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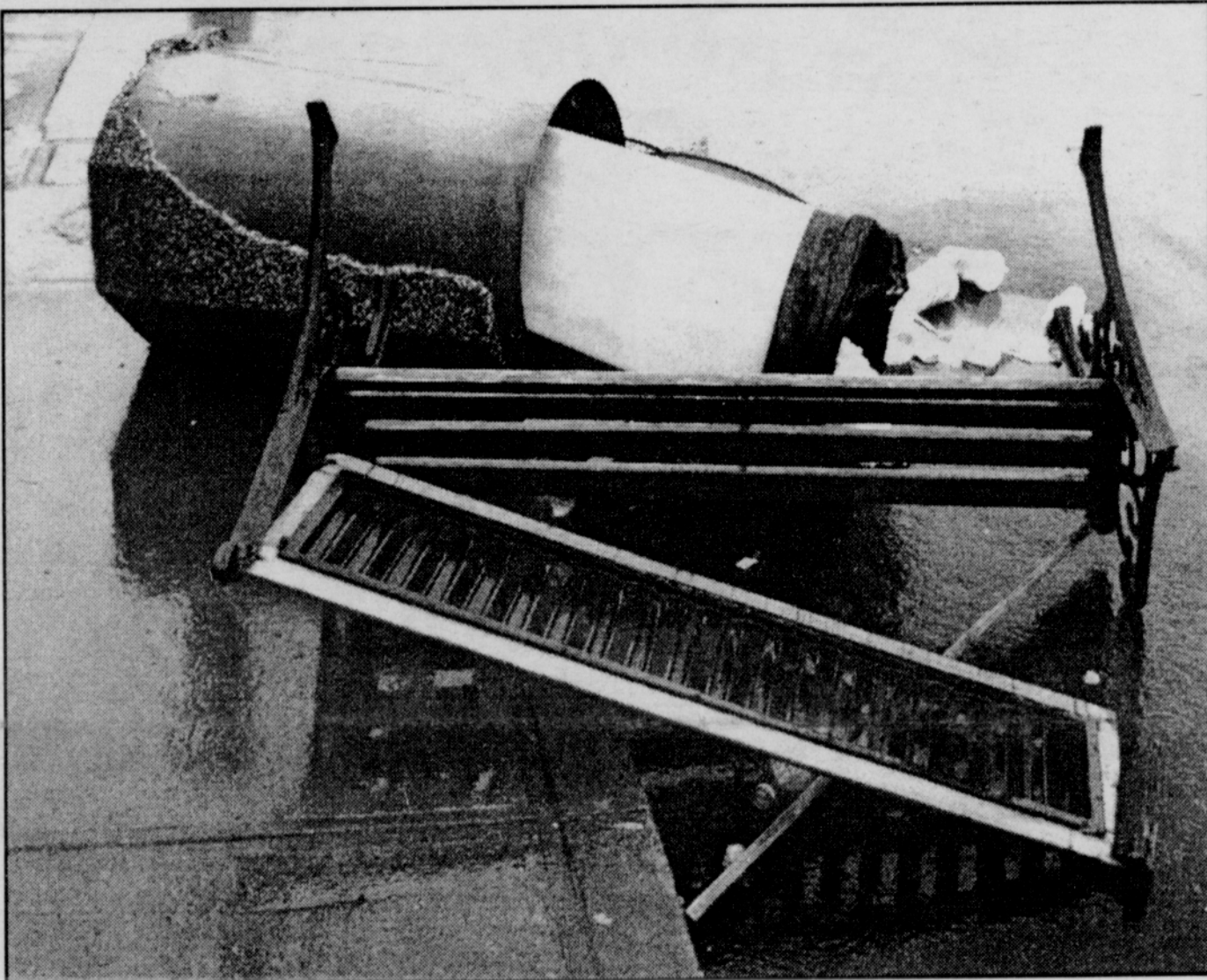
The INDEPENDENT

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"Voice of the Upper Nehalem River Valley"

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Happy New Year??



Some language-impaired person(s) apparently think that celebration and vandalism have the same definition. They don't, and the destruction of this bench and aggregate trash container on Madison Avenue will cost taxpayers, both for replacement and for the time of a public works employee to clean it up on New Year's day. Seasonal decorations and the dirt in planters on Bridge Street were also thrown on the street. There is a standing reward from Vernonia Pride and the Vernonia Area Chamber of Commerce for information leading to the arrest and conviction of people responsible for vandalism in town. For information, contact the Vernonia Police Department, 503-429-7335.

Panel will aid city's "smart development"

An advisory committee will soon be formed to help review and update the development code of the City of Vernonia. The city has received a Smart Development Code Assistance

grant for this purpose and is seeking volunteers who are interested in having a positive impact on the growth and development of Vernonia.

The advisory committee will

include some city council and planning commission members, along with other interested citizens. Community members — business owners, realtors, developers, homeowners, residents and others — who would like to have a voice in the city's future are encouraged to submit letters of interest to City Hall at 1001 Bridge Street, Vernonia. The City would also like to encourage participation by people who do not usually get involved in City committees.

For more information, call Julie Coontz, City Planner, at City Hall at 503-429-5291.

Wyden sets meeting in St. Helens

Senator Ron Wyden will hold a Town Hall meeting January 13 at the Columbia Technical Center, 375 S. 18th Street in St. Helens, from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m.

When first elected to the Senate, Wyden promised he would have a town hall in each county, each year, so every

Oregonian would have a chance to talk with him. Columbia County residents are invited to discuss issues and to express concerns for the upcoming legislative session.

Wyden's Columbia County Town Hall was held in Vernonia in 2001.

Tax payments sent to other countries

Approximately 1400 Columbia County property owners appear to be delinquent in payment of their property tax bills and about 200 businesses appear to be late with their personal property tax payments. In this case, appearances are deceiving. An unknown number of checks intended for the Columbia County Courthouse have been turning up in Colombia, Mexico, and the Middle East, and at least three have been cashed in Florida.

In addition to being inundated by taxpayers who received delinquent notices and called to say their checks had been sent, but hadn't been cashed, the problem was further exposed shortly before Christmas. At that time, the finance and taxation department received a call from Mexico requesting permission to cash a check addressed to Columbia County. Additionally, one business owner reported that his check was returned from a Middle Eastern country.

Columbia County Commissioner Rita Bernhard had difficulty reaching an inspector for the U.S. Postal Service because of the holidays, but finally made contact on December 31. In response to Bernhard's questions, the only official response is that the postal service doesn't know what happened but is trying to figure out why the mail went elsewhere.

Earlier, a USPS employee in the Portland regional sorting center said the mail was sent to the wrong location because of a computer error which read the address as Colombia, South America, instead of Columbia County Courthouse, St. Helens, OR 97051. One postal service employee suggested that future problems may be eliminated by adding a street address for the courthouse,

Bernhard said, because "the computer reads three lines of the address, from the bottom up."

That would add a line just above St. Helens, OR 97051, reading 230 Strand Street, but doesn't explain why or how mail went to Mexico, the Middle East or Florida, or how it would prevent future computer errors. In addition, it would be very expensive for county government and the state court system, which shares the courthouse address, to print new forms and envelopes.

County officials were aware that mail had previously gone to Colombia because two letters, one to the county counsel's office and one to land development services, were returned from there in October or November. The postal service was contacted at that time, Bernhard said.

The three checks that were cashed in Florida were sent by two different county businesses. When returned to the payor, they had been stamped with a phony endorsement stamp that read "Columbia Cty Tax Collector."

In the meantime, the county is advising taxpayers whose checks have not been received by the county nor cleared by their bank, to stop payment on those checks and re-issue another check. If your tax payment check has cleared your bank, the county recommends that you check the endorsement on the back to be sure it was cashed by the county. If you are uncertain, call the tax office at 503-397-0060.

Because of the unusual situation, the Board of Commissioners has agreed to waive the usual late charge for delinquent taxes when the payors can show they mailed their payment on time.