

# HOMICIDE: Witness reported helping Sregzinski move the body

Continued from 1A

guns and ammunition, along with black ski masks, rubber gloves, a roll of duct tape, containers of gunpowder and more.

Ward in the affidavit stated he received an email May 3 from Walla Walla police detective Chris Ruchert asserting the department "developed information that Robert Gage Sregzinski had committed a homicide in the Walla Walla area" and Rodriguez was the victim.

Walla Walla police detective Steve Harris on May 4 called Ward with more information: A witness reported Sregzinski shot

Rodriguez in a Walla Walla home. Sregzinski rolled the body into a carpet and had the witness help move the body to Sregzinski's vehicle. Sregzinski then left to bury the body.

Police found a body days after a two-story uninhabited home at 83949 Highway 339, Milton-Freewater, caught fire May 18. The blaze damaged the home but destroyed the nearby garage. An investigation revealed the garage had no power and arson could be involved.

Walla Walla detectives had questioned Sregzinski about Rodriguez's death, according to the affidavit, and he mentioned Winesap

Road. Detectives suspected Sregzinski buried the body along the road that runs near Milton-Freewater. Walla Walla police heard about the fire the day it happened and realized the site was just a block east of Winesap. Ruchert asked Milton-Freewater officer Dan Lackey to go to the scene and look for a body.

Lackey found carpet that matched a design from the homicide scene, the affidavit states, and he found a pile of rocks and cement blocks.

When he moved the blocks, according to the document, "he noted a distinct odor of what he believed to be a dead body."

That body was identified as Rodriguez. The sheriff's office then established the site as a crime scene.

Sregzinski was in custody at the time of the fire and does not face arson charges. Umatilla County District Attorney Dan Primus said only that the case remains an active investigation. Walla Walla Prosecuting Attorney James Nagle was not immediately available Thursday afternoon for comment, and a spokesperson for Walla Walla police also did not immediately return a call.

Contact Phil Wright at [pwright@eastoregonian.com](mailto:pwright@eastoregonian.com) or 541-966-0833.

# TRAIN: UP said rails were inspected as recently as May 31

Continued from 1A

Association of American Railroads, has lobbied against new braking requirements, saying they would provide "minimal safety benefits" at a price tag topping \$3 billion. Federal officials say putting new brakes just on locomotives hauling large loads of oil and other flammable liquids would cost far less, around \$80 million.

The derailment released 42,000 gallons of crude oil and sparked a massive fire that burned for 14 hours.

The mayor of Mosier, the tiny river town where the train derailed, reacted with alarm to the preliminary findings.

Union Pacific said Wednesday that it would resume running oil trains through the gorge sometime later this week despite objections from residents and elected officials.

"Where else are there rusty bolts that could fail?" said Mayor Arlene Burns. "I think it's outrageous that they're telling us it's safe."

Union Pacific said its inspections didn't detect the broken bolts that caused the derailment. The company tests for sideways movement in the rails using a machine that puts an amount of pressure equivalent to a locomotive on the rails — a stress test that would reveal loose or broken bolts, said Justin Jacobs, a Union Pacific spokesman.

The stress test previously was conducted every 18 months but will now be done every three months, Jacobs said. Union Pacific also has expanded inspections of all its tracks in Oregon and Washington state, particularly in curved portions of track, he said.

The company has said the rails were inspected as recently as May 31, but it wasn't clear if the inspection included the stress test. Jacobs didn't know.

The government's preliminary report said walking inspections along the rails were critical to detect broken bolts and track movement. Feinberg said it was the railroad's responsibility to detect those problems.

"We feel like it could have been prevented with closer inspections, better maintenance," she said.

At least 27 oil trains have been involved in major derailments, fires or oil spills in the U.S. and Canada during the past

decade, according to an AP analysis of accident records. Federal officials have responded with requirements for tougher tank cars, speed restrictions and other actions, but the accidents have continued.

Steven Ditmeyer, a rail consultant who worked in leadership positions at both the Federal Railroad Administration and at Burlington Northern Railroad, said sheared-off bolts like those seen in the Oregon derailment are likely symptoms of a larger problem.

In the 1990s, he said, Burlington Northern had a series of derailments on tracks in Washington state that all involved sheared off railroad spikes, which served the same function as the bolts in question in the recent wreck.

Investigators eventually determined overloaded cars, a lack of lubrication between the wheel assembly and the body of the tanker cars and not enough gravel in the railroad bed combined to put strain on the track when the train was in a curve. That strain loosened the bolts holding the rails to the rail ties and pushed the rails apart, causing derailments, he said.

"When they said those sheared lag bolts, that was the hint that said they really need to look in the direction of these other aspects," Ditmeyer told the AP. "These are heavy cars when they're fully loaded," and a treatment to reduce the volatility of the Bakken crude makes the oil heavier, he said.

The Oregon Department of Transportation last week asked federal rail authorities for a moratorium on oil trains in the Columbia River Gorge after also expressing concerns that the weight of the oil trains might be too much for the tracks.

In a presentation last week, department administrator Hal Gard said the lag bolts found at the scene were rusted on both ends, indicating they were sheared off before the derailment. State officials showed a photo of a pile of lag bolts collected at the site.

Feinberg said there are weight limits on tank cars that haul crude oil and other products, but there's been no suggestion Union Pacific's cars exceeded those.

"Whether a railroad is moving heavy cars or lighter cars, it is still their responsibility to maintain the track," she said.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

The Eighth Street Bridge provides access to a sparsely populated area north of Pendleton.

# BRIDGE: Construction will start summer 2017

Continued from 1A

unfit to carry heavy vehicles.

Patterson said the city applied for federal funding to replace the bridge in 2000, 2005 and 2012. It received a grant in 2013.

"If we didn't do it, the money would be sent somewhere else," he said.

At face value, the Eighth Street Bridge is a baffling target for multi-million dollar investment.

Everything east of Lee Street Grade is county land and the northern city limit line ends around Northeast Ellis Place. The urban growth boundary, a separate boundary that restricts urban sprawl, doesn't extend much further north, ending parallel to Owen Court. The areas that do fall within those boundaries feature sparse development — Patterson estimates Lee Street Grade serves about a dozen Pendleton homes and a 30-vehicle RV park located alongside the river. Additionally, Lee Street Grade residents can easily access their homes by crossing the Main Street Bridge to North Main Street and continuing onto County Road 1003.

But city officials say the intent of the project is to accommodate the residents of tomorrow.

Patterson said there is undeveloped land west of Lee Street Grade within the urban growth boundary that is zoned residential. If housing is developed on the land, the new dwellings would help the city move closer to reaching 85 percent of its residential capacity, which would allow the city to expand its urban growth boundary.

Mayor Phillip Houk also thinks their is room for residential growth along Lee Street Grade. He said a developer looked into building new housing in the area as recently as six months ago, although he declined to name the developer.

Houk is familiar with the Eighth Street Bridge area. He lives on North Main Street and keeps some horses on a property near Lee Street Grade.

Houk said failing to replace the bridge could prevent further development. "I think it's possible (without replacing the bridge) but I think it's much less likely," he said.

While a federal grant covers 90 percent of the project, the city is on the



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

The city of Pendleton is moving ahead with plans to replace the Eighth Street Bridge.

hook for 10 percent, about \$762,043.

An original co-owner of the bridge, the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners agreed to split the local cost but was able to saddle the city with some unwanted property while doing so.

Following months of negotiations, the county agreed to contribute \$381,017 in exchange for the city taking sole responsibility of the bridge and 4.3 miles of county road in city limits.

With an already underfunded street system, much of the county road assumed by Pendleton does meet city standard and will require costly upgrades.

George Murdock, the county board's chairman, said the deal was struck out of a desire to be a good partner to the city, rather than addressing a county priority.

Of the 335 bridges in the county system, Murdock said the Eighth Street Bridge was low on the list until the

city secured the grant and requested the county split the match.

"The Eighth Street Bridge just wasn't high on our radar," he said.

The bridge has been high on the radar of Eighth Street residents, who will be impacted by the construction and see some permanent changes to their driveways and off-street parking.

"I'm never going to love this," Eighth Street resident Rachel Dagley said at a March city council meeting. "I guess that's probably the biggest thing. I don't understand it. I'm not understanding the need for even 10 percent of the city's budget to be expended on this."

The city council hasn't always been on board with the project either.

Neil Brown was one of the three councilors to vote against the bridge's replacement and said he would probably vote against it again if a vote was held today.

"I personally look at grants

as a way to waste money," he said.

In addition to the amount of money the city has to invest in the project, Brown was also concerned about improvements needed for the intersection of Eighth Street and Court Avenue to handle increased traffic flow on the new bridge.

Brown also said new housing development would most likely grow to the south of the city's center rather than the north.

While Brown doesn't buy the premise of the project, he said the concerns he and others have brought forth has improved the project and mitigated some of its impact.

Construction on the bridge will start in summer 2017.

The Fire

with special guest Peter Willis

**FRIDAY, JULY 22**  
7:00 pm, Doors open 6:30 pm

Pendleton Center for the Arts

Tickets \$12 - Reserve by calling 541-278-9201 [pendletonarts.org](http://pendletonarts.org)

## Color My Pendleton

# FUN RUN

June 25, 2016 • 9:00 a.m.

## Roy Raley Park

### Register

[www.travelpendleton.com/color](http://www.travelpendleton.com/color)

\$18 Youth 12 years & under • \$30 Adults • \$70 Family of Four  
CMEO Kids Fun Run @ 8:30am • \$10 Youth 10 years & under

### Title Sponsor

CHI St. Anthony Hospital

#### Color Station Sponsors

#### Community Sponsors

A Travel Pendleton & Pendleton Chamber of Commerce Event