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JANUARY 27, 2024

WORLD WEEKEND

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\$3.00
119th year, No. 121

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Community Impact Awards: Public Life and Service

BALANCING ACT



Provided file photos/State Sen. Brad Hawkins

Senator Brad Hawkins poses for a photo at the summit of Saddle Rock in Wenatchee in 2023. **BELOW:** The Senate Early Learning and K-12 committee meets on Jan. 11, 2018.

Brad Hawkins on navigating politics, public service and personal life

BY PETE O'CAIN
World news editor

WENATCHEE — Be careful with the P-word. “What got you into politics?” a Wenatchee World reporter asked Sen. Brad Hawkins in an interview. “I try not to think of it as politics,” he replied, “but as public service.”

The lawmaker described himself as someone who’s “not really very political,” but conceded the job requires politicking.

“You do have to have certain political skills,” he said.

Hawkins was elected to the state Legislature in 2012 as a representative for District 12.

Four years later, he was elected as the district’s senator after the seat was vacated by longtime Sen. Linda Evans Parlette.

So, public service. Hawkins



got into public service, in a way, through his father, Buell Hawkins. The elder Hawkins was a Chelan County Commissioner from 2000-2008 and a strong supporter

of former District 12 representatives Dale Foreman and Clyde Ballard. Hawkins recalled helping his father put up yard signs as a kid during a Foreman campaign.

“My father has always been someone I’ve really looked up to,” Hawkins said. Adding, “He was like my number one public servant: worked really hard, cared about people, wanted to do the right thing, very authentic.”

His political career began with an internship for District 13 Sen. Harold Hochstatter, R-Moses Lake, while in college and then a two-year stint as a North Central Educational Service District board member.

In 2004, Hawkins was appointed to the Eastmont School Board seven weeks after it declared the district was in a financial emergency. He was 28.

Over the next eight years, the board helped bring stability to the district. They hired Garn Christensen as its superintendent

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Columbia Elementary Superintendent Kory Kalahar discusses plan to close school

BY JENNI RODAS
World staff

WENATCHEE — The Wenatchee School District plans to close Columbia Elementary as part of their system-wide budget reduction plan.

Following turmoil after the announcement of their plans on Saturday, Superintendent Kory Kalahar and district spokeswoman Diana Haglund sat down with The Wenatchee World to explain the process.

Questions and responses have been edited for clarity.

Wenatchee World: Would Columbia Elementary be closing if there hadn’t been a budget error in 2022?

Kory Kalahar: Most likely. Our goal is to align our staffing to enrollment and the problem is huge and it’s massive so whether or not there was the one-time budgeting error we would still be in this situation because of declining enrollment. As I showed on the slides last night over 900 students in the last eight years, 185 students just this year and we don’t even know what next year brings. So we have to plan for what we think of as the worst — as another 185 students — but we don’t know, could be more, could be less.

And then that happens every single year so one of the things we try to keep in front of is next year when we have less students we need to align our staffing to our enrollment and the year after that when we have less students we will have to align our staffing to enrollment and the year after that — it just keeps going because we don’t know what the floor is. And on the decline that we’re experiencing right now, yes, we would need to be consolidating our resources each and every year.



Kory Kalahar
Wenatchee School District superintendent

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‘I know I can get off the streets’ Needs, hopes heard during annual homeless census

BY OSCAR RODRIGUEZ
World staff writer

WENATCHEE — The annual search to connect with and count homeless people in the area began Thursday early morning right before the sun came up.

Volunteers huddled in a circle at the Hope Care Clinic, right next to Light-house Ministries to receive

instructions for the 2024 Point in Time Count.

The statewide census is conducted each January and required by the state and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, according to Amber Hallberg, Chelan County housing program coordinator, who is also coordinating this year’s count.

At last year’s Point in

Time Count, a total 121 individuals were surveyed. Among them, 105 out of 121 surveyed were unsheltered, down from 123 in 2022.

It is a required condition of the state and federal funding public entities receive to address housing

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World photo/Jacob Ford

Chelan Douglas Community Action Council’s housing coordinator Sara Brito, center left, speaks to Michelle B., who declined to give her last name, about her homeless situation during this year’s Point in Time Count Thursday at the Wenatchee Avenue underpass for the George Sellar Memorial Bridge. Brito stated she’s known Michelle for over 15 years helping her get clean and gain housing. Michelle lost housing due to relapsing to drugs.

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Homeless

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and homelessness issues, Hallberg explained.

“We’re trying to identify what the need is for housing resources in our area,” she said. “And so we do this by conducting surveys of people who are experiencing homelessness.”

Before setting out, Hallberg went over the zoning assignments for each of the two-pair teams heading out Thursday morning.

Tom Bonwell and Sara Brito who both work in the Chelan-Douglas Community Action Council’s housing program were assigned to search two zones. The first was much of South Wenatchee from Ferry Street all the way down to the Wenatchee Rescue Mission.

Bonwell and Brito’s first destination was Mission Street Park. Like previous years, they carried with them several black backpacks full of useful hygiene and winter items like gloves, socks and wipes.

Around nine people were gathered below the overpass on Stevens Street which leads to the George Sellar Bridge. Some were sleeping — or trying to — on blankets laid on the slope of the wall and others huddled around a small fire on the ground.

Brito’s first survey was with Michelle B., who declined to give her last name. Michelle’s most recent stint with homelessness began in 2017 after she was released from prison and had relapsed with drugs.

“It’s kind of hard to fall asleep when you’re out on the street, especially if you’re a girl,” Michelle said. “We have it hard out here, and we’re not bad people. We’re just homeless.”

Clothes hung on a barrier and some food containers littered the far end of the spot along with three naloxone containers, empty.

Gabriel Boothman, 23,



World photo/Jacob Ford

Chrystal Ortega, left, speaks with Chelan Douglas Community Action Council’s housing program director Tom Bonwell, center, and housing coordinator Sara Brito about her homeless situation Thursday next to the George Sellar Memorial Bridge. Ortega is living in a tent with her boyfriend, dog, and cat. She stated a contributing factor to her situation is not being able to give up her animals for housing assistance.

Point in Time Count participants

Agencies that helped with survey outreach:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ◆ North Central Education Service District | ◆ HopeSource |
| ◆ Columbia Valley Community Health | ◆ Sage Advocacy Center |
| ◆ Women’s Resource Center | ◆ Chelan-Douglas Community Action Council |
| ◆ CAFÉ | ◆ Molina Healthcare |
| ◆ Women’s Resource Center | ◆ Link Transit |
| ◆ Coordinated Care | ◆ Chelan-Douglas Health District |
| ◆ Catholic Charities | ◆ Chelan-Douglas Volunteer Attorney Services |
| ◆ Chelan-Douglas Housing Authority | ◆ The Alano Club |
| ◆ Chelan County Veteran Services Office | ◆ Office of Behavioral Health and Advocacy |
| ◆ Washington Department of Veterans Affairs | ◆ Coordinated Entry with Wenatchee Rescue Mission |
| ◆ YWCA NCW | ◆ Sage Families for Children |
| ◆ Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) | |

said he’s been “off and on the streets” for the last three years or so. Personal troubles in his life led to his relapsing to drugs after having been off them for the last couple of years.

“I know that I can get off the streets and that it’s not good to be out here,” he said. “I’ve been beat up a lot of times, like jumped and stuff. I’ve been arrested like nine or 10 times. I know how to do it. I have the tools and everything, but it’s just like the motivation. I don’t know. It’s a very, like, it’s hard to understand if you if you’re not homeless.”

Boothman said he overdosed for the first time the night before and was lucky someone was there

with him to bring him back. “It’s scary,” he said.

Part of the count also involves asking each homeless person a set of prepared questions meant to better understand how they got to that situation, as well as other demographic information.

“Something that we’re focusing on this year is one of the questions asked about where was your last permanent housing?” Hallberg said. “What type of permanent housing so we want to know where people were last permanently housed? Was it a rental house? Or did you lose a home that you owned?”

The idea is to better find ways to prevent people

from becoming homeless in the first place, which first requires more data about those affected.

“That can kind give a better gauge to our elected officials of the different financial issues that people may be facing,” Hallberg said. “And is there anything that we need to do about that? Do we need to create programs for that? Do we need to do advocacy at the state level? What does that look like?”

Chrystal Ortega was sheltering not far from the Mission Street Park right alongside the George Sellar Bridge in a tent with her boyfriend.

Ortega said she’s unable to stay at the Wenatchee

Rescue Mission shelter because of her pets, a dog and a cat. But their biggest challenge being homeless has been finding a place to stay semi-permanently, “so I could do something with my life,” she said.

The state Department of Transportation, which owns the small strip of land alongside the bridge, has already instructed them to be out of there by Monday.

“We’re not really sure sure where we’re going,” she said. “I’m trying to get into school to get a medical assistant certificate and stuff like that. The basic thing that everybody out here wants is just, you know, somewhere to lay our heads at night and somewhere to feel safe and have our stuff. So that way we can go and do what we need to do.”

Ortega said that once the tiny homes planned to be built and located at the Wenatchee Rescue Mission are available, she will be there. But for the time being, she is thinking about the next place she’ll live.

The second zone Bonwell and Brito were deployed to included much of East Wenatchee. But searching in several spots along the east side of the Apple Capital Recreation Loop Trail was fruitless with very few signs of people sheltering there.

Bonwell and Brito have participated in the yearly count for close to two decades and remarked that the count has improved but feel the homelessness has become a lot more visible.

Bonwell said he still has hope for things to improve, given that he’s seen firsthand people be able to turn around their lives for the better, grow and change.

Hallberg also said that their work is ultimately about “getting people connected to the resources that they need to work towards self sufficiency.”

Hawkins

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and passed a construction bond during a recession to renovate three schools.

Twenty years since he joined the Eastmont board, Hawkins, now 48, considers the experience the most formative and difficult of his career in public service.

“We did it together as a board,” Hawkins said. “(We had a) difference of opinions but we learned how to work it out and put the students and staff first and work through all that and bring more credibility and transparency to the school district and get the public on board.”

It’s an approach he carries to the capitol.

In a Legislature dominated by his Democratic colleagues, Hawkins garnered bipartisan support for change with regional and statewide impacts, like a bill that required the state to improve forest health to dampen the effects of wildfires, and funding for Wenatchee’s Confluence Parkway project.

He said the trick is being a good listener and respecting differences.

“And realizing that just because you think differently than someone doesn’t mean that they’re wrong and you’re right,” Hawkins said. “It just means that you think differently and that’s OK.”

That attitude ties closely to what he said he’s most proud of in his professional life: accessibility.

“For me, the little things matter,” Hawkins said. He added he’s “just as proud of providing excellent customer service to constituents” as he is of legislative accomplishments.

Not forgotten are those closest to him.

A career in politics, or rather public service, can have ill effects on life outside the capitol. Hawkins said he’s seen the job ruin marriages and cause burnout. They’re pitfalls he tries to avoid.

“One of the things I’ve always tried to do is have a good balance and do this job in a way that honors my wife, supports my kids, and benefits my constituents,” Hawkins said.

Editor’s note: Sen. Brad Hawkins was selected as this year’s recipient of the Wenatchee World’s Community Impact Award for Public Life and Service. This story and several others about people and organizations making an impact on the community will appear in our annual Progress Edition, which publishes on Feb. 29. Honorees will be presented their awards 5:30 p.m. that same night at Pybus Public Market’s LocalTel Event Center. Tickets for the Community Impact Awards ceremony are \$35 each and available at wrld.us/communityimpactawards2024

School

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Diana Haglund: The notion behind consolidation is to be more efficient with our dollars so that we can continue to provide a high quality education to all of our students in Wenatchee. Consolidation that would involve the closure of an Elementary school would take us from seven resource-thin schools to six schools that have a more solid funding base and support for Wenatchee kids so they can continue to receive that high-quality education that they deserve here in Wenatchee.

ICYMI: Budget error compounds Wenatchee School District’s woes

WW: Is there a chance that the district’s projections could be wrong?

Kalahar: Always. We are still really out of alignment right now in our system, we have not corrected ourselves from some of the budget considerations that happened in 2021 and 2022 so we are already out of alignment and we’ve been working on how to write that system and we’re not there yet.

Either way, if we did not experience as high of an enrollment decline next year we would still need to be doing major alignment to staffing from enrollment.

Haglund: It’s really difficult to have a crystal ball about what’s gonna happen there are many variables that play into enrollment decline from you know increasing number of a new schools that we see, new educational offerings for families, housing prices and the availability

of homes in our community. Some of the shifts that are happening in North Central Washington, people are moving to smaller bedroom communities, so we take all of those variables into account when we do our forecasting to make sure that we’re thinking more broadly and planning for that scenario that we believe is gonna happen.

We’ve been pretty close on our projections. We are looking at birth rates and things like that as well so we’ve been historically pretty accurate with those predictions and those forecasts but like I said it’s hard to have a crystal ball and know what’s gonna happen but this is our best thinking with the information that we have right now.

WW: What are you doing to prevent another budget error?

Kalahar: We have put a lot of things in place, we’ve had some staffing changes which is one thing we’ve put into place, we’re on the path to exhausting the dollars from the ESSER funding that got us through COVID and that will help us in that process as well and just making sure that all the T’s are crossed and that all the I’s are dotted along the way.

The most important thing is that we are fiscally responsible with our community’s dollars and we take care of our children in that process.

WW: Can you please explain the process of closing a school according to state law and how you’re in compliance?

Kalahar: The process has many different steps. And so I think the steps that are outlined in the state law are that the things that we kind of mentioned last night at the board meeting. You need to have a 90-day process period for the work to be done, there needs to be a written analysis that is shared with your school board. And you also need to have a public hearing that happens during that time. And so those are the pieces that we have kind of

set in motion. We have been working on the budgetary process and the reduction process for a while, but we want to make sure those pieces are set up so that when we get this started, we can follow the process as needed.

WW: Why did the district write the press release announcing plans to close Columbia in a way that made it sound like a done deal?

Kalahar: There are two kinds of decision-making processes that happen. One of those is the school district’s plan for a budget reduction process. And that was the piece that we had not finished, but we’re solid on that part. This is what we’re proposing as our plan.

The other piece is then how do we execute that work through the school board?

And so yeah, it came off as “There is no reason to even talk about this.” And that’s not the intent. The intent is we need to communicate that this is the district’s plan, the school board will have to execute it, and we will follow the processes and the law that are that hold us accountable. So yeah, there’s a disconnect there.

WW: Can you provide an overview of what the consolidation process entails?

Kalahar: I think there’s actually a lot in the process of this. I don’t know if we will be able to unveil all of that at the Feb. 13 meeting. But we’re going to provide as much background as to how the decision was made and how we came up with the idea of consolidation and with Columbia Elementary. So that’s what Feb. 13 is about. A lot of the work that we have to do in that consolidation process is we need to take care of our staff, we need to take care of our students and we need to take care of our families first and foremost because that’s the most important part.

But then after that, that’s not an easy process. And that is not something we

want to gloss over. Because that’s the human part of this work is everyone needs to be well taken care of. But what we’ll share on Feb. 13 is how we got to this decision in more clarity with the board. And I think giving a little bit more background there as well because there were things that we shared last night that needed to be shared with the public that is just kind of “Here’s where we are as a district, here’s the magnitude of the budget reduction process that needs to happen.”

And then we’ll get into some more specifics about the why behind it. The other process is, how are we working with our students? How are we working with our parents and families, which schools are our students going to be aligned to what is busing or transportation look like? And all of those kinds of pieces that are kind of like management of people pieces. And so those are the things that we’ll have to work through during that 90-day period, as well, and be ready to share that with the board multiple times along the way.

Haglund: Another piece that we’ll also be working on that is happening right now is evaluating how we would utilize that school building in the event of a closure for existing programs, what that would look like, we also need to take a look at the facilities, you know, age, any challenges with it just from the infrastructure side of things. So there’s some really in-depth reporting. That’s part of that process, that will be in that written analysis that will be provided to the board. So we have a lot of that data, we’re digging in even deeper so that we can develop that written plan that’ll be shared in February. I will have a more comprehensive kind of look at the why, but also the how, and so that will all be built into that plan.

WW: Columbia Elementary has a diverse student population. How will the

district address the needs of students from different ethnic backgrounds during the consolidation process especially considering the demographics of the school?

Kalahar: As I shared last night, the demographics of the Wenatchee School District are very much the demographics of Columbia, or Mission View our Lincoln, you know, we have to take care of all of our students in a variety of ways. And I think that takes overall care of the entire stakeholder community, you know, as well and I think that we’re in a position right now where — I know we’re in a position right now — where people are hurting, people are upset, and they’re angry and they’re frustrated, and those real raw emotions we saw Tuesday night at the school board meeting.

And I think that’s where we need to spend the majority of our time is if this consolidation and closure does happen, then how are we uniquely addressing the needs of those students that will have to then have a new find a new home as their school across the way and that takes a whole community and I think it takes our hold school district to make that happen. But I think it’s paramount because all of those students have individual needs and they’re being addressed at Columbia right now. And we need to make sure those individual needs and the resources that help support them follow those students.

Haglund: In our district, there are about 2,000 elementary-aged kids who come to our schools every day with unique lived experiences in need of individualized attention, especially those who come to us from migrant backgrounds who are English language learners who are coming from homes that are experiencing poverty or they’re experiencing, you know, housing insecurity like Dr. Kalahar said that that is who we serve in the

Wenatchee school district.

That is who we are. And we embrace that diversity. That’s what makes us great. That’s what makes our staff amazing across our system, we have worked really hard to ensure that all of our buildings provide a high level of service to students who walk in our doors, no matter what their background is, or what like I said, whatever their need is, we have highly skilled educators who are ready to embrace kids every day and support them in their unique learning needs.

We have what’s called a guaranteed and viable curriculum, that means there’s consistency across all of our buildings. Because we have a high mobility rate, in Wenatchee, so we have kids that often move from building to building for educational, further education for different purposes. But they experienced the same education at each one of those buildings and that’s really important when we think about that transition, and what that will look like, for these kids, as they may be entering a new school, our staff are ready to embrace them. They do amazing work. And we would also be looking to have our Columbia staff, you know, as part of those school communities as well, and when actually school district is one school community that, again, really takes care of our kids. We know our students, we see them, we value them, and we want them to feel a strong connection of belonging in our schools.

Kalahar: These are these are big challenges and these are big decisions that impact more than just a building or a staff. They rippled through our entire community. And so I think it’s important for us to acknowledge that and to move forward, you know, gently and and trying to do the work that is going to sustain our system over time.

To view the full interview with Kory Kalahar, visit wenatchee.world.com.