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Bentz chosen to replace Ferrioli

Former representative moves from House to Senate



The Eagle/Richard Hanners
Dr. Eric Wattenburg, left, and Rep. Cliff Bentz at the Grant County Regional Airport in John Day Jan. 4 before being interviewed by county commissioners.

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

County commissioners from Grant, Harney, Malheur, Baker, Deschutes, Jefferson, Lake, Wasco and Wheeler counties overwhelmingly chose Rep. Cliff Bentz to fill the remainder of former Sen. Ted Ferrioli's term in office for Senate District 30.

Bentz received votes from 24

of the commissioners Jan. 4, while Dr. Eric Wattenburg received votes from two and Suzan Ellis Jones received one vote, according to Deschutes County Commissioner Tammy Baney, who chaired the group.

Ferrioli officially resigned from office Nov. 22 to begin his appointment by Gov. Kate Brown as a member of the Pacific Northwest Electric Power and Conservation Planning Council, whose mission is

to ensure an affordable and reliable energy system while enhancing fish and wildlife in the Columbia River Basin.

Republican precinct committee persons from Senate District 30 nominated the three candidates. The district is the largest Senate District in the state.

Sixteen of the 27 commissioners met at the Grant County Regional Airport in John Day to interview

Bentz and Wattenburg. Eleven commissioners participated by phone.

Bentz, a Republican from Ontario, has served in the state House since 2008 and will take the oath of office as a senator at noon Jan. 8 in the Senate Chamber. Wattenburg has been a physician for 15 years, owns a walk-in clinic in Redmond and hosts a weekly talk-radio show.

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FIREWISE WORK SLOW BUT STEADY

Public lands project approved near Granite

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Establishing Firewise communities in Grant County has been a work in progress, Firewise Coordinator Irene Jerome told the Eagle. There were a number of distractions last summer — the eclipse, the Rainbow Gathering and the fire season. But there is some progress to report.

The Grant County Firewise Communities program received \$40,531 from the federal Secure Rural Schools program for this year. Jerome notes that Grant



Irene Jerome

County's rural areas lack structural fire protection services, but more is needed than just cleaning up fuels around homes to create defensible spaces: Communities also need evacuation plans.

"Fires move fast in some areas, and resources are limited," Jerome said.

Firewise designation

The process to designate a Firewise community begins with a risk assessment conducted by a local fire chief and an Oregon Department of Forestry representative, she said. Jerome writes up a report, the community develops a timeline and

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Contributed photo/Irene Jerome

Fire professionals share information with the group on Dayville's successes, risks and vulnerabilities in the event of a wildfire during the Dayville Firewise Community Assessment.

TOP PHOTO: In this Eagle file photo, Howard Gieger, left, and Phil Bopp tend a burn pile on Gieger's 40-acre property in the Pine Creek area May 6. Gieger is the chairman for the Pine Creek Firewise community.

It's unclear how state could block pot prosecutions

By Claire Withycombe
Capital Bureau

Several legal observers say that there are limited ways for Oregon officials to defend state-regulated cannabis businesses in the courts in light of changes to federal guidance on enforcement of the drug.

Marijuana has been legal under Oregon law since July 2015, but it remains illegal under the federal Controlled Substances Act.

U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions on Thursday rescinded an Obama-era policy, referred to as the Cole Memo, that guided federal law enforcement to focus on larger-scale violations of federal law rather than target state-compliant marijuana operations. The action opens even marijuana businesses complying with state regulations to prosecution.

Sessions did not mandate such prosecutions, but instead gave federal prosecutors in each state authority to decide where they would focus their enforcement actions.

While it doesn't appear likely that Billy Williams, the U.S. attorney for the district of Oregon, will pivot in light of that change, state officials say they are exploring legal options.

In a press conference Thursday, Democratic Gov. Kate Brown stressed what she called a coordinated effort among state, local, and federal law enforcement to implement the Cole Memo's guidance.

"The result of all this collaborative work is that we have now a thriving marijuana industry," Brown said.

However, the governor did not provide any specifics on what legal recourse might be available to the state in the event that federal prosecutors pursue the state's cannabis industry.

On Thursday state Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum said she would do everything in her "legal authority" to protect Oregon's regulated pot businesses, though neither she nor Brown proposed a specific strategy to block federal prosecutors from enforcing drug laws passed by Congress.

Henry Wykowski, a San Francisco attorney specializing in cannabis, said Oregon could become a "sanctuary state" for marijuana, much like Oregon is a sanctuary state for undocumented immigrants.

A Democratic state assemblyman in California has proposed a law there to do just that.

However, the state couldn't intervene in a criminal case brought by federal authorities, Wykowski said.

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Tax changes could mean business investments

Ag and timber sectors see benefits

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Large and small businesses in Grant County could see immediate benefits from passage of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act in December — from agriculture to timber — but the hospital could see increased costs from an increase in uninsured patients.

The Oregon Farm Bureau



Barry Bushue

Bushue noted, in addition to simplifying tax rates, the bill eliminates the estate tax for families up to \$11 million while maintaining annual indexing for inflation, which covers most family farms and ranches.

praised the bill.

"This bill lowers taxes for the vast majority of our agricultural families," Oregon Farm Bureau President Barry Bushue said in a press release.

The bill also preserved or improved several key tools for small businesses, such as cash accounting, carry-forward of net operating losses and bonus depreciation, Bushue said. The latter, also known as immediate expensing, will allow farmers and ranchers to write off costs of qualifying purchases up to \$1 million — twice the amount previously allowed. Immediate expensing will also be allowed for used, not just new, equipment, he said.

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