

Bill would include firefighters' names on roadside memorials

Columbia County family helps introduce amendment during 2019 Legislature

By NICOLE THILL-PACHECO
The Spotlight

A bill in the 2019 legislative session would allow the names of fallen firefighters to be included in roadside memorials throughout the state.

In 2013, the Oregon Department of Transportation approved roadside memorials to honor fallen members of the Armed Forces, and amended the law in 2015 to include public safety officers.

Now, the family of a Columbia County firefighter who died in the line of duty is pushing to have the statute amended to include fallen firefighters.

The family of Robert Hales, a former Scappoose Fire District volunteer firefighter and EMT who died from a heart attack following a long shift in 2008, proposed the language change to Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, who is sponsoring Senate Bill 528.

"Well, I have been close to all of the people on whose behalf it's introduced," Johnson said, acknowledging the names of Robert Hales' family members. "And I think it's the same motivation of us wanting to recognize the selfless service of police officers and our military who have lost their lives in service to others."

Evelyn Hudson, Hales' aunt,



PHOTO COURTESY OF SCAPPOOSE FIRE DISTRICT

Robert Hales died in 2008 after he volunteered for a 12-hour shift fighting wildfires in Columbia County and suffered a heart attack. His family honors him every year by attending the Oregon Fallen Firefighters Memorial Ceremony in Salem, and has now also pushed to change state law to allow firefighters' names to be included on roadside memorials.

said introducing this change in legislation is personal for her family, but not the only reason it's important.

"Well, the fallen fireman is my nephew and he was dear to my heart, and he left behind his daughters and wife. And it's not just about them. All survivors have to go through the same thing," Hudson said.

Last August, on the 10th anniversary of Robert Hales' death, the Scappoose Fire District honored him by publishing a memorial article.

On Aug. 17, 2008, Hales worked a 12-hour shift as a wildland firefighter, volunteering with the Scappoose Fire District on a day when the county had recorded more than 130 dry lightning strikes. Multiple fires had been reported,

including many in Scappoose, the fire district noted. After working his shift, Hales suffered a heart attack and died. Hales had been a volunteer firefighter and EMT for eight years, often working out of the Chapman Fire Station.

Roadside memorials are established through an application process. The Legislature must pass a resolution to recognize an individual, and then the Department of Transportation collects a fee to pay for the costs of erecting and maintaining the "Fallen Hero" sign. Police officers and members of the Armed Forces are the only categories that can currently be recognized.

Amending the law to allow the inclusion of fallen firefighters is a logical next step, Hudson explained.

While the bill goes through the House and Senate, Hudson said she is strongly advocating for families of fallen firefighters to make their voices heard on the topic and to stay involved with public discussions and hearings on the bill.

"I really just want to get the word out," Hudson said. "I want the Legislature to see the support for all the fallen fireman. It would be beautiful to see all those people coming in through the doors in uniform, supporting this bill."

In September each year, the state hosts an Oregon Fallen Firefighters Memorial Ceremony in Salem to honor the 169

line-of-duty deaths that have been reported in the state. Hudson said that she and her family attend the event annually, which has led to a deep connection with other families who have experienced loss.

"We think about him (Robert) every day and just being able to have his children see a sign on the side of the road would be wonderful," Hudson said. "But again it's really about everyone in the state. You meet all these families that are survivors. It's just as devastating for them ... We understand each other. It's really hard."

While the bill is still going through the legislative process, Johnson, who is co-chairing the ways and means committee this year, said she thinks people will be supportive of it.

"I believe there will be other people that will feel exactly the way I do, that these are public servants — whether it's military, police, firemen — that put themselves in harm's way for others, and we owe them our acknowledgment and respect," Johnson said.

The progress of the bill and notifications about public hearings can be found on the Oregon State Legislature's website.

As of this week, the bill had been assigned to the Senate Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness committee for review, but no hearings had been scheduled.

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Out on the Town

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 1

- **Scappoose Library Lab for Preschoolers**, 10:30am, 52469 S.E. 2nd St. In the meeting room. Pulleys, cogs, wheels and fun! Explore how things work and enter the world of science for kids, including entertaining projects using educational Legos
- **Caples House Museum Afternoon Tea**, 2-4pm at the Caples House Museum

feature information on digging deeper into the lives of our ancestors through newspaper research. Presented by Brandon Sundeen

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 5

- **AARP Tax-Aide**, 9am-2:30pm at the St. Helens Senior Center, 375 S. 15th St. Free tax help for taxpayers that are middle to low income with special attention to those age 60 and above. Free
- **St. Helens Library Fiber Fanatics**, 10am, 375 S. 18th St. Meet in the Armstrong Room. Hang out with fellow fiber enthusiasts. Knit, crochet, weave, spin and more. Enjoy conversation while working on projects in a relaxed setting
- **St. Helens Library Preschool Storytime**, 11:15am, 375 S. 18th St. In this program for three- to five-year-olds and their

are middle to low income with special attention to those age 60 and above. Free electronic filing of all eligible returns. To make appointment call 503-397-0960

- **Bethany Lutheran Church 39th Annual Quilt Show**, 10am-3pm at Bethany Lutheran Church, 34721 Church Rd., Warren. Book sale, Bake sale - whole pies available, quilt raffle and more! Light lunch