

County's complaint about gated road continues

By Samantha O'Conner
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Baker County Commissioners on Wednesday resumed their discussion about a disputed locked gate on a road through private property near Lookout Mountain in east Baker County.

Commission Chairman Bill Harvey said commissioners met Tuesday with attorney Larry Sullivan in an executive session (closed to the public) also attended by two historians that Sullivan has brought in to research the history of roads in that area.

"They said they had not had complete research due to some papers missing in the archives so they are recontacting Seattle Archives and Washington, D.C., for final documentation," Harvey said.

He said the county will schedule a public hearing on the issue once the historians have compiled all the data.

"That will be a meeting by itself and we will give you all updated time and date on that," Harvey said.

Commissioners have instructed Sullivan to file an amended motion on the county's suit against Todd Longgood, who owns the property and installed a locked

gate across the road about two years ago.

The road leads from the Lookout Mountain road east through Sawmill Basin to Connor Creek Road, and eventually connects to the Snake River Road along Brownlee Reservoir between Huntington and Richland.

In its lawsuit the county contends that the road is an historic public route that can't be blocked.

Longgood's attorneys disagree, citing historic maps, property deeds and other records as evidence that the gated road was built after the land was converted from public to private.

Parks department budget shortfall

Commissioners also discussed potential ways to raise money to operate the county-owned Hewitt and Holcomb parks on Brownlee Reservoir near Richland.

Among the possible options are selling three county parcels with the revenue dedicated to the parks department, soliciting Idaho Power Company to operate the parks on the county's behalf, and asking voters to approve a special taxing district similar

to those that use property taxes to pay for the library and for noxious weed and mosquito control.

Several people attended Wednesday's meeting to comment on the parks budget problems. Revenue from the two parks dropped by about \$13,000 annually during the past two fiscal years compared with the previous two.

"It's very important to this whole county those parks stay open," said Theron Hampton of Richland, who owns a motel in the town of 175 on the Powder River arm of Brownlee Reservoir.

Richland, about 43 miles east of Baker City, is the closest town to Hewitt and Holcomb parks, but Hampton said Richland isn't the only community that benefits from the parks attracting anglers and boaters.

Lots of people shop in Baker City before they go out there," Hampton said.

He suggested if there is a taxing district, it would go county wide.

Wanda Holcomb of Richland told commissioners her mother and father-in-law donated the property for Holcomb Park, which is dedicated to their son, John

Noble Holcomb, who was killed in Vietnam in 1968 and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, America's highest military honor.

"I have a personal interest in not wanting that park to go away," Wanda Holcomb said. "And I do see a lot of people do come into that park in the summer."

Wanda Ballard of Baker City noted that one of the factors contributing to declining revenue at the parks — low water levels in the reservoir during the spring and summer — "is not new."

"People that use that resource they know and they usually schedule around it and some of them don't care as long as they can get their boat in," Ballard said.

In some years, depending on the mountain snowpack, Idaho Power Company, which owns Brownlee Dam, is required by the Army Corps of Engineers to lower the reservoir to make room for snowmelt and reduce the risk of downriver flooding.

Idaho Power also releases water during the summer to help push anadromous fish down the Snake and Columbia rivers to the Pacific Ocean. Fluctuating water levels

can make it difficult or impossible to launch boats at the parks, and can also affect fishing.

Ed Elms, chairman of the Parks Department Advisory Board, said a special district would be an option to look at. "It would be a small amount," he said, referring to the property tax rate that likely would be required.

Elms raised concerns about funding for a few months until they find a solution.

"I think even if Idaho Power was to say 'hey, we'd be interested in doing it,' they're not going to start January first or February first," Elms said.

Commissioner Mark Bennett addressed rumors that the county is considering closing the parks or selling them.

Neither is true, Harvey said.

"Baker County will not sell or give the property away," Harvey said. "We will always have ownership of the property. So it is our responsibility to do the best that we can with what we have."

"We do have to make some hard decisions."

Karen Spencer, the parks department coordinator, told commissioners that Mark Millsap approached her two

weeks ago about leasing the former Sumpter Valley Railroad depot on Broadway Street, where the parks department has its office, for use as a nanobrewery.

"That's one thing that we looked at just within the last couple of weeks and we think that's a viable option," Spencer said.

The Commissioners postponed further discussions on the parks budget until their next meeting Dec. 18.

In other business Wednesday, commissioners:

- proclaimed the week of Jan. 26, 2020, to Feb. 1, 2020, as School Choice Week.

- heard from Watermaster Marcy Osborn and assistants Luke Albert and Nathan Petrucci about water rights regulations during the past irrigation season.

- heard a yearly update from Nancy Staten, administrator of the Baker County Health Department. Staten said that last fiscal year, which ended June 30, 2019, the department gave 4,300 immunizations.

"Just FYI, if anybody needs their flu shot, we still have flu vaccines, so we're ready and able to give you that," Staten said.

DANGEROUS

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Sawyer has served as hearing officer since the city established a dangerous dog ordinance in 2014.

Karen Spencer, 52, owner of the schnauzer, attended the hearing to tell her story about the Nov. 3 incident in which her 13-year-old dog Gizmo, was attacked by a large unleashed pit bull along Foothill Drive about 2 o'clock that afternoon.

The owner of the pit bull, Brandon Baltzell, 24, of Lakewood, Washington, did not attend the hearing, Duman said. Baltzell also did not respond to calls from Spencer regarding the incident.

Duman said that as a result of Sawyer's ruling, a written order will

be forwarded to Lakewood. The city has an ordinance similar to Baker City's regarding dangerous dogs that will require Baltzell to meet certain standards for protecting his own community if he keeps the dog.

And if he brings the dog back to Baker City, Baltzell will be required to follow the requirements of Baker City's ordinance, which calls for, among other things, that the animal be kept inside or when outside that it be maintained within the boundaries of a 6-foot-tall fence. Baltzell also must maintain a minimum \$100,000 liability insurance, have a microchip implanted in the animal and keep its rabies vaccination up to date.

If Baltzell fails to meet all requirements of the ordinance and brings

the dog back to Baker City, he could be cited and the animal could potentially be seized, Duman said.

"It is the owner's responsibility to follow the rules of this community," Duman said.

Spencer said she was thrilled with the results of the hearing.

"I'm happy with the restrictions," she said. "I hope they are adhered to."

Gizmo, who was taken immediately to the Baker Animal Clinic after the attack in which the pit bull bit him in the left shoulder, belly and neck, has recovered.

Spencer said the veterinary bills totaled nearly \$600. She does not plan to seek restitution from Baltzell because of the expense involved with no guarantee of recouping the

expense, she said.

Sadly, after more than 25 years of walking almost daily through Baker City neighborhoods, she no longer feels safe and will not walk her two dogs in town again, she said.

She recently took Gizmo and her Italian greyhound, Bullet, out to Virtue Flat for a walk through the sagebrush.

In her initial call to Baker City Police, Spencer was told that officers could not take action against Baltzell because he would be taking his dog back to Washington.

Duman took another look at the dangerous dog ordinance, which was established in 2013 after 5-year-old Jordan Ryan was mauled to death by a pit bull. The chief, who has been leading the police department since

July 1, found that the ordinance authorizes police to investigate all dog complaints and to proceed with further action if appropriate, including a hearing before Sawyer.

Spencer also took her concerns before the City Council in November.

And she has offered to serve as a hearing officer to substitute for Sawyer on cases in which Sawyer is not available or has a scheduling conflict.

She said City Manager Fred Warner Jr. assured her that Duman has met with his officers regarding how future dangerous dog complaints will be handled and the protocol specified in the ordinance.

"Hopefully we can turn this into a positive," she said.

Giant step back in time Mammoth or Mastodon Remains Now at EOU

By Dick Mason

The (La Grande) Observer

LA GRANDE — A fossil is a messenger from the past.

Eastern Oregon University now has such a message-carrier on campus — the partially fossilized remains of a mammoth or mastodon, recently recovered near Prineville by EOU students and faculty.

What information does this creature, which is at least 10,000 years old, have to share? The complete answer may not be known until the mid 2020s.

Faculty and students from EOU's anthropology and biology departments are now beginning the long process of painstakingly cleaning and examining the partial

remains of the creature.

"We will be working on this for three to five years," said Rory Becker, an EOU anthropology professor who led a group of students on a dig at the Prineville area site in October with fellow anthropology professor Linda Reed-Jerofke and biology professor Joe Corsini.

The remains are of the front quarter of the creature. EOU professors and students hope to find out what happened to the rest of it.

"Where did the rest of it go? It is a bit of a mystery," Corsini said.

One possibility is the remains were carried away by carnivores in Central Oregon when mammoths roamed. Corsini said the mammoth

will be examined closely for teeth marks that could reveal another animal pulled its remains away.

Construction workers in a gravel quarry owned by Craig Woodward, an EOU alum, discovered the prehistoric remains earlier this year. He immediately alerted Eastern about the find. Woodward died not long after the bones were discovered and his family carried out his wish of making them available to Eastern.

The bones were 30 feet below the surface, according to an EOU news release, but only 6 inches of soil covered them when the party from EOU arrived. This meant they had to be exceedingly cautious about where they



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Biology professor Joe Corsini, right, and Eastern Oregon University students Matthew Wetzell and Erin Blincoe remove sediment Friday morning from the bones of what could be a mammoth.

tread. EOU student Erin Blincoe noted she was surprised at one point to learn she was nearly standing on an ancient vertebrae.

"I had to be careful," she said. "I did not want to damage it."

The vertebrae were successfully removed from the site in addition to giant front-leg bones, including ulna, radius and humerus, as well as tusks and a cranium. Corsini said the animal may have been a juvenile because the ends of its long bones do not appear to be fused at the shaft.

To protect the bones found at the Prineville area site, they were packed in sediment and then covered with plaster before being transported to La Grande.

Some of the smaller bones, including teeth, may be enclosed within the larger sections that were carefully packed out. Corsini said he hopes the teeth can be found because they would help determine whether the creature is actually a mastodon rather than a mammoth. Mammoths and mastodons were similar elephant-like creatures.

The time period the mammoth or mastodon died will be determined later by dating the age of the sediment around it through a process known as optically stimulated luminescence. The OSL dating work will be done at a Utah State University, Becker said.

The sediment samples from the dig site have not

been exposed to light for thousands of years. The sediment was placed in tubes in a manner to prevent light exposure.

While EOU faculty and students don't yet know how far back in time they stepped during their dig, the magnitude of the opportunity it provided is not lost on them. Some, like EOU student Hannah Wilhelm, were students new to anthropology who found themselves thrust into a graduate level atmosphere.

"It is a cool opportunity to experience this in an intro level class," she said.

EOU student Lydia Hurty knows she might never be a part of something like this again. She described it as "a once-in-a-lifetime experience."



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Eastern Oregon University professors Joe Corsini, left, and Rory Becker talk while standing next to a portion of the mammoth or mastodon bones they helped excavate during a dig with students near Prineville. The bones are packed in the sediment they were found in to help protect them.