IN BRIEF

Properties annexed in south Seaside

SEASIDE — Residents of 45 properties on the south end of town are now official residents of Seaside.

The third and final reading of an ordinance annexing property on the east and west sides of U.S. Highway 101 was unanimously adopted by the City Council on Monday night. The annexation plan covers parcels on Avenue U to Avenue S, about two-thirds of those on the east side of Highway 101.

"We all have to work together to get these things done and this is a big step forward," Mayor Jay Barber said. "The annexation of south Seaside is something we've all been passionate about because that is the welcoming corridor into our community."

A separate ordinance exemption allowing the existing Trucke's RV Park to operate as it has before annexation also received a unanimous adoption.

Driving the adoption of the annexation ordinance was the city's longtime goal to eliminate "checkerboard zoning," where neighboring parcels are served by different governments.

Residents now under Clatsop County jurisdiction would see an increase of about $1.80 per thousand of their home's assessed value.

— The Astorian

Pacific, Wahkiakum counties part of emergency proclamation

OLYMPIA, Wash. — Pacific and Wahkiakum are among 25 Washington counties included in Gov. Jay Inslee's emergency proclamation due to flooding and winter weather.

The proclamation provides for a heightened state response to damage sustained from a series of storms that started around Jan. 20 and caused flooding, landslides and other problems. As of last week, the damage total was estimated at more than $3 million.

"The effects of this severe winter storm event continue to impact the life, health and property of individuals in this state, as well as the property and infrastructure of Washington state, and is a public disaster that affects the life, health, property or the public peace," Inslee said in the proclamation.

State Route 4 partially reopens while slide cleanup continues

SKAMOKAWA, Wash. — A single lane of State Route 4 west of Skamokawa reopened over the weekend after a landslide closed the highway Jan. 23.

Traffic will alternate through the area via the eastbound lane. The westbound lane will remain closed while contractor crews working for the Washington State Department of Transportation continue work to remove approximately 50,000 cubic yards of debris and stabilize the hillside.

"A long-term fix could take months," said Joanna Lowrey, a project engineer for the department. "We know this is a vital stretch of road for many folks and we would like to thank travelers for their patience as we continue work to reopen all lanes of the highway."

— Chinook Observer

DEATHS

Feb. 11, 2020

HARGER, David, 56, of Warrenton, died in Astoria. Hughes-Ransom Mortuary is in charge of the arrangements.

Feb. 9, 2020

KELLEY, Patrick Martin, 77, of Warrenton, died in Warrenton. Ocean View Funeral & Cremation Service of Astoria is in charge of the arrangements.

ON THE RECORD

Strangulation

• Ryan James Dehamer, 23, of Seaside, was indicted Wednesday for strangulation, coercion and menacing.

Theft

• Jeremy Wayne Martin, 28, was indicted Wednesday for computer crime, identity theft and theft in the second degree.

• Michael Travis Johnson, 31, of Lacey, Washington, was indicted Wednesday for theft in the first degree.

DUII

• Quinn Foster Burke-Anderson, 31, of Carlsbad, New Mexico, was arrested Saturday near Grand Avenue for driving under the influence of intoxicants, reckless driving and criminal mischief in the second degree.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

THURSDAY

Seaside Civic and Convention Center Commission, 5 p.m., Convention Center, 415 First Ave.

Gearhart Planning Commission, 6 p.m., City Hall, 698 Pacific Way.

Warrenton Planning Commission, 6 p.m., City Hall, 225 S. Main Ave.

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Cannon Beach fire district seeks tax levy

Voters will decide in May election

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

Colin Murphey/The Astorian

Voters will be asked to approve a tax levy for the Cannon Beach fire district.

CANNON BEACH — The Cannon Beach Rural Fire Protection District board has decided to ask voters to approve a new tax levy in May.

The fire district, which serves Cannon Beach, Arch Cape, Cove Beach and Falcon Cove, had nearly 440 calls last year — a record number that has steadily increased over the years. With greater demand, the fire district has struggled to find ways to sustain operations.

The fire district has one of the lowest permanent tax rates in the county at 35 cents per $1,000 of assessed value. The permanent tax rate is set when a district is established, which leaves fire districts dependent on voters to approve levies and bonds for more funding.

Voters have approved a five-year levy to support the fire chief's position for 19 cents per $1,000 of assessed value and a five-year bond for a ladder truck at 9 cents per $1,000 assessed value. If voters approve the new levy, total funding will increase from 63 cents per $1,000 of assessed value to 98 cents.

"The last thing I want to do is burden the citizens with more taxes, but in order to continue … to provide the services the community expects, this is what we have to do," Fire Chief Marc Reckmann said.

The additional revenue will be used to hire a second commanding officer and replace equipment while developing a replacement cycle to reduce maintenance costs.

"It's really about maintaining the services that we have, but also enhancing them," Reckmann said.

Fire districts and fire departments throughout Clatsop County have experienced dwindling numbers of volunteer firefighters, which has led to the need to hire personnel to supplement volunteers and run day-to-day operations.

Without a second commanding officer, the chief is on call at all times, which has contributed to the turnover of fire chiefs in Cannon Beach.

The fire board's president, Garry Smith, said the primary goal for the levy is to fund a position for a second officer so there is always a commanding officer available, especially for rescues.

"Without the levy we can't do that and it puts our chief in jeopardy of trying to do his job and perform the services we need to perform for the community and the district," Smith said.

Between September 2018 through last August, 77% of calls were for people who do not live in the fire district's boundaries.

About 62% of the district's calls are described as rescue and emergency medical calls. Reckmann said the majority of rescue calls have involved tourists visiting the coast for day trips.

Smith said the fire board would ideally like to find a sustainable stream of funding collected from tourists since they make up the majority of calls.

The fire board is having conversations with Cannon Beach about a potential food and beverage tax, part of which could help fund the fire district. Currently, the fire district does not recieve funding from the city.

"The board of directors has been very, very, very cautious about going to the voters to ask them for money for personnel, but we're at a point where we really don't have any choice. If we're going to maintain the fire service to this area that people expect, we're running out of money to do it and we need their support to keep it going," Smith said.

"It's a problem that's developing that if we don't find some solution for it, the fire service in these small communities is going to either go away or it's going to have to consolidate into one large organization," he said.

Forestry department needs emergency infusion

By TED SICKINGER
The Oregonian

Scott Stoddard/The Daily Courier

Firefighters and others watch smoke from a fire near Grants Pass in 2018.

Seven months into the state's two-year budget cycle, officials at the Oregon Department of Forestry say they've blown through most of the budget that lawmakers approved for the entire biennium and are asking lawmakers for an emergency cash infusion.

A large infusion — from $52 million to $132 million — otherwise, agency officials say, they'll have exhausted their budget by March.

It's a Band-Aid fix for a structural problem, and it comes as lawmakers and the governor are looking to expand the agency even further. They're sponsoring bills that would bolster the agency's firefighting capabilities and forest restoration work — above and beyond the immediate budget requests. And such plans are coming without any cohesive strategy to make sure the agency is on firm financial footing and has the resources and managerial wherewithal to do its job.

In the near term, agency leaders are looking for a minimum of $52 million and as much as $132 million, money they say is needed to keep the doors open and keep regular programs running; to pay a consultant hired to help them get their financial house in order; and to cover firefighting costs in the upcoming fire season.

The wide range of the request reflects the variability of the agency's firefighting costs. The bare minimum is a forecast of $20 million for 2020, with a high end $92 million. Fire costs have exceeded that in the past, however, and have averaged $70 million annually since 2013.

"This is new ground for us," said Joy Krawczyk, a spokeswoman for the agency. "We haven't put in a request like this in the past, especially in a short session, so we haven't really heard how that's going to move."

State Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, and co-chair of Way and Means Committee, said the committee had yet to discuss the agency's budget requests in any meaningful way.

"We're just reacting to the plethora of requests coming in," she said. "There are certain things we're going to have to do for forestry or else it's going to go broke … We're going to have to do it quickly."

The agency's problems come as no surprise. It has been bumping along at the edge of financial abyss for months due to delays in invoicing and collecting reimbursements for firefighting costs, primarily from the federal government. The agency has $103 million in outstanding receivables, $17 million of which date back to 2015. Of the $103 million, the agency still needs to invoice more than half.

Fire borrowing

To plug its resulting cash flow problem, agency leaders have looked for help on a variety of fronts. They borrowed money from Treasury, had the Department of Administrative Services cover its payroll, and tapped internal reserves that mostly belong to the agency's state forest program. The agency paid off its payroll borrowing in January, and says it plans to pay off its $25 million line of credit with Treasury in April.

Meanwhile, it has been clearcutting heavily on state forests to keep cash coming in the door.

The overall problem is called fire borrowing, and was a big one for the U.S. Forest Service until Congress gave it access to disaster funding to cover its large fire costs. Oregon's forestry department insists it needs a similar, permanent solution. In an era of consistently large fire seasons, agency leaders say it no longer has the financial capacity to float those costs and pay its vendors while waiting for reimbursement from federal authorities. In the meantime, the diversion of money from other programs is undermining work in those areas.

State Forester Peter Daugherty told legislators in a recent letter that the agency was making a number of process improvements and staffing changes to speed up its invoicing and had implemented agencywide cost containment to conserve cash. "However," he wrote, "the much larger problem is the way wildland firefighting is funded that cannot be solved through operational adjustments or process improvements."

In the absence of a more permanent fix, Daugherty has come hat in hand to the Ways and Means Committee, which is already demanding monthly reports from him detailing the agency's financial condition. Daugherty is also on a performance improvement plan from the Board of Forestry, which was caught off guard by the extent of the agency's financial crisis last year.

The agency's emergency budget request comes as Gov. Kate Brown and other legislators are seeking additional sums of money to beef up the agency's firefighting capacity. Brown wants to add another 68 positions at a cost of some $20 million a year. Another forestry modernization bill sponsored by Senate Minority Leader Herman Baertschiger, R-Grants Pass, has proposed adding 50 new fire positions and modernizing the department's aviation fleet at an unspecified cost.

First bite

Brown also wants to vastly expand the number of forest acres treated each year through thinning and prescribed burns to increase forest resilience to wildfire. A wildfire council she empaneled last year is recommending the state treat 300,000 acres annually for the next 20 years. That's a huge boost that comes with a $200 million annual price tag, though the state would seek matching dollars for forest treatment on federal lands.

This year, the governor is hoping for some $25 million as a first bite in tackling the much larger problem. "I expect at least a one-to-one match from our federal partners for any money that Oregon invests," Brown told members of the Senate Committee on Wildfire Reduction and Recovery at a hearing last week. She met with those federal partners Sunday in Washington, D.C.

It's unclear where Oregon plans to raise all this money, however, or how much of it will happen in the short session. Critics have expressed concern about writing new checks and expanding an agency that's finances have been botched in recent years, though the agency's actual firefighting program is well-regarded.

The Department of Administrative Services has entered a $700,000 contract with a CPA firm, Macias, Gini and O'Connell, to assess the forestry department's fire finance operation and recommend improvements. That process won't be done in time for the current session.

Brown's legislation also includes a funding study to determine how the state could fund her proposed treatment program and how other states fund their annual fire costs.