

Local & State

Walden discusses how pandemic is affecting his final year in office

■ Oregon's only Republican in Congress disputes notion that it's a partisan issue

By Julie Sabatier and Courtney Sherwood
Oregon Public Broadcasting

After more than 20 years on the job, U.S. Rep. Greg Walden is preparing to retire. But until his term ends early next year, Oregon's only Republican in Congress remains engaged in the business of writing laws, guiding policy and — most recently — advising President Donald Trump on reopening the U.S. economy in the era of COVID-19.

Walden, whose district includes Baker County, discussed his views recently in an interview with OPB on the appropriate response to the coronavirus, his support for reopening rural areas of Oregon before the rest of the state, and the reasons he is not pushing the rest of the country to adopt vote-by-mail yet.

On the response to the coronavirus, Walden said he's listening carefully to medical professionals, particularly to the advice of Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

"We have to be guided, to a very large measure, by the most brilliant scientists we have and health folks we have in America, and, frankly, learn from our global partners about what's worked and not worked in their countries, and apply all that," Walden said.

Walden pushed back against the suggestion that Americans' COVID-19 responses have been divided along political lines.

"There's a lot that gets spun out there by pundits, but I don't see it as political," Walden said, adding that Trump's recent tweets urging people to "LIBERATE" several locked-down states led by Democratic governors are a sign that the president's

"Among Republicans and Democrats and independents, if you are in an area that's had virtually no cases, or none at all, you're saying to yourself, 'You're killing my economy and my small business.' If we have the protective equipment, if we have the ability to act like adults and do spaced social distancing, can't we get back to work?"

— Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore.



"an optimist at heart" and noting that the president also criticized Georgia's governor, a Republican, for moving to reopen that state too soon.

The view that many Americans' are nonpartisan in their take on COVID-19 is supported by two recent polls. A national poll found majorities of all major political groups say they support the stay-home orders, although that sentiment is stronger among Democrats and independents than Republicans. A separate survey of Oregonians found that 82% support restrictions aimed at containing the spread of disease in this state.

Yet there is a divide in attitudes in Western and Eastern Oregon. DHM Research said Wednesday a relatively low 54% of Oregonians polled east of the Cascades strongly support the governor's stay-home orders.

Walden said he believes different lived experiences are driving the push to end stay-home orders in eastern Oregon, where some counties, including Baker, have no COVID-19 diagnoses and some political leaders are asking Gov. Kate Brown to ease restrictions.

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ness,'" Walden said. "If we have the protective equipment, if we have the ability to act like adults and do spaced social distancing, can't we get back to work?"

Brown has said she's considering the suggestion.

"We know that we have a handful of counties across the state that have virtually no cases that we are aware of," the governor told OPB last week. "What we do need to have in place for them to open up is that they have to have the ability to test. They have to be able to test people who have symptoms and people who don't, who may be asymptomatic."

Walden said he supports a similar approach.

Vote-by-mail

Walden said another issue that seems more clearly divided along party lines is not partisan — at least in his case.

Voting rights groups and many Democrats have been pushing to make mail voting available nationwide in response to the pandemic, while Republicans and the president have opposed that effort, often citing concerns about voter fraud.

Though Walden is siding with other Republicans, he said his view is based on pragmatism, rather than fraud concerns. Walden said there's not enough time to get

a functional national vote-by-mail system in place by this November's presidential election.

"We gave states half a billion dollars to make sure their software works and everything is going to be great to roll out unemployment benefits in a very timely manner," Walden said. "Look at the disaster in Oregon trying to get that done. We suddenly discover that we have a 30-year-old computer system ... and then it breaks down repeatedly. I'm not going to put the validity of America's general election on the line by thinking every state is as good as Oregon, when it comes to elections."

When it comes to elections, Walden's era of influence is nearing its conclusion. His political career began in 1981, when he served as a congressional staffer. Later, he was elected to the Oregon Legislature, and then, in 1998, to Congress. Now he's watching as 11 candidates vie for the Republican nomination for the 2nd Congressional District — which covers all of Oregon east of the mountains and parts of Southern Oregon — in hopes that his party will keep the seat. Five Democrats are seeking their party's nomination in an effort to wrest the seat from the GOP. Primary ballots are due May 19.

"Democracy is loud and messy. It still works, and I've had a great run and a great journey," Walden said, as he reflected on the upcoming end to his political career. "It's important work. I hope whoever Republicans pick, Democrats pick, are people who are anchored in the values, culture and the life, and understand the core issues of that district and what makes it unique. I guess we'll see in a few weeks."

CHARGES

Continued from Page 1A

Other charges against Cernazanu include 15 counts of first-degree encouraging child sexual abuse, a Class B felony; 11 counts of second-degree encouraging child sexual abuse, a Class C felony; and 11 counts of first-degree invasion of personal privacy, a Class C felony.

District Attorney Greg Baxter said Cernazanu, who was arraigned on the charges Monday in Baker County Circuit Court, was ordered held on \$1.8 million bail by Judge Matt Shirtcliff.

Cernazanu is represented by Bob Moon, a Baker City attorney. Sgt. Sean Belding of the

OSP Major Crimes Criminal Division, said the state Department of Justice sought local assistance in the investigation from OSP on Feb. 11 regarding accusations against Cernazanu of internet crimes involving a child.

Google initially reported sexually explicit photos of the young person to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the allegations were investigated by the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, Belding said.

Belding said Cernazanu most recently had been employed as a corrections officer at the Powder River Correctional Facility in Baker City. Baxter said Cernazanu

had been on administrative leave from the prison during the investigation and is no longer employed there.

He also had served for a short time as a reserve officer for the Baker City Police Department.

Baxter said the crimes took place over about a year and a half. The earliest are alleged to have happened on April 21, 2018, in Baker County and the latest crimes are alleged to have occurred on Aug. 4, 2019, in Baker County. The victim, a female minor, was a person

known to Cernazanu, Baxter said.

State Police officers served search warrants at Cernazanu's home on Feb. 19 and they seized digital evidence, including computers and phones, that was analyzed by the Department of Justice, Belding said.

The case was presented to a Baker County grand jury on Thursday, April 23, and a secret indictment was issued that day. OSP contacted Cernazanu the next day at his home and arrested him, Belding said.

COUNCIL

Continued from Page 1A

People who attend in person will be asked to comply with social distancing, and seats will be arranged appropriately.

The resolution for longevity pay hikes would apply to the 16 city employees who aren't members of a union. The list of nonunion workers includes the fire and police chiefs, public works director, finance director, building official and some employees in the fire, police and public works departments.

The City Council hasn't changed the salary schedule for nonunion workers since 2014. The schedule includes base salaries and five steps, with pay increases of 2% (steps 1 and 2) or 4% (steps 3 through 5) that employees can receive if they meet performance standards. Employees who reach step 5 can qualify for a 2% merit pay increase based on the city manager's discretion.

According to a report to councilors from Robin Nudd, the city's human resources manager, the gap between the salaries of nonunion and union employees has shrunk, and in at least two cases a nonunion supervisor is earning less than \$1 more per hour than union employees they supervise.

"It is difficult to encourage a well-qualified candidate to take a supervisory position when they make more by being in the union," Nudd wrote in the report.

The city staff is recommending a pay equity/salary compensation study be done this year and presented to the City Council in January 2021, but no immediate changes to the nonunion salary schedule.

The proposed resolution councilors will consider Tuesday would, however, expand the longevity pay incentive for nonunion workers. Currently, only employees with at least 20 years of consecutive employment at the city are eligible for a 4% pay increase.

The proposed resolution would make nonunion employees with at least 10 years at the city eligible for a 2% increase, and employees who reach 15 years would be eligible for a 2% increase.

In other business Tuesday, the Council will:

- Get an update on the city's aquifer storage and recovery program, which allows the city to divert water from streams in the watershed into a well during the winter and spring, and then pump that water back into the distribution system when needed during the summer.
- Consider a resolution for the temporary closure of the Court Avenue Plaza, between Main and Resort streets, from noon to 7 p.m. on Wednesdays from June 3 to Oct. 14 to accommodate the Baker City Farmers Market.
- Consider a resolution allocating money from the sidewalk replacement fund. Although the city no longer charges the monthly sidewalk fee to residents and businesses, about \$50,000 is available from previous years' collections.

The resolution would disburse the money by the previous formula — 75% offered to residents to defray the cost of sidewalk replacement, and 25% for a public project. The proposed public project this year is on Washington Avenue near Brooklyn Primary School.

NICHOLS

Continued from Page 6A

Editor's note: This is the continuation of Bruce Nichols' response to the question: "What are your two biggest concerns about the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the county, and how would you propose to deal with those?"

Fear of the virus and fear of the unknown consequences have created significant problems for everyone in one form or another. The physical and mental well being of citizens is a top priority, as is everyone's financial security.

Assistance for people with genuine disabilities, physical or mental, must be continued for individuals and families. They should not bear a heavier or lighter burden (given their unique situation) than the rest of us.

Baker County's financial health is a concern that will require the Board of Commissioner's prompt attention. The economic turmoil caused by the uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic will have immediate and long lasting effects on the county's current and future budgets. State and federal revenue streams the county has relied upon are being slashed by significant amounts.

Budget shortfalls, when first identified, must be addressed immediately. More stringent rules on spending by all county departments have been put in place. I believe Baker County will "weather the storm" because we have some reserves. Should the economy not recover relatively quickly, there will likely be more budget cuts required. These cuts would include discretionary spending in all departments (basically fat) and, if necessary, deeper cuts in departments that do not have mandated expenditures (basically meat).

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