POLITICS

Pro-Palestinian protests cut short Wyden's southern Oregon town hall

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Sen. Ron Wyden speaks to a packed crowd while answering a question during a town hall on Sunday, March 16, 2025, at Clackamas Community College's Randall Hall Gym in Oregon City. (Mark Graves/The Oregonian)Mark Graves/The Oregonian

By Maddie Khaw | The Oregonian/OregonLive

A town hall hosted by Democratic U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden was cut short Monday in southern Oregon after pro-Palestinian protesters disrupted the event. Videos posted on TikTok show around 20 people walking around the town hall crowd and in front of the podium at Rogue Community College in Grants Pass,

chanting, singing and yelling statements including “arms embargo now” and “Palestine will be free,” their voices drowning out Wyden’s attempts to speak into a microphone.
One protester called Wyden a “butcher of Gaza,” reading off a sheet of paper. Another called out, “You don’t want peace if you send bombs.” Others chanted to the crowd of constituents in seats: “Which side are you on?”

Video from the event shows Wyden being escorted out of the community college gym after the moderator, Rogue Community College president Randy Weber, tried several times to ask protesters to let others ask questions.

Some videos show a man in a gray suit grabbing and pushing two of the protesters. It is unclear whether that man is part of Wyden’s staff or the college’s; a spokesperson for the senator said his office does not discuss security measures.

Wyden first left the podium hoping the demonstration would stop so he could resume speaking, said Kelly Gonzales, a Rogue Community College spokesperson. But as the protest persisted, it became clear that it would “prevent meaningful dialogue,” and the college announced it was ending the event.

“We are saddened for those who showed up with the intent to ask questions and have their voices heard by an elected official,” Weber, the college’s president, said in a statement. “Rogue Community College values civil discourse and looks forward to hosting the Senator again.”

Hank Stern, the spokesperson for the senator, said Wyden has held more than 1,000 previous town halls, where attendees have “every opportunity … to exercise their First Amendment rights and ask him any question.”

He added, “Unfortunately, a small group of people did not allow that to happen on Monday.”

The death toll in Gaza has climbed above 62,000 since the Oct. 7, 2023 Hamas attack that spurred Israel's military siege. Israel recently announced plans to reoccupy Gaza City and other heavily populated areas, while international outcry builds over famine in the region.

In Grants Pass, the demonstration was organized by a group of individuals from Jackson and Josephine counties, said Rianna Koppel, one of the protesters. They aimed to draw attention to their demands that Wyden support an arms embargo on Israel and cut financial ties to pro-Israel lobbying groups that have donated to his campaigns.

Wyden, a son of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, was among a handful of Democratic and all Republican senators who last month voted against a bill to halt a $675 million weapons sale to Israel. U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, a fellow Oregon Democrat, supported the bill.

"We're going to shut it down for Palestine until those two things stop," Koppel, 37, said. "The bombs are ongoing, people are being starved and our taxpayer dollars are being weaponized and abused by our senator. … You may not continue your town halls as usual when you are not listening to your constituents."

Wyden's stance on Israel has prompted protests and criticism at several other town halls in the past year. He has supported Israel's right to defend itself but also criticized its prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, for blocking aid and food to Palestinians.

Wyden announced Wednesday that he signed a letter with several other Democratic senators demanding the Trump administration act immediately on reports that Israeli settlers are blocking humanitarian aid deliveries into Gaza and attacking Palestinian civilians.

The event will be rescheduled, Stern said, but the location and date are yet to be announced.

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