

AFSCME, county at odds

Two organizations have been negotiating since June

By Emily Mentzer
The Itemizer-Observer

POLK COUNTY — Polk County mental health workers and administration are in a “cooling off” period after unsuccessful negotiations over wages.

“Basically, we’ve been bargaining with the county

since June,” said Dustin Breittwieser, mental health counselor and member of the bargaining unit for American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 173. “We have not been able to reach a settlement. They’re taking a hard line. They cited political reasons for not wanting to give us a raise. They won’t budget off 1.5 percent (cost-of-living adjustment) with us.”

County Administrator



Greg Hansen said AFSCME members are asking for 2.5 percent COLA, a difference of 1 percent. The county and the union essentially agree on selective salary increases for 10 to 15 positions, he added.

Amanda Stevens, Polk County mental health worker, said at the Sept. 23 county commissioner meeting that the “insufficient COLA” offered “makes me feel devalued and disrespected.”

She said her workload — and that of all mental health workers in the county — has increased significantly because of reforms to Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act.

“We serve more clients, with additional monitoring

requirements,” Stevens said. More reports are being made and investigated.

Joseph West, AFSCME representative, said state requirements in reporting have put a lot more work on mental health counselors such as Stevens.

“Workers in her department used to do six- to seven-page reports,” West said. “Now those reports are 80 to 90 pages.”

West said that union workers have worked with the county in the past, accepting lower increases and taking layoffs. But now, the county has roughly \$3 million more in the mental health budget.

“The wage increases that the mental health — and our overall public service workers — are requesting or trying to reach with the county are pretty much on average with most of what we’re seeing (in other AFSCME represented agencies),” West said.

Hansen said the additional revenue in the mental health budget has gone to contingency and increases in staffing and equipment. He noted that he tries to keep county workers paid on the same level as those in five other counties used to compare: Linn, Benton, Lincoln, Yamhill and Tillamook.

Hansen said he doesn’t agree that the reason the county is keeping firm at its 1.5 percent COLA offer is political.

“Recently we went for a public safety levy,” he said. “The county is very cognizant of that, and are stewards of the public’s money. I don’t think it’s the best time to give a more than generous COLA.”

During the cooling off period, the county and union will meet with a mediator two more times to try and work out the wage portion of the contract.



The new Monmouth Historic Walking Tour app for iPhones or Androids allows users to explore the tales of buildings in town and on Western Oregon University’s campus.

Explore, learn about Monmouth

New app makes it easy to walk around downtown, WOU

By Emily Mentzer
The Itemizer-Observer

MONMOUTH — A new app for smartphones makes it easier than ever to find out more about historic buildings in the city of Monmouth.

The app, Historic Monmouth Walking Tour, is available for both iPhones and Google formats. It cost about \$6,000, which was paid for through a grant, said Mark Fancy, Monmouth community development manager.

Once downloaded, the app provides users with information, pictures and history about 29 historic sites in Monmouth, including Western Oregon University. A global positioning system icon allows users to identify

where they are in the city and see where on the map the next historic site is.

The app is very basic. The GPS function does not automatically update to show where you are or in what direction you are walking. No notifications are available as you pass by historic sites, so you have to be looking for them.

It’s free to download and use. The map is easy to read, and the facts are interesting. Additional photos are included with some sites, featuring historic pictures of a place, or sometimes photos of what it looks like inside.

The app also features “fun facts” about Monmouth, including that the sequoia tree that is decorated every year on Western Oregon University’s campus was planted in 1887.

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Dallas author wins award for children’s book

Itemizer-Observer staff report

DALLAS — Kim Conolly, a Dallas author, has won the Cascade Award for her unpublished children’s book, “I’ll Tuck You in, Mama,” at the Oregon Christian Writers Summer Conference held in Portland in August.

The contest received more than 225 entries.

Finals judges were top editors, agents, and authors from the Christian publishing industry.

Jeff Gerke, a Writer’s Digest author, and Susan May Warren, an award-winning author, presented the

awards.

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