

The Times-Independent

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'Ren's gone. Now what?': In Green River, the death of its mayor still lingers

By ANDREW CHRISTIANSEN for The Times-Independent

The death of Ren Hatt is felt beyond Green River's City Hall — in classrooms, conversations and the routines of a small town where his roles as teacher, attorney and mayor often overlapped.





Photo caption: Royd and Toni Hatt speak April 14 at their home in Green River. Their son, Mayor Ren Hatt, died Dec. 5, 2025. In the months since, family, friends and residents have reflected on his presence in a community where his roles as teacher, attorney and mayor often overlapped. Photo by Andrew Christiansen

"When a mayor in a town of 900 dies, it wasn't, 'Oh, the mayor died.' It was, 'Oh man, Ren's gone. Now what do we do?'" said Edward Bennett, city manager of Green River.

Residents and city officials said the loss of Mayor Ren Hatt has been felt in classrooms, in everyday conversations and in the routines of a small town where he was a constant presence.

Hatt, 40, died Dec. 5 after the driver of a semitrailer crossed into his lane on Highway 6 west of town, according to the Utah Highway Patrol. He had recently been re-elected to a second term as mayor.



Photo caption: Ren Hatt is pictured in 2021 at Hell's Backbone Grill. Hatt, who served as mayor of Green River from 2022 to 2025, died Dec. 5 after being reelected for a second term. Photo by Maria Sykes

In the months since, grief and the day-to-day responsibilities of running the city have unfolded side by side. For many, the loss is not confined to a single role but reflects the absence of someone whose roles overlapped in daily life.

Hatt taught at Green River High School for eight years, leading language arts classes along with speech and debate, journalism and theater. He also worked as an attorney and served as mayor — roles that kept him closely connected to residents across generations and settings, from classrooms to council meetings to community events.

"It's not just losing a mayor — it's losing a teacher, losing a friend, losing a community member and losing this beautiful mind that was able to look at situations and see something different

than what most of us in the community could see," said Green River City Councilor Kent Nelson, who knew Hatt most of his life and served alongside him.

A LOSS THAT REACHES INTO DAILY LIFE

In Green River, residents said, loss does not stay contained. "In a town like ours, mayoral death is personal. It's community. It's not just political," said Bennett.

That dynamic has shaped how the past several months have unfolded, with reminders of Hatt's absence surfacing in everyday interactions — in conversations, meetings and among city staff. "Every once in a while, his name comes up," Bennett said. "And there's always a pause."



Photo caption: Green River City Council member Kent Nelson speaks April 14 inside the City Council chambers. Nelson served on the council with Mayor Ren Hatt and said the loss has been felt across multiple parts of the community. Photo by Andrew Christiansen

City Councilor Bo Harrison, Hatt's cousin, said he learned of the accident through a call from Hatt's father and immediately began thinking about how to support those closest to him.

"It was devastating, sad," Harrison said. "I was more worried about his family ... and how I could help."

At Green River High School, the impact was immediate.

"There was a deep sense of shock and heartbreak throughout the school," said Principal Kayce May-Riches. "Students and staff leaned on one another in ways that really reflect who we are as a small, close-knit community."

Over time, she said, that grief has shifted, but not disappeared.

"The initial shock has softened, but the loss is still felt every day," she said, noting students still reference Hatt in class and staff reflect on what he would have said or done — particularly the expectations he set for how they think, communicate and engage.

Markie Vetere, a second-grade teacher at Book Cliffs Elementary, said the impact extended to younger students as well, many of whom had siblings who were taught by Hatt and were aware of the loss even if they did not fully understand it.

"They walk in the next school day, and the first thing they tell a teacher is, 'Did you know our mayor passed away?'" she said. "Everybody knew."

She said the grief is not limited to any one place.

You can feel it almost everywhere you go," Vetere said. "You walk in a room and you can feel it."

Like many families in Green River, Nelson said he saw that impact firsthand through his daughter, who was one of Hatt's students.

"A few weeks before he passed, she said language arts is my favorite subject," Nelson said. "Language arts is nobody's favorite subject ... unless you really like it. And that was because of Ren."

GRIEF AND GOVERNANCE AT THE SAME TIME

Even as the community was processing the loss, city leadership had to move quickly. "There's not really a pause button for local government," Bennett said.

Under Utah law, a vacancy in an elected municipal position must be filled within 30 days. Hatt died just a month before his new term was set to begin.

"It was controlled chaos," Bennett said. "We hadn't navigated something like this before."

Harrison, serving as mayor pro tem, stepped into the role immediately. Taking on that role, he said, underscored how much time Hatt had devoted to the job.

"I began immediately realizing how much time he spent on the phone and attending meetings," Harrison said. "I don't think some people understand how much he really tried to help this community."

The council opened a 14-day application period and conducted interviews in a public meeting. Three residents applied.

On Jan. 28, the council unanimously appointed Larry Packer, a former councilor who served during Hatt's administration and lost re-election last year.

The decision was not without tension. Nelson said some residents questioned why the position was filled by appointment rather than a special election.

For Packer, stepping into the role has meant balancing responsibility with uncertainty.

"It's been kind of frustrating because my lack of experience in this position is a hindrance, but I've learned something every day ... and I'm not backing down," he said.

A COMMUNITY-FIRST APPROACH

Residents said Ren Hatt's connection to Green River shaped both how he led and what he believed public service should look like.

He grew up in the community, left for college and law school, then spent several years working in Tennessee before returning to Green River.

His mother, Toni Hatt, said she was initially surprised when he decided to run for mayor, but that the decision reflected how he saw his role in the community.

"Green River has been the best jumping-off point for me," she recalled him saying. "I want to be able to give back to my community, and I feel like this is something I can do."

She said he had always stayed engaged with others and taken an interest in people and the community around him.

Those who worked with Hatt said his effectiveness came as much from how he communicated as from his knowledge.

"He was not a politician," Bennett said. "He was a community member who just happened to be the mayor."



Photo caption: Ren Hatt gives a tour of Hatt's Ranch to Epicenter Summit guests in 2022. Photo by Danny Baxter

Royd Hatt said one of the things he most admired about his son was his willingness to consider all perspectives.

"You got to take all sides into consideration and then make a good decision," he recalled him saying. "Whether they are attacking you or not, doesn't matter."

Nelson said Hatt had a way of sharing knowledge without creating distance.

"He was definitely smart, but he didn't make you feel inferior to him because of his intelligence," Nelson said. "He was easy to learn from."

Former City Manager Tyler Hunt said that approach was especially important in public settings.

"He could handle those situations with articulation and care," Hunt said. "Even when people disagreed, they felt heard."

Hatt's background also gave him a perspective few others in the community had.



Photo caption: The Green River flows through the town of Green River. Residents said the loss of Mayor Ren Hatt has been felt across daily life in the small community. Photo by Andrew Christiansen

"Because of his experience, because of his law degree ... he saw things differently than most of us," Nelson said.

At the same time, Bennett said his leadership was grounded in a broader purpose.

"There was nothing that Ren did under the auspices of the mayor to benefit himself," Bennett said. "Everything he did was for the betterment of the community."

His parents said that approach extended beyond leadership roles into how he interacted with people day to day.

"He was everybody's friend, and they were his," Royd Hatt said.

HOW LEADERSHIP HAS CHANGED

Since Hatt's death, Bennett said city operations have continued — but the way leadership functions has shifted.

"There's been a shock to the system," he said.

Hatt spent four years shaping how council meetings operated, emphasizing structure and consistency.

"We've had four months of people in charge of these meetings that don't have that experience," Bennett said. "It's just different."

That difference is not about any one individual, he said, but about the loss of a leadership style developed over time.

"With a new mayor, new councilors and a different approach, there are growing pains," Bennett said.

CONTINUITY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSE

Even with those changes, Hatt's priorities continue to shape the city's direction, particularly around housing and economic development.

Nelson said Hatt approached those issues with a willingness to consider a wide range of ideas.

"He wanted to take a serious look at anything that could help the community," he said. That approach helped draw more residents into local discussions during his time as mayor — a trend officials said has continued, and in some ways increased, in the months since his death.

"We have a community right now that wants to be more involved," Bennett said.

In a town this size, even small increases carry weight.

"When we have nine or 10 people that are vocal about something, that's 1% of the population," Bennett said, noting that in a larger city like Salt Lake City, that level of participation would mean thousands of people at a meeting.

He said that engagement has led to new conversations about how residents can take a more active role — from organizing events to forming community groups outside formal city meetings.

"If there's a silver lining," Bennett said, "it's that people want to be engaged."



Photo caption: The ball field in Green River that the city is considering renaming after former Mayor Renn Hatt, who died last December. Photo by Andrew Christiansen

STILL UNFOLDING

More than five months after Hatt's death, residents and city officials said the initial shock has given way to something quieter, but no less present.

They described an ongoing adjustment — one that continues to surface in small moments and daily routines.

Bennett said those moments often come unexpectedly.

"We still miss him. We still think about him," he said.

The city has begun exploring ways to honor him, including the possibility of naming a local ballfield after Hatt, a longtime player and all-state catcher.

At the same time, Bennett said, the community is still working through what it means to move forward without him.

"We're trying to figure out how to honor him and keep doing the things he cared about," Bennett said.

Harrison said that adjustment is shaped by daily life, where Hatt's absence is felt in everyday interactions.

"In a small town like this, you see people all the time," Harrison said. "The grocery store, the post office, work, the weekends — your lives overlap in so many ways. You notice when they're gone."

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