might be completely unaware."

Even if Airbnb did start paying the city directly, it would be in a lump sum, making it difficult for the city to cross-reference to see who paid their taxes and who didn't. The city is facing similar difficulties with VRBO, which does collect and pay the tax, but doesn't provide homeowner information.

Because these companies will not reveal where the taxes are coming from, the city warned permit holders in a letter that even if companies are collect-

ing the taxes they could still be in violation of the city's code.

"Unfortunately, the lack of reporting has put you, and other short-term rental owners, out of compliance with the city's code," according to the letter. "The city understands that this is likely being done without your knowledge and is interested in coming up with a solution that allows us to ensure that all taxes are being collected and paid."

In the short term, the city is looking for ways to independently get the information from homeowners and cross-reference themselves — an exercise that creates extra work for both the city and residents.

"This disproportionately affects small cities," Watts said.

To avoid any compliance issues, Fullerton provides a schedule to the city of when rooms were rented and through which booking site, and then lists whether he or another agency has paid the lodging tax.

"It's just extra work. We'd always have to reconcile, but if Airbnb was doing this properly, we wouldn't be sending (the city) a check," Fullerton said. "The ideal solution would be for (the platform) to collect and remit the right amount, and provide the city with a level of detail."

Chair: Functionality was an immediate priority for the new board

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people who care a lot about the citizens of our county," Nebeker said.

Former Warrenton Mayor Mark Kujala was sworn in to replace Lee in District 1, and Pamela Wev succeeded former Commissioner Lisa Clement in District 3. Thompson, who was re-elected in November, took her second oath of office in District 5.

"We collaborate with our colleagues to define and accomplish the work of our collective body, the board. We act to further our work by our liaison assignments. That much, I think, we can agree on," Thompson said in a statement she read at the meeting. "After that, we have differences. How we resolve those differences arising as our intentions are translated into words and actions determines our effectiveness and results."

Functionality was an immediate priority for the new board after two rocky years. Commissioners plan to meet in the coming weeks to discuss board rules and potentially make changes.

"As we revisit our rules, I have some ideas that I think may improve our meetings, so that's my first thought," Nebeker said.

Another new face at the meeting served as a visible example of her thinking.

Nebeker asked Larry Taylor to take notes as a voluntary parliamentarian, an expert on board rules and procedures. Taylor sat behind a table near the dais and next to County Clerk Theresa Dursse.

One of Nebeker's ideas is to enter into a contract with Taylor to help streamline meetings and ensure that commissioners are following board rules and Robert's Rules of Order, a set of guidelines for public meetings widely used in the U.S.

The board rules, adopted in 2014, require that meetings adhere to Robert's Rules unless they conflict with previously stated mandates. The rules also give the chair the power to appoint a parliamentarian.

"I just thought it would

be good if he could face the board so that if anyone had a question to ask about procedure or had a point of order, they could ask him," Nebeker said. "We have, in the past, run our meetings, I think, quite casually. But it worked, and we may agree that we want to continue to do that. But our county counsel is not a parliamentarian, and we all look to her for that advice. But I just thought, let's give this a try."

In an email forwarded to commissioners Wednesday morning, County Counsel Heather Reynolds said she had "grave concerns" about the idea.

"A parliamentarian usually serves a large legislative body, and the board of county commissioners acts both in a legislative and quasi-judicial capacity," Reynolds wrote. "The chair runs the meeting (and) determines the order of the board business under the rules of the board per chapter 3, section 4 of the (Clatsop County) Charter."

Both Reynolds, in the email, and Thompson, at the meeting, also raised concerns about an appearance of partisanship. The county charter mandates that all county offices be nonpartisan.

Taylor, a longtime Democratic activist who ran for Astoria mayor in 2014, served last year as chairman of the Clatsop County Democratic Central Committee.

"I'm eager to keep a bright, clear line between any affiliation and the operation of this nonpartisan board," Thompson said. "Anybody who thinks Larry Taylor isn't still active in the Democratic Party locally and at the state level just isn't paying attention."

During the discussion, Sullivan offered support for Nebeker's idea.

"I have no problem with working towards better understanding of Robert's Rules of Order. I think that they can be very helpful in a meeting," Sullivan said. "I also know that Mr. Taylor has recently been certified as a parliamentarian, which is not an easy task, and not many people have that level of skill."

Elk: Oregon Solutions often plays the role of mediator

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But working with Oregon Solutions, based out of Portland State University's National Policy Consensus Center, may be one way for diverse groups to develop a cohesive management plan.

The organization met with Warrenton Mayor Henry Balensifer and Gearhart Mayor Matt Brown, law enforcement, state fish and wildlife employees and other stakeholders to discuss the growing number of elk in and around the two cities.

Karmen Fore, the director of Oregon Solutions, and her team plan to talk with more stakeholders and determine whether tackling the elk issue should become one of the organization's projects. The organization could also ask Gov. Kate Brown's office to officially designate the work an Ore-

gon Solutions project, opening up potential state funds.

Oregon Solutions often plays the role of mediator, but also enters the scene when communities are struggling to determine oversight and responsibility of an issue.

One example is the group's involvement after flooding in Vernonia in 2007 destroyed the town's middle school and high school. Rebuilding the schools was vital to the town's survival, but was too much for a single group — or someone like a school principal — to coordinate.

Warrenton and Gearhart leaders told Fore and Michael Mills, program outreach manager with Oregon Solutions, that the elk herds pose public safety risks and damage private property. Last month, an elk clambered over the hood of a Toyota Prius that had stopped to let a herd cross state

Highway 104. The elk slipped and smashed into the windshield.

Neither Mayor Brown nor Mayor Balensifer believe they would find widespread community support for culling the herds. But Balensifer said Warrenton is interested in discussing a variety of options, including controlled hunting.

Brown noted Gearhart is still interested in looking at the possibility of relocating animals, even though state wildlife officials have said this would not be possible.

Most elk-appropriate habitat in Oregon already has plenty of elk. Some of the animals even came originally from Clatsop Plains stock, noted Chris Knutson, northwest watershed manager for the Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Transporting elk is no longer considered biologically or

socially responsible, Biederbeck added. There is always the chance of transferring disease along with the animals.

John Putnam, northwest director for the Oregon Hunters Association, said it is important to explore all solutions.

Human behavior — feeding the elk, stopping to take pictures of them — has helped to create the problem, habituating the animals to the presence of people. "But we need to keep all options on the table," he said.

It is unlikely the elk will ever be gone for good, no matter what solutions communities may attempt. But on a scale from zero to a million elk, stakeholders still do not know what their communities are willing to tolerate.

"We don't even really know, from a public perspective, what an acceptable number is," Knutson said.