

Community members support Balzer, ask board to step down

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department," the letter continues. "It would be best for the fire department and community if certain board members would resign from the board before it becomes a recall situation."

Ten more current and former volunteers shared their concerns in personalized letters.

"During every call I have ever been on or with Mike (Balzer), his leadership, knowledge and skills were top notch," wrote volunteer firefighter Trevor Mount.

After explaining the shock of the firing, Mount asked, "Why did you not share with us the board's concerns? Because let's be really clear here.... Without volunteer firefighters,

there is no need for you, the board."

In a letter addressed to Balzer, retired Cannon Beach Fire Marshal Mike Graham wrote: "A fire chief must have the full trust of his or her firefighters, and I feel you have achieved that trust. I remain in total support of you, and hope the board of directors will reconsider their action."

Public confusion and emotions were further inflamed as the board's explanations for Balzer's firing were not readily forthcoming.

Last month a public records request by the Gazette revealed that Balzer's firing, according to board member Garry Smith, was "strictly business, not personal." Particularly, the board took issue with Bal-

zer's perceived clerical and administrative shortcomings.

Many community members remain unsatisfied by that rationale, as evidenced in the 22 letters Neuwrith collected from local residents.

"I doubt that the alleged lack of administrative skill was sufficient to merit termination," wrote Cannon Beach resident Eric Reiter, a retired Portland Police Bureau sergeant. "Until the board can demonstrate that it was, Chief Balzer should be reinstated."

In a three-page letter, former board President Alfred A. Aya Jr. detailed a tenuous working relationship between the Balzer and the board. Aya wrote that members of the board were



ANDREW R. TONRY PHOTO/CANNON BEACH GAZETTE

Susan Neuwrith is seeking changes on the Cannon Beach Rural Fire Protection Board.

engaged in "determined micromanagement," which he deemed an overreach.

"In my opinion, from what I've observed, those three directors cannot keep themselves from intensively 'managing' the fire chief and his responsibilities," Aya wrote. "Seeing no way to correct this effectively, I resigned from the board where I'd served as vice president for 12 years and president for 18."

Upstairs at the firehouse, where the board meets, Neuwrith made reference to a plaque titled: "Cannon Beach Fire and Rescue: Our Values." She pointed to one line in particular. It reads: "Open communications at all levels."

"The board isn't operating with that kind of transparency," Neuwrith said. "Mike Balzer was the impetus of this, but he is not

the sole reason. As I've observed the meetings, they are so unprofessionally run."

Board members subject to Neuwrith's recall, Clyde, Beck-Sweeney and Smith, declined requests to comment on the petition.

After registering the recall with Clatsop County, Neuwrith is currently collecting signatures. She said she needs to get a minimum of 125, and 150 to be safe, and believes she will gather them with ease. Should she succeed the board members will need to decide whether to contest or resign.

"This isn't something I enjoy doing," Neuwrith said. "I don't like going up against people who are donating time and effort to the community. But it's time for new leadership."

Storm damage repairs may impact planned improvements

Storm from Page 1A

"The plan was to improve the trail anyway, but this will certainly change the scope of that work," said Rippee, who is no longer sure that the money set aside for the project will cover the cost. The good news is the parking lot and restroom facilities are still open to the public. The parks department suggests gaining alternative beach access at nearby Hug Point or Tolovana recreation sites.

Other state parks and recreation sites that comprise the 10,000-acre Nehalem Bay Management Unit, aside from Arcadia and Ecola, have, so far, fared better this winter. They include Nehalem Bay and Oswald West state parks; Saddle Mountain State Natural Area; and Manhattan Beach, Hug Point and Tolovana Beach recreation sites.

"In terms of landslides, it's mostly Ecola that experiences them," Rippee said. "It seems not a year goes by that repairs are needed. It's a very active area."



SUBMITTED PHOTO/CANNON BEACH GAZETTE

The beach access trail at Arcadia Beach State Recreation Site suffered major damage as a result of mid-November stormy weather.

History of landslides

To prove his point, Rippee accessed Google Earth on his computer and zeroed in on Ecola State Park. A closeup image shows tell-

tale signs of landslides that have occurred previously. Trails over the years have had to be rerouted as well.

If El Niño simmers down, as forecasted for the ear-

ly part of this year, Rippee said he is confident repairs at Ecola and Arcadia will be completed by May. He is quick to point out, however, "that's a best-case scenario."



SUBMITTED PHOTO/CANNON BEACH GAZETTE

The viewing platform at Ecola Point sat precariously close to the landslide caused by torrential downpours in mid November.

As far as a dollar amount for the work, it is too early to tell until Parks and Recreation solicits bids, something that will occur in the next few weeks. Complicating matters in repairing the culvert and washed out road at Ecola is the issue of fish passage in Canyon Creek. Engineers have yet to determine whether or not to replace the existing culvert with a larger one or construct a bridge over the creek. Once the bidding process has been completed and the storm season has passed work will commence.

Good year for parks

As for the rest of 2015, it was a good year for the state parks system. Early numbers indicate visitation throughout the state was up nearly 25 percent from the year before. Rippee is keeping his fingers crossed that the worst weather this winter is over and that he and his staff can once again concentrate on "routine" park maintenance in anticipation of the 2016 season.

As for the stormy and wet November weekend that closed Indian Beach Road at Ecola State Park and beach access at Arcadia Beach State Recreation Site, Rippee sums it up in just five words: "That was quite a weekend."

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