

IN BRIEF

Astoria parks employee tests positive for coronavirus

An Astoria Parks and Recreation Department employee has tested positive for the coronavirus.

City officials could not provide more details about the case, which was announced Monday morning, but said the employee works with the maintenance, aquatics-recreation and child care divisions.

The case has not impacted operations and services at the parks department yet, but the situation further highlights the tight staffing issues that exist in the department, City Manager Brett Estes said.

At a recent City Council meeting, Jonah Dart-McLean, the city’s parks director, said the department is operating with a skeleton crew and has very little leeway if employees are out sick. The department relies heavily on part-time workers, but has had difficulty recruiting new employees.

The park department’s day care program, Sprouts Learning Center, formerly Lil’ Sprouts Academy, closed for the last two weeks of August after a staff member tested positive for the virus.

The city has since required all city employees — except for police officers — to get vaccinated. The parks department lost two employees from its child care program as a result, but has generally seen compliance with the mandate.

The Oregon Health Authority, meanwhile, reported 12 new virus cases for the county on Friday. Since the pandemic began, the county had recorded 2,443 virus cases and 27 deaths as of Friday.

— *The Astorian*

Earthquake strikes off southern Oregon Coast

A 4.7-magnitude earthquake hit off the coast of southern Oregon on Sunday morning.

The temblor struck just after 4 a.m., with the epicenter about 110 miles west of Coos Bay, the U.S. Geological Survey reports.

As of 9 a.m., the USGS had 10 responses in its online “Felt Report” database, which asks the public if they felt any shaking. Earthquakes of magnitude 4.0 to 4.9 are considered “light.”

They’re also common off the Oregon Coast. More than 3,500 seismic tremors of magnitude 2.5 or greater have buzzed there over the past 50 years.

— *The Oregonian*

DEATHS

Oct. 24, 2021

PYRYT, Bonita “Bonnie” Carol, 78, of Gresham, formerly of Seaside, died in Gresham. Caldwell’s Luce-Layton Mortuary of Astoria is in charge of the arrangements.

Oct. 22, 2021

HASTINGS, Shawn Edward, 60, of Seaside, died in Seaside. Caldwell’s Funeral & Cremation Arrangement Center of Seaside is in charge of the arrangements.

ON THE RECORD

DUII

• Robert Francis Dean, 33, of Austin, Texas, was arrested Saturday at Lewis and Clark Road in Astoria for driving under the influence of intoxicants and reckless driving.

• Alishia Mikhala Keller, 20, of Astoria, was arrested Friday at U.S. Highway 101 Business and Wireless Road for DUII, reckless driving and reckless endangerment. A motor vehicle accident was involved.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

TUESDAY

Clatsop County Planning Commission, Countywide Citizen Advisory Committee, 9 a.m., joint meeting, (electronic meeting).

Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District Board, 5:15 p.m., Bob Chisholm Community Center, 1225 Avenue A, Seaside.

Astoria Planning Commission, 5:35 p.m., City Hall, 1095 Duane St.

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

WEDNESDAY

Astoria Parks Advisory Board, 6:45 a.m., City Hall, 1095 Duane St.

Clatsop County Board of Commissioners, 6 p.m., (electronic meeting).

THURSDAY

Sunset Empire Transportation District Board, 9 a.m., (electronic meeting).

Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce, noon, (electronic meeting).

Clatsop County Recreational Lands Planning Advisory Committee, 1 p.m., (electronic meeting).

Cannon Beach Planning Commission, 6 p.m., (electronic meeting).

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Jeff Clemens/Chinook Observer

Powerful waves tear away at the shoreline at Washaway Beach in Pacific County, one of the fastest-eroding places on the West Coast.

ODOT can learn from missteps in massive post-wildfire logging job

State auditors reviewed cleanup

By CASSANDRA PROFITA

Oregon Public Broadcasting

Oregon secretary of state auditors found the Oregon Department of Transportation can learn from its troubled experience overseeing the largest wildfire cleanup job in state history.

Auditors did a limited review of the state’s post-wildfire hazard tree removal operation at ODOT’s request after an outpouring of public concern over the extent of the trees being tagged for removal and cut down.

In an advisory report released last week, seven state auditors reviewed the lessons learned in the extensive cleanup that followed Oregon’s most destructive wildfire season ever.

“Oregon’s 2020 wildfires, and the scale of debris removal executed by the state, were unprecedented,” auditors wrote in their report. “Much of the planning and work was done in a rapid time frame with staff who had little to no prior experience with disaster debris management. Lessons learned from the experience should be carried forward for future preparedness efforts, which include planning, training and exercising, to better respond and recover from disasters.”

Extensive roadside hazard tree removal after last year’s wildfires has raised concerns that the state is overcutting trees that aren’t actually hazardous.



Cassandra Profita/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Extensive roadside hazard tree removal after last year’s wildfires has raised concerns that the state is overcutting trees that aren’t actually hazardous.

WHILE THERE ARE NO PLANS FOR A STATE-LEVEL REVIEW OF THE WILDFIRE RECOVERY EFFORT, THE AUDITORS’ REPORT SAYS ODOT INTENDS TO HIRE A CONSULTANT TO DO AN AFTER-ACTION REVIEW OF DEBRIS REMOVAL OPERATIONS.

tions better with its organization of staff and contractors, and the state needs to improve its legal process for accessing private properties during a wildfire cleanup.

The advisory report also finds that ODOT could improve internal communication and the quality control process for tree removal. They found there was no reliable or comprehensive documentation ensuring damaged trees marked for removal had a complete review.

“ODOT’s debris removal work is incredibly important not only for making our highways safe but for helping Oregonians recover and rebuild after the devastating 2020 wildfires,” Secretary of State Shemia Fagan said in a statement. “The report shows that in this extremely difficult crisis, ODOT learned and adapted throughout the cleanup. ODOT’s efforts are clearing the way for Oregonians to rebuild their homes, businesses and communities.”

Earlier this year, arborists and others who worked on the project reported excessive tree-cutting and mismanagement, stoking public concern over the large swaths of logging visible along roadways in wildfire corridors.

Oregon lawmakers held hearings on the reported problems, gathering testimony from workers who said ODOT didn’t have proper criteria for deciding which trees should be removed, that inexperienced workers were irresponsibly marking trees for removal and cutting trees that weren’t actually hazardous without anyone from

ODOT supervising.

State Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, called on Gov. Kate Brown to stop the project and investigate the allegations. He raised concerns that mismanaging such a large disaster recovery effort could jeopardize the state’s federal funding for the wildfire cleanup work.

But the governor allowed the work to continue, and ODOT Deputy Administrator Mac Lynde told lawmakers his agency was hiring an independent forester to review the operation while the secretary of state audited the project.

Independent forester

In June, the independent forester ODOT hired, arborist Galen Wright, found ODOT was properly identifying hazardous trees for removal.

Wright estimated about 42% of the tree population along the three largest fire corridors had been marked for removal, auditors found, meaning that 58% of the trees were preserved.

But auditors were clear that their project was not actually an audit and was limited in its scope. They gathered information from state employees, contractors and stakeholders involved in hazardous tree removal, including management and staff from ODOT, state and federal agencies, Golden, Oregon tribes, county government workers and concerned Oregonians.

They also conducted site visits to tree-removal sites in June. But their report states they didn’t test the reliability of hazardous tree removal data or assess the adequacy of the criteria used

to evaluate whether a tree is hazardous.

Fagan said her office wasn’t looking at how things might work “in a perfect world,” but rather what controls ODOT had over the cleanup operations and whether the agency could make those controls work better.

“Something that I learned through this process is that Oregon through ODOT actually has a more conservationist view than (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) does,” Fagan said. “If Oregonians don’t agree with even the current way that ODOT is doing this, that’s something they can take to their legislators. ...The Legislature would have to direct ODOT to change their process.”

Auditors found ODOT and many other entities including the U.S. Forest Service, firefighters, utilities and private landowners all removed trees after the 2020 fires, and there was no documentation of the number or location of trees removed during the early wildfire response.

Fagan noted that the auditors’ report uses illustrations of land areas along highways to show that multiple landowners such as utilities and private industrial timberland owners are also removing burned trees and making it difficult to discern whose tree removal work the public is seeing from the road.

“Oregonians who were going along and thought in general too many trees were being cut might have been noticing the additional private tree removal, which obviously ODOT doesn’t have control over,” Fagan said.

While there are no plans for a state-level review of the wildfire recovery effort, the auditors’ report says ODOT intends to hire a consultant to do an after-action review of debris removal operations.

Tree removal cleanup work is estimated to be completed by next summer.