

City apologizes for Echo councilor's comments

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
STAFF WRITER

The city of Echo issued an apology Friday for statements made by city councilor Lou Nakapalau on Facebook calling a gay man an anti-gay slur and telling him that when he dies of AIDS he will spit on his grave.

"The Echo City Council would like to extend its sincerest apology to those who were offended by comments made by a council member in a Facebook dialog reported by the *East Oregonian*," the statement reads.

"Comments of individual council members on their personal social media accounts do not have any endorsement or approval of the council as a whole nor do they represent city policy."



FILE PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Louis Nakapalau talks about his experiences in joining the army at the age of fifteen and serving in Vietnam during a Veterans' Day ceremony in 2015 at Stanfield Secondary School.

The statement goes on to say that the city does not endorse any statement that disparages someone because of their identity and

has never taken an action or adopted a policy that was "in any sense prejudicial or biased toward a class or group of people."

The comments in question happened on Oct. 7 on the Facebook page for "Kumu Hina," a documentary about a transgender Hawaiian woman.

Nakapalau argued with filmmaker Joe Wilson about transgender rights, culminating in his comment about spitting on Wilson's grave. The comment has since been deleted and Facebook shows Nakapalau edited another part of the conversation to remove profanity.

City councilor Robert Harris proposed issuing the apology during Thursday's council meeting — the first since Nakapalau made the comments on Oct. 7.

"I think that's the absolute least we can do," Harris said.

His motion was met with

several seconds of silence from the rest of the council, prompting an outcry from audience members as it looked like the motion might die from a lack of a second, but it was seconded by councilor Janie Enright and the entire council — including Nakapalau — voted to approve the motion.

Nakapalau did not offer any comment during the council meeting and has not returned requests for comment.

Two people — Vickie Read of Pendleton and Jenny Sullivan of Hermiston — commented during the meeting that Thursday's meeting asking for the city to take some action.

"I'm absolutely disgusted and think any self-respecting council would throw him off," Sullivan

said. On Friday, Echo business owner Pam Reese said some businesses have posted signs on their doors stating that people of all races, religions, countries of origin, sexual orientations and genders are welcome.

Reese called Nakapalau's comments "hate speech" and said she was mystified watching "a group of elected officials struggle to understand how to do the right thing."

Harris also proposed that the council put together some sort of ethics and social media policy for council members, and city administrator Diane Berry said she had some examples from other cities that she could bring forward for discussion at a future council meeting.

Ranch & Home deadline extended

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
STAFF WRITER

Hermiston residents hoping to hit a new Ranch & Home store for Christmas shopping will be out of luck this year after the company told the city it won't open its doors before its original deadline of Jan. 1.

The Hermiston city council voted Monday to extend deadlines until June for the outdoor lifestyle retailer after owner George Dress asked for a new deadline of March 1 to fulfill requirements needed to be reimbursed for some development costs.

The city had previously approved an agreement with Ranch & Home to reimburse system development charges, building permit fees and some sewer costs — an incentive package worth an estimated \$107,800 — if the store being built on south Highway

395 gained its occupancy permit by Jan. 1, 2018. The agreement also stated that the city would reimburse the company \$185,000 in road development costs if the company managed to recruit a grocery store to build next door by Oct. 1, 2018.

In the original deal, the company would be reimbursed 10 percent less — about \$11,000 — for each month it missed the deadline, for up to six months.

The company has had difficulty finding electricians, however, causing Dress to request that the full reimbursement be extended to March 1. After Mayor David Drotzmann expressed concern that March would not be enough time to finish, the council voted unanimously to extend the deal even further, to June. Ranch & Home will also have until Oct. 1, 2019 to recruit a grocery store.

Assistant city manager Mark Morgan said staff recommended an extension on the agreement because the "major intent" of the money was to get Dress to begin construction on the development, and the January deadline was put in place to avoid having an open-ended deal. The city recently had to delay a project putting traffic signals on NW 11th Street because it received no bids from electrical contractors, he said, so "the city can certainly commiserate" with having projects thrown off schedule due to a shortage of electricians in the area.

He also said there didn't seem to be a downside to extending the part of the agreement about the grocery store, because either no grocery store would come in and the city would not have to pay the road costs, or the city would get a new grocery store.

"The city can continue to recruit, but it just doesn't carry the same weight as another business owner saying 'I've invested millions of dollars here,'" he said.

Drotzmann said he agreed that the real intent of the incentives were to get the ball rolling on construction of the store, and there didn't seem to be any reason why Ranch & Home would want to delay opening if they had a choice.

"I don't think they're making this up," he said. "I don't think they're trying to stall by any means."

Councilor John Kirwan agreed, noting that the company he works for, Union Pacific Railroad, has problems finding electrical contractors in most states where it is located.

Sunset Park celebration set for 4 p.m. Wednesday

HERMISTON — Hermiston residents are invited to celebrate winning a grant for new playground equipment for Sunset Park on Wednesday at 4 p.m.

The grant comes from a contest sponsored by Moda Health and the Portland Trail Blazers. Hermiston won more than \$16,000 this summer after beating out Tillamook and Portland in an online voting contest.

The celebration Wednesday at Sunset Park, 11 N.E. Fourth St., will include a ribbon-cutting ceremony at 4 p.m. and refreshments. Senior vice president Robin

Richardson will represent Moda Health and vice president of social responsibility Christa Stout will represent the Blazers.

Hermiston parks and recreation director Larry Fetter said the playground equipment paid for by the grant was ordered in July but has not yet arrived, and he does not have a firm date for when it will.

He said it was disappointing that the equipment wasn't in place in time for the celebration but it is "beyond our control."

"Regardless of when it arrives, even if it's the middle of winter, we'll get it in the ground," he said.

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We also want to express our thanks to all who participated in the event.