



## Recall of parks commissioners launched

By John Darling For the Tidings

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Members of a group called Support Our Seniors (SOS) are working on recalling of three members of the city's elected Ashland Parks & Recreation Commission, in the wake of the August firing of the Senior Center's staff and an evolving plan to modify senior services.

Petition paperwork was taken out Wednesday to recall Michael Gardiner, Jim Lewis and Rick Landt, three members of the five-member commission.

Resistance to senior program changes is documented at a new website ([ashlandsos.com](http://ashlandsos.com)) and in a video assailing the commission for the layoffs and proposed changes in what services are offered where and a push for the center do "revenue recovery" — many of which the commission walked back after pushback from the program's clients and volunteers.

Among changes that did go through was the discharge of the center's paid staff, including former Senior Center Manager Chris Dodson. She has retained Portland lawyer Christopher Lundberg, who calls it a "wrongful firing ... vindictive (and) related to silencing her as an advocate and active spokesperson for that (senior) community."

Lundberg says he and Dodson, manager of the Senior Center for 14 years, are "actively reviewing all her legal options to address the ... wrongful firing." A lawsuit has not yet been filed, he said Friday in an email.

Lundberg says "the Department's decision to remove Ms. Dodson from her role as manager of the Senior Center was totally unnecessary and makes no sense. No one has more knowledge and expertise concerning the Senior Center's services and the Ashland senior community's needs than Ms. Dodson. If the Parks and Recreation Department had been operating in good faith with respect to Ms. Dodson, the right decision would have been to keep her on as manager. Under these

circumstances, the Department's decision appears vindictive and more likely related to silencing her as an advocate and active spokesperson for that community than to any so-called legitimate purpose."

Calls to the Parks & Recreation Department for comment, as well as emails to parks commissioners, went unanswered Friday, when the city was observing Veterans Day.

Recall petitioners are listed as Mary Sundberg, Mary Canfield and Avram Chetron. As its reasons for the recall, SOS contends:

- Ashland Parks & Recreation Commissioners (APRC) continue to mismanage their \$9 million annual budget, seriously threatening the sustainability of the city's general fund;
- APRC mismanages personnel, including the layoff of "effective, well-qualified staff" at the Senior Center and replaced them with "unqualified parks employees, thus endangering our seniors' well-being";
- APRC "repeatedly and flagrantly" failed to follow Oregon Public Meetings Regulations by under-publicizing meetings, disallowing or ignoring public input, and failing to accurately reflect citizen input in meeting minutes;
- With "disregard for public concern," APRC voted to spend \$230,000 for a Portland consultant to decide the fate and future design of Lithia Park, "threatening specific historic sites in our beloved crown jewel"; and
- APRC spent \$49,000 on the 2016 Performance Audit which recommends, "Do a better job with what you have before making any changes" and "Conduct a comprehensive community needs assessment before acting," then "ignored these recommendations."

At a Thursday presentation at the library on the troubled Senior Center hosted by SOS, members recounted the damage they say will result from layoffs, cutbacks and other plans of Park & Recreation, "destroying the precious core," as Gwen Davies put it. "This is not the Ashland we need. We need a democratic process."

Seniors faulted the whole process that led to the Parks & Recreation proposals, announced Aug. 7, with "little or no forewarning or input from seniors," and "very little opportunity for public comment since then," they alleged.

The SOS video carries many soundbites from both sides, with one senior, Mike Hersch, claiming elders disproportionately face both mental and physical problems that are not understood by newly installed staff from Parks & Recreation at the Senior Center. "It used to provide TLC where there was no other place to get it"

was no other place to go to.

While noting that the department had pivoted on its original plans for cost recovery and moving some senior program offerings to The Grove on East Main Street, Chetron, in an interview, said the next step for SOS is to “broaden the net and involve more people ... and maintain pressure on the City Council to be responsible and admit they have the power to intervene.”

Parks & Recreation Commissioner Gardiner spoke briefly at the SOS presentation Thursday about the cost of services for seniors. Asked to comment by the Tidings, he declined.

Chetron called on Parks & Recreation to “restore core services” formerly functioning at the Senior Center, saying they were wiped out with layoffs.

“They should start again at the beginning,” said Chetron. “They assume things will simmer down and they can go ahead with their new proposal.”

The next meeting of the Ashland Senior Program Advisory Committee is set for 3:15 to 5:15 p.m. Monday in the council chambers at 1175 East Main Street.

SOS members will speak and show their video at 1 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 11, in the Gresham Room at the Ashland Public Library.

— *John Darling is an Ashland freelance writer. Reach him at* .....



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