

Auditor finds money missing at Walla Walla Community College

Potential misuse of funds by longtime rodeo coach Buster Barton reported

By SHEILA HAGAR
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — A recent report by the Office of the Washington State Auditor found misuse and loss of almost \$7,000 from Walla Walla Community College.

The report, published in late December, also found weaknesses in WWCC's internal financial controls.

As required by law, WWCC officials notified the auditor's office in July of potential misuse of funds by longtime college rodeo coach Buster Barton.

Barton had overseen the school's rodeo team — part of the school's athletic programs — since 2004, leading men's and women's teams to regional and national competitions. He was recruited to the school as a student in 1997, according to past *Union-Bulletin* stories.

College officials said Wednesday that Barton is no longer employed there. As head rodeo coach, his most recent annual salary was \$55,091 for coaching and other assigned duties, said



Walla Walla Union-Bulletin Photo/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

Walla Walla Community College officials notified the Washington State Auditor in July of potential misuse of funds by longtime college rodeo coach Buster Barton, who had overseen the school's rodeo team — part of the school's athletic programs — since 2004, leading men's and women's teams to regional and national competitions. He was recruited to the school as a student in 1997.

Sherry Hartford, vice president of human resources.

In a letter to WWCC's administration, state Auditor Pat McCarthy said between July 2018 and last April, Barton misappropriated funds that should have been given to students to buy meals on team road trips under the school's policy.

The state auditor's office does not determine if a crime has been committed, thus uses the terms "misplaced" and "misappropriated" in its reports, spokeswoman Kath-

leen Cooper said Wednesday.

The WWCC case has been referred to Walla Walla County Prosecuting Attorney Jim Nagle's office, Cooper said.

Nagle, however, said the auditor's report lacked the investigative information needed to determine if prosecution is appropriate and that his office can't pursue a case without it.

College officials hired an independent investigator, who determined there were possible losses by Barton

totaling \$6,969.

Barton told the investigator he misplaced horse-stall rental revenues generated by sporting events at the college and made unauthorized and personal purchases using a WWCC-issued bank card, McCarthy's report said.

State auditing staff reviewed that investigation and concluded a total \$4,995 of misappropriation occurred, and \$1,982 of questionable spending by Barton took place during the same period.

The missing meal money was given to the coach in advance of rodeo events to cover student meals.

After such trips during the 2018-19 school year, however, Barton submitted travel expenses indicating the advance funds had been given to the students when they had not, the report said.

One credit card charge for \$8 by Barton paid for unallowable expenses and was also deemed misappropriation by state auditors.

The report said questionable spending by Barton added up to \$1,982, of which \$1,420 was the missing rodeo stall-rental fees and \$562 came from unauthorized credit card purchases.

Last May, Barton told the investigator he had experienced personal issues during that time and might have used the bank card inadvertently for personal purchases, the auditors said.

Barton agreed he had not given students the designated meal funds, instead paying for the food himself. Cooper could not say where any difference in those two amounts ended up.

On Aug. 26, Barton agreed to repay the college \$6,969, according to McCarthy's report.

That restitution has begun, WWCC officials said Wednesday.

Auditors also said internal financial controls at the college were inadequate to safeguard public resources.

The investigation found a lack of oversight and monitoring of bank card use, inadequate processes for handling student meal funds and no oversight of cash transactions for horse-stall rentals at the school.

McCarthy's office recommended school officials bolster control over those areas to safeguard public dollars and ensure compliance with WWCC policies.

As well, school officials should seek recovery of investigation costs of \$3,650 from Barton and/or WWCC's insurance provider, as appropriate.

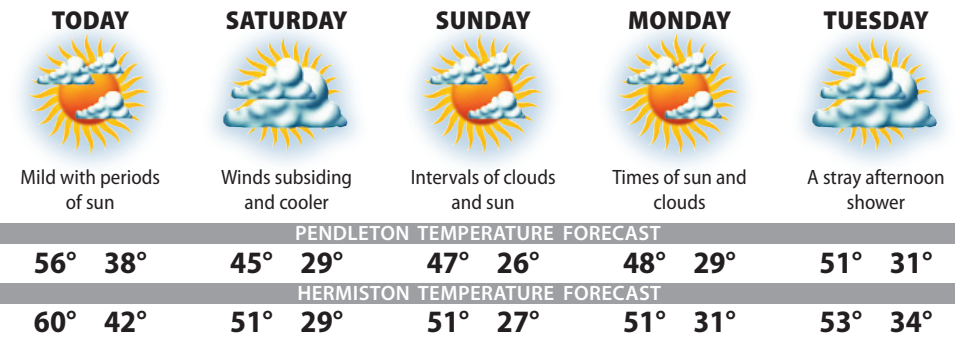
In their response to the findings, college officials laid out new rules for credit card purchases and keeping track of receipts.

As well, students getting a meal allowance now provide their student identification number and sign for cash received. Coaches are to charge group meals on the college bank card.

The rodeo team is being led by interim head coach Brent Palmer.

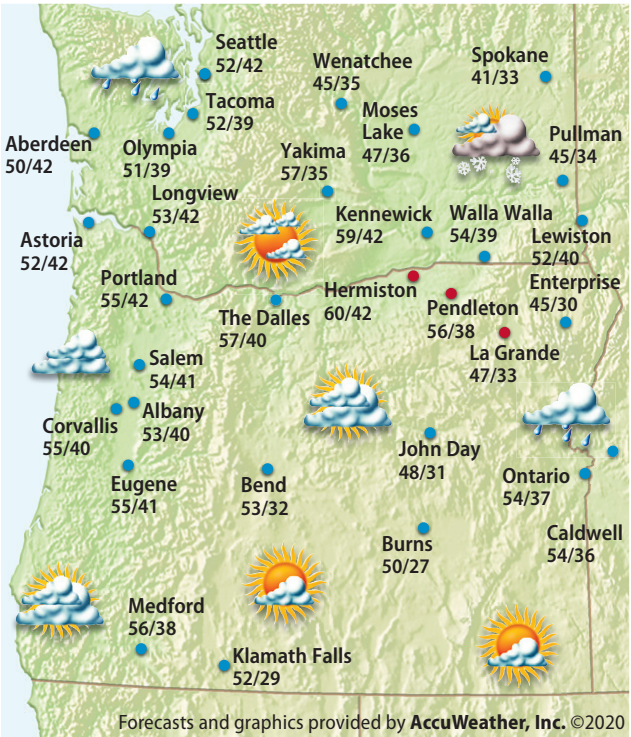
McCarthy's office will examine the case again as part of a full audit that begins later this year and will cover years 2016 to 2019, Cooper said.

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.



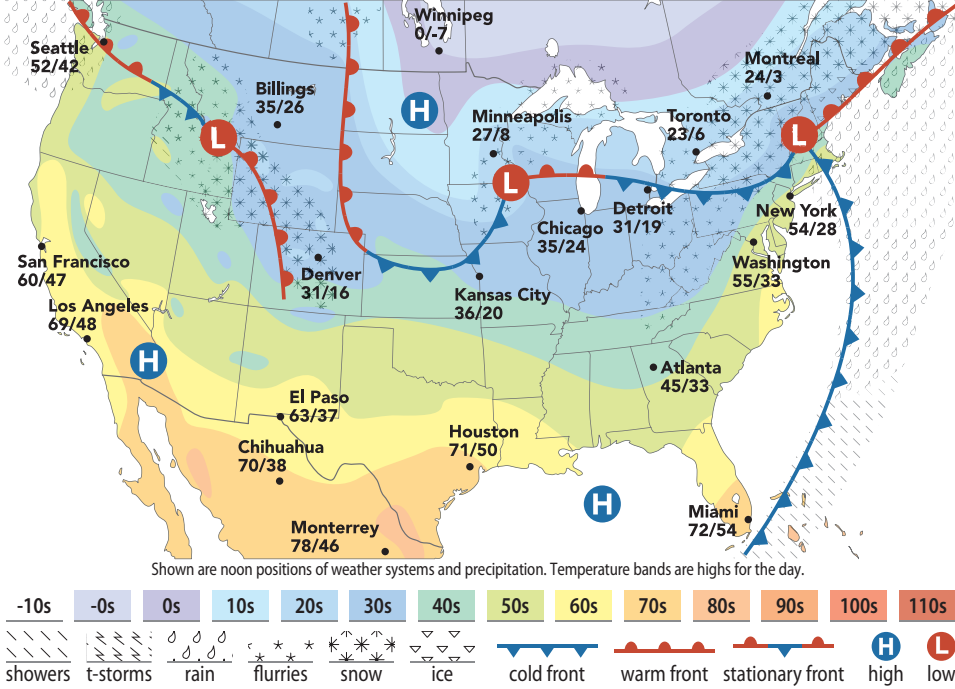
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NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 88° in Immokalee, Fla. Low -32° in Antero Reservoir, Colo.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



Treasure Valley Reload Center meets railroad's design-progress benchmark

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

ONTARIO — Malheur County leaders aim to start construction of a truck-to-train shipping center north of Nyssa in about a year and have it ready to take shipments in the fall of 2021.

That partly reflects Union Pacific Railroad Co.'s written endorsement of design progress, county Economic Development Director Greg Smith said at the Idaho-Malheur County Onion Growers Associations annual meeting on Tuesday in Ontario.

Planning for the intermodal shipping facility, to be called Treasure Valley Reload Center, started more than three years ago. It will be mainly for onions — now trucked some 230 miles to Wallula, Washington, only to return east on trains to big markets — but will be available for shipment of other agricultural products.

The onion industry of Southwestern Idaho and Southeastern Oregon supplies more than 40% of U.S. consumption in winter and early spring, meeting participants said.

Smith said that since the local group's engineers met UP's required 5%, then 30%,

progress benchmarks, the railroad's own engineers will team with them to guide the project to final internal approval.

"Now that we have the letter from UP, we move to 100% design-engineering," he said.

"We are looking forward to working with you on developing new rail service to this location," Union Pacific wrote in a Jan. 28 letter to Malheur County Development Corp. "Based on the 30% design dated Jan. 15 and representations made to UP, UP plans to move forward with its track authorization process subject to the company (MCDC) satisfying the conditions."

MCDC must complete various project tasks and pay \$125,000 — to be treated as a deposit — for UP's engineering and other project work, the letter said. MCDC will work with a UP marketing and sales representative to prepare a plan for the rail service it would receive and the rates it would pay.

An environmental assessment, and water impact



Smith

and soil compaction studies, have been completed as part of reaching Union Pacific's 30% design-engineering progress threshold, Smith said.

Treasure Valley Reload Center is planned on 294-plus acres on the east side of Arcadia Boulevard from Gamble Island Road north to Gem Avenue. UP's main line forms the east boundary. The site purchase was completed Jan. 11.

The Oregon Transportation Commission last summer gave conditional approval to \$26 million in grant funding.

Smith would not identify the would-be operator, but said it is publicly traded company that has done business in the Treasure Valley for years and "has avenues to opening new markets."

The *Malheur Enterprise* has reported the proposed operator is Americold, a national shipping and warehouse company.

Treasure Valley Onion Shippers LLC formed recently after Americold said it wanted to negotiate with one group, said Grant Kitamura of the MCDC board and Baker & Murakami Produce, a major onion shipper in Ontario.

BRIEFLY

Benton County fined \$30K after road worker's death in 2019

ALBANY — Benton County has been cited for five safety violations and fined more than \$30,000 by the state of Oregon after a 2019 accident that killed a county road maintenance worker.

The Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Division launched an investigation after Pete Neuman, 59, was crushed by a heavy piece of equipment called a "skidder" that's used to move logs, the *Albany Democrat-Herald* reported Thursday.

The state faulted Benton County for providing a faulty piece of equipment, not providing adequate safety checks and not properly training employees. The fines total \$30,500.

The county has 30 days to appeal. No criminal charges have been filed in the matter.

Neuman was partially ejected from the skidder on Aug. 9, 2019, after it rolled about 300 yards down a steep hillside near Corvallis and flipped over. The skidder landed on top of Neuman, killing him.

— Associated Press

CORRECTIONS: The *East Oregonian* works hard to be accurate and sincerely regrets any errors. If you notice a mistake in the paper, please call 541-966-0818.

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