

IN BRIEF

Fire displaces six people in Seaside

SEASIDE — A fire in a duplex on Avenue B displaced six residents late Tuesday.

Police received the report shortly after 9 p.m., Fire Chief Joey Daniels said. Police evacuated residents prior to arrival and were able to contain the fire to one side of the duplex.

The fire was deemed accidental, Daniels said.

Overdose Awareness Day planned by county

Overdose Awareness Day, an event to remember friends and family who have died from drug overdoses, will take place at the Barbey Maritime Center in Astoria on Aug. 31.

The Clatsop County Public Health Department will host the event from 5 to 8 p.m.

Attendees will see educational presentations. A candlelight vigil will honor loved ones lost. An opportunity to train on, and get supplies of, Narcan, a medication used to reverse drug overdoses, will be offered, the county said.

People will also have a chance to tell their own stories. They can also share a photo of someone they lost to an overdose on an interactive memorial space, the county said.

“Overdose deaths are preventable — we can do something and we all must do something,” the county said.

Ultralight aircraft flies into tree near Knappa

An ultralight aircraft taking off from Karpens Airport in the Knappa area on Wednesday flew into a tree, the Astoria Fire Department said.

Astoria assisted the Knappa Fire District in the incident.

The pilot, who declined medical treatment, reached the ground using a ladder truck from Astoria, Knappa Fire Chief Kurt Donaldson said.

“These types of incidents demonstrate how well our Clatsop County (fire departments) work together to resolve complex incidents that in this case we don’t see often,” the Astoria Fire Department wrote in a Facebook post.

Body of Washington state man recovered

The body of Aaron Tyler Blake, 37, of Bellingham, Washington, has been recovered, Oregon State Police confirmed.

Blake was discovered on Aug. 12 in the Columbia River near Jetty A, according to the Clatsop County Sheriff’s Office.

On the night of July 27, Blake’s car was found abandoned in the Astoria Bridge’s northbound lane, near the highest point over the river, according to the police report.

Lower Columbia Q Center seeking applications for board

The Lower Columbia Q Center, a nonprofit that provides outreach, education and advocacy for the region’s LGBTQ community, is seeking applications to serve on its board.

A custodial board was appointed in June to guide the nonprofit following a legal battle. The interim board has also been tasked with forming a new board to lead the organization into the future.

For more information, visit the organization’s website.

— *The Astorian*

DEATHS

Aug. 16, 2022

RENICK, Andrea Lyn, 31, of Seaside, died in Seaside. Caldwell’s Luce-Layton Mortuary of Astoria is in charge of the arrangements.

Aug. 15, 2022

THOMPSON, Margaret Frances, 93, of Astoria, died in Astoria. Hughes-Ransom Mortuary is in charge of the arrangements.

ON THE RECORD

Theft

• Terry Richard Madsen, 53, from Utah, was arrested on Tuesday for second-degree theft and second-degree disorderly conduct. He allegedly stole a cart from Fred Meyer in Warrenton and was jumping into traffic before law enforcement contacted him on the New Youngs Bay Bridge.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

TUESDAY

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

the Astorian

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BLASTED

Luke Whittaker/Chinook Observer

Long Beach volunteer firefighter Scott Elliott reacted as he was blasted with water during the annual Firefighter Games last weekend.

Commission fires head of the state’s public defense system

Singer held the job for nearly eight months

By DIRK VANDERHART and CONRAD WILSON
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Steve Singer survived the first attempt at his job. The state’s top public defender was not as fortunate the second time around.

In a widely expected move, the commission overseeing Oregon’s flagging public defense system voted to fire Singer on Thursday in a 6-2 vote with one member absent. Singer has led the Office of Public Defense Services for nearly eight months, winning fans among public defenders. But his confrontational style has grated on commissioners, employees and Oregon Supreme Court Chief Justice Martha Walters.

The commission, which was reconstituted by Walters on Tuesday, did not take the act of firing Singer lightly. When the vote was initially called on Thursday, only four commissioners voted to fire Singer, one short of the required majority. But after more discussion, two brand new commissioners, Jennifer Nash and Kristen Winemiller, agreed to fire him.

“Based on the information I’ve heard about how much damage it will cause the agency if we don’t move forward,” Nash said, “I’m going to vote to terminate Mr. Singer.”

“I agree,” Winemiller added. “That’s also my vote.”

That came after Singer mounted a vigorous defense, characterizing the push to remove him as a dictatorial move by Walters and the judiciary at large, and saying it would put a black mark on Oregon’s efforts to reform public defense.

“This is the most significant frontal attack on the independence of public defense ever in the United States,” Singer said as part of a lengthy address to the commission before the vote. “It is frightening. It is scary.”

Singer’s removal settles one issue that had provided distraction from the state’s mounting public defense crisis. But it creates new questions, such as who will take over the agency in his stead, and whether that person will prove more successful at navigating the three branches of government now intensely focused on the issue.



Bradley W. Parks/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Oregon Supreme Court Chief Justice Martha Walters, shown addressing the state House in 2019, removed members of the Public Defense Services Commission.

Commissioners said they would take up appointing an interim director as soon as next week, but for now left the agency in the hands of three staff members, including deputy director Brian DeForest, who clashed with Singer.

Hundreds of criminal defendants in Oregon are currently without lawyers, and the state faces a class-action lawsuit aimed at bringing it back in compliance with the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees a right to an attorney for those charged with crimes.

‘Chaos’

Thursday’s action is the latest development in a dramatic series of events set in motion at a similar commission meeting last week.

At that Aug. 10 meeting, Walters and commission chair Per Ramfjord forcefully urged commission members to vote to fire Singer. They and other commissioners said the director had bullied subordinates, lashed out at Walters for no reason, offended lawmakers with rash statements and failed to craft a workable plan to dig Oregon out of its public defense crisis.

The fate of Oregon’s public defense reform, Singer’s detractors suggested, would be placed at risk if he were allowed to continue in his role.

“We’ve been a chaos of Mr. Singer’s making,” Walters told the commission at the meeting.

But while every member of the commission agreed on Aug. 10 that the first eight months of Singer’s tenure in Oregon had been rocky, they could not find agreement on what to do about it. The group deadlocked on votes to fire Singer or place him on leave, with some commission members voicing a belief in Sing-

er’s vision and abilities even as they decried his conduct.

With Singer now gone, questions remain about how the state moves forward. Oregon is in the midst of an unprecedented and troubling public defense crisis, which now includes more than 700 defendants — some jailed — without access to attorneys.

According to a study released in January, the state needs roughly 1,300 additional public defenders to meet its caseloads. And state officials, who have known for years that the threadbare system is likely unconstitutional, now face a class-action lawsuit over Oregon’s inability to provide indigent defense.

Complicating matters, public defenders around the state had warned to Singer, and praised him for the urgency and vision he brought to the flailing agency. Many of those proponents pointed to the work he did in reshaping public defense in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

“For the first time in my time in public defense ... we have a director who seems to hear the voice of rural Oregon’s public defense community, understands their needs, and responds to those needs,” Erik Swallow, a defender in Roseburg, wrote in a letter to commissioners last week.

Chilling message

At the same time, many of the high-ranking government officials who’ll have a central say in improving Oregon’s public defense system have appeared to support removing Singer.

State Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, and House Speaker Dan Rayfield, D-Corvallis, both backed Walters on Monday when she fired the public defense commission.

“I’m not sure anyone saw this coming,” Courtney said at the time. “Things are a mess and they’ve got to get better. We’ve got to correct this thing.”

See *Fired*, Page A6

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Love always forever and ever and ever - Dad