

Bend Fire

Continued from A1

All this activity lately has led to a historic surge in emergency calls at the city's 116-year-old municipal fire department.

Last month was Bend Fire & Rescue's busiest on record in terms of call volume.

In June, the fire department responded to 1,118 calls, of which 885 were medical in nature, an increase of nearly 10% over May.

It's noteworthy because June isn't typically as busy as July and August, said Bend Fire & Rescue Chief Todd Riley.

"I hope June's not foreshadowing what the rest of this summer's going to look like," Riley said. "We are doing as much as we can with the people we have."

When the town shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the first quarter of 2020, the fire department saw calls slow to a trickle, with less fire activity and fewer people needing to go, or wanting to go, to the hospital.

But that lull lasted only a few months before fire and medical calls sprung back to historical averages. And with recent summertime activity, the department has been stretched, Riley said.

"What's responsible for the increase in call volume?" Riley asked. "I think people are ready to get out after a year and a half locked down. And don't forget that in that time that everybody was locked down, Bend still grew."

With an annual budget of \$26 million, Bend Fire & Res-



Dean Guernsey/Bulletin file

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cue employs 130 people, 91 of whom are firefighter-paramedics, across seven stations. Through a unique arrangement, its firefighters serve some residents outside the city living in Deschutes County Rural Fire Protection District 2.

Riley doesn't see the trend stopping after wildfire season ends. Call volume in the past 12 months also rose by about 10% above the previous year.

The agency has put in for a possible three-year grant to fund its next big need: staffing an engine based out of the Pilot Butte substation, which would require nine new firefight-

er-paramedic positions. Currently, the Pilot Butte station, the agency's newest, is staffed with only an ambulance.

"Another resource would help with the call volume we're experiencing now, but we can't just put an engine there because we don't have funding in place. Our funding is what it is," Riley said.

The agency's current tax levy is scheduled to run out in 2024. Riley expects to start a public campaign to reach voters in fall 2023.

Riley foresees further staffing challenges associated with this wildfire season, which typically starts in late July but

this year is considered having already begun. The agency has agreements to share equipment and personnel with others in need.

Several Bend employees are currently serving in command roles at the Grandview Fire northeast of Sisters.

Bend's recent past features two significant fires that wiped out entire neighborhoods, the Awbrey Hall Fire in August 1990 and the Skeleton Fire in August 1996.

"I'm currently knocking on wood," Riley said. "History does tend to repeat itself."

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123RF

In this stock photo, a bat flies out of a church attic.

Bat

Continued from A1

Emilio DeBess, public health veterinarian for the Oregon Health Authority, said seven bats tested positive for rabies in Oregon this year: four in Lane County, one in Josephine County, one in Grant County and one in Deschutes County.

DeBess declined to release additional details about the circumstances or location of the rabid bat found in Bend.

"There's always an uptick of rabies activity in the summertime," DeBess said. "This case is a great reminder not to pick up dead or injured bats due to possible exposure and to keep pets vaccinated."

According to DeBess, potentially rabid bats, dead or alive, that come into contact with people need to be sent to Oregon State University's Veterinary Lab in Corvallis for testing.

In order to test for rabies, veterinarians need to look at an animal's brain. It's a quick procedure nonetheless, DeBess said.

"We test over a hundred bats every year, and usually 8-10% are positive," DeBess said.

Rabies cases in animals

other than bats are rare, but they do occur. Two Oregon cats tested positive for rabies in recent years, one in 2015 and one in 2017, according to an annual report put out by the Oregon Health Authority.

Additionally, a couple of Oregon goats and foxes tested positive for rabies between 2010 and 2014, prompting enhanced surveillance of those populations by state health officials.

Rabies cases in humans are exceptionally rare due to vaccinations, and the disease is 100% preventable with prompt medical care, according to the report.

But better safe than sorry, DeBess said. Once symptoms begin, the disease is fatal.

"If you find a bat during the daylight hours, it is most likely not healthy and should be avoided," DeBess said. "Bats suffering from rabies will normally bite in self-defense and pose little threat to people who do not handle them."

If a person or pet is bitten by a bat, promptly report it to Deschutes County Environmental Health at 541-317-3114 and report the bite to a medical provider.

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Blankenship

Continued from A1

"I don't know how that is going to work out in the future, but that is my biggest concern."

Blankenship announced her retirement in June, and at the end of the month will hand the operation over to Steve Denison, who is currently the Deschutes County elections supervisor.

The decision to leave was a personal one, she said, since her elected term technically doesn't end until 2023. It was in part driven by the recent passing of her husband and a desire to spend more time with family, she said.

"It changes your perspective on things," Blankenship said.

A lifelong Oregonian, Blankenship was born in The Dalles before eventually moving to Redmond and graduating from Redmond High School. Before being elected clerk in Deschutes County, Blankenship began her career in records keeping at the city of Redmond in 1986. It wasn't a career she had anticipated — before joining the city, she had received her degree in business and was working in retail, she said.

But when the owners of the shop where she worked announced they were going to retire and close down, she decided to apply to be the assistant to the city recorder. Soon after she became the city recorder for Redmond for the next 15 years.

She called the position a "natural fit."

"I loved researching things and giving people answers," Blankenship said.

Blankenship loved helping people sift through records so much that one year, instead of taking her planned time off before Thanksgiving, she stayed in the office to help someone research a project for hours.

"It's exciting when you can

"I loved researching things and giving people answers. It's exciting when you can help someone find something."

— Nancy Blankenship, Deschutes County clerk

help someone find something," she said.

She decided to run for county clerk in 2003 as a way to exercise her ability to leave her comfort zone, Blankenship said. Blankenship was quickly thrown into the deep end, administering 10 elections in two years, including a contentious presidential election.

Blankenship said her most stressful moment as a clerk was the 2004 election, when a drop of graphite ink fell between the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates on a handful of ballots.

But even in the most stressful of times, Blankenship said the key to getting through elections was to be consistent and transparent.

"You do what's right, no matter how painful or how stressful it is," she said.

Whoever is elected after Blankenship, however, will have new challenges to face. Some of those include navigating new technology and finding new ways to verify ballots that don't require a signature, Blankenship said.

But her biggest concern is the spread of election-related misinformation. During last year's general election, Blankenship's office spent hours answering questions about the integrity of mail-in voting, and responding to demands to know when ballots were picked up from ballot boxes, which is a security concern.

These questions were largely prompted by national rhetoric from former President Donald Trump, who falsely claimed the election was being stolen from him.

She is concerned about people believing whatever they read on social media, instead of referencing trusted sources.

"It's not like we can come to your desk and say 'that's not true,'" Blankenship said.

Blankenship said she is not sure what it will take to combat the distrust that was created last year. But in her experience, she has had positive experiences after offering tours to people with concerns so they can see for themselves what her staff does.

"I've never had someone come in full of suspicion who hasn't felt better after coming in," Blankenship said.

As she heads into retirement, Blankenship said she is looking forward to having more time to "smell the roses" — which she often didn't have time to do as clerk — and to knock some travel items off her bucket list. Redmond residents may see her riding around on her newly-purchased e-bike.

But colleagues of Blankenship hope the legacy she has left with the county will continue.

Blankenship's dedication to the job is what defines her most, according to some of her colleagues.

Steve Druckenmiller, the clerk for Linn County, has worked with Blankenship the whole time she has served as clerk, he said. Clerks across the state often work together to figure out how to implement new voting legislation, like automatic voter registration.

She had the ability to bring people together and facilitate productive conversations, even when the issue was contentious

or people disagreed, he said. She always approached situations with an open mind, and created a space where people could speak honestly without consequence, Druckenmiller said.

"She was just meant to be an elections official," he said.

Jeffrey Sageser, the county's recording supervisor, worked with Blankenship for nearly two decades. He recalled multiple times when she would receive a call on election night from a resident about not being able to get down to the county building to receive a ballot, and would personally drive to the house to give it to the person to make sure he or she could vote.

"She never let anyone not have an opportunity to voice their opinion at the ballot box," Sageser said.

Blankenship led the department with selfless kindness and professionalism, Sageser said — a combination of traits that are hard to find these days.

"Nancy has left an impressionable mark on Deschutes County and the way elections should be administered," he said. "She will leave a legacy that will be enduring for many, many years to come. For those who follow her, they can look to her as an example on how to do it right."

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