

# THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873



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## Brownsmead pulls it off

*Corps of Engineers used to be responsive; now not so much*

“We’re all in this together” was the bedrock American assumption. That has changed across a wide range of activities. One of those became apparent in Brownsmead on Monday when a tide gate failed. In prior decades, the Army Corps of Engineers would have answered a call to play a major role in dealing with the disaster. This time Brownsmead was largely on its own. Thanks to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Brownsmead residents, such as Ralph Peitsch and others, emergency repairs saved the day.

But Brownsmead resident and Clatsop County Commissioner Dirk Rohne’s attempts to rouse the Corps of Engineers drew little response. Rohne said that it was a little like calling a fire department, only to be asked how many more houses might burn.

Hurricane Katrina, which hit New Orleans and the Gulf Coast led to a change of attitude in Congress and the Corps. In essence, the Corps has backed out of its responsibility. In Rohne’s words, “The Corps isn’t what it used to be.”

Meanwhile, we all pay for the Corps of Engineers.

All diking districts are not equivalent. The Brownsmead District is active. But others in Clatsop County and elsewhere in the region and nation are not. While Brownsmead is high-value agricultural land, elsewhere on the

lower Columbia River former tidal marshes were diked with a view to farming and settlement that have failed to jell in the passing decades.

Since the 1990s, the Corps has actively sought opportunities to restore tidal interchange on some of the 70 percent of tidal wetlands lost on the Columbia since 1870. These marshes are not viewed as critically important as habitat for young salmon and other species. The Cowlitz Tribe is currently engaged in a dike-related marsh restoration elsewhere in Clatsop County.

Simply letting nature take its course isn’t a satisfactory answer in these situations. For example, the Corps, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Wahkiakum County, Wash., engaged in a long and expensive modification project when a 1920s-vintage dike failed in 2012 near Cathlamet in the Julie Butler Hansen Refuge for the Columbian white-tailed deer.

It remains important to defer to community values when it comes to tidal restoration. There needs to be a systematic effort to plan for abandoning those that lack local support, while identifying long-term maintenance options for dikes that communities like Brownsmead deem important.

Rising sea levels this century will make these discussions and decisions a big part of local rural planning as this century advances.

## This is a great opportunity

*New Coast Guard cutters are welcome and appreciated*

The amazing thing isn’t that Astoria and surrounding communities are so supportive of the U.S. Coast Guard, but that the Coast Guard does not always meet with enthusiastic acclaim wherever it is located. It is easily among the most useful and efficient of federal agencies, greatly enhancing the viability of maritime businesses while directly contributing to local economies via payrolls and purchasing.

Yet for years we have heard that the Lower Columbia River exhibits a singular affection for the men and women of the Coast Guard, well above and beyond the reception they receive in other coastal communities. Perhaps this is because we have ample reason to know just how dangerous our river and ocean can be, and what a major role the Coast Guard plays in helping our neighbors return safely from the sea. There are plenty of local people who grew up with fathers thanks to the lifesavers of the Air Station and Cape Disappointment. The Steadfast, the Aids to Navigation crew and the National Motor Life Boat School all maintain deep local ties and generate many fans.

It is welcome news that the Coast Guard is considering home porting two of its fast response cutters in Astoria, a decision that could double the number of USCG personnel in the Columbia River sector. This would be hugely positive for the area’s economy, not only in terms of paychecks and stable employment, but also in the sense that it would support additional vessel traffic and safety. The Columbia is a world-class river, the point of entry for a region of vast strategic importance in terms of high technology, agricultural production and other key assets. From the vicinity of Astoria, these cutters would have direct access to all of the North Pacific.

A strong case can be made that Clatsop and Pacific counties can far more easily accommodate these cutters and their personnel than would be possible in Newport, the other homeport under consideration. It is well worth making this case whenever and with whomever we can. Newport may have been better suited for the NOAA Pacific Research Fleet, but Astoria is clearly the superior choice for the Coast Guard.

We will welcome the cutters.

### GUEST COLUMN

## State auditor comparison is complex

By GARY BLACKMER  
The Oregon Secretary of State’s Office agrees with the March 2 editorial calling for more auditing capacity (“Oregon needs more auditing capacity,” *The Daily Astorian*). In fact, we are seeking more auditors in this legislative session, and they would increase our ability to audit additional state programs, including its computer systems.

The editorial’s call for an independently elected auditor, however, overlooks the language in Article VI Section 2 of the Oregon Constitution, which declares that the elected secretary of state is “auditor of public accounts.” In other words, Oregon already has an independently elected auditor.

Comparing Oregon’s 68 state auditors to Washington’s 355 is a bit complicated. About 250 of Washington’s auditors spend their time auditing the financial statements of local governments. Those 250 auditors are also paid for by local governments. In Oregon, we require our local governments to hire a certified public accountant (CPA) firm to do the

work, and we examine the audits and work papers they prepare to make sure the CPAs are doing a good job.

We do that with just two auditors. Better? Maybe. But in no way does the disparity reflect any lack of commitment by the State of Oregon to aggressive auditing.

Let’s start with our attention to fraud, waste and abuse. We have a hotline (800-336-8218) that is available 24/7 for anyone to report concerns. We respond to about 185 hotline calls a year. And, we are always on the lookout for fraud. Our recent work produced evidence of welfare fraud in

Klamath County. We assisted federal, state, and local investigators and prosecutors to get three store owners sentenced to 90-month stays in prison, and criminal charges against 60 others.

Finally, let’s look at performance auditing. Our 27 performance auditors more than pay for themselves in identified savings.



Gary Blackmer

Since the 2008-2009 fiscal year, we’ve returned an average of \$23.43 for every \$1 spent. And yes, part of our job is to help agencies avoid mistakes, but those audits don’t make headlines. Our website has performance audits that identify problems — and recommend

solutions — to improve our education system, child care oversight, transportation turnover, temporary assistance for needy families, and much, much more.

Our information technology audits have identified millions of dollars in errors in human services, employment, and other systems. We also examine the security of those systems and produce confidential reports.

And yes, we’d like to have more auditors. In the 1993-95 budget, we had 90 auditors. The 2013-15 budget allows us only 68.

We are asking for three more. Thank you for your support.

Gary Blackmer is the director of the Oregon Secretary of State’s Audits Division.

### GUEST COLUMN

## Straight talk about the Port of St. Helens

By PATRICK TRAPP

The people of Oregon expect that those sitting on state-appointed commissions will be fair, thorough and knowledgeable.

Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

Several weeks ago, a guest opinion by former Oregon Transportation Commission (OTC) Chairwoman Catherine Mater contained misinformation and leveled serious allegations regarding the Port of St. Helens’ applications for ConnectOregon grants to help fund dock improvements at the Port Westward industrial park near Clatskanie (“The real story behind the St. Helens coal denial,” *The Daily Astorian*, Feb. 5).

Mater’s allegations are being made in spite of hundreds of experts within multiple state agencies reviewing and evaluating the applications. All found the applications to be in compliance, and subsequently scored them highly against the originally established criteria.

The truth is that the Port of St. Helens did not provide any false information to the OTC or the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) regarding whether: 1) matching funds are available or 2) the project is construction ready. The matching funds were first committed from Pacific Transloading, and then later were provided assurance from the Port. The Department of State Lands (DSL) has stated in writing (several times) that it does not require a permit, a lease, or any action for the dock project to begin construction.

According to ConnectOregon Frequently Asked Questions and Manual (Oct. 7, 2013): “ConnectOregon is a lottery bond-based initiative to invest in air, rail, marine, transit, bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure to ensure Oregon’s transportation system is strong, diverse, and efficient.” The key word here being “infrastructure.”

In late 2013, the Port submitted two projects focused on marine infrastructure investments on the Beaver Dock at Port Westward. One project is for Berth One and the other for Berth Two. The proposed improvements to both berths would strengthen, diversify and improve efficiency at the Beaver Dock, currently and in the future.

The actual application states that, “The dock is owned by the Port and will continue to be operated as a common-user port facility. Pacific Transloading LLC, and Ambre Energy, has entered into a terminal services option with the Port for nonexclusive use of the dock. Portland General Electric, a current tenant, has rights to the dock. Columbia Pacific Bio-Refinery, an existing tenant, also uses the dock to ship liquid bulk commodities by barge; the improved dock will continue to serve this purpose. This project will enable additional uses and users of the dock that require mooring deep-draft vessels.”

The Port was clear in its application that one of the users could be a company that ships coal, and one of the users could create an operational project that involved coal. Remember, ConnectOregon is about infrastructure, not operational projects. The difference between infrastructure and operational projects may be confusing to some, however those charged with evaluating and approving applications should understand it.

In her first op-ed, Mater commented that the issue was about coal, and then she proclaimed it wasn’t about coal. Clearly, it is about a bias against coal. Why else would Mater ask me about adding lease provisions focused on coal in July: “. . . would not the Port

follow precedent it established with the recent acquisition and rezoning of the second large tract (to exclude the storage, loading, or unloading of coal) in a lease provision with Ambre Energy?”, and then in August at the OTC hearing ask: “If we (the OTC) have authority to make this change (regarding match funding) in terms of who finances the project, would the Port also agree that no financing of the project can come from a coal company?”

That’s in comparison to one of the other OTC commissioners, who called it the way he saw it. He doesn’t like fossil fuels and he’s going to vote against the Port’s application because the dock improvements could be used for that purpose. I still disagree with his reason, but he was consistent, not on a fishing expedition to find something wrong with the application where no errors existed.

During the OTC deliberations last August there was a question regarding the Port assuming the matching funds if Pacific Transloading/Ambre Energy should fail to come to fruition. The ConnectOregon criteria focuses on, “How much of the cost of a proposed transportation project can be borne by the applicant and from any source other than the Multimodal Transportation Fund.” The applicant is the Port. Any source other than Multimodal Transportation Fund includes loans, bonds, Pacific Transloading, and/or any other tenant or prospective tenant the Port may end up working with.

Does the Port have the match? This was asked in July, couched under the question: If Pacific Transloading goes away, do we have the ability to meet our financial responsibilities? The answer was, and is, yes. The full response to the question of match was, “Both of these projects represent critical public infrastructure for the Port and the region, if needs be the Port would capitalize on its resources, other prospective dock users, and our Bonding Authority to ensure project completion.”

The Port was asked by Mater to put that in writing. In August 2014, the Port of St Helens Commission sent a letter to the OTC reaffirming the Port’s



Patrick Trapp

ability to pay. It was again asked during testimony by Mater at the OTC meeting in August. Again the answer was yes. Now here we are in March, and the answer is still yes. The Port of St. Helens has assured ODOT and the OTC in writing that the Port has the matching funds for this important infrastructure improvement to Berth Two at Port Westward.

In response to this and other allegations raised by Mater, ODOT confirmed that the Port of St. Helens had provided the necessary information regarding match funding: “You provided everything requested to staff’s satisfaction. Hence, your project is being forwarded to the OTC for funding consideration.”

Mater’s allegation that Pacific Transloading/Ambre never agreed to meet the match is just plain wrong. Although the applicant is the Port, an outside third party was hired to help draft the application, and the Port worked with Pacific Transloading to review the application ensuring that everything referencing their involvement was accurate.

Another question was if the Port was ready to proceed with the project if the grant funds were obtained. That boils down to permits and leases. The first is a regulatory issue; the second is an agency administrative action. That was already addressed with DSL, keeping in mind the project is to renovate, repair, and modernize infrastructure at Port Westward, versus the operational project Pacific Transloading/Ambre is pursuing in Boardman.

The Port has a wharfage registration for the dock, and as such can conduct cargo operations. According to DSL, the agency in charge of issuing permits and leases for state submerged land for dock facilities: “No authorization, permit or other agreement is needed to renovate the dock for general wharfing.”

DSL has determined that “if and when” the Pacific Transloading/Ambre operational project comes to fruition, then that would be the time to pursue a lease to conduct transloading activities. There is no requirement to pursue or obtain a “proprietary agreement” prior to starting, or completing, construction work associated with general cargo operations — the kind our other tenants count on and the kind of cargo operations our prospective tenant, Northwest Innovation Works, is also counting on.

In other words, under the guidelines of ConnectOregon, the project is construction ready. Any accusation that the Port’s project is stymied in readiness because of a permit or a lease issue is just wishful thinking on the part of opponents of dock improvements and job creation at Port Westward.

The matching funds have always been assured, as required by the ConnectOregon process. There was never fraud. All guidelines were followed. To suggest otherwise is simply an outrageous claim by a person recently fired as the chairwoman of the OTC.

Mater, and all those who continue to distort the facts, should apologize.