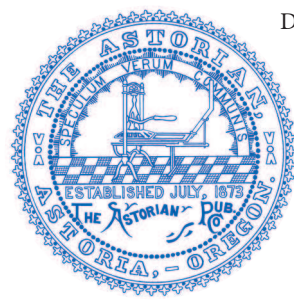


THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873



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OUR VIEW



Danny Miller/The Daily Astorian

Conversations must continue to solve the housing crunch in Astoria and across the North Coast.

Housing crunch conversations should continue

There are no quick-and-easy fixes for the housing crunch that impacts nearly all walks of life and income levels in Clatsop County, but there are steps the region can take to begin addressing the problem.

In a five-day series, The Daily Astorian examined the forces that are driving the housing availability and affordability issues throughout the county, along with what is and what is not possible for the North Coast to achieve. What we found is that the crunch is very real and it crosses all income levels. Like an octopus, the crunch has long tentacles that reach out and influence the economy and business growth. It also dramatically affects the quality of life for both new and long-term residents as well as the political attitudes of our decision makers. At its heart is the much deeper — and much more divisive — issue of what does our region want to be when it grows up.

The causes

We also found some consensus on the factors that came together and are continuing to cause the crunch. The root of the problem goes back to the Great Recession, when production of new housing units stagnated. As industry recovered and more jobs were created, demand for additional housing rose, but that has been met by stagnant supply. The result has been low vacancy rates for renters and few properties on the market for buyers to purchase.

The housing demand is also running headlong into other obstacles as well, including a lack of land for developers to build on in some areas; vocal opposition with a lot of “NIMBY” toward larger projects; and an anti-growth undercurrent from a portion of the population that has been met by political appeasement by elected officials trying to please everyone they serve. Additionally, the crunch varies slightly from city to city so leaders in each are somewhat hamstrung in approaching it as a regional issue. As a result, there hasn’t been a sense of urgency focused on housing, and not much progress has been made toward a long-term solution.

First steps

So what can be done toward fixing the problem?

First and foremost, the housing crunch conversations need to continue. Recently, Clatsop County Economic Development Resources has been spearheading discussions among local leaders on the issue, and it has created a greater general awareness of the problem.

Most experts say market forces alone will not solve the issue. They believe it will take market activity, development and density code changes, public- and private-sector partnerships and community consensus to make the creation of new housing a priority. No doubt, consensus will be the biggest barrier to overcome.

But as Kevin Leahy, executive director of Clatsop Economic Development Resources, says, “You cannot sit there and say ‘Well we’re just not going to deal with it. It’ll go away.’ It’s not going away.”

Leahy’s absolutely right, and we hope that by continuing the conversations, it will lead to a greater emphasis on developing a long-term vision for each of the North Coast’s cities as well as an inclusive vision for the entire region, which it currently lacks. That long-term thinking should lead to deeper strategic planning that should go well beyond each city’s comprehensive plan.

It certainly won’t be easy, and it won’t happen overnight. Leaders in each city will have to have the political will to tackle the divisive task of trying to balance the issues of tranquility and quality of life with that of economic growth and development.

For that to happen, it first must start with continuing those conversations.

Q: IF THE CORPORATIONS SUBJECT TO OREGON'S M97 COULD SIMPLY PASS THE TAX INCREASE ON TO CONSUMERS...

...WHY DID THEY CONTRIBUTE A RECORD \$22.5 MILLION* TO TRY TO DEFEAT IT?



SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

Area volunteers needed, commitment is ‘priceless’

By R.J. MARX
The Daily Astorian

“Our volunteers are priceless,” Seaside Fire Department Chief Joey Daniels said from his office at the Broadway firehouse.

In one week in October, a tornado slammed Manzanita and damaged more than 100 properties. In Portland an explosion cleared city streets. In Astoria, a warehouse fire injured two.

October is National Fire Protection Month and coincidentally — the week of the tornado, gas explosion and warehouse fire — Daniels reached out to the community with a call for volunteers. The dramatic impact and need for a firefighting response was seen at each of these events.

“I think there’s a strong need nationwide, not just Clatsop County,” Daniels said. Volunteers are harder to come by, he said.

“As the community builds, not only the tourism we have coming in, as the valley builds, people come down here, we have an obligation to protect citizens and tourists,” Daniels said. “I think some people are hesitant to join because they assume we don’t need the help. I don’t think there’s a volunteer agency fire department in the county that wouldn’t like to see people come in.”

Daniels, along with Lt. Chris Dugan and Division Chief Dave Rankin, is one of three paid Seaside firefighters.

While the department is operating with a contingent of 30 to 35 volunteers, calls have increased dramatically. Seaside Fire and Rescue jumped from an average of 700 to 800 calls a year to 1,300 calls a year within the past decade. They run about three to five calls a day, he said, but sometimes they get 15 or 20.

Businesses used to release their employees for fire calls, but today that’s not always an option.

“We have only the three paid staff during the week, so we rely heavily on volunteers,” Daniels said. “You could have 40 to 45 volunteers and still have only five or 10 available at certain times. You never really have enough.”

Despite mutual aid agreements, a countywide shortage puts stress on all agencies.

The addition of even one or two new volunteers to the pool would be “priceless,” Daniels said. “It’s not just for Seaside. If 10 people go join Astoria, that’s 10 more people we can go to ask for help. We all help each other.”

Daniels said he recognizes volunteering with Seaside Fire and Rescue is “a huge time commitment,” but, he added, the rewards are great. You don’t have to be a “physical specimen,” and anyone 18 or older is eligible.

Training in the basics

All prospective volunteers undergo a six-month training to learn basic mandates. There is no difference between requirements for volunteer or career firefighters.



Submitted Photo

“Team 911” were victors in the Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District’s summer softball league championship. The team is sponsored by Public Coast Brewing in Cannon Beach and several of the players, including Chief Joey Daniels, are members of the Seaside Fire Department as staff and volunteers.



R.J. Marx/The Daily Astorian
Chief Joey Daniels of Seaside Fire and Rescue invites volunteers to join the department.

“Everybody here gets their training in firefighting,” Daniels said, though most of the department’s calls — 75 to 80 percent — are medical emergencies. “We train everybody to fight fires. When you call 911 you need us to make sure we have firefighters.”

Seaside volunteers are often first on the scene fighting wildland fires in wooded areas and mountains to the east of the city. Volunteers train for medical emergencies, search and rescue operations, as lifeguards, drivers and pump operators. “If a volunteer doesn’t want to go into a burning building, that doesn’t mean they can’t join the fire department,” Daniels said. “There are other needs. People kind of find their niche.”

Volunteers provide a “wealth of knowledge,” with careers from professional firefighters to public works employees, law enforcement and hospital personnel. “Everybody provides their own expertise,” Daniels said.

Medical calls take firefighters to Saddle Mountain, Hamlet or Tillamook Head for low-angle rope rescues, and to the beaches for water rescues.

Help in emergencies

The department prepares for catastrophic events like earthquake and tsunami — “but those

aren’t our everyday,” Daniels said.

Volunteers help out at emergencies — Seaside volunteers pitched in after the recent tornado struck Manzanita — and provide traffic and safety assistance at parades, football games and special events like Seaside’s beach volleyball tournament and Hood to Coast.

The service is not without a time commitment.

“Our guys not only step up, they’re training every Wednesday night for three hours,” Daniels said. “We train on weekends and come in for civic events. Don’t come thinking you can only give a half hour a week to your commitment. You have to be committed, but there’s a lot of reward.”

That reward, Daniels explained, is the strong sense of camaraderie that comes from working as one group. It’s not only the commitment from volunteers that make a difference, Daniels said, “it’s the commitment of their families.”

“Our families give up a lot,” he said. “On the Fourth of July volunteers are here 14 to 16 hours a day. That’s a holiday for most people. We’re always having our volunteers, our spouses, better halves brought in to make them a part. If I don’t, we lose them.”

Roots in Seaside

Daniels and his wife Jaime are parents of a 7-month old son, Jacob. They live in Seaside.

“I grew up in this community,” Daniels, 39, said. “That’s why I enjoy working here. I went through the school system. I was a volunteer for Gearhart for 16 years. I’ve always worked with Seaside.”

Daniels received an associate of arts degree in fire science and an associate of arts degree in criminal justice, both from Clatsop Community College.

“All of our people love their community,” he said. “If you’re community-oriented, we’re the place to be. Our voters have always been supportive. Now we’re asking if there are people who want to join us. They see us out there, they might not know we need help.”

R.J. Marx is The Daily Astorian’s South County reporter and editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette.