

N^{WHIDBEY} NEWS-TIMES

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Outrage over firings in wake of hospital no-confidence vote

By **JESSIE STENSLAND**
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The three hospital administrators who were the target of a “no-confidence” vote still have their jobs, but four other members of the executive team do not.

A week after WhidbeyHealth medical providers overwhelm-

ingly passed a vote of no confidence in CEO Ron Telles, Chief Operating Officer Dr. Garth Miller and attorney Jake Kempton, Telles terminated four people in administrative positions who were brought in during the last couple of years to help make improvements in a public hospital system with serious financial and public percep-

tion problems.

The fired executive team members were Chief Nursing Officer Erin Wooley, Chief Information Officer Brett Mello, Human Resources Officer Debbie DeCorde and Quality Control Officer Jon Scallan.

In a written statement, Telles said it was “an incredibly difficult decision, but important for

the continued financial viability of the organization.”

“We have accomplished great things in the past year,” he wrote, “including passage of the levy lift. However, after rigorous financial analysis, it was clear that more action was needed, including reducing and restructuring the executive team.”

The reaction from the com-

munity was swift, dramatic and overwhelmingly critical of Telles and the hospital board. Many felt Telles’ actions were retaliatory toward members of the executive team who were honest about the problems in the organization. Others opined that he was creating “organizational

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Voters reject bond to build new schools

By **KARINA ANDREW**
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After three counts, Oak Harbor’s bond is still trailing well behind the number of votes necessary to pass, and district officials think misunderstandings around rate calculations may have been the deciding factor for some “no” voters.

The \$184 million bond required a supermajority of 60% of the vote to pass. As of Thursday evening, it had earned just under 46%.

Oak Harbor Superintendent Karst Brandsma said he and other school officials can’t say definitively why voters shot down the bond, which would have funded construction of new school buildings and other facilities, though the number of projects funded by the bond and the total cost to taxpayers are likely factors.

He said misinformation about how the tax rate is calculated may have also contributed to a number of “no” votes. The superintendent said he heard concerns from some Oak Harbor residents that they would end up paying more money to the district as the assessed value of their property increased, or that the district would pocket the taxes paid by new property owners as more houses were built in the city.

With a school bond or levy, however, taxpayers approve the total amount the district can collect over the life of the tax. The district cannot collect more than the approved

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Photo by Karina Andrew/Whidbey News-Times

Community members and stakeholders who attended Wednesday’s ceremony tour the new creek.

Navy, nonprofit team up to build a creek

By **KARINA ANDREW**
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A collaborative creek restoration project between the Navy and a local nonprofit came to an official close Wednesday with a small creekside ceremony, but the ongoing salmon restoration effort will continue for years to come.

Naval Air Station Whidbey Island and the Skagit River System Cooperative have been working together since September to turn a ditch on a Navy property on North Whidbey into a winding, freshwater creek to provide juvenile salmon with a place to acclimate to living in saltwater.

“Projects like this are really important for juvenile salmon. There’s not as much habitat available in the river deltas and along the shorelines as there once was,” said Eric Mickelson, the project coordinator from the cooperative. “They look for places like

this where there is freshwater flowing into the salt marshes, where they can come in and they can acclimate and they can hide out from bigger fish that might want to eat them. Fish that do that, we find, have a better chance once they get out to the ocean of surviving.”

The creek is only the latest in a series of projects the Navy has undertaken in the last three decades to improve the parcel of land east of Oak Harbor and south of Crescent Harbor Road. In the early 1900s, residents built drains and channels in the area in an effort to make the land dry and farmable. The Navy developed an interest in restoring the land in the 1990s, after it took ownership of the area.

Since 2007, the Navy and the Skagit River System Cooperative have worked together to breach coastal berms and reintroduce tidal exchange into the system, creating a large salt marsh and allowing fish to access

the area.

In monitoring the site, the Navy and the cooperative noticed that young salmon would stage at the top of the marsh, likely in an attempt to reach freshwater exchange from the original channelized creek that no longer had an entry point into the marsh. The creek restoration project, which began in September 2021, was implemented in direct response to the needs demonstrated by the fish.

John Phillips, the natural resources manager for the Navy, said the transition from the freshwater where salmon are spawned to the saltwater where they spend most of their adult lives is a difficult one. Young salmon need spaces with some freshwater input to gradually prepare themselves for life in the ocean.

The Navy and the cooperative created the

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Released from prison early, man stole car, crashed through gate

By **JESSIE STENSLAND**
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A man who got out of prison early last year because of the state Supreme Court’s Blake decision is accused of stealing a car from an Oak Harbor tow yard and crashing it through a gate Feb. 6, according to court documents.

Prosecutors charged 26-year-old Justin Keen of Langley in Island County Superior Court with theft of a motor vehicle, malicious mischief in the first degree, criminal impersonation in the first degree, identity theft in the second degree and vehicle prowl in the second degree.

If convicted of the charges against him, Keen could face up to four years and nine months in prison under the standard sen-

tencing range.

According to a report by an Oak Harbor detective, witnesses at A1 Towing reported hearing a sudden revving sound and then a crashing noise as a white car broke through a gate that secured the impound area at about 6:30 a.m. The car then sped off recklessly on Northeast 16th Avenue. A van parked nearby that witnesses thought was associated with the car theft also drove off, the report states.

A driver later reported the car traveling recklessly and speeding through Oak Harbor.

Detectives went to the scene and learned that the stolen car, a 1990 Acura Integra, had been impounded after a traffic accident; it was considered by the insurance company to be totaled, the report states.

In addition, a personal vehicle of an employee had been broken into. The ignition and steering column were disassembled and damaged when someone attempted to steal it, the report indicates. About \$900 worth of camping and search-and-rescue equipment was taken.

The gate sustained \$5,000 in damage.

The detectives located a section of a fence that had been cut to gain access to the yard.

The next day, a deputy with the Island County Sheriff’s Office stopped the suspected van north of Oak Harbor. Keen was a passenger in the van and gave the deputy a fake ID, the report states.

The driver of the van said he gave Keen a ride to the tow yard the previous day to steal items,

but he didn’t know he was going to steal an entire car, the report states.

Court records indicate that Keen has an extensive criminal record, including convictions for possession of stolen vehicles and hit and run.

In court Wednesday, Chief Criminal Deputy Prosecutor Eric Ohme explained that Keen was released from prison early last year because of the state Supreme Court decision in State v. Blake. The high court struck down the state’s drug possession law, finding that it violated the due process clause of the Constitution.

As a result, the criminal records of thousands of people across the state had to be cor-

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HOSPITAL

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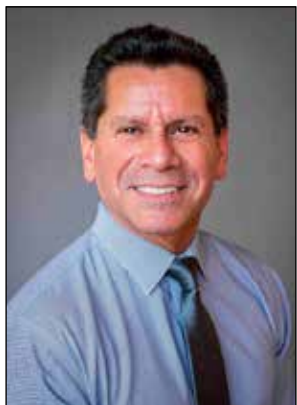
chaos" which would make it difficult for the board to get rid of him.

Many hospital employees spoke with *News-Times* anonymously for fear of retaliation, but others were willing to go on the record because they felt the community needs to know what is happening.

Dr. David Lemme, chief of the medical staff, said the terminations were part of a longtime and troubling pattern on the part of the administration. The level of turnover in the public hospital district and clinics is a profound problem, he said, and it's not just due to wage issues. The administration often doesn't treat people with respect or work to build their trust.

"We're losing quality providers because of personality issues," he said. "... They fire or coerce valuable members of the team to go somewhere else."

Many of the people who



Ron Telles

contacted the *News-Times* were especially concerned to lose Wooley, who was described as a leader who did much to improve the perception of the hospital across Whidbey Island and successfully organized the hospital's COVID-19 response.

Washington State Nurses Association, known as WSNA, released a statement saying that the nurses at WhidbeyHealth were surprised by Wooley's departure. The association described her as "a respected leader and advocate for quality patient care."

"WSNA has significant

concerns around ongoing care of patients, coordination of nursing care, as well as the working conditions and safety of the nursing staff," the statement reads. "The registered nurses represented by WSNA are heading into negotiations with WhidbeyHealth for a new collective bargaining contract, and the dismissal of key members of leadership will have an impact."

The association said the retention and recruitment of nurses will be a top priority.

"The nurses have not had a meaningful raise since 2018," the association said. "Their salaries are far behind area market and there are critically low staffing levels in several units of the hospital."

Bill McDaniel, a retired rear admiral who ran Navy hospitals, is a board member of the WhidbeyHealth Foundation, which raises funds for the hospital. He said he has serious concerns about Telles' actions. He said his initial response when hearing that the four people were terminated for financial rea-

sons was "bull."

"We just passed a levy to pay for high-quality people like this," he said, referring to the levy lift that will generate an extra \$6 million a year in property tax revenues.

McDaniel said the loss of Wooley will be widely felt.

"Everybody in the hospital thinks the world of Erin. She's a star. She's the one we go to," he said, adding that Telles has been much less accessible to the foundation.

Ultimately, McDaniel said, the community deserves better answers.

"It bothers me that this occurred at this time and in this manner," he said.

Dr. John Hassapis, a general surgeon, said elected members of the hospital board are ultimately responsible for the problems. He said the medical staff — which includes physicians, nurse practitioners and other providers — decided to take the no-confidence vote because they felt their concerns weren't being transmitted to the board.

The vote was a message to the board, he said.

According to the doctor, 40 providers took part in the vote. A total of 30 voted in favor of the no-confidence vote, four voted against it and six declined to vote.

Hassapis also said high turnover is a major con-

cern.

"Patients can't see the same doctor twice in a row," he said.

Hassapis was one of many people who cited the longtime and ongoing problem with the phone system for the hospital and all the clinics. It's a serious issue, he said, when patients can't get through to their doctors.

Likewise, he said the different electronic records devices don't communicate with each other, which isn't efficient and causes problems.

Mello was brought in to fix these problems, but his work was not complete before he was terminated, the doctors said. Medical staff members are concerned that the technical problems will only get worse.

Dr. Robert Wagner said another problem is the hospital's system of bringing providers in on a fixed salary and switching them to a production-based compensation system that significantly cuts their wages. As a result, they end up leaving.

"It's just a merry-go-round," he said.

Wagner said some of the providers work in other small rural hospitals that are much more successful.

"The leadership and administration there can sift through the difficulties and make things work,"

he said.

The hospital board met with representatives from the medical staff for nearly three hours Thursday night to discuss the no-confidence vote. The board went into a closed-door executive session and took no action afterward.

Another executive session is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Feb. 14.

Afterward, Wagner said residents should also be encouraged to contact board members with their concerns. The emails for the individual commissioners are on the "board of commissioners" page on the hospital website.

Letters to the editor are also welcome at editor@whidbeynewsgroup.com.

While many people see difficult problems in the administration of the hospital, many also emphasized that the doctors and other providers are top-notch.

Wooley said she was surprised and saddened by her termination, but she wants people to trust in the quality of health care they will receive from the hospital and clinics, despite management issues.

"Without a doubt," she said, "WhidbeyHealth has some of the finest providers and absolutely outstanding clinicians."

OBITUARIES

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Juhl

Jacqueline Juhl

December 15, 1950 – February 6, 2022

Jacqueline transitioned at her home in Anacortes surrounded by loved ones after many years of health struggles. She is survived by her devoted husband, Dr. Robert W. Juhl, and their children: Cecily C. Hazelrigg (grandchildren Anya G. Hazelrigg and Yarezi C. Hernandez Hazelrigg, great-granddaughter Opal M. Hazelrigg), Stephany K. Hazelrigg (granddaughter Malayla A. Cunningham), Hans and Becky Juhl (grandchildren Parker, Noah and Wyatt Juhl), Nicholas and Courtney Juhl (granddaughters Charlotte and Madeleine Juhl), Courtney and Christopher Farah (granddaughter Laura Farah), and Allison and Billy Darling (granddaughters Leighton and Jane Darling). She also leaves behind her two sisters, Janis Edwards and Nan Wood, and many loving cousins and extended

family throughout Texas. She was preceded in death by her beloved mother, Celia Garcia Wood, and her eldest sister, Virginia Foret.

Jacqueline was born in Tucson, Arizona, traveled the United States and the world as an Air Force child, and raised her children in Oak Harbor, before moving to Anacortes. Jacqueline and her sisters were among the first generation of their family to attend college, starting at Texas A&I and ultimately graduating from Texas Tech University with a degree in clinical nutrition. When her children were older, she returned to school to earn a dental hygiene degree from Shoreline College and then continued on to complete a second bachelor of science degree in dental hygiene at the University of Washington. She earned a double-emphasis Master of Science degree in dental hygiene education and community and rural oral health from Idaho State University and held two short-term fellowships in Dental Education and Care for Persons with Disabilities (DECOD). She held various leadership positions in professional associations and community health advocacy groups and was a co-author and editor of SMART Oral Health: The Medical Management of Caries.

Outside of her family and work, Jacqueline was a highly innovative and intuitive cook with myriad creative gifts. She was a dedicated member of any parish she attended throughout

her life, serving as cantor, choir member, eucharistic minister, and supporting adult and youth education in the church. Jacqueline was a precision seamstress, a skilled stained glass and fused glass artisan, a painter of walls and canvases, a doodler, a calligrapher, an adept knitter, a singer in the church choir and in the kitchen, and an avid mariner and explorer of the islands of the northern Pacific. In her younger days, she was a college cheerleader and summered as a lifeguard on the Gulf of Mexico. She waterskied, snow skied, scuba dived and camped and was a parent volunteer for innumerable school fieldtrips. Like the generations of Garcia women who came before her, Jacqueline was a passionate, caring and fierce woman.

On Monday February 14, 2022 at her home parish (Immaculate Conception Church in Mount Vernon) there will be a rosary service at 12pm followed by a memorial mass at 1pm. Afterwards, Jacqueline will be laid to rest at Grand View Cemetery in Anacortes during a private graveside ceremony.

In lieu of flowers, donations in her name may be directed to the Yakima Valley Farmworkers Clinic Dental Care Services program.

To share memories of Jacqueline with the family, please visit her online obituary and sign the virtual guestbook: www.evanschapel.com/obituary/jacqueline-juhl

ELECTION

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

amount, regardless of fluctuations in the number of properties taxed or the assessed value of the properties.

"I think we could have told that story better," Brandsma said.

Brandsma said in the future, the district will continue to ask voters to fund these capital projects.

"The way the current structure in the state of Washington currently exists is that the maintenance of buildings and construction and repair is

the community's responsibility. These buildings are in dire need of improvement," he said. "The need doesn't go away."

The superintendent said he will recommend that school board members engage in dialogue with the public about the bond and the necessary capital projects as they make a new plan for funding construction.

District officials will also continue to look for funding opportunities from the state. Brandsma said most district school buildings will be eligible for some form of state assistance within the next five years, though never enough to cover the projects in their entirety.

Oak Harbor's school bond was the only tax measure that didn't pass on Whidbey Island in the Feb. 8 special election. Coupeville School District successfully passed a \$10.6 million operations levy, a \$1.95 million technology levy and a \$6 million capital projects levy with 54%, 56% and 51% of the vote, respectively, as of Thursday evening.

"We are aware that these special election measures were likely more difficult for our voters to approve dur-

ing these times of uncertainty," said Coupeville Superintendent Steve King. "So, we are extremely thankful and humbled by our communities' continued support of our students, schools, and programs. We commit to continuing to be good stewards of our communities' investment and will continue to prioritize our communities' priorities in our school district."

On the South End, voters approved a \$10.5 million replacement levy for the South Whidbey School District with a 67% vote and a maintenance and operations levy for the Parks and Recreation District with 73%.

"On behalf of students and staff, thank you for supporting the South Whidbey School District Replacement Levy for Education Programs and Operations," South Whidbey Superintendent Josephine Moccia wrote in an email to district families.

"Your vote makes a difference," she added. "Together, WE make a difference."



Maddox

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