

Commissioners approve revised plan for hiring parks contractor

By Samantha O’Conner
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Baker County commissioners on Wednesday approved a revised request for proposals for a contractor to manage Hewitt and Holcomb Parks near Richland.

Commissioner Mark Bennett made a motion to have the agreement labeled as a draft, to allow it to be subject to change during negotiations.

Commissioners voted unanimously to remove the position of parks director, which Karen Spencer has had since 2007.

“We are moving in a direction,” Commission Chairman Bill Harvey said. “We will no longer have that position and we need to set a timetable for this so everybody understands. So my motion is to remove that position on the last day of February so we can move down this next direction that we’re going to and that gives the position time to make plans and make changeovers.”

Commissioner Bruce Nichols, who was out of town and participated in the meeting by phone, said he is concerned that the county is eliminating the parks director position before it has a contractor.

“I think we need to have something in place,” Nichols said.

Harvey said he believes the county will have enough time to get the proposal out for people who are interested.

The county’s goal is to hire a contractor before the parks open April 1.

“I just need to allow somebody, other people, to know timetable wise so they can make plans and adjustments,” Harvey said. “And I don’t think it’s great to leave things hanging in the air. That’s the reason for the motion.”

Bennett said he believes that cutting the position, and soliciting a contractor, is “about the only option I see.”

“What we’re trying to do is to accomplish two things: First and foremost, keep the

parks open, which is what we’ve committed,” Bennett said. “And second of all, to try and be fiscally responsible at the same time.”

Commissioners also approved Bennett’s motion to give the Human Resources department authority to spend up to \$100 to purchase plaques to recognize outstanding employees.

“Currently we don’t really have any process or any policy guidance on this,” Bennett said.

In other business Wednesday:

- Sheriff Travis Ash updated the commissioners on the sheriff’s office, including Amanda Bunch’s recognition at the Chamber of Commerce as a hometown hero of 2019. Bunch was also recognized at the Oregon State Sheriff’s Association.

Deputy Brandon Mastrude in Corrections was honored for saving a person’s life at the jail in 2019 and recognized as a Hometown Hero.

Deputy Talon Colton has graduated from the public safety academy and will fill the empty deputy position after his 16 weeks of training.

- Baker County Veteran Service Officer Rick Gloria gave an update on his department.

Gloria said about 2,000 veterans live in Baker County, about 12.5% of the population. He said he is managing cases for 1,264 veterans or spouses.

Among the services Gloria offers are helping veterans apply for medical coverage, disabilities, pensions, home loans, educational benefits and transportation to medical appointments.

“Right now I’m tracking every homeless veteran,” Gloria said, adding that those he’s aware of are being sheltered.

Gloria said Lori Barker and Joe Hayes with Community Connection and Cliff Cole with the Northeast Oregon Compassion Center also provide significant help for veterans.

POOL

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The pool was closed Jan. 13, Moe said, and a Jan. 18 home swim meet was canceled.

The city expects the pool to remain closed until about March 9, said Michelle Owen, Baker City public works director.

The mechanical issue with the heat exchanger unit made it unfeasible to keep the pool open, with water temperatures dropping to a chilly 74 degrees.

“Nobody wants to swim in that,” Owen said.

The water is usually at 86 degrees except for during swim meets when the temperature is lowered to 80 degrees, she said.

The heat exchange unit in the large pool will be rebuilt for an estimated \$13,800, plus an installation fee, Owen said. A new unit will be placed in the smaller training pool, for \$7,900 plus installation.

The pool will be closed until after the swim team’s season ends. The state swimming championships begin Feb. 21, said Buell Gonzales, BHS athletic director.

Gonzales said he was happy Coach Moe and her team members were willing to put in the extra effort to finish out the season.

“I think we’re making the best out of a rough situation. I appreciate the kids putting in a little bit of extra work,” he said. “And I feel fortunate that Paula is really sticking this out. A lot of folks would have just said, ‘you know what — we’re just done.’”

For her part, Moe said she has been proud of her team and the students’ willingness to travel to La Grande and back to continue the three-night-per-week practices.

In order to work around bus schedules and the La Grande swim team’s schedule, the students leave Baker City at 4:30 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and are in the La Grande pool by 5:30 p.m. The team members practice for an hour and a half and are home between 8:10 and 8:15 on those nights.

Moe said she worked with her friend, Teresa Roberts, pool superintendent for the City of La Grande to arrange the practice schedule.

“It’s going well,” Moe said. “The La Grande pool has been very nice to us. It’s great to have relationships like that.”

The City of La Grande is charging the Baker School District \$15 per day for use of the pool, Gonzales said.

The trips are all business for the students, Moe said. Students bring snacks for the bus ride and eat when they return to their homes.

Moe said she expects the experience to bring her team members closer.

“More team bonding is happening,” she said. “From the time kids have to spend on the bus, they are becoming a much tighter group of friends.”

Once the bus returns to Baker City, Moe has another 30-minute trip to her house near Wolf Creek Reservoir.

“I just am super happy that we could work it out and keep the season going for these kids,” Moe said, despite the hardship of the travel time and late-night return home.

“I’m glad everyone is sticking with it,” she said. “And I’m glad everyone is patient and kind. We haven’t had any problems with it.”

OREGON LEGISLATURE CONVENES FEB. 3 FOR 35-DAY SESSION

Lawmakers debate intent of short legislative session

By Claire Withycombe, Jake Thomas and Sam Stites
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — You could say that Oregon is a bit “odd.”

Until 2012, the state’s legislators only met in odd-numbered years, a practice dating to 1885.

But the sessions got longer as lawmakers grappled with issues facing a growing state. By the 1980s, the average session lasted six months, according to the secretary of state’s office.

In 2010, voters said “yes” to allowing annual sessions — and limiting the number of days in each session. So now, in every even-numbered year, lawmakers and lobbyists descend on the Capitol for a “short session” of up to 35 days.

Confused yet?

In the 10 years since voters approved the change, the short session has provided something else for Democrats and Republicans to quibble over: GOP lawmakers complain that the even-year sessions have become unruly with consequential new laws pushed through with inadequate time for the public to have its say.

The next of these maligned “short sessions” begins Feb. 3. Sen. Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, who leads Democrats in the Senate, told reporters last week that short sessions are intended “primarily for budget issues.”

Legislators write the state’s two-year budget during its longer sessions, then use the even years in between for touch-ups.

But in her next breath, Burdick said the session is also time to address issues of an “urgent nature,” such as reducing the state’s emissions. A similar proposal stalled last session after Senate Republicans fled the state.

During the 2016 short session, for example, lawmakers raised the minimum wage, intended to stave off a potential ballot measure that Burdick said wouldn’t have been as carefully crafted.

“I think you’re always going to have that tension, you know, what is an emergency?” she said. “What is urgent?”

With a plan to enforce emissions restrictions on greenhouse gases expected to dominate the session, Republican lawmakers have complained

that the public won’t have time to give input as the legislation is shepherded through the House and Senate with a tight 35-day deadline.

Democrats counter that time is running out to tackle climate change and that ballot measures on the horizon, pushed by environmental groups, mean lawmakers should use the session to craft a more careful plan.

Some lawmakers say the short session isn’t used as intended. Sen. Kim Thatcher, R-Keizer, has proposed doing away with it altogether.

“Ever since it was instituted, as I live through each of these short sessions, I think, ‘Wow, this is not what was sold to the voters,’” Thatcher said. “I think it needs to be reevaluated as to whether it’s working or not and make some changes.”

Thatcher’s proposal — Senate Joint Resolution 202 — would eliminate the short session but keep the current 160-day limit on regular sessions in odd-numbered years. Lawmakers could extend that session by five days at a time by a two-thirds majority vote in each chamber.

“I would even say that (regular sessions) could be made a little shorter,” Thatcher said.

While proposing to get rid of the short session, Thatcher said she also is open to looking at ways of limiting what could be done in a short session. She thinks that could restore the short session to what she believes lawmakers intended.

What’s particularly frustrating, according to Thatcher, is that the Legislature can call itself into special session for emergencies and budget fixes anyway. She recalls special sessions between her election to the House in 2004 and when the short session was implemented first in 2010.

The short session’s architect, Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, wasn’t available to comment on his creation. (Courtney was absent for a week of meetings lawmakers held at the Capitol Jan. 13-17 due to hospitalization for a hip injury).

Previously, Courtney said one session every other year was not enough to complete lawmakers’ work.

“Society is so dynamic and so diverse,” he told The Oregonian in 2010. “There are so many more people than when they first designed this struc-

ture that it cannot respond the way it should.”

The Legislature held record-length sessions in 2003 and 2005, followed by a special session in 2006. The saga renewed interest in annual sessions.

In 2006, a nonpartisan citizens’ commission recommended that the Legislature move to annual sessions to better attend to the state’s business.

Two years later, the Legislature held a special session that was billed as a test run for a permanent annual session. During the 19-day session, lawmakers adjusted budgets, approved bonds for an arena at the University of Oregon and tightened toy safety.

But other key proposals didn’t advance, including help for distressed homeowners and changing the handling of teacher misconduct. Some lawmakers complained that the session was too short to accomplish all that should have been addressed.

Then, in 2010, lawmakers referred the issue to voters with what The Register-Guard described as “scornful opposition from minority Republicans.” Later that year, voters approved the change.

In the pamphlet distributed to Oregon voters in November 2010, unions argued that an annual session would allow lawmakers to better respond to economic issues as the state recovered from the 2008 recession.

A group of bipartisan lawmakers argued that an annual session would improve government efficiency and responsiveness.

“Since 1999, the Legislature has had to call eight special sessions to resolve urgent issues that couldn’t wait,” they wrote in the Voter’s Pamphlet. “This is an ineffective and inefficient way of doing the people’s business. Oregonians deserve better.”

Proponents said annual meetings of the Legislature would save taxpayer money by cutting down on lengthy sessions in odd-numbered years.

There was no organized opposition to the ballot measure, but Sen. Brian Boquist was a vocal critic.

In a recent interview, the Dallas Republican said that voters were told the session would be used for budget adjustments and technical fixes

to laws.

Boquist still opposes the way the short session is structured. He said that the session’s schedule requires bills to clear hurdles during the first week, which cuts off opportunities for public participation. Boquist said that’s particularly problematic for complex legislation, such as the plan to enforce emissions caps.



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