

Youth council reaches out to mayors



(From left) Don Williams, Cindy Weeldreyer, Tom Munroe, Karen Munsell, Richard Meyers, Scott Shepherd and Krista Parent.

By Caitlyn May
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During the 2017 Oregon Legislative Session, the Cottage Grove Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) managed to see a bill through from concept to

law and now, they want to make sure it's followed.

House Bill 3030 was passed during the last session after Rep. Cedric Hayden agreed to work with YAC, the city and community members to take on the use of nitrous oxide by minors. The

bill prohibits the sale of nitrous oxide, also known as whippets, to individuals under the age of 21.

After the law went into effect this year, YAC reached out to Oregon's mayors.

"They felt it was important to write a letter," city manager Richard Meyers said. The group sent a letter detailing its efforts, the path of the bill through the legislature and the consequences of breaking the new law to all 239 mayors in the state. As of Feb. 15, the mayor of Springfield responded to the group.

HB 3030 began when Cottage Grove resident Karen Munsell went before the city council detailing the harmful effects of nitrous oxide. The canisters were routinely sold at tobacco shops and convenience stores for 99 cents each and provide a quick, dangerous high for users. The canisters are intended to be used in baking. However, their

low price point and easy-to-use nature saw them being used to get high.

Munsell spoke with several community members including police chief Scott Shepherd, former mayor Tom Munroe, former superintendent Krista Parent and Meyers to work on legislation to ban the use of the canisters.

During her speech at a council meeting concerning the issue, a YAC member took interest and brought the matter to the rest of the group. Under Meyers' guidance and with help from the community, the group was able to catch the attention of Hayden and spearheaded the issue, testifying before state legislators.

The law, which went into effect in Jan. 1 imposes penalties against store owners who are caught selling the product to minors.

Zombie houses

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left officials with few options other than to declare the house a nuisance and continue to send letters to owners who had already left town and stopped paying the mortgage on the home. The letters hardly ever elicited a response when the owners could be found and when ownership was a mystery, there were even fewer options for the city.

"There are loopholes," Meyers said. "They should have to register the owner."

The house on Adams is still listed on county tax roles as belonging to a family trust. However, several financial institutions have had their stakes in the house as well, leaving the city to wade through records to determine who is responsible for the property.

On Feb. 12 when the garage caught fire and threatened the tree line that separated it from a block of neighbors, months

of council discussions on how to handle zombie houses boiled over.

According to Meyers, city law enforcement has a person of interest they are hoping to speak to concerning the fire. Cottage Grove Police Chief Scott Shepherd was unavailable as of press time.

The empty house and a string of fires, according to Meyers, met on Adams that day.

After the reported suspect(s) is caught and the damage repaired to the house, what can the city do about the small army of zombie houses? Not much and it's not alone.

Cities across the country are still wringing their hands over the lots of empty houses left over from the great recession. In 2016, the city of Portland foreclosed on its first house in nearly half a century after 24 years of complaints and more than \$66,000 in liens against the property. A code change that allowed homes to be sold for market value, rather than the total cost of the liens, was cited as the driving factor in the home's foreclosure (and four others) but it still left the city with more than 400 empty houses.

According to county records, Cottage Grove currently has 10 foreclosed homes but that number does not include homes that have not yet begun the official

foreclosure process but have already been abandoned by homeowners, making it difficult to pinpoint exactly how many of these homes fall into the zombie home category. In 2017, Lane County sent 15 empty homes in Cottage Grove up for auction.

"People could be living in them just like you or I live in them, taking care of them and so it's not a problem. We find out when it's a problem," Meyers told the council in November.

As of Feb. 16, he said the city is "watching" approximately five zombie homes.

At the end of last year, city officials worked with their attorneys to address a house on 6th St. that had begun to pose a public health threat. The house had been abandoned years before and by 2017, several individuals were living in the home.

Meyers said the city refused to turn the water on to the house without a rental agreement but electricity was provided by an outside company. Law enforcement officials throughout the state are encountering individuals who have illegally taken possession of homes in foreclosure due to the advice of several websites that detail how to use "squatters rights." However, Oregon law maintains that a squatter must prove that they have used the home openly for at least 10 years and has reason

to believe they own the home. The law does not cover people who are aware they are trespassing on the property.

In the case of the house on 6th St., law enforcement had visited the property at least 30 times, according to Meyers, and the individuals were aware they were not legally allowed inside the home. Officials were able to contact the owner of the home and strike a deal: the city would lease the home for \$12 a year, enabling officials to clear the property.

More than a month after removing the squatters, clean-up crews are still working.

"Rats," Meyers said. An infestation of rodents had reportedly grown to the point it impeded the clean-up process. "We can't go in and remove all the trash because the rats might run and scatter into neighbors' yards and the sewer system," Meyers said. "So we're removing a layer of trash and having the exterminator come in and then removing another layer." According to Meyers, the default exterminator fell ill at the sight of the house and his manager had to be brought in to handle the clean-up.

The cost of the extensive clean-up, which includes storing the property left behind by the squatters in adherence to state law, initially fell to the city. However, according to Meyers, plans were in place to bill the bank that owned the property and shortly after abatement on the house started, so did the long-delayed foreclosure process.

Meyers plans to send a bill to the responsible party for the house on Adams Ave. as well and bring an item before the city council in an attempt to take possession of the house.

The "receivership" method was discussed during the November council meeting as a possible fix for the 6th St. house before being set aside for the lease deal. Essentially, according to the city attorney, the city would take possession of the house as a result of the multiple liens against the property as well as the numerous visits by local police.

LORANE NEWS

Final district Battle of the Books is this Friday, February 23 beginning at 2:30 p.m. in the Applegate Elementary gym. Winner will represent the school.

Come out to Lorane Grange this Friday, Feb. 23 for a Barn Dance from 7 -10 p.m. A dance for all ages with \$10 for the caller.

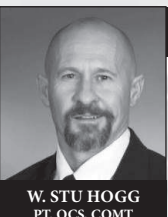
Then on Saturday, Ladies from the Rebekah Lodge are having a bake sale at their hall from 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. Come out and get some delicious goodies.

Crow Grange is holding an English Country Dance at 3 p.m. at their hall. Enjoy learning for all ages and even wear era costumes if you would like. After you get all that exercise, head over to Lirane Grange for a wonderful dinner.

Lorane Grange Spaghetti Dinner and Bingo is this Saturday, Feb. 24 starting at 5:30 p.m. for dinner and 6:30 p.m. for bingo. Had a great turnout last month, hope to see you all again. Dinner \$6 for adults, \$3 children 8 and under. If you only come for bingo, \$2 for dessert and beverages.

Next Lorane Grange meeting is March 1, at 7 p.m.

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