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Invasive plants taking over Gearhart dunes

Safety, fire and invasive species among panelists' main concerns

By LYRA FONTAINE
The Daily Astorian

GEARHART — Residents have seen vegetation on Gearhart dunes west of Ocean Avenue and south of E Street multiply over the last two decades. The city now grapples with whether to address the noxious weeds, shore pine trees and other species covering the dunes with a management plan or continue to let the vegetation grow in the city park area.

"We have the 'no plan' plan, and I think that's one of the reasons why we ended up where we are today," City Administrator Chad Sweet said. The noxious weed Scotch broom covers the dunes, some up to 10 feet tall or higher.

Residents filled the Gearhart Fire Station on Thursday night for an education forum and town hall meeting on dune vegetation, where they listened to city officials, state parks representatives and other experts. The panel was organized by Margaret Marino, a resident who has expressed concerns about the vegetation at city meetings and reached out to state departments and ecologists for assistance.

While some residents enjoy the vegetation and worry that management practices could impact wildlife, others are concerned about public safety, fire hazards, invasive species and more.

"We've got many non-native species in there and we've got very invasive species, not



Photos by Danny Miller/The Daily Astorian

ABOVE: Gearhart City Administrator Chad Sweet points to thick growth of the invasive species Scotch broom along the Fire Trail on Tuesday in Gearhart. The city of Gearhart is looking at options for controlling the plant along the beach. **BELOW:** The Scotch broom plant can be seen with a view along the Fire Trail.

just Scotch broom, but species such as thistle, blackberry vines that continue to spread due to birds," ecologist and panel participant Kathleen Sayce said. "I am interested in restoring the prairie that was there, which is a handful of native species of grass."

Sayce said the city taking a hands-off approach "leads you into a mess in the long term."

Safety, fire concerns

Gearhart Police Chief Jeff Bowman said the trees and other dune vegetation could lead

to larger problems, from widespread camping violations to potential assaults, if the city does nothing.

"We, by not doing anything, are inviting people in to live, to camp," Bowman said. "It's bad for Gearhart to have all that, in my opinion, as a law enforcement officer. You can't see 5 or 6 feet in front of you half the time and I usually have my gun out because I don't know who I'm going to encounter."

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"We have the 'no plan' plan, and I think that's one of the reasons why we ended up where we are today."

Chad Sweet
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Room tax may include mandatory fees in CB

Pets are taxed, but minibars are not

By LYRA FONTAINE
The Daily Astorian

CANNON BEACH — Guests at Cannon Beach hotels and vacation rentals could soon pay room taxes on charges for pets, late check-out, extra guests, hot tubs and cancellations.

After reaching a consensus Tuesday, the City Council plans to amend the municipal code in February to clarify that the room tax applies to nonoptional fees. Optional charges, such as pay-per-view movies, room service or minibars, will remain untaxed.

Lodging operators had complained that the new rules had been sprung on them without public discussion.

Cannon Beach Vacation Rentals owner Linda Beck-Sweeney told the City Council Tuesday that lack of clarity about the new requirements affected her business.

"All this has placed an unnecessary hardship on the lodging community," Beck-Sweeney said. "Our lodging community is very generous to our community in many ways and we all work hard to bring quality services to all of our guests and deserve respect for that effort. If the city no longer respects the lodging community, what about the larger community of Cannon Beach?"

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Warrenton seeks clarity on measure

Attorney: Vague language could have consequences

By ERICK BENGEL
The Daily Astorian

WARRENTON — To avoid confusion and possible litigation, the City Commission is hoping to clarify, and perhaps modify, a voter-approved initiative that restricts the city's ability to divest itself of expensive assets.

At a town hall meeting Thursday, the commission asked people who drafted, and voted for, the measure in the November election to explain the intent and what they wanted to achieve.

The measure amended the city charter to require that when the city seeks to "sell, trade, divest, or otherwise dispose of" an asset valued at \$100,000 or more (in 2014 dollars), voters must approve the transaction by a double-majority. This means that voter turnout must exceed 50 percent, and more than half of those voters must say "yes" to the deal.

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Astoria Ford's move creates options by Youngs Bay

City believes land could be a case study

By EDWARD STRATTON
The Daily Astorian

Dane Gouge started selling Fords in December at the North Coast Retail Center in Warrenton, leaving the lots around his former dealership in Astoria empty, and some wondering what will happen to the waterfront property he left behind.

The site, which includes three lots, more than 3.5 acres of buildable land, 30,000

square feet of existing building space and 40 acres of mostly submerged land over Youngs Bay, is owned by Ruth Birdwell, the widow of former Pacific Northwest auto dealer Ray Birdwell, who died in 2013.

The property listing for the site expired last week. Broker David Hoggard said he hasn't heard back on what to do next. Birdwell was not available for comment.

"I'm not sure exactly what their plans are at this time," Hoggard said. "Right now, it's off the market temporarily."

The properties are all zoned general commercial, which allows anything from

parking lots and restaurants to hotels and apartments. The most recent property records showed the combined real market value at about \$3 million. The properties had been listed at \$3.5 million.

The site is of special interest to the city, which is trying to find ways to diversify Astoria's economy beyond tourism.

"Whoever buys it is going to have to be creative with the use of the property," said Community Development Director Kevin Cronin.

Cronin said the city will look at the site as part of Advance Astoria, a five-year

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Edward Stratton/The Daily Astorian

The former Astoria Ford dealership on Marine Drive, with more than 3.5 buildable acres of general commercial property overlooking Youngs Bay, is a special focus of the city's Advance Astoria economic development effort.