

Local & State

COUNCIL

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The issue was one of several topics councilors discussed during their regular meeting Tuesday at City Hall.

Dave Hunsaker of Baker City said he thinks the ban should remain in place.

“I’m not here to try to debate the benefits or detriments of the marijuana issue,” Hunsaker said. “But I am here to register mine and my wife’s desire that we leave that issue as the voters have already decided it and as we have decided it amongst ourselves.”

Hunsaker believes the issue is “best left alone” and that he doesn’t “think that it’s worth it” for the Council to reconsider the ban.

He had lived previously in Colorado and had seen the effects when that state legalized marijuana.

Alice Knapp of Baker City also voiced her objections to the possibility of Baker City allowing marijuana dispensaries.

“Huntington and Sumpter both have dispensaries and they’re in Baker County and that is part of their income,” Knapp said. “And I do have rentals, this is my income, and I have seen what irresponsible uses of opioids and marijuana does to my property.”

Marvin Sundean of Baker City said he is proud of the county for voting to “opt out of the legalization of marijuana.”

Sundean has worked as a prison volunteer for 25 years. He told councilors that prisoners have told him that marijuana was not addictive but they later told him they “needed a bigger buzz” and turned to opioids.

“To legalize marijuana in our little city to go along with the

crowd just because of a few more tax dollars, I think we’re barking up the wrong tree and it’s a very risky issue to deal with,” Sundean said.

Marijuana use by adults is legal in Oregon, but cities and counties had the option of banning retail sales and other marijuana-related businesses in their jurisdictions.

Perry, who was elected in November 2018 and sworn in as a councilor this January, said she suggested the discussion based on the hundreds of thousands of dollars Huntington and Sumpter have received from taxing dispensaries in those cities.

Perry said Baker City could use tax revenue for “enforcement of our dreadful meth problem.”

“But I truly respect everybody’s feelings and I agree with you,” Perry said Tuesday. “I don’t want more drugs in Baker, I don’t want to encourage our kids to use drugs. I wish they were just gone completely, but I do want you to understand the whole reason I was looking at that was through a revenue standpoint.”

Perry said she has heard from constituents who support the idea of allowing dispensaries.

“Respectfully, I get it,” she said. “We don’t want to encourage marijuana sales here.”

Councilor Mike Downing, who was also a member of the Council during the 2015 vote to ban dispensaries, said he stands by that vote.

He said the Council learned a lot about marijuana during its deliberations at that time, and he suggested people read minutes from meetings in 2015, available on the city’s website, www.bakercity.com

“We had numerous presentations from the police chief at the

time and the district attorney,” Downing said.

Mayor Loran Joseph pointed out that Huntington in particular has benefited from its proximity to Idaho, where marijuana remains illegal. Joseph said he doesn’t believe Baker City would collect nearly as much in taxes as Huntington has.

In other topics Tuesday, Bill Uttenreuther told councilors he’s concerned about how the issue of noxious weed growth is handled.

“We need some help with weeds in town,” Uttenreuther said.

He thanked Councilor Randy Schiewe, along with Rocky Brown and Mitch Osborn, for their volunteer work in dealing with weed issues.

“What do we do? Who do we call?” Uttenreuther asked. “Is this still on a complaint basis only or is the police department or the fire department or public works going to take care of it?”

Joseph said the city still handles weed issues on a complaint basis.

“Fingers crossed we have staffing back up to the levels that we can get people out there,” Joseph said.

The Council on Tuesday approved temporary parking restrictions for the Baker City Cycling Classic June 29, and the temporary closure of Court Avenue Plaza for the Baker City Farmers Market on Wednesdays from June 5 to Oct. 23.

The Council will schedule a work session to discuss goal-setting, development charges and challenges, the public safety fee, spending limits for staff and, during an executive session closed to the public, labor negotiations with the city’s three unions.

Republicans seek to slow work in Salem

By Andrew Selsky
Associated Press

SALEM — Republicans have forced a clerk in the Oregon Legislature to read aloud every word in nearly every piece of legislation, giving granular details about farm loans, motor vehicle taxes and other government minutiae as the minority party uses the stalling tactic to try to gain leverage.

Democrats have supermajorities in both the state Senate and House, and Republicans are using the strategy to push their own initiatives and weaken Democratic ones. Lawmakers in statehouses and in Congress have a history of turning to delay tactics — sometimes imaginative ones — to stall or kill legislation.

Minority Republicans in Colorado wanted a 2,000-page bill read aloud this year, so Democrats brought in computers to read it at hyperspeed. A judge knocked down the trick, and Democrats said they lacked time to finish everything on their agenda before the session ended this month.

In 2013, GOP Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas spoke on the Senate floor for 21 hours, including reading Dr. Seuss’ “Green Eggs and Ham,” to oppose President Barack Obama’s health care law. In 2003, Texas Democrats fled to neighboring Oklahoma to deny enough members to vote on a redistricting bill, effectively killing it.

The effort in Oregon has put House reading clerk Lacy Ramirez Gruss in the spotlight as she reads legislation hour after hour, day after day. Lawmakers often chat or work at their desks during the readings, but they applauded after she read a 45-page bill on May 1 for more than two hours without a break.

“It was a little bit wearying. I was ready to talk until I fainted,” she said,

laughing.

Ramirez Gruss stands and reads bills as fast as an auctioneer amped up on caffeine. She recovers in the evening by drinking mint tea with honey and has incorporated stretching into her routine.

The longest measure so far was 62 pages. It took three days to get through it, with some House sessions lasting only an hour. She sometimes asks colleagues to help carry the load.

Ramirez Gruss, who got her job in January, said it’s been a learning experience and an honor, both for her and her parents, who are immigrants from Mexico.

“He would always drive by the (Oregon) Capitol and never thought that he would ever set foot in here,” Ramirez Gruss said of her father. “It seemed so out of reach for him, from where he’s come from. And for me to work here is such an honor for him.”

She said 85 bills totaling 461 pages have been read since May 1, instead of the usual summaries.

“This has been the longest consecutive number of days of reading the bills in full that we can recall,” said Timothy Sekerak, chief clerk of the House.

Even as the House whittles down the pile of measures by voting on them, the list has gotten bigger as more legislation emerges from committees.

“We’re not keeping pace at the moment,” Sekerak said.

But he said he’s proud the Oregon House hasn’t resorted to bringing in speed-reading computers like Colorado Democrats. They used five computers to simultaneously read a lengthy bill at hyperspeed, making it unintelligible. The GOP sued, and a judge said computers can’t be used if they can’t be understood.

LAW WOULD ALLOW JUDGE TO REQUIRE PEOPLE TO UNDERGO TREATMENT FOR MENTAL ILLNESS

Oregon considers change to civil commitment law

By Kristian Foden-Vencil
Oregon Public Broadcasting

ROSEBURG — Last year, Don Baglien’s 19-year-old son experienced a psychotic break. It was a Sunday afternoon. He picked up the family picnic and threw it over the fence. Then he started turning on every faucet in the house, dragging furniture outside and howling.

“By the time the evening rolled around, he was convinced that his air conditioner unit had some kind of poison in it and was releasing some kind of toxic chemical that was going to kill him. So he unplugged it and he was going to roll it down the hill and get rid of it,” Baglien said.

It got so bad Baglien called the Roseburg police and had him arrested for menacing. Baglien worked with the local behavioral health provider to get him help. But since his son is an adult, he couldn’t intervene and things got worse.

“There were at least six or seven times when things were so out of hand that it was clear that he needed to get a bed somewhere where someone could keep an eye on him,” Baglien said.

Although the 19-year-old has been diagnosed with schizophrenia, he does not accept that he’s ill. Baglien has tried to get him civilly committed by having people argue in front of a judge that he’s a danger to himself and others — that’s the legal standard in Oregon.

But during those proceedings, his son understood enough to appear rational and calm — convincing the judge not to commit him.

It happens a lot according to Josephine County Judge Pat Wolke.

“We’ve reached a point where the bar is so high, that really the only way to enter the Oregon State Hospital, for example, is to be arrested. And we find that to be unacceptable.”

— Chris Bouneff, Oregon branch of the National Alliance on Mental Illness

“What we’re talking about are the people who will not get voluntary treatment. Because they have a condition called Anosognosia. And that means that they’re so ill that their ability to even understand that they’re ill has been taken away from them,” Wolke said.

Civil commitment is a delicate issue for families and authorities. The way it works now is that when someone threatens a family member or runs through traffic screaming at cars, police can place a hold on them. A county judge then decides whether they’re “a danger to self or others.”

But that legal standard has not been defined by the courts.

The process is justifiably difficult. But many think it’s become so difficult that people only end up getting help after they break the law and are criminally committed. So Oregon is thinking about changing the way people with mental illnesses are civilly committed.

Chris Bouneff lives with a mental illness and heads the Oregon branch of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. He understands the reluctance to civil commitment.

“Just because we have a mental illness and we’re symptomatic

doesn’t mean we’re stupid or drooling on ourselves. I mean we have a sense of reality. We’re able to understand, if we’re before a judge, that I may lose my liberty,” Bouneff said.

Civil commitments have been appealed so many times that the legal standard has gradually become harder and harder to meet. For example, one threat of suicide is no longer enough to prove a danger, according to the courts. And any perceived danger has to be “highly probable,” not just likely.

“We’ve reached a point where the bar is so high, that really the only way to enter the Oregon State Hospital, for example, is to be arrested. And we find that to be unacceptable,” Bouneff said.

He said Senate Bill 763 aims to decriminalize mental illness and is a minimal fix. The bill would define “dangerous to self or others” as “likely” to inflict serious harm within the next 30 days.

The bill also dictates that one threat of suicide can now be considered by a judge.

“We certainly don’t want to open the floodgates. We don’t want to make it so easy that we’re overusing civil commitment. But the bar has to come down a tiny bit because we are losing people,” Bouneff said.

But people in the mental health community are far from united in support of this bill.

Beckie Child was abused as a kid and suffers from PTSD. She’s also been held for civil commitment. She thinks the state should focus more on treating the early stages of mental illness instead of worrying about civil commitment.

“We do so little to keep people

from getting into crisis. And then, when they are in crisis, then we decide we have to do all these other things that really can disrupt people’s lives and cause a lot of harm,” Child said.

Senate Bill 763 came out of a task force put together by Wolke. He hopes the bill will mean more people get help sooner, instead of descending into crisis and only getting help after they’ve been arrested.

He also thinks it’ll save the state a lot of money.

“We’re stopping people from repeatedly going to the emergency room. We’re stopping people from repeatedly getting arrested and going to jail,” Wolke said.

He was pleased last month when the Oregon Legislature Fiscal Office found that the cost of the measure was “indeterminate,” likely avoiding opposition based on cost.

But then, the Oregon Health Authority added its own fiscal statement, saying the agency might have to open a new unit at the Oregon State Hospital to look after all the new people who might be civilly committed.

The OHA estimated the cost at about \$20 million over four years.

Wolke was frustrated because that figure only represents part of the financial equation.

“Yes, it will save the corrections department money. It will save hospitals money, it will save police departments money. But if it costs the Oregon Health Authority which did the fiscal impact statement, a little bit more money than they’re entitled to deep-six it with their fiscal impact statement — it’s just nuts,” Wolke said.



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