

NATE SANFORD: Hi, I'm Nate Sanford. It's Tuesday, April 13. And you're listening to The ForeFront. It's a new weekly podcast about the stories you need to know this week, produced by the front an independent student newsroom covering campus, Bellingham, and Whatcom County.

This week, what is the Board of Trustees? We hit the streets to see if anyone knows.

STUDENT1: Dude, I don't know anything.

STUDENT2: [laughs] Oh, please.

NATE SANFORD: After that, I'll be speaking with Campus news editor Ryan Morris. She'll help explain what the board actually does. And we'll also talk about the discussions involving building a longhouse on campus next year.

But first, here's what else is going on.

[River Sound]

NATE SANFORD: You're listening to the Nooksack River. It's a 75 mile long stretch of water that flows from the North Cascades into Bellingham Bay. It feeds into the Nooksack River Basin, and it's an essential source of water for Whatcom County. But who owns that water? That question has been a source of confusion for decades. And as of right now, there's still a lot of uncertainty over competing claims and who gets priority for the water.

Human factors like population growth and agriculture are continuing to limit the annual stream flow, and the problem's becoming increasingly urgent. The Lummi nation and the Nooksack tribe, who have been stewards of the river and surrounding land for millennia, recently announced that they've partnered together and are hoping to resolve the issue once and for all.

They've partnered for a new campaign that they hope is going to persuade the state to fund water rights adjudication. An adjudication is basically this complicated legal process where the state comes in and makes a formal legal judgment on a disputed matter. In this case, who gets priority for the water, and how much of it are they allowed to take? That applies to people who draw from the water directly, but also people who use wells or aquifers for farmland irrigation. The bills to fund the adjudication process are currently before the state legislature. But even if they are passed, the problem won't be solved overnight.

When the state adjudicated the Yakima River Basin, it took 40 years to work through all of the competing claims. And when it comes to adjudicating the Nooksack River Basin, experts say that might also take several decades.

NATE SANFORD: Just a quick warning, this next story involves discussion of antisemitism and hate symbols.

On April 2, around 8:30 in the morning, a weird manuscript was dropped off at Viking Union. The manuscript was about 40 pages long; handwritten on what looked like grocery bags. It contained bizarre symbols, drawings, references to science fiction, the number 99,999 was repeated over and over again. And most alarmingly, it also had drawings of swastikas.

Mark Behee was working at the Viking Union front desk that morning. And he actually saw the man who dropped off the manuscript. But he told The Front that he didn't get a good look at the man, but that he was wearing a dark hoodie and a mask- the medical type that everyone wears now. Behee instantly recognized the manuscripts and ran outside to try to find the man, but he'd already disappeared. And Behee was able to recognize the manuscripts because the same thing had actually happened to his coworkers a few months earlier on January 22. University Police were called both times but Behee said they were equally confused.

Now, several years ago, Western had a pretty horrific string of antisemitic incidents. In winter of 2016 swastikas were drawn on the doors of multiple buildings in the Fairhaven complex. And then in 2018, seven books in the Jewish Studies section of the library were vandalized. When the manuscripts were dropped off on April 2, Western's bias response team was alerted, but no Western alert was sent. In an email. Paul Cocks, who is a spokesperson for the University, said that while the manuscripts did contain what looks like a swastika, the weird context of the writings made it too difficult to deduce any meaning, and the University Police didn't see any evidence of a threat to campus.

NATE SANFORD: You can read more about the manuscript, the Nooksack River, and other stories on our website, WesternFrontOnline.com. There are also links in the episode description.

Up next, does anyone know what the Board of Trustees actually is or what they do? Reporter Kyle Tubbs hits the socially distant streets to find out. After that, we're joined by campus news editor Ryan Morris to talk about the board's most recent meeting and their discussions about acting on student demands and building a longhouse on campus next year.

KYLE TUBBS: Hello, my name is Kyle Tubbs. And we're gonna be asking people about the Board of Trustees at Western today.

Can you name one member of Western's Board of Trustees.

STUDENT A: Frickin, like Sabah. Whatever.

KYLE TUBBS: Can any of you guys name him?

STUDENT B: No, sorry. I think... is like Kshama Sawant from like Seattle?

STUDENT C: Is Paul Dunn a member of the trustees? Is he on the board?

STUDENT D: I have no idea. I got no answer there.

STUDENT E: No, no, no, I cannot. No, no. No.

KYLE TUBBS: Can any of you know?

STUDENT F: I'm saying no, I cannot.

STUDENT G: No, I cannot

STUDENT H: Absolutely not.

STUDENT I: No idea.

STUDENT J: Definitely not.

STUDENT K: No

STUDENT L: No

STUDENT M: No

STUDENT N: no

STUDENT O: No.

STUDENT P: I was a journalist, I should know this... No, I can't.

NATE SANFORD: Alright, so I'm now joined by Ryan Morris, who is The Front's new campus news editor. Ryan, thank you so much for joining us.

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, I'm so happy to be here on the first episode of our podcast.

NATE SANFORD: Yeah, definitely. So, Ryan, you attended the big board of trustees meeting that took place earlier this month. And before we get into the big discussion they had about the longhouse on campus next year. I feel like we need to address the elephant in the room. What is a trustee? And why does Western have an entire board of them, because I've been here for almost four years now. And I feel like I still don't entirely understand what they do.

RYAN MORRIS: Most colleges have a board of trustees or something like that. And Western's board of trustees is this group of nine people and they're responsible for overseeing and supervising the direction and care of the University. So, they meet several times a year, they used to meet in person, and they don't anymore, but they typically meet twice per academic quarter, or about six times per year to check in with the University president and other top-level people at Western to get a status update on how Western is doing.

And then they also vote on major decisions about the University's overall direction. Many people think that the trustees only makes financial decisions, and they totally do. And they make a lot of decisions about student fees, for example, but they do a lot more than that. One other notable decision they usually make is what new buildings they're going to bring to campus. So, president Randhawa supervises the day to day operations of Western but the board makes the overall governing decisions. And they're actually the ones who appointed Randhawa and other Western presidents. So being a trustee is a volunteer position, and they're not actually compensated for this work.

NATE SANFORD: Yeah, cuz, you know, I think a lot of the time, it feels like President Randhawa is kind of like, you know, the leader of Western and, you know, kind of making all these because- just because he's so public facing, but it kind of sounds like the Board of Trustees is almost, sort of above that, and making, you know, kind of all these big lofty missions and goals for Western. And then it's up to President Randhawa and the other administrators to actually implement those goals.

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, totally.

NATE SANFORD: Um, but how does someone become a trustee though?

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, so there's eight of them that are appointed by Governor Inslee for six-year terms. And then one of them is only serving for a one-year term, which is a student representative. So, our current student representative is Hunter Stuehm. He is a second year grad student at Western, and he's also the Director of Communications for Associate Students. He is actually ending his term as student trustee. So, the position will be open for students who want to apply by April 19, on the trustees website.

NATE SANFORD: Interesting. So, I mean, it's kind of crazy that these- these meetings are happening where basically all these major decisions about the direction and future of the University are being made.

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, thankfully, they're public, though.

BOT MEMBER: Submitted approval of the minutes of the Board of Trustees meeting February 11, and 12 2021.

NATE SANFORD: Ryan, could you- could you walk us through how a typical Board of Trustees meeting goes? What happened at the most recent one?

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, so the meeting always starts with voting to approve the minutes from previous meetings. And then they have a public comments section where anybody can show up and tell the board what they're thinking about the direction of the University.

NATE SANFORD: And how did the public comment section go with the most recent one?

BOT MEMBER: Thank you. The next item on the agenda is public comment. Since no one has signed up, the public comment period is concluded. And we will move on to the next agenda item.

RYAN MORRIS: Well, nobody signed up. So, nobody gave public comments.

NATE SANFORD: Nice. Could people show up if they wanted to, like is this something that's open to students?

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, so students can be involved or keep tabs on the board in a lot of ways and one of those is signing up for public comment. They can also read the Board of Trustees agendas and meeting materials which are public on their website, which is trustees.wvu.edu. And their meetings are also recorded in public. They usually don't upload them for a week or longer after the meeting. But you can listen to them live on their audio cast which is also on their website.

And then after the public comment, we have part of the meeting where John Myers, the board chair gives a report on the status of the University.

JOHN MYERS: To our students, we have great expectations that there may well be a return to, at the very least, a new normal for the coming fall.

RYAN MORRIS: After that President Randhawa and other major figures at Western give the board their updates on how the University is doing.

JOHN MYERS: Sabah and his administration have been hard at it, speaking to the broader University community on diversity, equity and inclusion, establishing the Office of Equity at Western...

RYAN MORRIS: After update, the board goes into a discussion about Western's budget for some significant upcoming projects. And because Western is a publicly funded University, the money for those has to come from the state legislature, which is currently negotiating the budget.

NATE SANFORD: Yeah, and what- what are some of those big projects that Western's hoping to get funding for?

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, so one of them right now is a \$51 million electrical engineering and computer science building that Western is hoping to construct in the next few years. Some of that money is also coming from private donations. The building is actually going to be named after two donors who donated \$10 million. And those donors have a pretty big history of tax fraud that The Front reported on.

Another really significant project that they're working on is a Coast Salish style longhouse, which the school is hoping to build in the arboretum.

NATE SANFORD: Yeah. And so, the longhouse could you give sort of a background about the longhouse? How long has that been in the works?

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, so Western is actually on Coast Salish territory, and longhouses are traditionally very important to Coast Salish tribes. So, in 2016, Western's Native American student union, sent a letter to Western and outline- outlined five demands. One of those demands was the creation of a tribal liaison at Western, and that happened. Laural Ballew, who spoke at the board trustees meeting was appointed to the tribal liaison position. And then another major demand was longhouse.

So, their full list of demands was the implementation of a tribal liaison position, a requirements that students verify tribal enrollment, or descendance, when applying to Western, full funding for an annual spring powwow, which they've had for a few years now, government to government training between Western and local tribal governments, and then finally, the construction of the longhouse.

So, Ballew said in the meeting that these five demands are being met, and that's a historic move for Western but WWU is actually pretty behind the curve when it comes to having the longhouse space on campus. Peninsula College, UW, Evergreen State, University of British Columbia, Oregon State, University of Oregon- all of these Pacific Northwest schools already have a designated longhouse space. And Western has been the only school in the I-5 corridor to not have one for several years.

NATE SANFORD: So, it sounds like pretty much everyone except us has one at this point. And I imagine it must be a pretty big priority for Western. Where do things currently stand?

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, so right now the project is budgeted at just under 5 million like 4.9 million, and funding failed to pass the legislature last year because of COVID. And those state budget priorities kind of shifted.

SABAH RANDAWAH : So, the project is fully funded by the house. It is not fully funded by the Senate.

RYAN MORRIS: And the state legislator- legislature is voting on it again this year. It's being fully supported by the house, not yet the Senate, but the University is hoping that it will get negotiated. And the legislature is expected to finalize the operating budget on April 25.

NATE SANFORD: Interesting. And so, if funding is secured, which- which does sound pretty likely, where's the longhouse going to be built?

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, so they're planning to build it in the Sehome Arboretum. Some parts of the Arboretum are actually owned by the city though, while some are owned by the University, and where they're looking to build the longhouse is actually owned by the city. And it's right near the main trail entrance by Fairhaven. So, the University says that they've spoken to Mayor Fleetwood and other city officials, and so far they've been supportive of the idea, but they're still in negotiations.

NATE SANFORD: Awesome. That's super cool. And where... when it when it is constructed, what's it going to be used for? Primarily?

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, so Ballew spoke about this in the meeting, saying that the longhouse can be a place of community for all Western students, but especially Native students. And it's also a way for Western to recognize the sovereignty of the area's indigenous people. The longhouse would be a space for community workshops and programs relating to food sovereignty and mental health. And thematically, Ballew also kind of ties the whole project into the pandemic, speaking about how students are going to be returning to campus in the near future, and they're going to be returning having gone through more than a year of this traumatizing and isolating experience. And for students, especially students from Native communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, having this place of community and healing is going to be really important.

LAURAL BALLEW: Especially now as I mentioned, You know, when our students come back to campus, nothing's gonna be normal after this year. This year and a half, two years, and a lot of our students have- a lot of our Native students have gone home. And the reservations have the highest fatality rate with COVID. So, our students are going to be coming back with their own trauma of financial and personal burden. And so that is always on the forefront of my mind. And that's why I feel that having this long house, and we're now calling this the house of healing, because it's kind of appropriate if we get the funding.

NATE SANFORD: Yeah, you know, hopefully, if things do start returning to normal this fall, that'll be able to, you know, start being an important place on campus.

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, for sure.

NATE SANFORD: Anyway, Ryan, thank you so much for joining us today and helping explain first, what the Board of Trustees actually is and what they do, but also this very important project that they were discussing that might be coming to campus soon.

RYAN MORRIS: Yeah, anytime.

NATE SANFORD: Awesome. Thank you.

NATE SANFORD Ryan Morris is The Front's campus news editor. Her team is going to keep covering the Board of Trustees and other big stories throughout the quarter. And you can follow that reporting on our website, WesternFrontOnline.com. You can also follow us on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook for breaking news and live updates.

This episode of The ForeFront was written and hosted by me, Nate Sanford. I also wrote the music for it. Nolan Baker is our chief audio editor and our producer. Special thanks to Emily Bishop and Kyle Tubbs. They helped us gather audio for this episode.

The story about the weird manuscript was recorded by me and Cliff Heberden wrote the one about the Nooksack River. Thanks so much for listening. We'll see you next week.