

IN BRIEF

Spence chosen new Port Commission president

The Port of Astoria Commission voted 3-2 on Tuesday to elect Frank Spence as the new commission president.

Spence replaces Commissioner Dirk Rohne, who is taking over Spence's former role as secretary.

Seaside banks 'North 40' for future park, recreation space

SEASIDE — The city received almost 8 acres at the north end of the former Seaside High School campus, referred to as the "North 40."

The transfer was approved in late April at a Clatsop County Board of Commissioners meeting.

The property was transferred to Seaside via a quitclaim deed recorded on May 7, county property management specialist Sirpa Duos said. The land was transferred as is and no money exchanged.

One year ago, the Seaside School District's board authorized the superintendent to negotiate and execute a \$3.2 million contract for the sale with Harry Henke, a registered agent of HTA Properties LLC.

The 102,000-square-foot former high school sits on 12.63 acres on N. Holladay Drive.

That property is still in the due diligence process, Superintendent Susan Penrod said. The land, zoned medium residential, was not included as part of the sale of the former high school.

The property will continue to be used for recreation and parkland.

As long as the park is used for youth recreation by the city, it remains city property. If it stops being used for those purposes, the deed reverts back to the county.

Gearhart playground close to fruition

GEARHART — A girl's dream looks closer to reality as the city prepares to bring a playground to Pacific Way.

When the former Gearhart Elementary School was shut down, the playground equipment was transferred to the new Pacific Ridge Elementary School. Ten-year-old Berkley Sturgell launched a Quarter Mile Challenge to raise funds for the city's Play Equipment Fund. The goal was to collect enough quarters to stretch the length of one-quarter mile. According to Sturgell's estimate, that was about 17,160 quarters, or roughly \$4,290.

Sturgell's efforts brought three times that, more than \$12,000. With outside donations large and small, \$31,000 has been raised so far, Mayor Paulina Cockrum said at last week's City Council meeting.

— *The Astorian*

Wildfire burning in Tillamook State Forest

A wildfire burning in the Tillamook State Forest jumped containment lines Tuesday evening.

The Game Hog Creek fire is estimated to cover 70 acres and is burning near state Highway 6, about 22 miles northwest of Forest Grove, according to Oregon Department of Forestry officials.

— *Statesman Journal*

DEATHS

July 13, 2021

SABOL, Richard J., 83, of Gearhart, died in Gearhart. Caldwell's Funeral & Cremation Arrangement Center of Seaside is in charge of the arrangements.

July 11, 2021

BOWSER, Sandra Yvonne, 79, of Seaside, died in Seaside. Caldwell's Luce-Layton Mortuary of Astoria is in charge of the arrangements.

MEMORIAL

Tuesday, July 20

VOLLMER, Frank J. — Memorial at 2 p.m. at Maritime Memorial Park; the Arrow No. 2 tug will go by and give a whistle in his honor at or around that time. All are welcome.

ON THE RECORD

Stolen vehicle

• Russell Dean Brooks, 35, of La Grande, was arrested on Tuesday in Warrenton for possession of a stolen vehicle, failing to carry and present a license, fraudulent use of a credit card and identity theft.

Disorderly conduct

• Miles Joseph Hunsinger, 55, of Astoria, was arrested on Tuesday at 10th and Duane streets for disorderly conduct in the second degree and criminal mischief in the third degree.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

MONDAY

Astoria City Council, 7 p.m., City Hall, 1095 Duane St.

Appeals court takes on peninsula immigration case

Rodriguez detained by ICE in 2017

By ASHLEY NERBOVIG
Chinook Observer

SAN FRANCISCO — The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals will hear arguments this September over whether the federal government should grant a Pacific County resident asylum in the United States.

Mario Alberto Rodríguez Casillas entered the U.S. legally in 2005 and moved to the Long Beach Peninsula, where he became a bilingual teaching aide for Ocean Beach School District. In 2017, seven years after his visa expired, he was detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the midst of a Trump administration crackdown on Pacific County migrants.

Rodríguez applied for asylum because he is a gay man and he argued he could face physical harm if he returns to Mexico.

Since then, an immigration judge and the Board of Immigration Appeals have denied Rodríguez's request for asylum. Rodríguez appealed to the 9th Circuit and his attorney, Luis Romero, said the court's decision to hear oral arguments for Rodríguez's case is notable.

"It usually means the case is of significant legal importance or not as clean cut as the government is making it seem," Romero said.

Romero, an immigration rights attorney with Novo Legal in Seattle, can't promise Rodríguez the judges will grant him asylum. But Romero said he will make sure Rodríguez's story gets told. With Romero's help, Rodríguez is more hopeful he might succeed.

The Executive Office for Immigration Review did not immediately respond to a request for comment about Rodríguez's case.

Prepared for anything

Rodríguez's apartment is stacked with boxes, bubble wrap and packing tape. He is always prepared to move back to Mexico. Last summer, when the Board of Immigration Appeals denied his request for asylum, Rodríguez



Luke Whittaker/Chinook Observer

In 2017, seven years after his visa expired, Mario Alberto Rodríguez Casillas was detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Rodríguez was told he had 30 days to either appeal to the federal appeals court or relocate to Mexico.

Rodríguez couldn't even get through the entire letter denying him asylum. He read far enough to see the board said "no," before the stress overwhelmed him.

After that, Rodríguez said he stopped asking God for help in his case.

"I said 'God, from today on, I won't ask you again to help me with my immigration case, because I have to learn that if you decide I have to go back to Mexico, it is something that I graciously will accept because it is what you want for me,'" Rodríguez said. "I won't ask you anymore, I won't beg you for my case. My prayers will be for others."

Rodríguez presented evidence to the appeals board that he was a protected class who had already suffered harm in Mexico because of his sexual orientation, Romero said. Rodríguez is worried about going to a doctor for HIV treatment because his last doctor told people Rodríguez was HIV positive without his permission.

However, the appeals board judge classified what happened to Rodríguez as bullying and did not believe it would result in harm to him. The judge dismissed the realities of what it is like to be LGBTQ in Mexico, Romero said.

The judge told Rodríguez if he relocated to a bigger city in Mexico, he would not face discrimination, Rodríguez said. But, while in a smaller town in Mexico people might bother a person who

is LGBTQ or ignore them, in a bigger city Rodríguez worries he might be killed for his identity.

"People in the justice system make the decisions, I think, based on what they read, but I think they need to travel a little bit or just to read more," Rodríguez said.

The U.S. State Department compiles an annual report on human rights practices in different countries. In the first six months of 2020, Mexico had at least 25 hate crime homicides against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, the report said. While some legal protections exist for these groups, what appears to be happening is a societal backlash against these changes, Romero said.

Rodríguez is a visible and trusted member of the Latino and undocumented community of Pacific County.

"People, when they have trouble, they just call me," Rodríguez said. "When they want advice they call me, when they want to do something or they don't know what department or office or place to go, they ask me and I tell them the best option."

He acts as a liaison for Pacific County Immigration Support. He volunteers with the organization because, without it, he doesn't think he would have kept fighting for so long.

The peninsula was like many agricultural areas that were "plagued" by immigration enforcement, Romero said. Many Hispanic people are employed in the shellfish industry, in addition to working in hospitality and other economic sectors.

"Success in this case would be a big win, not just for Mario, but for everyone on the peninsula who knows Mario, or is in the same position as Mario," Romero said.

Ever-changing enforcement

Romero began working as an immigration rights attorney in 2013 and witnessed the evolution of immigration rights under three different presidencies.

President Barack Obama's administration ran a "well-oiled machine" when it came to deportation, Romero said. The administration's deportation priorities targeted people with criminal histories and more recent arrivals to the country, he said. These groups often had fewer resources and less legal standing in court and it was easier for the Department of Justice to deport them, Romero said.

When President Donald Trump took office, his administration changed priorities. However, even under these priorities, Rodríguez might have escaped notice from ICE during the Trump administration, because his long ties to the Long Beach Peninsula community gave him more standing in court. An article by The New York Times on Rodríguez's case detailed the chance encounter that led to his arrest. Under the Trump administration, the undocumented community of Pacific County was paralyzed because everyone was a potential ICE target, Romero said.

While President Joe Biden's administration promised decriminalization of unauthorized border crossings and protections for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipients, Romero said he doesn't know whether those promises will be kept.

"Some of his policies have a lot of the Obama administration flavor," Romero said.

The Biden administration could still choose to close the case against Rodríguez, Romero said. Now that it is scheduled to go before the appeals court, Romero hopes the administration will take another look at the facts and ask itself if this is a case it wants to defend in court.

Ilwaco stadium repairs underway

Falling concrete poses danger

By BRANDON CLINE
Chinook Observer

ILWACO, Wash. — Critical work on Ilwaco High School's 43-year-old football stadium got underway in recent weeks, with Ocean Beach School District officials hoping the repairs can buy them enough time to identify a long-term solution and come up with necessary funds for the aging structure that has been a thorn in the side of the district since construction initially began in the 1970s.

The school district is spending about \$150,000 on the repairs, which Superintendent Amy Huntley said should extend the stadium's life for another three to five years. The repair work is being done by Helligso Construction, an Astoria-based contractor.

Stadium construction began in the spring of 1977, thanks to a \$1.96 million grant from a federal program in 1976 to rehabilitate the

district's facilities. A myriad of problems ensued not long after that work began, and construction continued throughout 1978.

"When they got the grant, it was supposed to do quite a few different things — the stadium, bus barn, I think they were supposed to have a pool and tennis courts," Huntley said.

As is obvious decades later, many of the projects the school district planned to use the grant dollars on never came to fruition. And stadium construction posed immediate problems.

"The stadium (the contractors) built was rather larger than it should have been, probably. They ran out of funding part of the way through the project and weren't able to finish everything," Huntley said. "What they built was something the district has really never had the resources to maintain."

Huntley, who has been with the school district for 28 years in a number of different capacities, said the stadium's condition has been a topic at board meetings the entire time. Some minor



Chinook Observer

The school district hopes stadium repairs will be completed by fall.

work has been done in the past 15 or so years, including repairing and painting some of the steel.

"But those were minor repairs, and really it's something that needs concrete sealing and just all kinds of things in our marine environment. Concrete and steel don't do well here," Huntley said, adding that the school district has hit a "critical mass" and the stadium has started to pose safety issues.

Just prior to the pandemic, when students were still regularly using the stadium's bottom-floor weight room, large chunks of concrete began falling from the ceiling onto the weight room area. The school district declared the area unsafe and halted using the space, and brought in a structural engineer to examine the stadium, which led the district to move ahead with its repair plan.

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