

# Sheriff’s investigation of reporter’s inquiries stokes ire

By **ANDREW SELSKY**  
*Associated Press*

VALE — Journalists in Oregon and beyond have risen in defense of a small newspaper after a county attorney asked the sheriff to investigate whether its journalists broke the law for trying to get comments from government officials after business hours.

Staffers at the *Malheur Enterprise*, a weekly newspaper in the remote town of Vale, said they were just doing their job.

“We’re not going to be bullied,” said editor Les Zaitz.

Malheur County Sheriff Brian Wolfe said Wednesday an inquiry determined no laws had been broken.

“As an elected sheriff, we will always respect the constitutional rights of anybody and everybody. We do believe in freedom of the press and free speech that we believe are our rights given by the Constitution of the United States,” Wolfe said.

The newspaper had been investigating why a car wash did not receive a five-year exemption for local property taxes that was allegedly promised. Bluebird Express Car Wash built a \$4.5 million installation in the town of Ontario after it understood it received the exemption, representing about \$335,000.

Greg Smith, the director for economic development for Malheur County, is responsible for determining and negotiating property tax exemptions. *Malheur Enterprise*



**Les Zaitz had planned on retiring from The Oregonian in 2016 to his range outside of John Day before he and his wife, Scotta Callister, bought the weekly newspaper The Malheur Enterprise in Vale.**

reporter Pat Caldwell sought several times to get comment from Smith, who is also a Republican member of the Oregon Legislature.

“This is an effort to get accurate information,” said Zaitz, a former investigative reporter with *The Oregonian* newspaper and a two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist. “The public is entitled to that information — not only entitled to that

information, it deserves it.”

Smith responded only after the story was published on Aug. 14 with the headline “Malheur County lured company to Ontario with tax break promise, then doesn’t deliver.”

In a statement that the newspaper published online, Smith said no “pre-application” for a property tax exemption had been

approved or signed.

“Over the last six months, me and my staff have been subjected to endless phone calls, hostile emails at all hours of the day and unwelcome office visits,” Smith asserted.

Zaitz said Caldwell sent two emails to Smith during business hours seeking comment. Zaitz said he felt it was his duty to email Smith on Saturday to provide every oppor-

tunity to comment before the newspaper went to press. Located in a small Old West-style building, the weekly publishes 1,400 copies, with additional paid online subscribers.

County Counsel Stephanie Williams asked the sheriff to determine if emails and calls to county economic development officials constituted a crime.

“We looked at harassment, telephonic harassment — really neither one comes close in this situation,” Wolfe said.

The reactions to the investigation varied widely.

One person told Wolfe that if he jailed the journalists, he would deserve to be voted out of office. Another person left a voicemail saying the press reports fake news and the sheriff should do whatever he wants with the journalists.

The Oregon chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists issued a statement rebuking county officials for asking the sheriff to investigate.

“Journalists doggedly pursue the stories they’re working on to inform the public and their readership of what is important to their communities,” said Amanda Waldroupe, president of Oregon SPJ.

Journalists from elsewhere voiced their support.

“The *Fort Bragg Advocate-News* and *Mendocino Beacon* here in California stand with you, *Malheur Enterprise*. Your public servants ought to grow a hide and get used to those weekend emails,” the newspapers tweeted.

## Forecast for Pendleton Area

