

RV park: ‘Half the people that came to this park come from broken homes, being evicted, cost of living going up too much’

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The letter, signed “management,” stated that the new owners wanted to make improvements to the RV park and that some tenants might be able to return in September. In the meantime, tenants were invited to move to properties operated by RV Inn Style Resorts, another company owned by the Werners, with the caveat that space was limited.

Pacific County health workers forwarded the vacate notice to the Northwest Justice Project, which brought in Thurston County Volunteer Legal Services. The state attorney general’s office then met with Cassinelli, who said the notice to tenants had come from the Werners. He was told to rescind the notice.

But signs went up around the RV park later claiming that, due to unsafe conditions, the park would close for business in mid-April. Utilities would be turned off and people needed to leave. Again, the attorney general’s office intervened.

Just after the sale was finalized, Long Beach police were called to the RV park. Representatives of the Werners had shown up to begin removing trailers. One of the men carried a gun. Long Beach Police Chief Flint Wright said the man didn’t threaten anyone and was carrying the gun legally, but to tenants, it felt like another intimidation tactic.

Police told the men they could not remove anyone’s property without a court order.

The Werners appear to have backed away from efforts to forcibly remove people and have instead begun offering to buy people out. Some tenants have taken the \$2,000 offered, but others say it’s not enough money for them to start over somewhere else, especially on a tight timeline.

Consumer complaints and accusations of wrongful eviction proceedings, steep rent increases and harassment of tenants have followed the Werners at multiple properties they operate throughout the Pacific Northwest. The Chinook Observer reported that 10 complaints have been filed with the state regarding operations at Beacon since the Werners took ownership.

KMUN reached out to the Werners several times while reporting this story, but received no response.

‘The public’s interest’

Today, tenants at the Beacon Charters and RV Park do not have regular garbage service. Instead, they have a commercial-sized dumpster placed at one end of the park. Many residents struggle to hoist garbage over the dumpster’s high sides. For a while, each morning, park resident Dallas Busse opened a side door to make access easier, but the dumpster is now filled to overflowing and he’s stopped opening the door.

The dumpster is set right across from Susan Gill’s trailer. She says it has started to attract rats, raccoons and scavenging birds.

Meanwhile, a communal bathroom and showers facility is down to a single working shower on the women’s side. Busse recently found a way to get one shower on the men’s side to work, but the water is barely lukewarm.

At a port commission meeting on May 17, RV park tenants and other residents told commissioners the Werners are not maintaining the RV park as required under their lease.

Conklin, the tenants’ attorney, also maintains that the Werners have violated several conditions of their lease with the port. He has asked city leaders to call a meeting with the



Dallas Busse has taken on the role of advocate and groundskeeper at Beacon Charters and RV Park in Ilwaco as new owners have tried several times to get longtime tenants to move.

Katie Frankowicz/KMUN

port and urge port commissioners to end the lease with the Werners.

To Conklin, the port’s ownership of the land is one of the more “alarming” aspects of the whole situation.

“There are other parks around the state that are privately held,” he said. “But this one is actually on taxpayer-owned properties ... and should be managed, I believe, in the public’s interest.”

Conklin said, “All around the state, localities are struggling with the issue of how do we provide houses — homes — for low-income people. And here the port is going in absolutely the wrong direction in mass eviction of folks who have been living quite stable and paying their own way.”

Butch Smith, the chairman of the Port of Ilwaco Commission, said Beacon was never intended for long-term stays.

Under the port’s lease agreement and city rules, the RV park was meant for short-term stays. But for years, both the city and the port looked the other way as Cassinelli allowed tenants to stay year-round and, in some cases, for many years.

Historically, Ilwaco struggles during the quieter winter months when tourists and recreational fishermen are gone. Allowing what was technically a violation at Cassinelli’s RV park was one way the business was able to survive, Smith said.

But after Cassinelli informed the port commission last year that he was preparing to sell, the discrepancy needed to be resolved. When Cassinelli returned later with a potential buyer, then-Port Manager Guy Glenn Jr. negotiated the lease, making it clear the RV park was intended for short-term stays.

However, Smith and the other port commissioners say they knew what the change could mean for longtime residents.

In the new version of the lease, the commissioners included a stipulation: The new owners needed to give tenants time to find somewhere else to live before shifting back to a short-term stay model. The lease provided six months, but Smith told the Werners state law might require more time.

“We thought when we left that meeting we

had a game plan with the new owners,” Smith said.

He was surprised by what happened at the RV park next. Still, he isn’t sure what the port can do even as tenants increasingly look to the port’s role as leaseholder as an answer to their troubles.

Smith is not aware of violations of the lease. At the port commission meeting last week, he asked tenants to bring any evidence or statements to the port office.

Margarita Cullimore, an Ilwaco City Council member who attended the meeting, criticized this approach.

She pointed to the letter from Conklin that outlined potential lease violations. She urged port officials to look into the matter themselves as the property owners and not put the burden on the RV park tenants.

Limited role

Smith maintains that the port has a limited role to play. He said most of the issues he has heard about appear to be matters best handled by the state and the county. He added that it seems like the Werners are now interested in working with people to help them relocate.

“We want this to work for everybody involved,” Smith told KMUN, adding, “The new owners of the RV park, we certainly want them to be successful. And we certainly want the people that have lived at Beacon to find suitable places to live and move to and be very successful, too.”

On the city side of things, Cassinelli echoed Smith.

“There’s only so much the city can do and until all that’s completely defined, the city’s going to be spinning our wheels,” he said.

However, Cassinelli said the city is looking to see where it can be involved.

He told KMUN he does have some second thoughts about selling the RV park given how things unfolded with the new owners.

“I like most of those people,” he said of his former tenants. “I, you know, went out of my way for them. They didn’t deserve to be treated the way they were.”

Cassinelli said he did not have conversations with the Werners ahead of the sale about

what would happen to tenants.

“If you have a rental house, do you discuss what’s going to happen with the tenants when you sell your rental house? You might,” he said. “I mean, I just assumed they were running an RV park and mobile home parks and they would keep all the tenants because it was a steady income.”

Like Smith, Cassinelli believes the Werners are “starting to come around.”

But, he added, “I don’t own the thing, I don’t have anything to do with it anymore and I try to stay out of it.”

‘Scares us’

That is what tenants like Busse have a hard time understanding.

Busse has lived at the RV park with his dad on and off since 2011. He has been attending port commission and City Council meetings, advocating for his neighbors and himself.

Cassinelli was a good landlord, in Busse’s opinion; the mayor even gave him the trailer he lives in now. But he feels betrayed by the sale to the Werners. Cassinelli’s status as an elected official again as of January is a factor.

“Most of our votes are what put the councilmen in their seats,” Busse said, “so the way we were looking at it is: We voted you guys to be here and you’re supposed to be helping the people.”

“So tell us: How can you help us right now? Because us, your people, need help. We’re your neighbors and it just feels like you guys are sitting and watching as we just get ripped down by these people.”

Like many who live at Beacon, Busse relies on Social Security and isn’t sure where he would go if suddenly forced to move. But he is also worried about the elderly people at the park who face other difficulties besides lack of money.

One woman who lives near Busse’s dad is in her 80s and not well. She was mentioned often in interviews with the RV park tenants. The early vacate notices and then the visits by the Werners’ representatives so unnerved her that she now refuses to open the door to almost anyone. Other people only leave their trailers late at night, afraid their possessions will be seized if they leave during the day.

“Half the people that came to this park come from broken homes, being evicted, cost of living going up too much, just having everything go downhill,” Busse said.

“The fact that these people can’t understand where us as citizens come from when they come and tell us that they’re kicking us out of our homes and we only have so long to do that. Yeah, that scares us because we’re already here trying to survive.”

Gill, the woman whose trailer is now near the dumpster, has lived in the RV park for 14 years.

She was very frightened when the Werners threatened to shut off utilities since she relies on an oxygen tank at night and, with the recent stress, increasingly during the day. Still, she has another place lined up and doesn’t have to worry about where she will go next.

But she feels a duty to stay at the RV park for as long as she can for the sake of her neighbors.

“The more people that work together, the better the situation can be,” Gill said. “And I don’t have enough problems that I have to be the person that runs out of desperation. I think that would be a really bad cop-out to do that.”

This story is part of a collaboration between The Astorian and Coast Community Radio.

Johnson: Won’t revise her politics to try to siphon more votes away from Kotek, Drazan

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Last week, she added former Gov. Ted Kulongoski, a Democrat, and former U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, a Republican. She’s backed by former Rep. Knute Buehler, a Bend Republican who was the GOP nominee for governor in 2018, losing to Gov. Kate Brown.

Johnson has straddled the political divide for much of her life. Born in Bend and raised in Redmond, her father, Sam Johnson, was a prominent timber industry business owner. He served seven terms in the state House as a Republican. He was mayor of Redmond at the time of his death in 1984.

After earning a law degree and commercial pilot’s licenses for both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, Johnson ran an aviation company that included firefighting aircraft.

Like her father, she ran for the House, winning election in 2000.

Unlike her father, she was a Democrat.

She moved to the state Senate in 2005, where she represented the North Coast and served until resigning last year to run for governor.

In Salem, Johnson was often at odds with Kotek, most recently on cap-and-trade legislation that led to Republican walkouts in 2019 and 2020.

Passage of the bill was a priority for Kotek in the House. While its fate was uncertain in the Senate, Johnson was seen as a likely opponent.

Over the years, Kotek and leaders of the progressive wing of the Legislature’s Democrats have seen Johnson as a roadblock to legislation on gun control, the environment and the expansion of collective bargaining rights further up the ranks of fire, police and other public employees.

Johnson already has a soundbite-ready line when asked about Kotek, playing off polls that show Brown with low job approval ratings. “Tina Kotek is more Kate Brown than Kate Brown,” she said.

On the Republican side, Drazan won a fragmented primary with about 22% of the vote among 19 candidates. Fervent followers of former President Donald Trump were unable to rally around a single standard-bearer, instead splitting their votes into substantial chunks spread among several candidates. That helped Drazan win.

Johnson said it will be impossible for Drazan to appeal to moderate swing voters who are the key to winning the governorship while not alienating the conservative GOP base.

“I don’t think she’s going

‘RURAL OR ANYONE WHO FEELS DISRESPECTED AND IGNORED. MY LOYALTY WILL ONLY BE TO THE PEOPLE OF OREGON.’

Betsy Johnson | independent candidate for governor

to be able to speak her mind,” Johnson said.

‘Let Betsy be Betsy’

Democrats have been planning a counterattack on Johnson since well before Kotek’s primary victory.

Oregonians for Ethics, a political action committee, has raised more than \$195,000 to highlight Johnson’s votes against Democratic initiatives. The largest contributor has been the Democratic Governors Association, with \$65,000.

Drazan has chafed at suggestions that if Johnson makes the ballot, the Republican candidate could be nothing better than a spoiler for a Johnson victory over Kotek.

In April, Drazan told Willamette Week that Johnson’s break with the Democratic Party was an opportunistic move to take advantage of the first election in which a governor or ex-governor wasn’t on the ballot since 2002.

“She could have been helping recruit and elect moderate Democrats all these years,” Drazan said.

Johnson says she won’t revise her politics to try to siphon more votes away from Kotek or Drazan.

“Let Betsy be Betsy,” Johnson said. “Let me get out and connect with regular people who are sick and tired of the status quo.”

The abortion issue could loom large due to an expected U.S. Supreme Court decision that could strike down the landmark Roe vs. Wade, the 1973 ruling that legalized abortion nationwide.

Drazan is against abortion rights. Kotek and Johnson are strongly in favor of protecting abortion rights. That could cap Johnson’s appeal to a large swath of Republicans.

Johnson said her position is “not negotiable.”

“I am unapologetically pro-choice,” she said. “I disagree with everything that Tina Kotek stands for except when it comes to a woman’s right to choose.”

Johnson said that the much discussed urban-rural divide is a problem for Democrats, whose center of political power is Portland.

Johnson is critical of Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler and what she sees as local officials allowing sometimes violent demonstrations and sprawling homeless populations to chase away businesses and visitors.

But she sees the popular Republican route of campaigning against Portland as misguided.

As the state’s largest city and business hub, the city automatically has a huge — at times overwhelming — impact on state politics.

“You can’t have Oregon without Portland,” Johnson said. “It’s our metropolitan area.”

While Democrats dominate in Portland — Kotek’s home — and much of the Willamette Valley, Republican political leaders have often been drawn from eastern, central and southwestern Oregon. Drazan, from Canby in Clackamas County, was an exception.

Johnson noted she grew up in central Oregon and has represented districts first in the southern coast around Bend, then one on the far northwest of the state. Her aviation business took her to all corners of Oregon, with frequent stops in Portland.

Johnson said that makes her a unique candidate — not bound by one spot on the state map for political support. She hopes her campaign appeals to voters in between the politi-

cal norms in Salem — which she sees as extremes.

“Rural or anyone who feels disrespected and ignored,” Johnson said. “My loyalty will only be to the people of Oregon.”

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