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A calming force guides the river's ships

Steerman is first
woman dispatcher for
Columbia River Bar Pilots

By ABBEY McDONALD

Coast River Business Journal

When Sam Steerman picks up the dispatcher radio, her voice shifts into the casual authority of an airline pilot making an overhead announcement.

"Yes, the helicopter will be with you shortly. Again, there's nothing you need to do," she said into the radio, eyes on the ship visible from her window at the Columbia River Bar Pilots' office in Astoria.

"Roger," the captain's static-muffled voice replied.

As soon as she hangs up, she watches as a bright yellow helicopter swoops in to do a training exercise, a man dangling on ropes underneath it.

In the dispatch office, among numerous photographs of men and ships — and men on ships — lining the walls, Steerman's personal touches stand out. Her dyed red hair practically glows, even in overcast weather. A travel mug with Siouxsie and the Banshees, an influential British rock band, sits on the desk next to her computer.

"I'm definitely not a typical person for this

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Sam Steerman stands in the Columbia River
Bar Pilots dispatch office in Astoria.

LYDIA ELY/THE ASTORIAN