

## COUNTY

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Shelly Cutler will be following the commissioners discussion March 3 with trepidation.

Cutler is executive director of the Baker County Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber, operating under the organization Baker County Unlimited, has the current contract to run the visitor center on Campbell Street near Interstate 84.

Cutler said she's concerned that commissioners could decide to cancel that contract. The county, using the tax paid by guests and motels and other lodging establishments, gives the Chamber about \$77,000 per year to operate the visitor center.

If the contract ended, Cutler said, the loss of revenue would make it difficult, if not impossible, for the Chamber to put on Miners Jubilee in July. The event was canceled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cutler expressed the same concern last winter when commissioners were preparing to award the visitor services contract to either the Chamber or to Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort, which also submitted a proposal in December 2019.

After deciding not to award a new contract in February 2020, commissioners have twice extended the contract with the Chamber. The most recent extension, approved Jan. 6, 2021, continues the contract through April 30, 2021.

In the written contract amendment, commissioners stated that they "would like to continue current services until a new contract for Visitor Services is in place."

That probably won't happen for several months. Commissioner Mark Bennett said he wants the county to hire a consultant to help commissioners draft a new request for proposals for

the visitor services contract, a process that would take a fair amount of time. The county has yet to hire a consultant.

Commissioner Bruce Nichols said on Friday morning, Feb. 26, that he believes the county needs some sort of visitors center operating consistently, and that he wouldn't support ending the current contract without a way to continue to assist visitors.

In the meantime, Anthony Lakes general manager Peter Johnson has urged commissioners to announce a time frame for finishing a request for proposals and moving ahead with awarding a new contract.

In a Jan. 9, 2021, email to Bennett and Nichols, Johnson called on the commissioners to "simply follow through and release the new RFP as recommended by County legal counsel and as stated in County bylaws."

Johnson noted in his email that although county bylaws state that the visitor services contract is to be awarded every six years, the current contract with the Chamber of Commerce has been extended.

"We do have some concerns on how ethical that is," Johnson wrote.

An attorney representing Anthony Lakes, Rebecca Knapp of Enterprise, sent a letter on Feb. 1 to Andrew Martin, the county's attorney, regarding the visitor center issue.

In his Feb. 16 response to Knapp, Martin wrote that "The County is currently in the process of hiring a consultant to perform an analysis and provide recommendations as to what Baker County needs from a Visitors Center."

In a Feb. 19 email whose recipients included Bennett and

Nichols, Johnson, the Anthony Lakes general manager, wrote that Martin's response "gives us much more concern than simply the Visitor Service contract. It gives us serious concern as Baker County residents and tax paying citizens."

Johnson quoted excerpts from Martin's letter, including this sentence: "The process of attempting to create a new RFP (request for proposals) has revealed that there is no directive or any formal guidance identifying what a Visitors Center should or needs to provide to best support Baker County and its tourism industry."

Johnson questioned whether, given the lack of guidance in the current visitor services contract, the county can justify continuing that contract with the Chamber of Commerce.

"I can assure you that I personally would not have a job if I started issuing contracts with no idea of where the dollars were going or what was expected of them," Johnson wrote.

In his letter to Anthony Lakes' attorney, Martin, the county's attorney, wrote that the county intends to wait to issue a request for proposals until it has "an accepted definition, purpose and expectations for a Visitors Center in Baker County that can be clearly articulated to interested bidders."

Martin's letter continues: "This does not mean that the current Visitors Center will simply continue to operate indefinitely. The lack of direction and definition of what is expected and needed on Baker County is equally problematic for the current Visitors Center. Although I do not believe that your client has any actionable grounds to pursue a lawsuit, your points about the delay and frustration for your client are well taken and I have shared them with the Commissioners."



Nichols

## SUSPECT

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Lira is accused of taking items from the home belonging to Taylor and Cassaro.

The kidnapping charges allege that Lira forced a third victim, Tamesha McCurdy, to go from one place to another without her consent.

The coercion charges allege that Lira compelled McCurdy in three instances not to engage in conduct she knew she had a legal right to engage in, such as telling someone what she knew or had seen, under threat of harm. In another instance, she allegedly was compelled to engage in behavior she knew she had a legal right to abstain from, such as lifting up her shirt, by threat of harm. Taylor was the victim in one count of coercion.

The menacing charge accuses Lira of placing McCurdy in fear of "imminent serious physical injury by holding a saw up to her neck," the indictment states.

Second-degree robbery and second-degree kidnapping are Ballot Measure 11 crimes that each carry mandatory minimum sentences of 70 months in prison.

In seeking the court's approval of lowering Lira's bail amount, Moon stated that the parties are negotiating.

He stated that his client has no criminal history and would benefit from participating in an Alternative Incarceration Program with the Department of Corrections. Lira would not be eligible for the program unless he settles the outstanding warrants in Coos County, Moon stated in the court records.

In addition to no prior criminal convictions, Moon noted that Lira has a long work and academic history. He earned an associate degree at Southwestern Community College in Coos Bay, and a bachelor's degree from the University of Oregon in 2013, where he majored in Spanish and Latin American studies.

Moon said Lira had enrolled in a master's degree/teaching program at the University of Oregon in January 2020. He had been awarded a \$10,000

scholarship to help fund his education.

Moon stated, however, that Lira had a substance abuse problem that began in adolescence. Lira turned to drugs and alcohol when he became overwhelmed by stress tied to personal problems and responsibilities at his parents' restaurant, according to Moon.

Moon stated that Lira's mother traveled to California to care for his grandmother when she contracted COVID-19. His grandmother eventually died from the virus. And Lira's father traveled to Mexico, leaving Lira in charge of both restaurants.

Moon stated in the court records that his client dropped out of the master's degree program and "had mental breakdowns."

Lira started living on the streets of Coos Bay, Moon said. Friends who were worried about him contacted one of his childhood friends who lives in Baker City and his friend drove to Coos Bay to pick Lira up and bring him to Baker City.

Lira had been in Baker City about a week when the crimes are alleged to have happened, Moon said.

Aiden Porter Lang, who was indicted on the same charges Lira is facing, was sentenced to a year in jail and five years' probation upon release, in December.

In a plea agreement with the District Attorney's office, Lang, 24, pleaded guilty to first-degree burglary, coercion and menacing. The other charges were dismissed as part of the plea agreement.

If Lang's probation is revoked during the five-year period, he will be sentenced to 6 years and 8 months in prison, as required by the agreement. Lang's probation also could be revoked if he fails to testify at any hearing in other cases of parties involved in the crimes, including at trial, the agreement states.

At a Monday hearing in Baker County Circuit Court regarding Lira's case, Shirtcliff granted Moon's motion to postpone a trial that had been set for March 16-18, 2021.

Lira is scheduled to appear in Baker County Circuit Court for a status check hearing at 11:15 a.m. April 4.

## CHARGES

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Gonyer, who was living at Gladstone at the time, was sentenced to 75 months in prison after pleading guilty to one count of first-degree sexual

abuse involving a girl younger than 14, court documents state. That crime took place in February 1998.

Gonyer also pleaded no-contest to two more counts of first-degree sexual abuse in Clackamas County, accord-

ing to the court records. The second count in the case took place in February 1998 and involved a boy younger than 14. The third count, involving another girl younger than 14, happened in March of 1991.

Gonyer received a second

75-month sentence for the 1998 crime involving the boy, that ran concurrently (at the same time) as the first sentence. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison, which ran consecutive to the 75-month prison term (one after the

other) for the third crime. He also was ordered to complete 10 years' post-prison supervision upon release from prison.

The 75-month prison terms are mandatory minimum sentences under Oregon law. The 18-month sentence was

based on the law prior to the enactment of Ballot Measure 11, which was approved by Oregon voters in 1994, according to the court record. Ballot Measure 11 established mandatory minimum sentences in Oregon for 16 violent and sex crimes.

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