

WHIDBEY NEWS-TIMES

SOUTH WHIDBEY RECORD

Wednesday, January 20, 2021

COVERING NORTH, CENTRAL & SOUTH WHIDBEY • \$1.00



Commissioner, prosecutor trade barbs

By JESSIE STENSLAND
jstensland@whidbeynewsgroup.com

The Island County prosecutor called an Island County commissioner "a terrible person" during a disagreement about public records that disintegrated into insults last week.

It wasn't the first such scene between Prosecutor Greg

Banks and Commissioner Jill Johnson, who have long had a strained relationship. Johnson called him a "snake" and a liar during a meeting three years ago.

Banks was invited to attend the commissioners' regular meeting via video Jan. 12 to introduce a new deputy prosecu-

tor and present a plaque to a longtime staff member. As the deputy prosecutor had trouble with the technology, Banks told the commissioners he would send a chat to the man.

Johnson interrupted him, saying that a "chat function" isn't supposed to be used since it doesn't retain the record in

a way required by law. After Banks tried to continue, she said that officials shouldn't follow the law only when they feel like it.

Banks told her that he wasn't breaking public records rules. He said he would be happy to discuss the law with Johnson in private, but she countered

that she's not going to talk to him outside public meetings anymore.

"That's just a ridiculous statement," Banks said.

Later in the meeting, Banks explained that his role is to provide legal advice to the commis-

SEE EXCHANGE, A7

Washington's vaccination schedule draws criticism from Island County

By JESSIE STENSLAND
jstensland@whidbeynewsgroup.com

Island County commissioners are sending the governor and the state Department of Health a letter complaining about the placement of disabled people living in group homes in the vaccination distribution phases.

In addition, one of the commissioners criticized officials at the state and a neighboring county for holding up Island County's vaccination schedule. Last week, the Board of Commissioners heard a wide-ranging update about COVID-19 impacts and vaccination plans from Don Mason, the COVID response manager.

During a discussion about vaccinations, Commissioner Jill Johnson said it was "discrimination" that people with disabilities who live in group

SEE COUNTY CRITICAL, A7

Co-sponsored by Muzzall, bill would speed up state reopening

By JESSIE STENSLAND
jstensland@whidbeynewsgroup.com

A state senator who lives on Whidbey is a co-sponsor of a bipartisan bill that would allow restaurants to have indoor dining, gyms to fully reopen and social gatherings to resume, all with safety protocols.

Sen. Ron Muzzall, a Republican from North Whidbey, is one of the 16 sponsors of Senate Bill 5114, which would immediately place the entire state in Phase 2 of the governor's Healthy Washington Roadmap to Recovery plan.

Muzzall is asking residents for input. An online hearing of the Health and Long Term Care committee is sched-

SEE REOPENING, A7



Photo by Emily Gilbert/Whidbey News-Times

Carol Johnston said she has watched this Pacific madrone grow for the past 14 years. The tree is slated to be removed during the Oak Harbor McDonald's renovation in February.

Madrona to make way for bigger McDonald's

By EMILY GILBERT
emily.gilbert@whidbeynewsgroup.com

An Oak Harbor woman had hoped to save a large Pacific madrone tree that is slated to be cut down to accommodate planned demolition and expansion of the city's McDonald's restaurant. Despite being named a Tree City USA by The Arbor Foundation for the 17th year in a row, the City of Oak Harbor has no special protection in place for the native tree species, *Arbutus menziesii*, commonly referred to as the madrona.

Carol Johnston works as a dental hygienist in a building next to McDonald's and has watched the tree grow for the last 14 years.

"I love this tree. It's probably the biggest in Oak Harbor," Johnston said, referring to the madrone.

The large, orange-skinned madrone tree is next to the drive-thru line. Johnston can see it from her window and noted that many patients comment on its beauty when they come in for a cleaning. The multi-trunk tree is likely between 25-30 feet tall

and has a diameter of more than 12 inches.

It can be difficult to grow Pacific madrones because the species is susceptible to soil and root disturbance, according to the Washington State University Ornamental Plant Program website. The Pacific madrone is valuable for erosion control and slope stabilization, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and was key in preventing further landslides at Magnolia Bluff in Seattle. It's prized for its ornamental value, but is also important for wildlife.

Johnston said she hoped the tree could be saved, but was told that it must come down as part of McDonald's upcoming renovation. Work is slated to begin in early February and the current building, built in 1976, will be torn down.

The new building will be increased to roughly 5,200 square feet from its current 3,600 square feet. It will lose a couple of parking spaces and will still have two drive-thru waiting stalls. The existing freestanding sign will remain.

SEE MADRONA, A2

Capital projects includes funds for big projects to sewer, parks

By EMILY GILBERT
emily.gilbert@whidbeynewsgroup.com

The Oak Harbor City Council recently approved changes to the city's comprehensive plan, which included amendments to the city's capital improvements plan and a land-use change to a 75-acre property the city purchased last year.

The land-use change will allow the city to develop property at the end of Gun Club Road as a park. The city bought the property last year for \$1.1 million and plans to build soccer fields.

The capital improvement plan outlines city projects over \$50,000 through 2026. Project funding in 2021-22 is included in the biennial budget, and projects listed farther out are used for planning purposes.

Several notable projects are planned for this year and next.

SEWER AND STORMWATER

The city's wastewater system has roughly \$3.4 million worth of projects planned for 2021-2022.

The biggest line item is \$877,717 for "remaining expenses" at the

sewage treatment plant this year. When asked for more clarification, Public Information Officer Sabrina Combs said the cost is for "items that come up as the project wraps up" and said it was a common practice to have money set aside for such things.

"The challenge is that it depends on the project and what is identified or needed," she added.

There is also \$650,000 set aside this year to pay for more membranes at the sewage plant to avoid

SEE CAPITAL PLAN, A2

Public comment sought for Navy's parks proposal

By EMILY GILBERT
emily.gilbert@whidbeynewsgroup.com

The U.S. Navy's proposal to expand its usage of state parks for training has produced some strong opinions on Whidbey Island and across Puget Sound.

The deadline for weighing in on the issue is Wednesday at 5 p.m., ahead of the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission's special meeting the following week.

The Navy has been doing clandestine training at state parks for decades, but it wants to

SEE NAVY PROPOSAL, A2



This Pacific madrone is at least 14 years old and likely between 25-30 feet tall. It is slated to be removed in February

MADRONA

CONTINUED FROM A1

Franchise owner Barbara Johnson also confirmed that the tree will be removed, as is allowed by the city.

"McDonald's really tried to save this tree for me," Johnson said. "But with city codes and everything, they're taking this tree down."

Unlike Seattle and Coupeville, both of which have special protections for the tree in question, Oak Harbor does not. Oak Harbor's namesake, the Garry Oak, is the only tree protected by city code.

Johnson said she had talked to the city about saving the madrona tree several times.

Johnson said she hoped drawing attention to the McDonald's madrone would increase public awareness for the species.

"People just don't know how special madrona trees are, only the Garry Oak," she said.

"It's just so sad people don't understand."

"They should be protected and we should have it in our city codes."

South Whidbey Rotary clubs donate to Homeless Coalition

Last Friday, the two Rotary Clubs on South Whidbey presented Executive Director Jonathan Kline of the Whidbey Homeless Coalition with checks totaling over \$2,000, plus several dozen sets of sheets and pillowcases, to assist in caring for the homeless population.

Kline said a presentation was made to both groups back in December about the coalition's needs. One group did a fundraiser, challenging the other group to match their donation.

The sheets the groups provided, Kline said, were a big help because of the amount of washing that has to be done whenever sheets are changed at the shelters.

The Rotary Club of South Whidbey and the Rotary Club of Whidbey Westside have donated over \$50,000 and thousands of hours of volunteer time during the last year alone.

"They do so much awesome stuff for our community," Kline said. "The Rotary is a real blessing to our com-



From left, Jim Rogers, president of Rotary Club of Whidbey Westside; Gwen Jones, president-elect of Rotary Club of Whidbey Westside; Marie Plakos, president-elect of Rotary Club of South Whidbey; Jonathan Kline, executive director of Whidbey Homeless Coalition; Nick Jefferys, president of Rotary Club of South Whidbey; and Bruce Enter, Rotary assistant governor for Whidbey Island.

munity here on Whidbey." To find out more about the Rotary Clubs, go to Rotary.org

For further information to support Whidbey Homeless Coalition, go to whidbeyhomeless.org

NAVY PROPOSAL

CONTINUED FROM A1

expand its usage from five to 28 parks, including multiple sites on Whidbey Island.

The Navy's previous agreement with the state ended in 2020. None of the state parks it used previously were located on Whidbey Island. Under its new proposal, the Navy would be able to use Deception Pass, Fort Casey, Fort Ebey, Joseph Whidbey and South Whidbey state parks for training.

Activities would include insertion, extraction, diving, swimming, over-the-beach movement and special reconnaissance. Trainees would also be rock climbing at Deception Pass State Park. A list of how each site would be used can be found on the state park's website.

Some criticism stems from concerns that the Navy will be spying on the public.

Members of the Langley City Council passed a resolution in December opposing the Navy's use of state parks, although no state parks are within city boundaries. It referenced a change.org petition against the Navy's proposal; as of Jan. 18, there are almost 6,000 signatures on the online petition created by the Whidbey Environmental Action Network, commonly known as WEAN.

Marianne Edain of WEAN said the "creep factor," or perceived spying, is a major concern.

"There has to be some place where people can go and breathe easy and not have to worry about somebody slinking around in the bushes behind them," she said. "That's why we have those state parks."

The Navy, however, has said that trainees will only be instructed to observe designated military personnel.

"The Navy will not be conducting surveillance of any members of the public, either through trainees or unmanned aircraft," Rear Adm. Stephen Barnett wrote in a letter dated Dec. 4.

Barnett's letter said service members would be acting in a way that is "completely benign" to the public, but that if a member of the public came upon a training, it would end immediately. The point is for service members to learn to act in a way that they can't be detected, the Navy has said. There are no plans to use drones in the parks, either.

Although a State Environmental Policy Act review found that the Navy's proposal does not have probable negative impacts on the environment, Edain was still concerned about delicate eco-

systems in state parks.

"They can't tolerate the kind of trampling this would involve," she said.

The state parks commission will be holding a special meeting to hear public comment on the Navy's proposal on Jan. 26 via Zoom.

Those wishing to submit public comment verbally during the meeting must register by 5 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 20 on the state parks website at <https://parks.state.wa.us/1168/Navy-training-proposal>. The public has until 5 p.m. on Friday, Jan. 22 to submit written comments about the SEPA findings.

A decision about the proposal is expected during the commission's regular meeting on Jan. 28.

CAPITAL PLAN

CONTINUED FROM A1

another overflow event like one last February; council members approved the purchase late last summer. Staff said the membranes will be installed early this year. The city will also spend \$200,000 on the sewer la-

goon outfall repair before the area is given back to the Navy this year.

There are \$2.3 million in stormwater projects for 2021-2022.

The most expensive project is for a feasibility study for \$950,000 to see if

the Freund Marsh can be used as a detention/pre-treatment pond.

PARKS

There are almost \$4 million worth of capital projects planned for the city's parks in 2021-2022.

The bulk of the money is earmarked for the next two phases of improvements to Windjammer Park, totaling about \$2.6

million; phase two design work is scheduled in 2021 and construction in 2022.

About \$1 million will be spent on a future park at the city's 75-acre Gun Club Road property over the next two years.

The plan also includes two Portland Loos for Flinstone Park, totaling \$75,000; new playground equipment for Tyhus and Koetje parks for \$80,500; and four pickle-

ball courts at Neil Park for \$80,000 this year.

WATER

The city has budgeted \$7.7 million in projects for the water system planned for 2021-2022.

One of the projects is to relocate a waterline near the Highway 20/Campbell Lake Road roundabout in Anacortes for \$2.3 million. There is also \$763,000 set aside to study additional groundwater resources for emergency water supplies for the city, and to

update its water system and emergency response plans from 2021-2023. Also budgeted is \$695,000 for water pipe extensions on West Erin Park Road. The city's goal is to expand the Goldie Road/Industrial area by extending utilities, and most of the money will be spent in 2022.

STREETS

There are more than \$5 million worth of street projects planned in 2021-2022.

Overlays in the Transportation Benefit District and annual street overlays account for most of the costs. One of the street projects is to create an access road on city-owned property to connect businesses that cannot access Highway 20 for a budgeted \$481,500 in 2022. Another project is for the city to develop an active transportation plan this year to see how it can support modes of transportation that include "walking, biking, roller blading, or skateboarding" for \$150,000.

A complete list of capital project plan amendments can be found on the city's website.

SARATOGA DENTAL

WHAT PATIENTS SAY ABOUT US:

"Best dentistry anywhere, anytime. Dr. Giswold & team always make me feel comfortable and confident. I've seen a lot of years, a lot of places, a lot of dentists. Saratoga Dental is the best!" - C. L., COUPEVILLE

Langley » 360.221.6373 » saratoga-dental.com

Guiding you from
FOR SALE to SOLD

Senior Real Estate Specialist

Alicia Dietrich, BROKER | REALTOR®
310-994-0073
adietrich@windermere.com
AliciaDietrich.withwre.com

Windermere REAL ESTATE
Windermere Real Estate/South Whidbey

Live the Island dream...

Janet Burchfield
FRONT STREET REALTY
22 NW Front St., Suite B,
Coupeville
360-678-6100 • 206-387-1924
www.janetburchfield.com

Signature REWARDS

Refer-A-Friend
JANUARY 4 - JANUARY 31

YOU BOTH CAN WIN UP TO \$500!

Signature REWARDS CARDS

GAMING | DINING | EVENTS | GOLF | LODGE

1.888.288.8883 | SWINOMISHCASINOANDLODGE.COM

Must be 18 to gamble. Management reserves all rights.

Swinomish CASINO & LODGE

HUGE ORIENTAL RUG SALE

49 TO 69% OFF!

GUARANTEED LOWEST PRICES
PRICES SLASHED TO THE BARE BONES

SAVE AN EXTRA 12% OFF
A RUG OF YOUR CHOICE

2 DAYS ONLY at WICA

565 Camano Ave., Langley, WA 98260
Sun Jan 24th: 10 am - 6 pm
Mon Jan 25th: 10 am - 4 pm
ALL REASONABLE OFFERS ACCEPTED