

Grass fire: Residents rushed to help save their homes

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went out to see what was happening.

"I thought they had it contained," he said as he saw the flames being fought further down the hill. "Then it went up the hill and there was nobody covering it."

Thinking quickly as the fire headed towards his neighbor's home, Taber grabbed a garden hose and shovel from his neighbor's yard and tried to contain the fire line. A truck driver who's often on the road, Taber said he always worried about not being home when a fire struck and didn't think his neighbors were there Monday.

"It's just amazing how fast it moves, that's why they're so scary," he said. "It's always in the back of your mind if you live here that this place could



Smoke wafts up from the charred ground following a fire on the South Hill just off of Southwest Third Drive in Pendleton.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

go up in flames because I've seen it happen."

A neighbor banging on their windows alerted Dar-

shae Hunter and Phil King.

Hunter and King said they opened the door and the neighbor told them his

drone battery "exploded" and ignited the fire. Neither Hunter nor King said they knew the neighbor's name

but they grabbed hoses and buckets to help.

Fellow neighbors Erika and Cory Egan, Chris Bounds and others snatched up more hoses and buckets to try and help the fire from crossing the gravel road toward their row of homes.

"It's a great way to meet your neighbors, that's for sure," Hunter said, laughing. "There's nothing better to do on Labor Day."

The fire blackened an eastern hillside below Southwest Third Drive, and underbrush and bark snapped and popped and flames burned through the clump of trees near more homes in the shadow of the hillside leading up to Interstate 84.

Pendleton fire kept one water tender on Southwest Third Drive while crews made their way to higher

ground. Narrow dirt roads in the neighborhood provide limited access. Pendleton police officer Chase Addleman helped at the scene and connected a fire hose to the hydrant at Southwest Third Drive and Isaac. Fire crews from Pilot Rock, Umatilla Tribal Fire Department and the Oregon Department of Forestry responded with brush rigs and more.

Crews cleared the scene around 5:30 p.m. Shawn Penninger, assistant fire chief with Pendleton, said the fire appears accidental. The drone operator told them the device crashed in the field, and the battery malfunctioned and set off the fire. The flames charred between 10 to 15 acres, he said, but firefighters protected people and property from harm.

Labor: Oregon labor laws among the strongest in the nation

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that category, which each allow teachers, firefighters and police to engage in collective bargaining; legalize project labor agreements; and do not have "right-to-work" laws.

The final part of each state's score was based on a list of 14 different worker protections, ranging from paid sick leave to recourse for sexual harassment. Oregon ranked third in that category. It checked all of the boxes except paid family leave, which will not take effect statewide until 2023. Currently seven states offer paid family leave.

Babic said as corporations have increased their "grip" on workers, it has become more important than ever for states to push back. In the retail industry, for example, chains have moved to using

computer algorithms to set employee schedules at the last minute based on fluctuating customer levels. Being asked to be on call at all times makes arranging for childcare, college classes or a second job difficult.

"A lot of workers rely on a series of part-time jobs to support them and their families, and it just becomes so precarious," Babic said.

Oregon passed a law in 2017 requiring employers in the retail, hospitality and food service industries with more than 500 employees worldwide to give their employees at least seven days notice of their shifts (changing to 14 days starting July 1, 2020). Exceptions are made if the employee has volunteered to be placed on a stand-by list to be given the opportunity to fill in for a coworker last-minute if needed.



EO file photo

Workers sort red onions on a conveyor belt while working at the River Point Farms packaging facility outside of Hermiston in 2016.

Employers who fit the above criteria are also not allowed to schedule an employee for a second shift within 10 hours of finishing their previous shift.

Oregon has increased other worker protections in

recent years as well. In 2016 it became the fourth state to mandate sick leave. Employees with at least 10 employees must offer at least 40 hours of paid sick leave per year, and smaller employers must allow at least 40 hours

of unpaid sick leave.

Oregon employers are also required to provide an unpaid, 30-minute lunch break for employees working more than six hours at a time, and an additional meal break should be added for shifts over 14 hours. Employees are also given a paid 10-minute rest break for every four hours worked.

Starting Sept. 29, employers will be required to allow breastfeeding mothers of children under 18 months old to take a break to pump their breast milk as many times as there is a "reasonable" need. Beginning Jan. 1, employers will also be required to provide "appropriate" accommodations to pregnant employees, including additional rest periods from manual labor if needed.

For a list of guidelines on other workplace laws in the

state, including whistleblower protections, child labor laws, holiday pay, drug testing, internships and more, visit www.oregon.gov/boli/TA/Pages/T_FAQ_Tafaq.aspx.

Workers whose rights have been violated can seek recourse through the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries. Saul Hubbard, communications director for BOLI, said the bureau enforces labor laws such as minimum wage, overtime meal breaks, prevailing wage on publicly funded projects and sick leave.

BOLI's civil rights division also investigates potential cases of illegal discrimination in the workplace on the basis of protected classes such as race, sexual orientation and religion. The bureau also protects whistleblowers from retaliation after filing a complaint or reporting illegal activity.

Steele: Local man wins back property, more from 'long con'

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never did anything wrong to Steele. They represented themselves and brought one of their daughters. Elizabeth Avila cried while testifying they had no means to pay Steele. The couple claimed they were ignorant of court orders or whether they should have signed property deeds over to Steele.

But Circuit Judge Rob Collins had none of it.

Collins, polite but resolute, told the Avilas prior hearings covered their arguments. Circuit Judge Dan Hill previously ruled they took the homes and money improperly from Steele. Friday's proceeding, Collins said, was about one thing — could they prove they returned Steele's money and homes?

They could not.

Collins concluded the hearing with the order granting Steele his deeds and the money judgement for \$127,336.59 plus interest. The judge's order did not go over well with Pedro Avila.

"I still have two daughters I can give to him," he exclaimed.

Collins warned him for being out of line.

Brent Smith, Steele's attorney, speaking Monday, said Elizabeth Avila is a good liar, and some parts of her story were true, which made sifting bogus claims from reality all the more difficult. But the order is a boon for Steele.

"First of all, he has clear title to his property," Smith said, and the judgement "quieted" the titles, ending any



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Steve Steele, left, speaks with his attorney, Brent Smith, before Friday's hearing at the Umatilla County Courthouse.

disputes over the properties. And the money judgement means Steele can garnish wages and such from the Avilas, but Smith said it may be a long shot for Steele to get back any money.

"They took more than \$127,000 from Steve, but it was how much we were able to prove," he said.

Steele's case relied on a protective order for elder abuse rather than following

a route of a lawsuit. Smith said such orders are relatively new to Oregon courts, but the process expedited certain matters.

"We needed them out of his life right away," he said, "and we needed them off the property."

Steele said he moved back into his home in Stanfield earlier this year after a police raid roused drug dealers from the place and a neighbor changed the locks for him. He lives on \$819 a month in Social Security disability and is renting out the Hermiston home for \$600 a month, he said, but the money does not go far after expenses. He also cannot care for the property on his own.

"Basically I'm relying on the kindness of friends to support me," Steele said.

His aim is to sell the homes, he said, leave behind the chaos of recent years and "live out my life as best I can."

Friday's hearing did not wrap up everything. The last attorney to represent the Avilas, Garrett Sharp of Hood River, withdrew in June. However, Smith said the Avila's paid Sharp with Steele's money. Smith said he has to work out a way to conclude that.

Elizabeth Avila is not done with Steele. She took to Facebook on Saturday and lamented how the court was unfair. She asserted she is preparing to post evidence on Facebook supporting her claims.

Her next court date in the theft and mistreatment case is Sept. 27.

Fire station: Pendleton openly solicited proposals for new usage

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restaurant. Tsiatsos said he had been looking for other places to try out the concept, and his architect contacted him about the opportunity in Pendleton.

He said it was still a "preliminary" idea, but Tsiatsos wants to turn the fire station's ground level into a restaurant and turn its upper story into a boutique hotel.

The city's property also includes two houses it rents out. Under Tsiatsos' proposal, he would demolish them and either put in more parking or retail space.

The concept isn't set in stone yet because Tsiatsos said he would need to see engineering studies to determine whether the station could sustain a second story development.

Tsiatsos considers his fire department proposal a "high risk/high reward" concept, and if the council selected his project, he would want to seek out funding from the urban renewal district to make the project feasible.

Hart, the owner of a dirt bike equipment retailer in

Hillsboro, confirmed he also submitted a proposal for the fire station, but after consulting with the city, he declined to discuss the details of his proposal.

Joseph Hull, the director of business development/operations for McCormack Construction Co., said McCormack was partnering with Hart on the proposal, but he deferred questions on the proposal to Hart.

McCormack has already established a working relationship with the city, having been the general contractor and construction manager for the new fire station.

Hart's business, Moto Stuff, sells dirt bike equipment like brake systems and foot pegs, advertising itself as offering "Trick Stuff for the Greatest Dirtbikes on Earth!"

The process

The city wants to withhold information on the proposals until the council interviews, which Corbett said will take place at the last council workshop in September, which is set

for Sept. 24.

He said he didn't know if the interview would be open to a public audience, but Oregon open meetings law states any council decisions have to be held in an open session.

Sept. 24 may also be the first chance the public gets access to the proposal documents, which the city denied in the *East Oregonian's* public records request.

In an email, City Attorney Nancy Kerns explained why the city was rejecting the request.

"The request for proposals which was issued by the City specifically provided that proposal materials would be exempt from public records disclosure until after preliminary evaluations were completed," she wrote, later citing specific public record disclosure exemptions spelled out in Oregon state law. "The City did this to insure proposers that they could have the opportunity to submit and present their proposals without risk of another proposer gaining access to the information contained therein."

Although the fire station property is unappraised, Kerns said the value of the property is relevant to the material and could also be exempted from public disclosure.

In the request for proposal document, the city states that it will keep the submissions confidential until the preliminary selection of the proposal "within the bounds of public records law."

Locals don't bid

Whoever ends up with the fire station will have a uniquely situated neighbor. The fire station shares a wall with The Muffler Shop, which is both its literal name and a descriptor of its services.

The Muffler Shop co-owner Mason Carlson was among a group of business owners who lobbied the city to repeal its river quarter building requirements for the area, which the council did in late 2018.

Without its repeal, Carlson said the city would be unable to sell the fire station because of the river quar-

ter's onerous standards.

Carlson said he might have bid on the neighboring fire station if it was a traditional sales process, but he didn't want to have to cater to the city to acquire the property.

He didn't imagine business changing too much once the fire station changes hands, but he didn't rule out entertaining an offer from the new owner.

"Everything's for sale," he said, adding that it was just a matter of whether the new owner could afford it.

Well before the council established a request for proposal process for the fire station building, Darrin Umbarger expressed interest in it.

In April 2018, the CEO of Clearview Disability Resource Center told the council that he wanted to use it to consolidate Clearview's medical supply closet and other operations in one building.

Despite the early interest, Umbarger said he ultimately decided against submitting a proposal because a city official told him his concept

didn't fit the city's vision for the property, declining to name who the official was.

While the nonprofit wouldn't have added anything to the property tax rolls, Umbarger said Clearview offers a different kind of value through the hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings to community members through the supply closet.

Umbarger said he's moved on from the fire station, but he's still looking to expand Clearview into a regional service.

Corbett said the request for proposal process wasn't meant to exclude anyone.

"We wrote the proposal to be inclusive of everyone who had expressed an interest in that facility," he said. "The council, as a group, did not take a position one way or the other, either encouraging or discouraging people from making proposals."

Corbett said he never told Umbarger that Clearview wasn't a good fit for the fire station, but he couldn't account for other city officials.