

# Police seek to solve Union County cold case

BY DICK MASON

The Observer  
UNION COUNTY — The Oregon State Police are turning up the heat on a local cold case.

OSP officers and OSP crime lab personnel will soon reexamine a site near Finley Creek, 18 miles north of La Grande, where the remains of an unidentified woman were found in August 1978.

The OSP team, which will have human remains detection dogs, will be searching for anything connected to the unidentified woman who was found there in a shallow grave more than 40 years ago.

The OSP will go to the site after all the snow there has melted. Detective-sergeant Sean Belding of the OSP said his agency will be facing a big challenge.

"It will be a little like looking for a needle in a haystack," Belding said.

Melinda Jederberg, of La Grande, a member of the Finley Creek Jane Doe Task Force, is more hopeful.

"We are very optimistic," said Jederberg, who founded the task force in 2019.

A big reason for the confidence is that task force members went to the Finley Creek site where the woman's remains were found twice in 2021 with cadaver dogs. The task force brought a single dog once and two on another trip. Each of the two dogs indicated they found ground under which there are human remains at the same site at or near a tree.

"One dog pawed at the ground near the tree," Jederberg said.

The task force members did not dig at the site because it is a crime scene and thus it would be illegal to disrupt it. They instead notified the Oregon State Police who later decided to investigate the site and possibly dig there.

Suzanne Timms of Walla Walla, Washington, who is assisting with the search as a volunteer, is glad that highly trained OSP investigators will soon be examining the Finley Creek site.

"They know how to collect evidence without contaminating the site. I can't wait," Timms said.

## A daughter's search

Timms is elated that the OSP will be investigating the site since she is



Suzanne Timms poses for a portrait at her home in Walla Walla on Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2021, alongside a missing person poster for her mother, Patricia "Patty" Otto, and a collection of documents pertaining to her disappearance. Timms believes the Finley Creek Jane Doe, discovered near Elgin in August 1978, is her mother, who went missing in 1976.

certain the Finley Creek Jane Doe is her mother, Patricia "Patty" Otto, of Lewiston, Idaho, who has been missing since Sept. 1, 1976.

Timms first suspected that the Finley Creek Jane Doe was her mother in 2021 when she saw an image created by a forensic artist in Massachusetts, Anthony Redgrave, the operator of Redgrave Research Forensic Services. Redgrave was assisting the Finley Creek Jane Doe group, and the image he created looked very similar to that of Timms' mother.

Other details have contributed to Timms' belief that the Finley Creek Jane Doe is her mother. The remains were found with a white shirt and red pants, which is what Patty Otto was last seen wearing before disappearing.

As part of the investigation in 1978, Lewiston police believed the Jane Doe could be Patty Otto, and Timms' grandparents Thomas O'Malley and Ardys O'Malley were flown from Lewiston to La Grande to identify the body. Timms said they were sure the re-

mains were those of their daughter, because the white shirt and red pants were found with the remains at Finley Creek.

"I found records indicating that they told the Lewiston police that the white shirt and red pants looked very similar to what my mother was wearing before she disappeared," Timms said, who discovered this information earlier this year.

Timms believes that her mother was murdered in Lewiston by her father, and then taken to Finley Creek where he buried her in a shallow grave.

The OSP's autopsy records for the Finley Creek Jane Doe, however, do not match those of Patty Otto.

Timms believes the discrepancy is due to an error made by the OSP's medical examiner while doing examinations of the skeletal remains for two Jane Does in his office at about the same time in 1978. She suspects he assigned his reports to the wrong Jane Does because his report for the second Jane Doe matches her mother's autopsy photos and dental records.

"It appears that he had the two Jane Does confused based upon documents he wrote himself," Timms said.

## A cash award

Timms said she is excited about the OSP's plans to examine the Finley Creek site because if bones are found their DNA tests could prove that they are the bones of her mother. Currently, there are no known bones of the Finley Creek Jane Doe because they are believed to have been cremated by the state after they were found, Timms said.

A recent cash award for information on the Finley Creek Jane Doe also offers hope that new evidence may come to light.

Interest in the Finley Creek Jane Doe has picked up since Crime Stoppers of Oregon announced in March that it was offering a cash award of up to \$2,500 to help identify the murdered woman.

"It has generated a lot of calls about the case," Jederberg said.

Jederberg, of the Finley Creek Jane Doe Task Force, said she hopes the reward and increased interest will encourage people to step forward.

## New additions, and a special week

A new "member's lounge" is now open with coffee, a variety of beverages such as protein shakes, and tables to sit and visit. This space also includes a room for Timberline Massage, owned by Tanya Pozzi. Massage appointments are available for both Y members and nonmembers — for information, call 541-216-3584.

Look ahead, Member Appreciation Week is May 2-7.

"We'll have activities every single day," Myer said.

That week also offers a chance to "try the Y for free" for those who aren't members.

For more information, or to find out about new programs, visit the website bakerymca.org, follow the Baker County YMCA on Facebook, or stop by the fitness center.

## The YMCA board

The YMCA has a board of directors, and Myer said he's hoping to bring on additional board members.

Those interested in serving on the board can call Myer at the YMCA, 541-523-9622.

# YMCA

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Looking ahead, the Y will bring back football — both tackle and flag — and add a youth tennis camp to the offerings.

"We want to give them a good introduction to sports," he said. "Why not try new things?"

Programs were somewhat limited during the past two years due to health restrictions.

"We had Y rules we had to follow with COVID," Myer said.

However, many continued unabated, such as gymnastics.

"It's busier than it's ever been," Myer said.

A new addition to the Fitness Center, at 3715 Pocahontas Road, is a swath of turf, which can be used for high intensity interval training. For instance, a metal "sled" can be loaded with weight and pushed or pulled on the turf, which adds resistance.

Myer said offerings such as this focus on overall fitness, not just a specific sport.

The Y should be, he said, "a positive influence on overall health and wellness for everybody."

The YMCA is also working with other organizations in the community. For instance, it is partnering with the school district to host a weightlifting program before school for Baker Middle School students.

## 24-hour access

Starting May 1, the fitness center will be available to members 24 hours a day, 365 days a week.

This is for ages 18 and older, and access is limited to the fitness center.

The goal, Myer said, is to serve a wide variety of the community, such as those who work swing shifts or can't make it in during the regularly staffed hours.

The 24-hour access is one of Myer's first goals. Another is to revive the Y expansion to add a gymnasium to the fitness center building.

"I'm aware and fully committed to bringing the gym expansion back to the table," he said.

# School

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He expects 22 to 25 foreign students will attend BHS when the 2022-23 school year starts this fall.

Andrew Bryan, a member of the Baker School Board, said he believes the International School will benefit district students as well as the community.

Students will have a chance to sit side by side in BHS classrooms with teenagers from around the world, Bryan said.

Moreover, he believes that the program will bolster the district's budget and allow the district to offer scholarships to Baker students that makes it possible for those who are interested to travel abroad and expand their perspectives both academically and socially.

"It's a fully global endeavor," Bryan said.

Although Witty said the district hopes to place some visiting students with host families, the traditional system through foreign exchange student programs such as Rotary and AFS, he said it's clear to district officials that these

won't be enough host families to accommodate all the visiting students.

"That's why we're making the investment" in the two homes, he said.

Each home will have space for at least six students, as well as local families who will live in each home, Witty said.

He said several current district employees have expressed interest in living in the homes and helping to oversee the international students. Those employees will likely work under a personal services contract with the district.

Bryan said it's possible that some visiting students will live part of the school year with a local host family, and the rest of the time in one of the homes.

## District projects financial surplus

The district's financial projections for the Oregon International School, which is a charter school, show the program generating a surplus for each of its first three years.

Witty said some of that money would be used to repay the district, with interest, for the money used to buy the

two homes.

The revenue also would be used for scholarships to help defray tuition for Baker students who attend school outside the U.S., he said.

The school district paid \$295,000 last month for the home at 1706 Washington Ave. Known as the Moomaw house, it's a Queen Anne/East-lake-style cottage build around 1900. It's named for original owner David L. Moomaw.

Witty said the Baker School Board will meet on April 12 to discuss buying a second home. That's the Kolb-White House, also known as the Langrell House, at 1503 Second St. The asking price is \$490,000.

The money for the home purchases is from the district's regular budget, Witty said.

The money is not part of the \$4 million the district will collect from the levy that voters approved in May 2021. That money can only be spent on earmarked projects, including the construction of a cafeteria and multipurpose building at Baker Middle School, and new heating/cooling/ventilation systems at all district schools.

Witty said he understands

that the district could have used the money that will go to the two homes for other projects.

"It always comes down to a choice," he said.

But he believes the investment in the two homes will benefit local students and, ultimately, the district's bottom line.

Bryan agreed. He contends the Baker School District is in better financial shape than any other district in the state.

Bryan believes that the International School will benefit both the district's students and the district's financial situation.

Witty cited the district's projections that the International School program will repay the district for the homes in less than 15 years, and that the program's overall revenue will exceed its expenses.

That's possible in part because the district has qualified to host international students under the J-1 visa program, Witty said.

Under that designation, the state would pay the district the same annual rate — about \$8,700 — that the district receives for local students.

"This generates revenue for

sure," Witty said.

He said only about six school districts across the country have qualified for that J-1 visa.

The International School also has a contract in Taiwan to offer online classes, with dual high school and college credits, for students there. The projected budget forecasts net revenue of \$46,000 from that contract the first year.

## International School staffing

Lindsey McDowell, public information and communications coordinator for the Baker School District, said the International School will have four employees, three of whom will work half-time or less for the program.

All are current district employees. Witty, who is retiring as superintendent, will serve as executive director, at 0.3 full-time equivalent.

Thomas Joseph, the current principal for the Eagle Cap Innovative High School, an alternative program in the district, will be the sole full-time employee, serving as principal and instructor. The district is recruiting his replacement at Eagle Cap.

the revenues collected for the service which could approach a million dollars a year in the very near future."

The personnel costs for the fire department have risen from about \$1.6 million per year in the 2017-18 fiscal year to \$2 million for the current fiscal year, which ends June 30, 2022.

The main reason for the increase is that the city in 2018 hired three new firefighter/paramedics — the city fire department is a dual-role department, handling both fires and ambulance calls.

Ambulance calls make up the bulk of the department's total calls — about 84% over the past four years, Cannon said.

The city received a federal grant that paid about two-thirds of the cost of the new firefighters, but the grant ended in 2021.

Although the city has increased the amount it collects from ambulance bills over the past year or so, Cannon said it's not enough to offset the expenses of operating ambulances in the future.

The biggest problem, he said, is that about 80% of the ambulance bills go to people who are covered by Medicare or Medicaid, and those federal programs pay only about 20% of what the city bills.

City and county officials have discussed several times over the past few years the looming financial issue once the federal money went away, leaving the city responsible for making up the difference in the fire department budget.

The City Council discussed the matter in August 2020 and cited it as a reason for delaying a decision on buying a new ambulance.

The county paid the city \$99,000 over the three-year grant period to help offset the cost of hiring the new firefighters. The county is contributing \$100,000 for the current fiscal year.

The county, being responsible for choosing ambulance service providers, in 2019 also sent letters of interest to 21 potential providers, including the city fire department. That covered the Baker ambulance service area, which includes Baker City and about two-thirds of the rest of the county.

(The county has three other smaller ambulance service areas, covering the Richland, Halfway and Huntington areas.)

Three of those providers ended up submitting bids — the city, Med Transport Inc. of North Powder and Metro West Ambulance Inc. of Hillsboro. County officials didn't disclose details from those bids, and in 2020 commissioners tabled the matter. The city has continued to provide ambulance service, without a contract, since then.

County officials have also discussed asking voters in the ambulance service area to approve a property tax levy that would be a new, long-term source of revenue for ambulance service.

Residents in the service area outside the city limits don't directly contribute to the city's fire department budget now.

A portion of property taxes that city residents pay, however, does go to the fire department, which is part of the city's general fund. The biggest revenue sources in the general fund, which also includes the Baker City Police, are property taxes, ambulance bills and franchise fees paid by utility companies.

McQuisten said she understands that the current situation, with the Sept. 30 date on the table, might have surprised some people.

"The citizens who understand the legal roles of our county commissioners, city council and city manager understand that we're in the middle of a process and why we are where we are," she said. "Others who haven't followed the situation very closely over the years are of course feeling sideswiped."

"In the end, all of us simply want the best ambulance services for our people, in a way we can actually afford. I think we can get there," McQuisten said.

# Council

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The City Council will meet Tuesday, April 12, at 7 p.m. at City Hall, 1655 First St.

If the city fire department ceases ambulance service Sept. 30, Baker County commissioners, by Oregon law, would be required to find a different ambulance provider.

Commissioners will discuss a request for proposals for ambulance services during a work session on Wednesday, April 13, at 9 a.m. at the Courthouse, 1995 Third St.

Commissioners voted 3-0 on Wednesday, April 6, to offer to contribute \$150,000 to the city for ambulance services during the fiscal year that starts July 1, 2022.

McQuisten said the City Council will consider that offer during their April 12 meeting.

City Councillor Dean Guyer said on Thursday, April 7, that he hopes city and county officials can agree on a solution that makes it possible for the city fire department to continue operating ambulances.

But to accomplish that, the city can't continue to shoulder the bulk of the financial burden, Guyer said.

"We need to go a different direction and the city cannot continue to subsidize the county's ambulance service nor can it continue to operate in the negative," Guyer said.

He said he hopes that the county's \$150,000 offer will lead to a joint city-county meeting.

"We need to start fresh and go forward as opposed to going backwards and plowing that ground," Guyer said. "I hope that we can get it resolved. I talked to many of the firefighters and also ambulance folks yesterday after the (county commission) meeting. And I feel their pain, I do. They don't want to move and they want to continue to live in our community and they're seeing that it could affect the quality of the ambulance service if we continue to go down this road and we can't come to a resolution between the city and the county in paying for the services."

Guyer was referring to a projection from the city that if the fire department no longer provides ambulance service, the loss of revenue — estimated at about \$1 million for the current fiscal year — would force the city to lay off half the current firefighter/paramedics.

Casey Johnson, president of the local union chapter that represents firefighters, said that would significantly reduce the department's ability to fight fires, particularly in cases when there's a need for firefighters to enter a burning home or other structure.

City Councillor Johnny Waggoner Sr. said that although he doesn't support the city continuing with the amount of financial shortfall it has in operating ambulances, he also doesn't like the possibility of layoffs in the fire department.

"If we can do it and provide the same service and not go in the hole, I'm willing to do it, to keep it going," Waggoner said. "Cause nobody wants to lay anybody off."

"There's no quick fixes for it," he said. "I hope Baker City does not have to quit doing ambulance services. But we'll see what the county puts out in the (request for proposals) and if we can do it, as much as I hate to see government compete against private stuff, I would rather keep our level of service for the citizens of Baker County, for our (ambulance service area)."

## City Council sets Sept. 30 deadline

The City Council voted on March 22 to send the notice to commissioners, including the Sept. 30 date for the city fire department to cease ambulance services, after hearing a report from City Manager Jonathan Cannon in which he wrote: "We are anticipating shortfalls between the cost of service and



Guyer