

OSP sergeant dies of gunshot wound in Joseph

BY BILL BRADSHAW

Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — An Oregon State Police sergeant was found dead in his patrol car Tuesday, March 29, of a single gunshot wound to the head, according to a press release from Wallowa County Sheriff Joel Fish.

Fish and WCSO Deputy Paul Pagano responded to a 3:41 p.m. call of a possible medical emergency at the residence of OSP Sgt. Marcus McDowell on North College Street in Joseph.

The State Medical Examiner's Office has determined the manner of death to be a suicide. McDowell was on duty at the time of his death, the statement said.

When Fish and Pagano arrived, they found McDowell unconscious in his patrol car in the driveway. After the officers made forced entry into McDowell's vehicle, they found him to be dead of a gunshot wound.

According to a statement March 31 by the OSP, McDowell spent his career at



Oregon State Police troopers walk up to a Wallowa County Sheriff's Office pickup Tuesday, March 29, 2022, as part of an investigation into a shooting death at a residence along North College Street in Joseph.

Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

OSP as a member of the Patrol Division, the Fish and Wildlife Division and as a K-9 handler working in the John Day and La Grande areas.

"He was respected by all and especially those he has worked so closely with throughout the years," the statement said. Fish said McDowell has

lived in Joseph "many years" and has family in the area.

Units from Enterprise Ambulance and the Joseph Fire Department also responded,

as did three Enterprise Police Department officers, a total of three WCSO units and three OSP troopers. North College Street between East Joseph Avenue and East Williams Avenue was blocked to traffic while the investigation was underway.

OSP Superintendent Terri Davie issued a statement in Fish's release.

"Thank you to our partner agencies for their assistance, compassion and professionalism during this tragic time," Davie said. "Our heartfelt thoughts and prayers go out to the family, friends, coworkers and responding emergency personnel."

Davie activated OSP's Critical Incident Response Team to provide peer support to other officers who have been affected by the tragedy.

"The OSP thanks the members of the public and other public safety partners for their support during this difficult time," Davie said in a separate statement. "Law Enforcement Officers have some of the same struggles as the rest of us and

need help too. Mental health is just as important as physical health in Law Enforcement. It has only been since 2018 that The Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act of 2017 was signed into law recognizing that law enforcement agencies need and deserve support in their ongoing efforts to protect the mental health and well-being of their employees."

Assistance in the investigation is being provided by officers and investigators from the EPD, the Pendleton Police Department, OSP and the Crime Lab.

The OSP statement urged anyone who knows of someone struggling with mental health to speak up, ask for help or reach out to professionals. Available resources include the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline that provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources at 800-273-8255. Crisis Text Line is a texting service for emotional crisis support. Text HELLO to 741741. It is free, available 24/7, and confidential.

COVID

Continued from Page A1

But since the county hit a record high of 183 cases the week of Jan. 16-22, case totals have plummeted more rapidly than at any other period during the pandemic.

The March total of 14 cases — and only one after March 11 — is the fewest in any month since June 2020, when there were four.

The recent absence of cases does not mean no county residents are being tested for COVID-19, although that number has dropped too.

For the current measuring week, March 27-April 2, the county reported 62 tests — all of them negative — through

March 31.

For the previous week there were 131 tests, again, all of them negative.

For the week March 13-19, there were 156 tests, one of those positive.

And for March 6-12, there were 199 tests, seven of which were positive.

The Baker County Health Department announced this week that starting Monday, April 4, it will begin posting case counts on its Facebook page weekly rather than daily.

The Oregon Health Authority will also cease sending a daily media release on April 4, although daily case counts and other statistics will continue to be available on the agency's website, <https://govstatus.egov.com/OR-OHA-COVID-19>.

case has been scheduled for April 19.

Baxter said his office is prepared to go the trial.

Neither Whitnah nor Moon cited a reason for withdrawing as Hackett's attorney.

Whitnah in his motion wrote that "I cannot disclose further specific grounds for this request without violating the Oregon Rules of Professional Conduct."

Moon wrote in his motion that "for ethical reasons, I cannot disclose the reason that I must withdraw as the attorney of record. ..."

Three other alleged fraud cases reported to Baker City Police in 2021 were settled by civil action between the residents and Hackett, according to a Baker City Police June 2021 press release.

According to the Oregon Contractor Construction Board, Hackett has never been a licensed contractor in Oregon.

The agency fined Hackett five times between 2009 and 2021 for working without a license, said Leslie Culpepper, communications and education manager for the Contractor Construction Board.

on how this snow comes off."

Lewis said that last year's slow runoff allowed for above average grass and brush growth — primary fuels for wildfires that were primed by the heat wave that pushed temperatures to record highs in most of Oregon. That grass growth meant that fires spread more rapidly, and in the case of the Bootleg Fire resulted in one of the nation's largest wildfires for 2021.

"It's kind of a catch-22 for us," Lewis said. "Does it come quickly and we have a drought? Or does it come off slow and we end up getting the grass growth?"

Despite being a La Niña year, the Eastern Oregon snowpack wasn't enough to start turning around the drought conditions in the area. As of March 31, most of Eastern Oregon remains in severe or moderate drought, and conditions are expected to worsen over the summer.

"In order to recover from that long-term drought we need successive years and we need excessive amounts of precipitation, and we're just not getting it," Oviatt said. "It's not going to happen this year, we're going to have to make some sacrifices in terms of surface water and available water."

Jungle

Continued from Page A1

More recently, though, city officials have described the Boys Jungle as an "attractive nuisance," a place where juveniles went to drink alcohol or smoke, screened from view by the dense foliage.

In 2011 the city asked the former owner, Ben Dean, to clean up the property and install private property and no trespassing signs.

The signs went up and some of the brush came down.

But Tsiatsos, whose company, GCT Land Management Inc., bought the property and the other parcels from Dean, did a much more thorough job.

Most of the mature trees remain, but in between the ground is largely bare, and visibility is much improved.

Tsiatsos (his name is pronounced "CHA-chuss") said that after he bought the Boys Jungle he found evidence that it had been used as a homeless camp.

Joyce Bornstedt, the city's technical administrative supervisor and also its parks coordinator, said Tsiatsos' efforts have greatly improved the situation at the Boys Jungle, which is one of the more popular sections of the Leo Adler Memorial Parkway.

That paved path for pedestrians and bicyclists, which the city built about 20 years ago, runs through the eastern edge of the Boys Jungle.

"We really appreciate the effort in cleaning that area up," Bornstedt said.

She said the city, which has a street right-of-way east of the path, also plans to do some tree trimming and other work in that area this year to complement the Boys Jungle transformation.

Bornstedt said the city has received many comments from residents since Tsiatsos started work in the Boys Jungle this winter, and almost all were pleased about the changes.

Tom Clement of Baker City, who spearheaded projects over the past two years to trim trees, remove underbrush and generally spruce up the riverside strip next to two other sections of the Adler Parkway, also lauded Tsiatsos' work in the Boys Jungle.

Clement said he's talked to many people who mistakenly credited him with cleaning up Boys Jungle, and the vast majority were happy with the results.

Tsiatsos said he realized when he bought the property that even though it's private, people did trespass, and that the conditions, with overhanging limbs and obstacles hidden by brush, were potentially dangerous.

"We recognized it to be a bit of a hazard, and we're trying to be good neighbors and get rid of some blight and still keep its romantic appeal to the city," Tsiatsos said as he strolled through the Boys Jungle on the afternoon of Thursday, March 31. "We tried to keep the feel of what it was. We're really happy with how it turned out."

He'd also like to be able to eventually remove the private property and no trespassing signs still affixed to several trees.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Dennis Scudder, an Army veteran, looks over his new neighborhood in La Grande on Thursday, Nov. 4, 2021. Scudder bounced between temporary housing solutions before moving into Veteran Village Union County, a new community of cottage-style homes.

"We tried to keep the feel of what it was. We're really happy with how it turned out."

— Gust Tsiatsos, owner, talking about cleaning up the Boys Jungle

Tsiatsos said he would prefer to transfer the Boys Jungle to the city for use as a public park.

Bornstedt said Tsiatsos has suggested a deal by which the city could make concessions for utility payments for the rest of the property he bought, in exchange for his donating the Boys Jungle.

That's not possible, Bornstedt said, because of accounting issues, since the water and wastewater departments are separate funds in the city's budget from the parks department, which is in the general fund.

Tsiatsos said he understands the potential bureaucratic obstacles.

But he still hopes he can work out an agreement with the city to transfer the Boys Jungle.

He said he's also considered conveying the land to the Veterans Administration for use as a public park dedicated to veterans.

If neither of the public park options is feasible, Tsiatsos said he probably would try to incorporate the Boys Jungle parcel into his plans to develop residential housing for the rest of the property.

"I'd prefer it to be a park," he said.

Tsiatsos said he had the work done this winter, after the ground was frozen, to reduce damage to the soil from the heavy equipment.

He said he intends to plant native shrubs in parts of the property.

Veteran housing Although the Boys Jungle work has been the most conspicuous evidence of Tsiatsos' purchase of the parcels between D and H streets, it's actually a relatively small part of his overall plan.

His chief purpose was to create housing for military veterans. Tsiatsos expects construction to start within 45 days on the first phase, which will include 13 rental cottage-style homes and a community center. Those will be built in the lot directly north of Memory Lane Homes assisted living facility on F

Street just east of Elkhorn Village apartments.

(The apartments are not part of the property Tsiatsos bought.)

The cottages are in the "tiny home" style, he said, covering about 500 square feet for the one-bedroom version (nine of those in the first phase) and slightly larger for the four two-bedroom units.

A new private street will access the cottages, running north and south between F and H streets.

The development is similar to the 10-cottage Veterans Village Union County that Tsiatsos built in La Grande. It opened in the fall of 2021.

For the Baker City development, Tsiatsos said he secured a \$1.5 million grant from Oregon Housing and Community Services to go along with \$350,000 to \$450,000 of private investment. He said the Northeast Oregon Housing

Authority would manage the development.

Rick Gloria, Baker County's veteran services officer, said he has met with Tsiatsos and is excited about the development and its benefits for local veterans.

"It will be awesome," Gloria said. "Housing is so hard to find here, and it will be great to have another resource."

He said he can work with local veterans who might qualify for a federal voucher that pays 70% of rental costs.

The second phase of the development involves building cottages that would be available for sale to veterans, rather than rental units, Tsiatsos said. That phase would be south of the first phase, nearer F Street.

Tsiatsos also owns the vacant lot north of Elkhorn Village apartments. The parcel extends to H Street, with the Powder River at the west edge and the Adler Parkway running through the eastern part.

He said he is considering a residential development on that parcel, but he has no specific plans.

Trial

Continued from Page A1

- Aggravated first-degree theft, \$10,000 or more, from Carol or Tim Delsman
- First-degree theft, \$1,000 or more, from Michael Ragsdale

Greg Baxter, Baker County district attorney, said a charge can be elevated from first-degree theft, a Class C felony, to aggravated first-degree theft, a Class B felony, if the amount is \$10,000 or more, or if the victim is 65 or older.

Robert Whitnah of Baker City was appointed in July 2021 to represent Hackett.

Whitnah filed a motion on March 14, 2022, to withdraw as Hackett's attorney, and Judge Matt Shirtcliff approved that motion the same day.

Another Baker City attorney, Bob Moon, was appointed on March 16 to represent Hackett.

Moon filed a motion to withdraw as Hackett's attorney on March 25.

Shirtcliff approved Moon's order on March 31.

A status check on the

Snowpack

Continued from Page A1

"There will be less available surface water for instream flows to support things. There will be less available groundwater storage because we're not recharging our system with our ground soil moisture and because we've been in a long-term drought and we didn't really recover from that over this winter."

Union County watermaster Shad Hattan agrees, stating that if the area doesn't get significant spring rain, "it will be hard on everything. Agriculture, stream flows. If we don't get moisture for April and May, that's (going to be) hard on everybody."

One silver lining to the early melt off and continuation of the drought? Fire season might be milder compared to last year.

"The biggest thing is how fast the snow we have right now comes off," said Trevor Lewis, assistant fire management officer with the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. "If we lose our snow real quick, and it dries out fairly quickly then our grass growth isn't as high, so we generally see lower rates of spread with our fires, even if we do have significant fuel moistures that are drier. It really depends

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