

IN BRIEF

Gearhart looks to November for fire bond

GEARHART — After missing the deadline to get a bond measure for a new fire station on the ballot in May, Gearhart is looking toward a vote in November.

“My hope is that we can get a fire station bond some-time on the ballot this year,” Mayor Matt Brown said.

Through surveys, the city determined about three-quarters of residents showed support for a new firehouse site to replace the building at 670 Pacific Way. The building was constructed in 1958 and is considered vulnerable in a Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake and tsunami.

More than half of survey respondents showed support for a new firehouse site at 1376 N. Marion, known as the “High Point” site.

Hazardous waste collection day scheduled for Saturday

The next collection day at Clatsop County’s house-hold hazardous waste facility is Saturday.

The collection center, located at 1789 Williamsport Road in Astoria, will be open from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. The facility is designed to receive and handle toxic, flamma-ble and otherwise hazardous products, including clean-ers, paint, batteries and pesticides. There is no cost to drop off waste.

The facility will also accept used diabetic needles on Saturday. The needles must be contained in 1-gal-lon sharps containers. Loose and uncontained needles will not be accepted.

Visit the county’s website for a complete list of mate-rials the facility will accept.

Astoria a finalist for Trail Blazers grant

The Astoria Parks and Recreation Department is a finalist with Sandy and St. Helens for a new all-abilities play structure at Violet LaPlante Park funded by Moda Health’s Moda Assist Program.

Moda Health and the Portland Trail Blazers each donate \$10 to the Trail Blazers Foundation for every assist during the NBA team’s regular season. The money goes toward an all-abilities playground in the chosen community.

The out-of-date playground at Violet LaPlante Park in Alderbrook is in need of replacement. With additional funds, the city will install a natural-themed climbing and play system to complement the park’s pastoral character.

Online voting determines the winning city. Vote online up to once a day at nba.com/blazers/assist until April 3.

State holds meeting on corporate activity tax

The state Department of Revenue will hold a meeting from 7 to 8:30 a.m. on Wednesday at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center to inform business taxpayers and professionals about the administrative rules for Oregon’s new corporate activity tax.

“We want to provide taxpayers with the information and tools necessary to comply with the law and will ask taxpayers to provide us with feedback on the temporary rules completed to date,” said Nia Ray, director of the state Department of Revenue.

— The Astorian

DEATHS

March 7, 2020

ADAMS, Kathleen Susan, 68, of Warrenton, died in Warrenton. Caldwell’s Luce-Layton Mortuary of Astoria is in charge of the arrangements.

ON THE RECORD

Sexual abuse

• Zacheria Lee Smith, 35, of Nehalem, was indicted Monday for attempt to commit a class B felony, sexual abuse in the third degree, harass-ment, menacing, pub-lic indecency and three counts of endangering the welfare of a minor.

Drug and weapons charges

• Lonie Charles Davis Jr., 41, was arrested Tues-day in Seaside for felon in possession of a restricted weapon, possession of heroin, possession of methamphetamine and theft by receiving.

Reckless driving

• Cody Alexander Arnett, 27, of Vancouver, Washington, was indicted Monday for attempt to commit a class A felony, two counts of unautho-rized use of a vehicle, flee-ing or attempting to elude a police officer, reckless driving and six counts of recklessly endangering another person.

DUII

• James George Alan Walters, 49, of Asto-ria, was arrested Tues-day on state Highway 202 in Astoria for driv-ing under the influence of intoxicants.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

THURSDAY

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

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

Scientists watchful for another whale die-off

Spring migration along the coast

By TOM BANSE
Northwest News Network

Last year, during the spring northbound migra-tion of gray whales along the Pacific Northwest coast, more than 200 whales — most looking skinny or mal-nourished — washed up dead on beaches between Mexico and Alaska.

As this year’s long jour-ney gets underway, marine scientists and whale lovers will be watching whether the unusual die-off contin-ues into a second year.

Gray whales overwinter in the warm waters of Baja California. Their migration along the West Coast back to summer feeding grounds off Alaska extends from February through June.

The first gray whales have already made it to Washington state. It took an Island Adventures Whale Watching tour barely 15 minutes to find some of them on the company’s first gray whale trip of the sea-son out of the Port of Ever-ett on Saturday.

Whale watchers on board spontaneously cheered and applauded when they got nice looks at individ-ually-recognizable whales named “Patch,” “Little Patch” and a third adult known only as “531.” The beasts are each roughly the size of a school bus.

“I’m pretty hopeful see-ing Patch coming back, see-ing Little Patch,” said Island Adventures naturalist Tyson Reed. Reed said the whales looked bulky and did not



John Calambokidis/Cascadia Research Collective

The dripping tail flukes belong to ‘Little Patch,’ a gray whale that has been consistently sighted in Puget Sound since 1991.

appear malnourished as so many of last year’s casu-alties did. “So, I’m hoping that’s a good sign,” he said.

Also along for the sea-son-opening cruise was a leading whale expert, senior biologist John Calambokidis of Cascadia Research in Olympia. He made a similarly positive assessment of the body con-dition of the early arriv-ing whales. He hesitated to pre-dict if last year’s die-off will continue into 2020.

“The limited information we have gotten so far has been a little ambiguous,” Calambokidis said. “It may be another month before we know for sure.”

Calambokidis said the gray whales the tour boat encountered were a fami-liar subgroup that consistently takes a detour and extended break from the northbound migration. This group of up to 12 discovered a veritable private buffet in north Puget Sound — hence their nick-name, the “Sounders.” At high tide, they swim into the muddy shallows of Posses-sion Sound, Port Susan and the Snohomish River Delta to gorge on ghost shrimp.

Gray whales are typi-cally bottom feeders, pre-ferred to filter tiny crusta-ceans from the seafloor.

Federal agencies remain concerned that last year’s die-off within the broader gray whale population may extend into this year’s migration. The previous time this happened two decades ago it stretched two years.

“So it seems possible, if not likely, that we’ll see elevated strandings again this spring as these whales head north and some of them, as happened last year, kind of run out of energy on that northbound trip,” said Michael Milstein, a spokes-man in Portland for the fed-eral marine science agency NOAA Fisheries.

Milstein said his agency has gotten reports of 36 dead gray whales in Mex-ico this year and five deaths so far on the U.S. West Coast — four in California and one on the Washington coast.

He said observers have also noticed more whales making uncharacteristic detours during the north-bound migration into bays

and inlets, such as Long Beach Harbor and San Fran-cisco Bay. Milstein said these could be feeding for-ays akin to what the Sound-ers do.

When last year’s num-bers began spiraling up, the federal government made a disaster declaration of sorts.

“The declaration is what we call an ‘Unusual Mortal-ity Event,’” explained Mil-stein, and it is still in effect.

The declaration is important because it freed up additional resources for scientists to study what the underlying causes of the die-off might be. Many government, academic and nonprofit institutions are lending scientists to this investigation, includ-ing Oregon State Univer-sity, University of Washing-ton, Cascadia Research and Seattle-based SR3.

Calambokidis said the research is organized into three prongs with different groups looking into possible causes. One group is look-ing into whether something is wrong in the Arctic food chain. Another scientific committee is studying gray whale population dynamics. Other specialists will try to rule out disease or toxins.

A leading theory is that starving whales could be a function of an increasing gray whale population inter-secting with a downturn in their prey in the Arctic.

“There are such dramatic changes occurring in the Arctic ecosystem with cli-mate change that is occur-ring,” Calambokidis said. “We have to make sure this isn’t a sentinel of some of the problems that are occur-ring up there.”

No new trial in \$1 billion timber verdict

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

A judge will not order a new trial or overrule a jury’s verdict awarding \$1 billion to local governments that sued Oregon over logging restric-tions on state forestlands.

Last November, more than a dozen counties and multiple taxing districts won more than \$1 billion in a class-action lawsuit that claimed Oregon wasn’t suf-ficiently harvesting tim-ber from property they’d donated decades ago.

Attorneys for Oregon argued the judgment should be overruled or that a new trial be ordered due to legal errors and because the jury’s verdict wasn’t adequately justified by evidence.

Linn County Circuit Judge Thomas McHill has denied those motions, saying “most if not all” the issues raised by the state govern-ment had already been ruled upon before or during the trial.

Nothing raised by Ore-gon’s attorneys after the ver-dict has demonstrated a “sub-stantial chance of prejudice” that would warrant retrying the case, he said.

The judge has entered a judgment with an interest rate of 9% per year on the \$1 billion award.

An Oregon Department of Justice spokesperson said the state government will appeal the judgment.

In Oregon’s request for a new trial, the state argued that sovereign immunity should have blocked the law-suit and that counties are subdivisions of the state gov-ernment that can’t sue it for damages.

According to Oregon, the state government also did not enter into a con-tract with the counties that required logging revenues to be maximized.

Even if such an obligation did exist, the plaintiffs failed to prove that Oregon vio-lated it, the state’s attorneys argued.

Oregon’s attorneys also

claimed the judge commit-ted procedural errors during the trial, such as barring the state government from offer-ing certain evidence.

In the complaint, the counties alleged that Ore-gon has fallen short of max-imizing timber revenues due to a 1998 rule change that emphasized managing for environmental and recre-ational factors of the forest-land’s “greatest permanent value.”

More than 600,000 acres of forest properties were foreclosed upon by counties after the Depression in the 1930s and donated to Ore-gon for management, with the understanding that some of the logging revenues would be returned to local governments.

John DiLorenzo, an attor-ney for the counties, said that his clients face “no down-side” in the litigation while the state’s potential financial liability will accumulate by more than \$260,000 per day.

“If we ultimately lose — all appeals and everything

else — we’re no worse off than we are now,” he said.

Oregon engaged in quite a few settlement negotiations with the plaintiffs before the trial but so far there’s been no indication that Gov. Kate Brown is willing to resolve the issue, DiLorenzo said.

“I think this is something that certainly warrants their attention,” he said.

Counties don’t have con-trol over how the forestlands are managed, but the state government must still com-pensate them for breaching its contract, he said.

“They created endan-gered species habitat on pur-pose when the law imposed no obligation for them to do so,” DiLorenzo said of Ore-gon’s forestland manage-ment practices.

However, DiLorenzo said that Oregon still has “flexi-bility” in managing its for-estland that could figure into an eventual settlement deal.

“If they want to propose something, our door is open and we’re willing to listen,” he said.

Neighbors remember man who died in RV fire

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

Neighbors at Sunset Lake Resort & RV Park held a celebration of life on Tues-day for the man who died after his RV caught on fire over the weekend.

Michael David Mur-phy’s RV caught fire Sun-day morning. When sheriff deputies arrived they found Murphy, 64, on the ground outside of the RV with burn injuries.

He was taken to a hospi-tal and was later released. He died Sunday in another trailer at the park. Murphy was known to have a termi-nal illness. Friends say he was on hospice care and had stage 4 lung cancer.

About 30 neighbors gath-ered Tuesday afternoon at the RV park with food and drinks to honor Murphy’s life. At sunset, they released balloons into the air with messages written to Mur-phy. He was known to be a Titanic history enthusiast, so they played a song from the



Nicole Bales/The Astorian

Neighbors at Sunset Lake RV park remembered Michael Murphy during a gathering on Tuesday.

movie “Titanic.”

“Sunset Lake RV park was Michael’s home and we were proud to have him as a tenant,” said Susan Hart, the manager at the park.

“This man would give you his shirt off his back. He would pull you out of jail if you went to jail. He would send you money if he thought you had to feed your kids or he’d be on your doorstep,” Hart said. “He’s my friend and I miss him.”

She said she has known Murphy for 14 years, and that he worked in the on-site store for more than eight years. She said he used to be a semitruck driver and has five children.

Hart said Murphy was known to be a bit of a grouch. “But he was our grouch,” she said.

“There were many Thanksgivings that nobody has anybody to go to. So, we had it at the store,” Hart

said. She said they also held celebrations for their com-munity during Christmas and Easter, and that Murphy was always there.

Hart said one of the only salvageable items they found after the fire was Mur-phy’s T-shirt that says, “We survived Sunset Lake,” which they sell at the store. She said despite conditions at the park, Murphy loved it and it was his home.

“Michael was like a brother to me,” said Henri-etta Cookie Becker, the assistant manager at the park. She said she has known Murphy for about six years and was tearful when she reminisced on memories of their friendship.

“You don’t have to be blood to be family,” she said.

Both Becker and Hart said they believe Murphy was at peace when he died. They said he was in bed and surrounded by neighbors and hospice nurses.

“He was content,” Hart said.

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