

Sheriff's Office changes phone answering system

By Chris Collins
ccollins@bakercityherald.com

Callers to the Baker County Sheriff's Office will no longer be greeted by the voice of a dispatcher whose primary role is to field emergency 9-1-1 calls.

Since Tuesday, Jan. 26, calls have been picked up

by an automated answering system. The change is designed to "better serve callers while prioritizing the most critical calls," a Sheriff's Department press release stated.

A recorded message welcomes callers to the Baker County Sheriff's Office and

provides instruction on how to make contact with the specific department that best meets the caller's needs by selecting one of eight numbers 0 to 7, or dial 9 to repeat the message.

Callers also are directed to hang up and dial 9-1-1 for true emergencies.

The automated answering system will respond to calls to the Sheriff's Office number, 541-523-6415, and to the Baker City Police number, 541-523-3644, which also has been answered by dispatchers for many years.

Ashley McClay, the Sheriff's Department's public

information officer, said the new system is expected to increase efficiency as dispatchers answer 9-1-1 calls.

"This will keep dispatch focused on critical calls, she said.

For example, dispatchers have at times been called away from helping

talk someone through how to perform CPR in a crisis situation to respond to a nonemergency call.

"Ultimately, we have probably needed this for quite some time," McClay said. "And ultimately — in a critical situation — we'll be giving better service."

LAEGER

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"When it went to Baker City, I didn't have to change anything, not even stationery," he said.

Over the decades, Laeger witnessed firsthand the boom-and-bust cycles of the local economy.

"We sold houses for a while. When the '80s hit, things were tough," he said.

In 1980, "you couldn't sell anything," he said.

"It didn't start to come back until 1986 or '87," he said.

For much of his career, Laeger focused on selling ranches and timberland.

"The last 40 years I sold mostly ranches. I sold a few ranches two or three times," he said.

Meeting people was his favorite part of the business.

"You carry friendships a long time after you sell them property," he said. "I still have some I visit with now and then. You meet a lot of good people."

He tried to look out for his clients.

"I didn't sell something just to sell it," he said. "If I thought they couldn't afford it, I'd try to talk them out of it."

Laeger was licensed to sell real estate in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Nevada.

"The farthest I sold was a ranch in Ely, Nevada," he said.

Starting place for agents

Laeger's agency also helped a number of agents get their start.

Mary Jo Grove started working as Laeger's secretary and bookkeeper in 1979.

She and her husband, Jim, both got their real estate licenses in 1980.

"He gave me the encouragement to get a license," Mary Jo Grove said. "He was my first mentor, and a great guy."

The Groves later went to work for Nelson Real Estate, and now own The Grove Team.

After decades of selling real estate, Laeger started having back issues, and his wife, Marguerite, encouraged him to retire.

"I told her when I turned 80, I'll retire," he said.

At the time, his office was in the small house just south of the White Apartments. In April 2008, he approached Andrew Bryan to see if he was interested in buying the building.

"I have no idea why, but I asked 'Lyle, what are you doing with the real estate business?'" Bryan recalls of that conversation.

Turned out, Laeger was willing to sell the business, too.

"He put out his hand and said 'I'm selling it to you.' I shook his hand," Bryan said.

Bryan, however, needed to obtain his license to sell real estate. So Laeger stayed on during that process.

He retired in late 2008. He turned 80 on Sept. 6 of that year, which also ushered in the Great Recession.

"There were only about eight brokers in town," Bryan said.

At one time in the past, Laeger had more agents than that working in his office.

Bryan set about establishing his own version of a real estate office, one he calls "nonconventional."

"It became a place for those who wanted autonomy," he said. "Everyone here has another interest or enterprise, something else going on."

Bryan has several roles.

"I'm the owner, I'm the principal broker, I'm the receptionist," he said.

The real estate market is on an upswing these days.

"The last six months to a year has seen more farm and ranch activity than in the last 10 years," Bryan said.

The promise of that sort of boom is what kept Laeger in the business so long.

"You gotta like it to be in it," he said. "When the downs come, you have to buck up and go on."

Police escort drivers down icy mountain

By Chris Collins
ccollins@bakercityherald.com

Icy road conditions kept winter outdoor enthusiasts away from home a little longer than expected Thursday, Jan. 28, when they attempted to drive down from Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort.

The situation was reported about 2 p.m. when a tow truck driver called the Baker County Dispatch Center to say that at least one vehicle had slid off the Anthony Lakes Highway coming down the mountain, said Ashley McClay, Baker County Sheriff's Office spokeswoman.

At one point, Sheriff's Department officers and a Forest Service law enforcement officer worked with Anthony Lakes to close the parking lot to prevent people from leaving until road conditions improved, McClay said.

Undersheriff Jef Van Arsdall reported that at least 10 vehicles slid off the road before traffic was held. Speed did not appear to be a factor in the crashes. Snowplows were called to distribute sand on the highway, McClay said.

"Road conditions were extremely slick," she said, adding that Van Arsdall reported that one vehicle continued to slide after its automatic transmission had been placed in park. Van Arsdall said he even had trouble remaining upright as he walked on the roadway.

Once the highway was sanded, 38 vehicles were led off the mountain with a police escort, McClay said.

Fired deputy suing Grant County, former sheriff

■ Tyler Smith, who was fired before entering a plea on criminal charges, contends county retaliated against him

By Sean Hart
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — A sheriff's deputy who was fired before entering a plea on criminal charges is suing Grant County and several employees.

Former Grant County Sheriff's Office Deputy Tyler Smith claims the county and its employees violated his constitutional rights under the First and 14th amendments, retaliated against him as a whistleblower and wrongfully discharged him from employment in a complaint filed Dec. 21, 2020, in U.S. District Court in Pendleton.

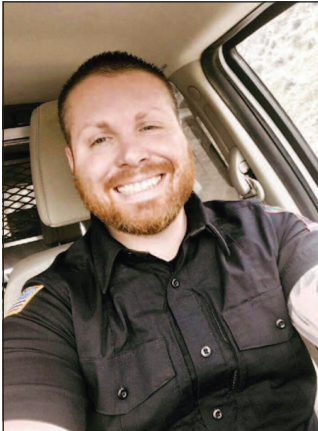
In addition to the county, the suit names former Sheriff Glenn Palmer, District Attorney Jim Carpenter, Undersheriff Zach Mobley and former Deputy Abigail Mobley as defendants and seeks damages for lost wages and distress as well as punitive damages and attorney fees.

Smith claims in the suit that Palmer and the Mobleys "orchestrated" a plan to get him arrested and removed from the sheriff's office.

County Judge Scott Myers said county policy prohibits discussing active litigation. Attempts to contact Palmer were unsuccessful, and the other defendants did not respond to questions from the Blue Mountain Eagle.

Smith was fired Dec. 17, 2019, before he entered a plea on criminal charges against his spouse, including attempted rape. A Sept. 27, 2019, grand jury indictment filed in Grant County Circuit Court accuses Smith of attempted first-degree rape, attempted first-degree sex abuse and fourth-degree assault in 2018. He pleaded not guilty April 30, 2020, and is awaiting trial.

Smith claims in the lawsuit the defendants retaliated against him after he reported allegations that Abigail Mobley, who was still employed as a deputy at the time, had used illegal drugs and had a



Contributed Photo

Tyler Smith is a former Grant County Sheriff's deputy.

sexual relationship with an inmate who was incarcerated for drug crimes to the Oregon Department of Justice on July 31, 2019.

According to DOJ officials, they did not investigate the allegations of drug use, but determined through dozens of recorded jail phone calls that Abigail Mobley was having sexual conversations with former inmate Darren Mortimore. DOJ officials concluded, however, there was not "a reasonable likelihood of proving beyond a reasonable doubt that Ms. Mobley committed the crime of custodial sexual misconduct."

Grant County Human Resources Manager Laurie Cates said the reason Smith was terminated was conditionally exempt from public disclosure under an Oregon law shielding personnel discipline actions.

A court order prevents Smith from carrying firearms while he awaits trial, but he claims in the suit this was only an excuse to terminate him.

"Defendants claimed that the reason was because (Smith) could not carry a firearm pursuant to the conditions of his release," the suit states. "However, that reason was false both because there were duties he could perform without a firearm and because the past practice within the department was to keep persons on administrative leave during the pendency of criminal cases until the criminal cases were resolved."

Abigail Mobley was on paid administrative leave



Blue Mountain Eagle/ File

Grant County Undersheriff Zach Mobley, left, and Sheriff Glenn Palmer sit in on a discussion on the recruitment of a new emergency management coordinator at a Grant County Court meeting May 27, 2020.

from March 18, 2019, until she resigned Dec. 26, 2020. During that time, her conduct was investigated by the Oregon Department of Justice and the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office, but they did not file criminal charges. She was also arrested for driving under the influence of intoxicants and pleaded guilty to enter a diversion program, but she was not ordered not to carry firearms.

The phone extraction

Smith claims in the lawsuit, he came to the conclusion Abigail Mobley was using drugs in 2018, the same year he separated from his spouse, who is a close friend of Zach and Abigail Mobley, and began a relationship with Haley Olson.

A transcript of messages from Olson's phone show she and Smith discussing his concerns about Mobley.

Idaho law enforcement extracted the contents of Olson's phone when she was arrested in January 2019, but the charges were dismissed. They also notified Palmer they found Smith's business card in Olson's vehicle.

Palmer asked Carpenter to request a copy of the phone extraction, according to a letter provided by Carpenter.

"The information, if applicable, will be used only for internal purposes, and will not be disseminated to any other agencies or third parties," Carpenter wrote in a Jan. 30, 2019, letter to

the Jerome County, Idaho, prosecutor, who provided him a copy of the extraction.

In an April 10, 2019, letter to Palmer, Carpenter said the extraction contained images, videos and audio files.

"I have reviewed the phone dump to determine whether any actionable evidence exists which could possibly subject Deputy Tyler Smith to discipline or sanction," Carpenter said. "While no formal review for criminal activity took place, evidence of such is unlikely as the standard for any criminal action would be higher than the review undertaken. I have concluded my review and recommend that you take no action against Deputy Tyler Smith."

In a Dec. 4, 2019, letter to Olson, Carpenter said he looked at the contents of the extraction but "was not willing to provide the flash drive to the sheriff or any other local agency" and deleted the contents.

Smith claims in the lawsuit that Carpenter provided access to, or described the contents of, the extraction — including sexual content and Smith's intent to report Abigail Mobley to the DOJ — to others, including Palmer.

"Carpenter provided access to Screenshots of portions of Olson's phone to Palmer," the suit states. "Sheriff Palmer showed intimate pictures of (Smith) and Olson to members of the community. The Mobley defendants likewise obtained access to intimate photos of (Smith) and Olson from Palmer and/or Carpenter's copy of the phone."

Olson has also filed a

federal lawsuit against Grant County, Palmer and Carpenter that is pending. Carpenter did not respond to emailed questions about that lawsuit, but his attorney has filed a motion to dismiss the lawsuit on procedural grounds. Palmer's attorney said the sheriff "never possessed or reviewed any of the material" Olson alleges, and he has filed a counterclaim for slander against her. Grant County's attorney said "the county court had no involvement with any of the salacious allegations at issue in the lawsuit."

The arrest

Smith claims in the new lawsuit that Palmer informed him he was being investigated in late March 2019 because his business card was found in Olson's vehicle and it could lead to his termination. Smith said he told Carpenter he wished to speak with DOJ regarding the criminal investigation of Abigail Mobley, and Carpenter told Smith he would have DOJ contact him, according to the suit.

Several weeks later, in April or May 2019, Smith claims in the suit, Carpenter told Smith to be patient when Smith informed him again that he had information to report regarding Abigail Mobley.

Smith claims Palmer learned he was going to report Abigail Mobley before June 2019.

"On June 20, 2019, Defendant Palmer met with (Smith) and berated him for his plan to discuss Deputy (Abigail) Mobley with DOJ," the suit states. "Defendant

Palmer asked (Smith) if he was running his own drug team or actively investigating Deputy (Abigail) Mobley. Deputy Smith said he was doing neither."

Palmer met with Zach and Abigail Mobley in June 2020, Smith claims in the suit.

"Defendant Palmer instructed (the Mobleys) to destroy all evidence they had in their possession regarding Olson or regarding Deputy (Abigail) Mobley's misconduct and that they were 'on their own' regarding her conduct," the suit states.

On July 29, 2019, Smith again told Carpenter he needed to speak to DOJ regarding Abigail Mobley, and he was finally interviewed July 31, 2019, and provided "information regarding Deputy (Abigail) Mobley's criminal activities," according to the suit.

On Aug. 9, 2019, Smith was placed on administrative leave "for unidentified 'policy violations involving ethical issues,'" according to the suit. Carpenter said Smith had been placed on leave "for issues related to the performance of his duties as a sheriff's deputy."

Smith remained on administrative leave until he was discharged.

Smith claims in the suit that Palmer and the Mobleys "orchestrated" a plan around August 2019 to get him arrested and forced out of the sheriff's office.

"The Mobley defendants told (Smith's spouse), falsely, that (Smith) was going to try to get full custody of their child if she didn't do something about it immediately," the suit states. "In response, his wife promptly filed for divorce, emptied her and (Smith's) joint bank account and, in early September 2019, lodged a criminal complaint against (Smith) for attempted rape. Both the lodging of the criminal complaint and the draining of the bank accounts was done at the recommendation of Grant County employees, including the Mobleys."

On Sept. 9, 2019, Smith was arrested based on his wife's complaint. The trial is set to begin April 5.