

Housing Crunch: 'We haven't made a lot of progress'

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They discarded the idea for a new public library with housing at Heritage Square as too expensive. They stayed silent when a local developer floated — and later withdrew — a housing project at the old Central School property off Irving Avenue. They turned down a Portland developer's bid to buy a vacant city lot off Second Street for an apartment project as premature.

Each of the decisions had a public-policy rationale, and some were rooted in the unmistakable message from many residents who want Astoria to reject new development that could alter the city's historic character.

Taken together, though, they do not reflect an urgency to solve what experts describe as a housing crunch for people at every income level.

"I feel like we haven't made a lot of progress," Mayor Arline LaMear conceded.

LaMear was the only one on the City Council to publicly advocate for a new apartment complex south of the city at Miles Crossing. The project, which could have helped ease the shortage of rental housing in Clatsop County, encountered neighborhood opposition and was rejected by the county Planning Commission. The developer — Richard Krueger, who was also interested in a housing project at the Central School property — dropped his appeal to the county Board of Commissioners.

"It doesn't seem to me that there's any reason why they shouldn't build out there," LaMear said.

Tension brewing

City Councilor Zetty Nemlowill, the marketing director at Astoria Co-op Grocery, whose husband, Chris, is co-owner at Fort George Brewery, has heard from new hires and longer-term employees who struggle to find a place to live.

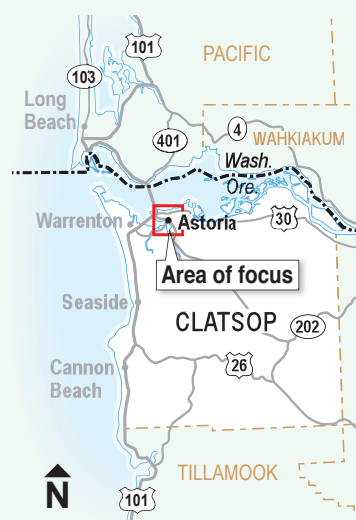
Nemlowill and her husband are part of a younger generation of entrepreneurs who have chosen to stay and build businesses in Astoria. Some tension is brewing politically between people whose livelihoods depend on economic growth, and financially secure transplants and retirees who want to preserve the characteristics that attracted them to the city.

Nemlowill called the shortage of housing a widespread problem, yet she, too, has sided with other councilors who worry about spoiling the city's quality of life.

"I think that there is an underlying current of anti-development in Astoria," she said. "It's one of the political trends right now. And it's too bad that people cannot see the realities of what we need right now, because they're too blinded by politics in that regard."

"I do think that development needs to be done very carefully, especially in such a precious city such as Astoria, but not all development is bad."

City of Astoria census and housing data



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Item	Astoria	Oregon
Population, 2015 est.	9,626	4.03 million
Population, 2010 est.	9,477	3.83 million
Population per square mile (2010)	1,539.7	39.9
Land area in square miles (2010)	6.16	95,988
Under age 18, 2015	18.9%†	21.4%
Under age 18, 2010	20.3%	22.6%
65 years and over, 2015	18%†	16.4%
65 years and over, 2010	17.1%	13.9%
High school graduate or higher, age 25 or older*	92.6%	89.5%
Bachelor's degree or higher, age 25 or older*	28.5%	30.1%
In civilian labor force, age 16 or older*	60.5%	62.4%
Median household income (2014 dollars)*	\$45,104	\$50,521
Per capita income (2014 dollars)*	\$26,089	\$27,173
Housing units, 2015	4,949†	1.72 million
Housing units, 2010	4,980	1.68 million
Owner-occupied housing units*	50.3%	61.5%
Median value, owner-occupied housing units*	\$242,600	\$234,100
Median selected monthly mortgage costs*	\$1,448	\$1,591
Median gross rent*	\$707	\$894

*2010-14 †2014 estimate

Alan Kenaga/EO Media Group



LEFT: Attorney David Noren, left, chats with his client Richard Krueger about proposed Miles Crossing apartment complex development earlier this year. Krueger decided not to appeal a county Planning Commission rejection. RIGHT: Councilor Cindy Price speaks with City Manager Brett Estes earlier this year.



The Daily Astorian/File Photos

Questions about growth

City Councilor Cindy Price has steered the conversation on housing toward the thornier question of growth. She, like Nemlowill, believes the community should decide what Astoria should look like in 20 or 50 years.

Price correctly notes that when many people talk about affordable housing, the description is pliable, a way to pitch a project rather than an objective definition. Affordable housing generally means that a renter or homeowner pays no more than 30 percent of their annual income on housing.

"It always becomes 'affordable housing,' which, of course, it almost never is," Price said.

Price describes Astoria as a "bit of Americana," but she said the community should be very clear about what it wants to protect. For all the talk of historic preservation and fear of unchecked development, the city still has many vacant storefronts and underused properties, particularly along the river, downtown and on the west-side gateway.

The city is working on an economic strategy, known as "Advance Astoria," to find balance and not overly rely on any one industry. The success of tourism has temporarily papered over some of the weaknesses in the regional economy, flaws that would likely become apparent during the next economic downturn.



Zetty Nemlowill



Arline LaMear



"I think there is a big difference between not wanting any projects and wanting to preserve the character of a community, and finding appropriate places for affordable housing," Price said.

Housing is scarce

As Astoria teeters on the seesaw between a working town and a tourist destination, housing is scarce. The economic rebound and cultural rebirth over the past two decades have made the city of 9,500 a more attractive place to live, work and visit. But Astoria's hillside geography and the desire for historic preservation offer few opportunities for housing projects.

A city affordable housing study last year found a shortage of both

affordable rentals and homes for sale. The city's housing stock of about 4,190 occupied units in 2013 was about evenly split between renters and owners. The study put the vacancy rate at 14.3 percent, but real-estate experts say it really is in the single digits.

Nearly 38 percent paid more than 30 percent of their annual income on housing, the study found, a burden felt more acutely among renters.

The city's buildable lands inventory in 2011 outlined a 15-acre deficit for residential property in the urban growth boundary. The biggest need was in low-density residential land for single-family homes. The state requires that cities have a sufficient supply of residential and employment land to meet a 20-year demand.

The research model estimated Astoria would need more than 1,000 new housing units through 2027, with about half being single-family homes.

The City Council has so far been reluctant to pursue higher density in residential neighborhoods to promote more housing, and has sent conflicting messages on mixed-use projects in other zones.

Researchers also projected that tourism and the second-home market would influence the demand for housing.

City councilors have frowned on the second-home market and vacation rentals, along with new condominium projects on the

Columbia River that some worry would attract transplants and drive real-estate prices higher for locals.

"I would like to see more housing," Nemlowill said. "But I don't see a clear way of doing that right now in Astoria that would please everyone."

Project-based approach

The City Council has indicated the city could relax the rules on accessory dwelling units, which are now allowed if attached to homes, like basements or attics. The city might allow the units in detached garages, guest cottages and workshops, which could make more efficient use of the city's older housing stock.

At this point, however, the council is unlikely to make significant revisions to the development code to invite more housing projects.

Brett Estes, the city manager, said the city would look at partnerships with Clatsop Community Action, the Northwest Oregon Housing Authority and others on individual projects.

There is city-owned land near Clatsop Community Action's Hilltop Apartments off Niagara Avenue, and the Northwest Oregon Housing Authority has a building that could be used for apartments in Uniontown. Nemlowill and others on the City Council have also suggested the old Astoria Yacht Club property now used by the city's Parks and Recreation Department.

Part of the city's affordable housing strategy is to create an inventory of vacant housing, and LaMear and Price have urged the city to see if vacant houses can be renovated for affordable or workforce housing.

Kevin Cronin, the city's community development director, said the city has identified three dozen vacant properties and is looking to encourage investors or buyers to renovate.

Price is also interested in a task force that would help outline the city's next steps, similar to the approach taken in Cannon Beach.

The city could also adopt a construction excise tax and a mandate that developers of larger housing projects reserve 20 percent of the units as affordable. The state Legislature approved the measures this year to help address the housing challenge statewide, but the provisions might not be suited for Astoria, which does not have the kind of volume to make the construction tax very valuable or the open space for many big projects.

"What Astoria has yet to do is to just admit that we're not going to be able to do that much," Price said.

Estes said he does not think the City Council has given up on its goal to promote housing that Astorians can afford.

"I would say that the council is still looking at ways to address that goal, but within ways that are appropriate for Astoria," he said. "What's the right fit for our community?"

"It's not giving up on the whole concept, it's looking for the right fit."

'I think that there is an underlying current of anti-development in Astoria. It's one of the political trends right now.'

Zetty Nemlowill
Astoria city councilor



The city of Astoria photographed in July.
Danny Miller/The Daily Astorian