

Gazette Times

VOL. 139 NO. 3 6 Pages Wednesday, January 15, 2020 Morrow County, Heppner, Oregon

Sheriff discusses commission oversight on elected officials

Trip to law enforcement conference at issue

By David Sykes

Morrow County Sheriff Kenneth Matlack held a lengthy discussion last week with county commissioners over proper oversight by commissioners of his office and elected officials in general.

The issue came up when commissioners wanted Matlack to come before them and discuss an out of state travel request for himself and Undersheriff John Bowles to attend a Western States Sheriff's Association Annual Conference in Reno next month. Matlack said money to cover the conference was covered in his budget and so felt no need to get approval from the commissioners. "I think an elected official needs to be treated differently (by the commissioners) than a department head," Matlack explained. "We (elected officials) are not employees and should not be treated the same as department heads," he emphasized.

The county has a travel policy that defines out of state as anywhere except Oregon, Washington and Idaho and requires "advance notice either during the budget process or presented to the Board of Commissioners 30 days in advance of the travel date." Matlack said the money for the conference was already included in his yearly budget, which had been approved by both the budget committee and the commission, so why did he have to ask the commission for approval? Commissioner Don Russell said, according to the county policy, if the conference were in nearby states the commission probably would not have been concerned. "We want to give department heads cover if they are out of the three-state area," Russell said. "People might ask why a person is going to this training?"

Matlack said, "On the flip side, commissioners don't have to take blame if the public is upset, they should be upset with the



Sheriff Kenneth Matlack

elected official." He pointed out that the commissioners have not been directing him to do certain types of police work and training. Matlack said he would understand their concern if there was a budget issue. "Budgets can change and that is your decision. But that is not a philosophical decision," he said. County Council Justin Nelson said his opinion on the commission's interest in sheriff travel plans was not about consent but more of a budgeting and out of state travel issue.

Commissioner Melissa Lindsay said the commission was concerned because sometimes county people make "poor decisions" on their travel and she wanted to "keep it transparent in the public's eye." Matlack said it was important for Bowles to attend the conference since his office "allows and encourages subordinate supervisors to be exposed and trained in the duties of his supervisor." He said this training is important so the undersheriff is able to take over if the sheriff is unable to perform their duties for some reason. Some of the subjects covered at the conference include policing on public lands, border security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ICE, issues and law enforcement activity involving public lands.

The sheriff's discussion with the commission appears to be part of a larger interaction between the commission and elected officials about the limits of commission oversight and control over elected officials. Previously the

commissioners confronted county treasurer Gaye Gutierrez, also an elected position, on oversight of her office. Commissioner Lindsay had asked Gutierrez for access to see certain county bank accounts which Gutierrez controlled. Gutierrez at that time resisted, which lead to further and ongoing disagreements between the two over authority and oversight. Subsequently commissioners and the budget committee have now said they are considering cutting the treasurer's salary by as much as 75 percent. While no action on the proposed cut has taken place, the talk of cuts did prompt Amanda Rea to drop out of the race as a candidate in the upcoming election running against Gutierrez. Rea cited uncertainty over the salary of the position as her reason (see related story). Gutierrez has filed to run again for the treasurer position, which she has held for many years, and so far, made no announced she is pulling out. If the commission and budget committee go through with the threatened salary cut it could drastically affect the amount of money Gutierrez will receive on retirement. Retirement income is based on the salary the person received during the final three years of their employment with the county.

Last week's meeting between the sheriff and the commissioners seems to be part of ongoing disagreements over the authority commissioners have over elected officials. The commission and the budget committee do control the purse strings for each office and department, however beyond that it is still an ongoing discussion. Elected officials in the county include sheriff, treasurer, clerk, assessor, justice of peace, district attorney and surveyor. The surveyor's position, however, may change from elected to appointed once his current term expires.

MCSO rescues woman stuck in snow up Willow Creek Rd

Leana Hast of Bend was rescued by Morrow County Sheriff's Office personnel after becoming stuck in the snow approximately 20 miles up Willow Creek Road last week. She reported being stuck to the sheriff's office at approximately 8:30 p.m. on January 10, stating she had been stuck since about 5:30 p.m.

Hast indicated she was uninjured and would stay with the vehicle until she could be located. Morrow County Search and Rescue,

along with A-1 Martin's Towing, began the search, staging at Cutsforth Park. After several attempts to locate her were unsuccessful, additional units were activated, including a tracked Ranger ATV.

Shortly after midnight Undersheriff Bowles and Lt. Harper located the Jeep Cherokee, high-centered and stuck in the snow about 24 miles up Willow Creek Rd. They were able to get the vehicle moving in re-

verse and began the trip back. Following a long trek back to Cutsforth Park, all parties were safe and back at the staging area at 1:30 a.m. on January 11.

The Morrow County Sheriff's Office reminds everyone that in hazardous conditions, "be safe, use caution and don't take unnecessary risks." If a person gets stuck in the snow they should stay with their vehicle and call 911 as soon as possible, said MCSO.

Electric Co-Op announces retirement and promotion

The Board of Directors of Columbia Basin Electric Cooperative is pleased to announce that current CFO Andy Fletcher has been selected to succeed Thomas Wolff as the utility's CEO/General Manager, following a four-month national search and recruitment process. The appointment is effective February 4. Fletcher has been employed with the Co-Op for over five years as the Manager of Finance and Administration.

Fletcher, who was raised in Ukiah and Pendleton, is a UO graduate with an MBA from Idaho State



Andy Fletcher

University. He earned a CPA license while auditing commercial entities. Fletcher and his wife Andrea reside in Lexington with their two high-school aged boys. Current CEO/General

Manager Thomas Wolff is retiring after 22 years with the utility. He started his career with CBEC as the Manager of Finance and Administration in November 1997 and was promoted to CEO/Manager on September 1, 2014. Wolff has served on several industry related state and regional organizations and forums.

Wolff and his wife Karen look forward to some travel and spending more time with their grandson. A retirement celebration has been set for Friday, January 31 at 6:30 p.m. at the Heppner Elks Lodge.

Rea drops out of treasurer's race

Proposed salary cut cited as reason

Saying uncertainty over the salary is making her "nervous", treasurer candidate Amanda Rea has dropped out of the race.

Rea had earlier filed to run against long-time treasurer incumbent Gayle Gutierrez but decided to drop out after hearing that the county budget committee and commissioners may cut the salary by up to 75 percent. "May not be a full-time job which makes me nervous to give up my normal full-time job," she wrote in her withdrawal statement. "It has been over a month since the conversa-

tion began and I needed to choose for the sake of my normal job."

At a recent meeting, the budget committee looked at three different salary options for the treasurer starting next year. Leave everything the same for a \$127,152 per year salary and benefit package, 25 percent cut to \$101,609, a 50 percent reduction to \$76,066 and a 75 percent reduction to \$50,524 yearly pay and benefit package. The budget committee at that time did not take any action on the proposals, however, the county com-

missioners said they wanted to make any changes early before the election since there were two people running for the office.

The county commission discussed the proposed cut and decided to send the decision back to the next meeting of the budget committee for a decision. There was no reason given on why they wanted to change the salary. Gutierrez was in attendance at the county commission meeting but did not comment about the cut when asked by the commission.

Rollover accident turns out okay

"What started out as a plan for a fun day sledding and bonfires and s'mores turned into a terrifying reminder that God is good. We had almost reached our destination when we realized the group behind us wasn't there," said Nikki Bergstrom of Heppner.

Bergstrom and others, in three separate vehicles, had traveled into the mountains near Heppner on Saturday, January 11, when they realized that the group traveling behind them wasn't there. They turned around and discovered a child on the side of the road crying, but there was no sign of the others. Bergstrom said she "bailed" from the pickup and saw daughter Eva walking up the embankment with Larissa Gray, Amber Boyer and Kyle McPherson, all of Heppner. The pickup had



Pickup rolls to bottom of embankment.

rolled several times down the embankment towards the creek.

"By the grace of God, and seatbelts, everyone is okay aside from being sore," said Bergstrom. "It was terrifying not seeing

my sweet girl right away, and we took an ambulance ride to make sure she was okay with our favorite driver (Uncle Rusty Estes)." She said that her husband, Adam Bergstrom, responded with the fire crew.

County begins junk vehicle cleanup program

Morrow County is holding a junk vehicle cleanup program for the entire county from January 7 through March 20. Types of vehicles allowed are cars, pickups, motorcycles, flatbed trailers and utility trailers. The price will be at a reduced rate and the amount will be decided on a case by case basis.

Morrow County deputies will be on the lookout for these types of items on

properties and will contact the land owner about possible code violations.

Those interested in having their vehicles picked up should call the Morrow County Sheriff's Office 24-hour dispatch at 541-676-5317. Names, addresses and phone numbers will be added to a list to be contacted by a deputy to arrange pickup.

The program is the brain child of county commis-

sioner Don Russell who has long been an advocate for cleaning up abandoned vehicles which are an eyesore in the county. "I don't think I should be able to tell people how many cars they can have to drive," Russell said at a recent county commission meeting. "But junk cars visible from the road is different."

Russell said in the

-See JUNK CARS/PAGE THREE

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