

# Joseph:

Continued from Page A1

official conclusion must be done in open session.”

He said the process might not satisfy all, but it’s “the right and legal way to do it.”

He added that “I don’t have any written accusations against a councilor for harassment or anything. But once I receive that correspondence and open it, that councilor and the rest of the council will be presented with that information.”

At present, it’s all hearsay, he said.

“Right now, all of this harassment stuff is ‘he-said, she-said’ stuff. That’s not how we operate; that’s not how anyone should operate,” he said. “It’s got to be a written complaint from a citizen, a councilor or an employee. As of right now, I haven’t received any of that.”

In addressing the audience, he empathized with those feeling frustrated.

“I realize some of you are feeling that frustration because nothing’s happen-



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

**Joseph Mayor Belinda Buswell, left, reads the Oregon Revised Statutes that specify what a public body may do in executive session prior to entering such a session Thursday, June 3, 2021. Councilwoman Kathy Bingham listens at right.**

ing,” Eckstein said. “Well, no one’s stepping forward, to be quite honest.”

The entire harassment issue arose when Parks Director Dennis Welch made such allegations that led to his having to take sick time off from March to May. That was followed April 1 by former Administrator/Recorder Larry Braden alerting the council of harassment violations during a council meeting and then he submitted his resignation April 16 for

those same reasons.

Since then, Welch has returned to work after talking with Eckstein. Braden has declined to specify the type of harassment or from whom.

But it appears disputes are occurring among city staff, Eckstein said.

“There have been allegations at the city level among city staff and those are being handled in the exact same way I just explained,” he said. “So once those time

frames have expired, a decision will be made and you’ll know what that decision is.”

He asked for the citizenry’s indulgence.

“I would just ask you to exercise patience as we make sure that everybody — the accuser and the defendants in any case — are given their fair chance to speak and respond to issues,” Eckstein said. “I know if you were in that situation, I guarantee you’d want the same thing, too.”

# Fire:

Continued from Page A1

through the region Thursday night and Friday morning.

Wind and terrain were major factors in the initial spread of the fire, which grew to about 2,500 acres by the end of the day Friday and 3,700 by Saturday evening.

Wind, though, also proved to later be a bit of an aid to firefighters.

According to the Oregon Department of Forestry’s Sunday report on the blaze, air resources faced extra challenges from extreme winds in the Northeastern portion of Wallowa County. The wind, though, pushed the active fire line back onto itself, aiding efforts to help

get the fire under control.

Christie Shaw, public information officer for the ODF, told the Chieftain Sunday afternoon that winds grounded air attack efforts during the day Saturday.

“The wind has been difficult in that terrain,” she said. “It’s been challenging for folks. Yesterday we shut down air operations for a few hours.”

Winds were estimated at around 32 mph, according to U.S. Forest Service trainee Sara Betscheider. She said, though, there’s not a specific baseline wind-speed that results in ground- ing aircrafts fighting fires.

“No magic numbers on the windspeed,” she said. “It was high, erratic winds, which in turn ... created

low visibility.” Shaw said the fire has been wind- and terrain-driven.

“It’s burned primarily up and down the canyon,” she said. “(Crews) are trying to really hold it in the bottom of Cottonwood Creek. It’s burning up and down the canyon. That is the part we can control.”

The challenge in battling the blaze is the location, ODF Deputy Agency Administrator Matt Howard said.

“This is probably one of the most difficult places to fight fire in Oregon,” he said in a press release from the ODF. “Joseph Canyon is known for its extreme terrain, communication challenges and natural hazards.”

The fire continued to grow Sunday, but at a

slower rate thanks to cooler temperatures and more moderate winds.

The blaze reached 4,000 acres by Sunday night, a much slower spread than Saturday.

“We won today. We didn’t win Saturday, but we won today,” Andy Hayes, incident commander trainee for the Blue Mountain Type 3 Incident Management Team, said Sunday.

The fire’s spread was held to 300 acres Sunday. The improved conditions allowed firefighters to work strategically. Added resources and burnout operations along Cottonwood Creek help create an anchor point to begin establishing containment lines.

Hundreds of personnel from various agencies have been fighting the fires.

# Cash:

Continued from Page A1

County Commissioner Todd Nash, who also is on the fair board, said he brought up the fairground’s needs to senators and representatives — including Levy — when he learned of the project money they had to dole out.

“When I first heard about that and was on the phone with a senator or representative, I did mention to them that the Wallowa County Fairgrounds would be a nice place to put it,” he said. “Didn’t hear anything back from Sen. (Bill) Hansell. It was about a week later that Rep. Levy decided to do that. We weren’t petitioned to say, ‘Where would you like this?’ It kinda came out of left field and caught us flat-footed a little bit.”

Nash said he was thrilled by the prospect of the fair board receiving such a boost to help restore the dilapidated grounds.

“I still believe that is the heart and soul of our community,” he said. “It’s where we gather not only for fair, (but) for events, for funerals, for graduation parties, you name it. The Cloverleaf Hall has the largest indoor space in Wallowa County.”

## Laundry list of repairs needed

Many of the buildings at the grounds need varying levels of repair, with the total cost estimated at around \$647,000.

Grants and fundraisers have been used through the years to help fund upkeep, and Stanley, who has been on the board since 2010 and been the chairwoman most of that time, said there is an effort to get some repairs done annually.

“We try every year to have money in our budget to conquer some project on our fair,” she said, pointing to the grandstands as an asset that recently was upgraded.

Even so, Stanley admitted that, “We struggle to support our fairgrounds. This is going

to be much needed.”

Nash rattled off a laundry list of restoration tasks that need to be done.

“Right now, the indoor area is in pretty tough shape. It needs a new roof. That was one of the top priorities,” he said. “There’s quite a few things with Cloverleaf Hall itself, the primary one being the furnace. There is an outside chance we’re going to get money to do that. But all of the buildings, the arena itself, the outdoor arena — the footing gets complaints every year from horses slipping.”

“The arena infrastructure, there with old panels and rotted posts. There is just a myriad of things there that need help with. Outdoor livestock facilities are in need of repair.”

Bringing restrooms to Americans with Disabilities Act standards, upgrading the snack bar and more are also on the list.

Stanley said she believes the grandstands are the oldest structure on the grounds, and added the beef and sheep barns were constructed in the 1940s.

“I’m hoping at our fair board meeting we’ll prioritize our projects so we know what is No. 1,” she said.

It’s uncertain exactly when the funds would be provided to the board. According to EO Media Group reporter Gary Warner, the money would be in an “as of yet undesignated bill” and would be part of the 2021-23 budget, but won’t be made official until the final day of the legislative session, which will be, at the latest, June 27. The budget goes into effect July 1.

Stanley said she hopes the money is in hand so that work can begin later this fall before the snow flies. Work would then resume in 2022.

If the funding does indeed come through, “it means a facility that is more rentable and more ready for events (in) our community which is important to all of us,” Stanley said. That’s the main thing.

“It will, for our community, be huge.”

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