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Dog Show starts fair week
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EMILY GOJMERAC/THE STAR NEWS

Carnival workers were busy this week setting up for the Taylor County Fair. The annual fair runs Thursday through Sunday and includes animal shows, rides, food, displays, truck pulls on Friday and Saturday night and a demolition derby on Sunday afternoon. Fair admission is free for all ages.



Tensions climbing

Petition calls for veterans committee chair to step down

BY BRIAN WILSON
 NEWS EDITOR

Reports of accusations of death threats directed at both county employees and elected officials, claims of harassment, and a general lack of trust permeated the board room during the July 20 meeting of the Taylor County Veterans Service Committee.

Despite this, committee members were able to take action on some issues and left the door open for future county discussion on others.

As with recent county meetings involving the veterans service office topics, the visitors benches were filled with more than a dozen area veterans, family members and other county board members. Also attending the meeting was the county's human resources director, sheriff Larry Woebeking, a uniformed deputy, and the county's attorney.

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Steve Voss and Sue Swiantek are members of the Taylor County Veterans Service Committee.

Board talks about ways to get community input

Medford school board looks at ways to address future facility needs

BY BRIAN WILSON
 NEWS EDITOR

Members of the Medford School Board on Monday talked about, talking about

future school updates and the options for getting public input on any future projects or referendums.

Before going to voters with the fall 2020 referendum, the district had paid a firm to have a survey done to see what the community would support. District administrator Pat Sullivan noted the referendum based on that information failed by just 147 votes in an election with the largest number of voters.

"A lot has happened in the world since we started that survey," said board president Dave Fleegel.

Fleegel asked if the district should be developing a plan for investment in buildings for future of education in order to find some common ground. He noted that in the last referendum they met a lot of people along the way that were a flat out no for anything.

See **MEDFORD SCHOOL** on page 5

Page 10: Thrift store gives back



SPORTS: Area players report to football camps



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★ Veterans service staff, committee members continue to butt heads

Continued from page 1

Unlike past veterans service committee meetings, the audience members were not given the option to speak during the meeting but were vocal in sharing their views and calling for committee chairman Lester Lewis to step down from his position. Petitions for the county to remove Rollie Thums and Lester Lewis from committee had also been delivered to the county with 63 signatures calling for Thums to step down and 114 signatures calling on Lewis to step down.

Tensions were heightened even before the formal start of the meeting as Lewis read a two page police report prepared on June 23 by Sheriff Woebbeking regarding Taylor County Veteran's service officer Shellie Shaw's concern that members of the county board "will likely try to have her killed."

The report (see sidebar) details Woebbeking's conversation with Shaw and that "she felt concerned since two separate veterans had informed her that supposedly County Board members are in a 'Taylor County/Medford mafia' and are in a 'Good Old Boys Club' and that she had to be careful." In the report, Woebbeking stated that Shaw told him another veteran had indicated to her that Lewis "needs 50 Cal to the head." Woebbeking noted this referred to a 50-caliber rifle round.

Lewis called on Shaw to address the allegations raised in the report including the continued allegations of harassment. Shaw had previously filed a harassment complaint against Lewis.

Shaw said harassment was in the form of Lewis, in his capacity as committee chairman, coming into the office unannounced and in the way of talking with benefit specialist Nikki Sherman. "It was very disruptive," she said.

"I never know when you will come in," she said, suggesting that there are "lies and rumors" being spread about her.

"It is a form of defamation of character and it is getting very old," Shaw said, objecting to Lewis reading the report and referring to it as an effort to assassinate her character.

"We need to stop until I can get my attorney here if this is how we are going to proceed," Shaw said.

At that point, Lewis formally started the meeting with the introduction of committee members. The committee has not met since before the county reorganization meeting in April, and the expansion of the committee from a three-member one to seven members, including two community member veterans. Committee members are Lewis, Thums, Lorie Floyd, Susan Swiantek, Catherine Lemke, Steve Voss and Larry Peterson.

In introducing himself, Voss said that he saw the committee's job as being one to enable the veterans service office to help veterans. "We need to get out of their way to help veterans," he said.

Thums said there are a lot of untruths being heard about the county's actions and intentions. He said that as county board members they have jobs to do. "Sometimes people don't like us because we do our jobs and that is part of the game," he said, and addressed the audience telling them he would not lie to them.

Rusk and Clark County Bills

Committee members voted unanimously to seek supplemental funding from the county general fund to pay bills from the Clark and Rusk County veterans service officers for time they worked in Taylor County while Shaw was on non-disciplinary administrative leave.

Shaw told committee members she was "walked out" of the office on April 19 and was out on leave for six weeks returning to the office on June 16. Shaw stated that while on leave she, at direction from the county, had to spend three hours with a forensic psychiatrist to evaluate her mental health. Shaw said she was concerned about the impact that bill and the bills from Clark and Rusk counties would have on her budget.

Shaw noted that her total office budget is only \$150,000. "We don't have a lot of funds to be used to support veterans," Shaw said, expressing concern that these additional expenses would take away from their ability to meet veteran needs.



"It is a form of defamation of character and it is getting very old."

— Shellie Shaw

According to Lewis, the decision to place Shaw on administrative leave was made by the county human resources director and county's labor attorney. "We weren't informed ahead of time," Lewis said, emphasizing that it was not a decision made by any member of

the veterans service committee.

"When I heard about it, it was news to me," Thums said.

"Shellie has rights, that is why we weren't informed," Lewis said of the reason the committee had not been involved with the leave.

Shaw said she wanted to make sure the money got back into her budget. She said that in her reading of the county code, the committee sets the budget but she is the one with operational authority over the budget.

County human resources director Nicole Hager stated the medical review bill was being paid from the contracted services line item in the county budget and was not being charged to the

veterans service office.

Lewis noted the committee's action would be to request the county's finance and personnel committee to reimburse the veterans service office for the \$2,585 charged by Rusk and Clark counties. A motion to do

Sheriff report on potential death threat

Note: The following is a police report prepared by Sheriff Larry Woebbeking on his investigation into allegations of death threats against CVSO Shellie Shaw.

On June 23, 2022, at 11:03 hrs, I received an email from Shellie Shaw of the Taylor County

Veteran's [Service] Office. The email indicated she received information from two (2) veterans, but she did not include their names, informing her that members of the Taylor County board will likely try to have her killed. Her email goes on to say she contacted her attorney for guidance, who informed her to tell law enforcement. Her email continues to say she is concerned this situation may escalate. She stated she does not want to see harm come to anyone, nor does she want to be tied to anything if someone is harmed in any way. She also indicated she does not want to be in a position where she must have to defend herself. The email concluded with "the harassment continues".

I replied to her email at 11:37 hrs on the same date. I informed Shellie it was likely the veterans were not basing that information on real life evidence. I also indicated it is concerning that a veteran may believe that a County Board member may try to harm Shellie and therefore feel they are protecting her and that could be a danger. I also informed her that I took these comments very seriously and felt that it could potentially lead to an altercation or danger to others in the Court House. I also asked her if she could arrange a meeting with the unnamed veterans who allegedly provided that information.

At approx. 12:30 hrs on the same date, I arrived at the Veteran's [Service] Office, knocked on the door, and was allowed in by Shellie Shaw, at which time she was having a conversation with Joe Svejda of Taylor County Buildings and Ground Department. After their conversation had ended, he exited the office and I spoke with Shellie about the email she had provided me.

During the conversation she alluded that she felt concerned since two (2) separate veterans had informed her that supposedly County Board members are in a "Taylor County/Medford mafia" and are in a "Good Old Boys Club" and she had to be careful. I asked her if she really felt that a County Board member would really try to kill her and to what point. She indicated that they may not necessarily kill her themselves, but they may hire someone to do it. I asked her again, to what end would someone, a county elected official, try to have her killed just because they don't like her job performance. She stated that she doesn't know, she is relying on the information given to her by the veterans and she hasn't been here long enough to know for sure, but she is concerned with the information. However later in the conversation, she stated she was not concerned for herself or her safety but those of others.

She also stated that throughout recent events, another veteran had indicated to her that Lester Lewis, (the current Chairman of the Veterans Administration Committee), needs a 50 cal to the head, (which would indicate a 50-caliber rifle round). She also had been told by a veteran, who she did not name, that he knows somebody who can take care of the situation, alluding to knowing someone who could have someone harmed or killed. I told Shellie Shaw these comments cannot be allowed and need to be addressed with the individuals who said them. I informed Shellie it's likely the veterans who made these statements are just talking and have no real intentions of harming anyone, but we don't know that, and we have to address this situation seriously as a potential danger to the safety of the courthouse and board members until we know for sure. I asked her if she could give me the names of these veterans so I could talk to them.

Shellie did not want to release the names. However, she stated she would contact them and ask for permission to release their names to me. I asked her if she would be able to do this in the next day or two (2) because I felt it was important to address this situation. She stated she would try and get back to me with the results. I again informed Shellie that this is a serious and it needs to be looked into and I would seek legal means available to find out who made these comments if she wouldn't provide the names to me. She stated that she understood.

Our conversation was approx. 20 minutes or so in length. During that time, we talked about other topics. She felt she is still being harassed by Taylor County and Lester Lewis, individually. She did not provide any specific examples; however, she believes she continues to be harassed. I informed her that if she feels she is being harassed she should act within her rights as a county employee or seek legal counsel for guidance and steps she can take within the boundaries of the law. But it is important that she does not over include the veterans in some of these work-related issues because it seems to result in agitated people and then it makes matters worse, and we end up with statements like the ones I am currently investigating.

Shellie asked if an outside agency would be more appropriate to look into this current matter. I informed her as of right now, I would look into the comments that were made and talk to the individuals involved. If there becomes a credible possibility of a criminal offense, then I would seek an outside agency to complete that investigation. However currently, there is no reason to seek an outside agency until I speak with the people involved to see if there is any type of criminal offense to even investigate. She stated she understood. We concluded our conversation.

— Sheriff Larry Woebbeking

that passed on a voice vote with all members voting in favor.

Staffing hours

A request to bump the hours of both Shaw and Sherman from 35 to 40 hours per week met with a mixed reception from committee members based primarily on concerns about where the extra money to cover additional payroll would come from.

Committee members rejected the request, but Lewis said they are welcome to make the same request to the finance and personnel committee. Even if the veterans service committee had voted to approve the request it would have had to also go to the finance and personnel committee.

The committee did not take formal action on a request by Shaw to reclassify her from a non-exempt (hourly) employee to an exempt (salary) employee because that request was not on the agenda.

Shaw reported on the current caseload in her office. She explained that there is a direct financial benefit for veterans, and by extension the community as a whole, by maximizing the benefit local veterans are able to receive. She said as veterans get closer to 100% disability, they open up other benefits including education assis-

tance for their children and even property tax relief.

“It is a huge benefit,” Shaw said.

According to Shaw, through the work of herself and Sherman, veterans in the county have been able to see an increase of about \$2 million over what local veterans have received in the past. All veterans benefits paid to county residents total about \$10 million per year.

Shaw said that if they were allowed to do more, they could bring even more federal funds into the county. She noted a piece of legislation is moving toward approval which would open the door to an increase in claims by making more conditions presumptive of exposure during time in the military. She said this could result in a large increase in the office caseload.

Voss noted the work that Shaw had done on his behalf in helping to get him the benefits he qualified for. He noted that being more proactive in seeking out these potential additional benefits would help attract more veterans to live and work in the county.

“This is about supporting our veterans,” Swiantek said in support of the proposal to increase the hours.

Lewis was more hesitant about increasing the hours for the office staff suggesting that as the staff gain experience in their positions they would be more efficient. Both staff members in the office started with the county in April 2021. He reported feedback from the Rusk County VSO who helped during Shaw’s leave who said the office staff was doing well for the experience they have. Lewis noted that while in a year, you may learn a position, it takes time to learn efficiencies.

Voss noted that he has heard complaints of the Rusk County VSO screwing up veterans claims while helping in Taylor County, so discounted the observation.

Peterson noted his own experience in the office about being able to get treatment through help of previous VSOs to go from being 100% disabled to 50% disabled. “After you initially go through the process, you can do it yourself,” he said, noting that it was very frustrating. “We try to lighten the burden on the veterans,” Shaw said, agreeing that while veterans are able to seek benefits on their own the Wisconsin model of having county VSOs helps greatly.

Shaw made the case for the increase to 40 hours based on the already large caseload in the department and with the expected expansion in caseload due to federal law changes which she said would have a huge broadening of presumptive conditions. She said they have already seen an increase in caseloads as they work to get applications ready to be submitted for when the regulations change.

“The workload is hard and it is going to get worse,” Shaw said.

As part of her request to the committee, Shaw also asked that she be reclassified to being an exempt (salaried) position. She said this would allow her to do the work needed to research veterans claims without having to worry about accruing compensatory time.

Hager noted that under the recent change in the county rules, even as an exempt employee Shaw would still be eligible for compensatory time up to the 20 hour cap.

Shaw also asked for three additional personal days for Sherman to compensate her for the additional work done while Shaw was on leave.

Lewis explained that the increase in hours has to go to the personnel and finance committee. He said as the department head, it is Shaw’s job to take that to that committee.

Lewis said where things become difficult is with the question of how much would the increase in hours cost. He asked if Shaw had looked into finances to see how it could be covered.

Shaw said she has looked at possible grants. “I feel I am flying blind,” she said. She estimated the requests would cost an additional \$24,194.04.

Lewis explained that as county board members were aware, the county is in a levy freeze. “We have no way to really increase our revenues in the county,” he said.

He urged everyone present to get involved at the legislative level and talk to legislators about getting additional funding for counties and specifically for the CVSO.

“If enough people show up, the legislators start listening,” he said.

However, Lewis said with no source for the additional funds needed to cover the increase in hours, he would be voting against the request.

Thums weighed in against the request giving Sherman additional paid time off questioning the need for it. “What she had to go through was extremely emotion-

“This is about supporting our veterans.”
— Sue Swiantek



EMILY GOJMERAC/THE STAR NEWS

Pending final approval by the county’s buildings and grounds department, the Veterans Service Office at the courthouse will move from their longtime office on the west side of the first floor to larger and more private office space on the east side of the hallway. The previous office space will be used for waiting room space for those with appointments with the office and for programming with groups about veterans programs.

ally exhausting,” Shaw said. She said that it was important for Sherman to take care of her mental health or she will not be good to anyone who comes into the office.

Thums, who serves as chairman of the human services committee, expressed concerns that this action would open Pandora’s box with a line of crisis workers in human services asking for the same benefit.

Lemke said she could support the increase in hours if Shaw could show where the money could come from. “You have to come up with the money first,” she said.

Voss disagreed noting there is more than 35 hours a week of work there. Swiantek noted that there are still questions of the exact amount Shaw has to work with from last year’s carryover funds. “The money may be there,” she said.

There was a discussion about the number of veterans in the county now compared to in the past. Lewis noted that while there were larger populations in the past those groups didn’t typically make claims. He said the veterans are all entitled to these services. “This is not a gift it is part of what they earned,” he said noting that for whatever reason veterans in the past did not make as many claims.

“We get more claims on the office than we did 20 years ago,” Lewis said.

Thums said they needed to be able to justify to taxpayers why they would be increasing costs. “We have to be responsible to those people to keep those taxes in check,” Thums said.

Floyd said she feels everyone in the county should be working 40 hours a week. And questioned how much comp time Shaw was currently accruing. Shaw said she is accruing about five hours per week of comp time.

In the end, committee members voted against the request on a 3-4 vote with Voss, Swiantek and Floyd in favor and Lemke, Thums, Peterson and Lewis opposed. Lewis said this is not the end, and suggested Shaw could take her proposal directly to the finance and personnel committee.

Lemke, Lewis and Thums also serve on the county finance and personnel committee.

In other business, committee members:

★ Received a report from Shaw that due to the increase in caseloads and the number of disturbances and distractions in the office they do not have the time to get the Veterans Outreach Day planned for this year.

“Last year was awesome, I hope we can do it again next year,” Voss said.

★ Gave their blessing to moving the VSO staff from one side of the courthouse hallway to the other.

The county’s buildings and grounds committee will have final say on scheduling the move. Earlier this year, that committee approved using the vacant office space as a waiting room so that veterans did not have to wait in the hallway. It was noted that office space is actually larger and more sound-proof than the current VSO space with lower ceilings so there was less echo. Shaw said these would make it a better option for veterans to both feel secure and be able to hear better.

The current office space would then be used as a waiting area as well as for outreach programming. Committee members were supportive of the change and unanimously approved the request sending it to the buildings and grounds committee.

★ Discussed the possibility of having regularly scheduled monthly meetings. It was noted there were requests from veterans working in the community to have the meetings in the evenings to allow them to attend. However, there were concerns about increased expense for staff attending the meetings and the availability of committee members to be able to meet given other commitments. Shaw will poll committee members about a regular meeting date each month.

★ Approved allowing Shaw and Sherman to attend their state convention for training this fall and to have the office closed during those days. A suggestion was made to see if another county could cover to have services available, however, it was noted that is this the primary training for all CVSO staff and most other offices in the state would also be closed those days.

After meeting discussion

Following the close of the regular meeting, veterans in the audience took the opportunity to express concerns about members of the committee. Resident Ken Klahn suggested that it was time for Lewis to step aside and let someone else take over the committee. He said he knows that Lewis’ intentions are right, but questioned the results and noted that Lewis serves on many county committees.

Lewis replied that he was given the job and that he would continue to do the job

in the best way he can. Other committee members defended Lewis. Floyd noted that issues with the office started before Lewis was appointed committee chairman last winter.

“If the fish stinks you should go to the head first,” Klahn said.

Floyd urged those at the meeting and others to keep an open mind.

“If the fish stinks you should go to the head first.” — Ken Klahn