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Pro-Palestine protesters shut down Wyden's Grants Pass town hall meeting

By Chris Bristol of the Daily Courier



SCOTT STODDARD / Daily Courier

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden asks for a show of hands on the topic of vote-by-mail as pro-Palestinian activists scream and chant during Wyden's town hall meeting at Rogue Community College in Grants Pass on Monday afternoon. It was the only question Wyden was able to take due to the disruptions by protesters. The meeting was halted early, just 22 minutes after it started.

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden took one question, about a Trump administration threat to vote-by-mail, before calling it quits after pro-Palestinian protesters brought a town hall in Grants Pass to a halt Monday.

The decision to end the town hall before it barely got off the ground came moments after the crowd at the Redwood Campus of Rogue Community College gave a nearly unanimous standing ovation to the Portland Democrat, who recently announced plans to seek a sixth full term in 2028.

But seconds after RCC President Randy Weber handed Wyden the microphone, about 15 or 20 people sprinkled throughout the audience suddenly took to their feet and started shouting pro-Palestinian slogans.

"Which side are you on?" they shouted in unison. Most of the demonstrators were young people, but an older woman in the audience held up a "Feed Gaza" sign.

"Sit down and shut up!" people screamed at the protesters, who marched around the RCC gym floor in defiance and wouldn't stop. Some in the audience grabbed at the protesters or got in their face, while others implored the police, who scanned the room for scuffles or anything more sinister-looking, to do something.

Wyden, no doubt eager to take President Trump and the Congress-controlling Republican Party to task on a number of subjects, such as the Jeffrey Epstein files and the war in Ukraine, gave up after about 20 minutes and left. The audience was soon shepherded outside, where people milled about and there were more mini-confrontations with the protesters.

There were at least a half-dozen officers from the Grants Pass Police Department on hand as well as at least one Josephine County sheriff's deputy. No arrests were made.

It was the end of Wyden's 1,132nd town hall since he was first elected to the Senate in a special election in 1996 to fill the seat vacated by Bob Packwood. In May, pro-Palestinian protesters disrupted a Wyden town hall in Medford, criticizing Wyden's support for Israel and acceptance of contributions from pro-Israel groups, but they eventually left and the event continued.

The disruption meant the town hall more closely resembled those held by Republicans since Donald Trump's return to power, which have drawn often angry crowds of Democrats. Republicans, including U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz of Oregon, have reacted by not doing them, or doing fewer of them.

Asked for comment afterward, Wyden's office issued the following statement:

"Because keeping the audience safe at any of the senator's town halls must be paramount, the college president announced that today's Josephine County town hall was postponed after it became apparent a dozen or so protesters would not allow the other 250 attendees to speak.

"As at every one of the senator's previous 1,131 previous town halls, every opportunity would have been presented to any Oregonian to exercise their First Amendment rights and ask him any question. Unfortunately, a small group of people did not allow that to happen today."

Josephine County Commissioner Chris Barnett was on hand. He said he was disappointed the forum was shut down and had heard the police did not make any arrests at the senator's request.

In a statement, Grants Pass police Chief Warren Hensman said his officers worked with Wyden's office and RCC.

"Balancing the rights of all individuals was important to us, and the meeting concluded without any arrests or unnecessary use of force," he said.

Despite being a Republican, Barnett said he came to the town hall to hear "the good stuff," referring to hot topics like Trump's threat to eliminate vote-by-mail, which Oregon pioneered in the 1990s.

"If we're going to unite, we've got to hear both sides," he said, adding, "I don't think we really heard any side today."

Pat and Bob LeLieur of rural Grants Pass said they didn't necessarily blame the protesters for disrupting the meeting for a moment, but refusing to stop is no way to win hearts and minds, they said.

"We heard them," Pat said, adding that once you make your point, "it's time to give somebody else a chance. Respect others."

Vicky Palmerton, a Democratic activist from Grants Pass, said she too has concerns about what is transpiring in Gaza, but shutting down Wyden was wrong-headed.

"How many of you even freaking voted last time, and how selfish are you?" she said of the protesters, most of whom appeared to be in their 20s.

Not everyone on hand was a Wyden supporter, but even the small contingent of Republicans in the crowd were quick to say they were disappointed the forum ended so abruptly.

That didn't mean some couldn't see the political humor in the moment. Skip Welles, a Navy veteran from Grants Pass, put it this way:

"This was the left shutting down the left," he said.

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