

Ponds: Volunteers hope to make a difference as cleanups resume

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ness, designed to include diverse members of the community, was postponed indefinitely as a result of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, volunteer efforts to clean up the Mill Ponds resumed.

Chandler, accompanied by his wife, Alex, and dog, "Sirius," made regular visits to the area, offering garbage bags at his own expense for those living or camping in the ponds and designating an area near U.S. Highway 101 for collection.

The Facebook page



R.J. Marx

Cleanup organizer Brady Chandler said he counted 638 needles collected during a December cleanup.

swelled to almost 400 members, with members from Seaside, throughout Clatsop County and beyond.

In early December, Chandler invited volunteers to help load and remove garbage that had piled up throughout the

park. He trimmed trees along pathways to enable trailers to load up in the interior.

The day after Christmas, Seaside's Parker McCarthy donated his time and a tractor, joining Chandler and volunteers to remove trash from an area likely to be flooded.

After mid-January storms, at least one of the camps was abandoned, likely due to flooding issues, Chandler said. "There was certainly some garbage that floated away, but our effort in December had a massive reduction in the trash that did float away. I wasn't expect-

ing a 36-inch water level rise, to be honest."

Another Mill Ponds volunteer cleanup is scheduled Jan. 30 and Jan. 31, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day, Chandler said. Event guidelines and a sign up are available on the Seaside Community Cleanup Facebook page. The city will be providing a dumpster and cost of garbage disposal.

Chandler said he is seeing a growing awareness of the public safety issues in the

park and the cleanup effort has new momentum this time. "I feel like people are finally realizing what's going on and starting to pay more attention to it."

The trails remain steady, he added, and with a few days of no rain before the cleanup, shouldn't be too muddy.

"Jan. 30 is my 30th birthday," he said. "I would rather spend it on the mountain in the snow, but this is important."

Reservoir: 'The system has been working great'

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The site will also house a new emergency operations center, Seaside Public Works Director Dale McDowell said.

A heated modular building — repurposed after use on the Seaside Civic and Convention Center expansion project — will contain equipment improving communications for

law enforcement and first responders.

Work on the emergency operations center is in its final phases, McDowell said.

Decommissioned pump stations will be used for confined space training for the fire department and staff.

McDowell asked the City Council to return retainage of about \$290,000 to contractor T. Bailey Inc.,

at which point the one-year warranty period will begin. Murraysmith Inc., the city's design and engineering firm, recommended the acceptance. The City Council and mayor unanimously approved the release.

"We are very pleased with the product we have, the process we've gone through, the contractor and what they've given us for this," McDowell said.

The school district is also happy with the new reservoir.

"The system has been working great," Superintendent Susan Penrod said. "We will be able to fully test it when the kids are back in school. We are confident it will be fine, as much of the district's water demand needs were based on fire code sprinkler requirements."

Police: Gearhart chief calls for sweeping reform

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Bowman emailed the directive "as a head's up why we may or may not respond" to Seaside police and Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, Clatsop County's mental health contractor.

Police and sheriff's deputies in the county can ask mental health experts for guidance when responding to calls involving people in crisis, but, in practice, a lack of funding and resources has kept the outreach from being a more effective tool.

Fatal encounters

The county has struggled for decades to provide adequate services for people in crisis, a challenge often compounded by alcohol and drug abuse. Over the past year, two people believed to be suffering from mental health difficulties have been killed after interactions with police.

Last April, Alexander Jimenez, a 34-year-old Warrenton man, died after police used a Taser to subdue him during an arrest and he wrestled with sheriff's deputies and police at the county jail. The state medical examiner ruled that Jimenez, who reportedly had schizophrenia, died from the toxic effects of methamphetamine.

In December, Alaina Burns, a 31-year-old Astoria woman, was shot and killed by an Oregon State Police trooper after reportedly brandishing a gun after breaking into a home near Sunset Beach. Friends of Burns' family said she struggled with drug addiction and mental illness.

Amy Baker, the executive director of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, said she wanted to meet with Bowman to discuss the issue further.

"Our current model relies on a co-response with law enforcement," Baker said. "We typically go to situations with law enforcement. If the situation is safe, we will take the lead in working with someone who is experiencing psychological distress."

"We agree that it is ideal to have behavioral health professionals respond to behavioral health crisis. However, we are not equipped to be the sole responder in situations such as when weapons might be involved; if the person is agitated or threatening harm to self or others and the person is unable to engage in conversation."

"Additionally, we are not equipped to transport people safely if they require assistance at an emergency department, and with law enforcement on scene, they



Seaside Signal

Gearhart Police Chief Jeff Bowman has drawn a line on mental health response calls.

are able to summon that assistance in an expedited manner."

Baker cited Lane County's CAHOOTS program as a potential model. Teams with a medic and crisis worker often respond to calls involving mental health, addiction and homelessness. "While we are excited by this model and can see the benefits of its application in our area, this simply cannot become a reality in our county without the funding to go with it," she said.

Funding a challenge

Seaside Police Chief Dave Ham said police will not follow Gearhart and change responses to similar calls for service in Seaside.

Seaside police are not expected to respond to calls in Gearhart, and Bowman's directive will not change Seaside's response coverage to assist them when needed. Seaside's dispatch center will continue to advise Gearhart police of calls for service in their jurisdiction.

Cockrum said she and Bowman have had discussions about police reform over the past year.

"I have reviewed and he has revised the Gearhart Police Department procedures on use of force, but not specifically through the lens of mental health," the mayor said. "I have asked him to add a procedure with contact information for the public on what to do if they are faced with a mental health crisis."

Cockrum proposed consideration of city funding in the next budget cycle for social service providers to assist in responding to people experiencing a mental health crisis.

Regardless of the response from other agencies, Bowman said he recognizes he is "just one person taking on bureaucracy."

He said he's willing to shoulder that responsibility.

"I'm not going to end my career with one of my officers or myself in a case like this Texas case," he said.

Bowman said he hopes his letter will inspire other jurisdictions to address police response to mental health care, ultimately leading to a change in law enforcement procedures in

the state.

"Having a mental health condition is not a crime," Bowman said. "And these subjects should not be treated as such. We have a duty to protect all lives and sometimes that task is best done by not doing. We're not psychologists. Let the professionally trained individuals handle these non-criminal calls."

"It is time for the social services community to step up and start taking an active

role," Bowman wrote in his letter. "There has been legislation calling for change, court rulings calling for change and society calling for change. Why isn't there a sweeping reform across the U.S. within law enforcement agencies to end the practice of law enforcement officers being the first response to these types of calls?"

"My guess, the political bodies of cities and counties are not addressing these mental health needs."

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