

Fee: Money collected will fund wildfire efforts in state

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The current annual tax rate in the Astoria district is \$1.21 per acre, and owners of forestlands are charged a minimum assessment of \$18.75 each year. A \$47.50 surcharge can be added if property owners build additional structures on their land.

Wildfire efforts

The money collected from these fees fund wildfire efforts in the state. Rates could vary each year based on the number of wildfires the Department of Forestry responds to in a given year and the number of people paying into the system, Astoria District Forester Dan Goody said. The department does not receive any additional revenue from the assessments.

While many of these property owners also pay taxes to local fire districts that respond to structural fires, the Department of Forestry's assessment is based on lands it would protect during a wildfire, Goody said. Therefore, many property owners who don't have many trees or vegetation on their land may also be subjected to these taxes.

But some property owners have been confused about the distinction. Tim Mancill, who has owned a 2.36 acre lot on North Wahanna Road in Seaside for almost 13 years that also includes his home, was assessed \$66.25 for his property. Much of his

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Coral Rose Shipley

Seaside property owner

property includes wetlands, which are submerged underwater for much of the year, along with some willow trees.

"I think they're out for a money grab," Mancill said. "Don't they have better things to do with their time?"

Goody said people would be surprised about the kinds of land that allow wildfires to spread quickly. In his experience, even lands such as cranberry bogs have caught fire, he said.

Astoria district

In October 2013, a fire assessment committee began its review of the Astoria district. The six-member committee included appointments made by the Department of Forestry, the Oregon State Fire Marshal, the Oregon State University Extension Service and three by the Clatsop County Board of Commissioners. Following a review, the committee made recommendations about what areas could be reclassified as forestlands.

"I don't mean any disrespect to

any of the folks living on the lands, but there is over 100 years of experience studying fire risks on the committee," Goody said.

Two public meetings and one hearing in May in Astoria and Seaside produced no oral or written public comments, Goody said. The final classification was recorded by the county in July.

Surprise

The problem: some property owners whose lands were reclassified were completely unaware that this process took place.

"I was surprised and was like, 'What the heck is this?'" Mancill said about the moment he received the notice in January.

Mancill was one of about 70 landowners who attended a town hall meeting in Seaside on Saturday to discuss the issue. The town hall, organized by state Sen. Betsy Johnson and state Rep. Deborah Boone, featured local officials and members of the Department of Forestry, as well as

concerned landowners. At times, the town hall became disorganized with attendees shouting out of turn, multiple people who were there said.

"There were so many questions," said Coral Rose Shipley, a Seaside property owner. "It was very hard for the people presenting to make their presentations. They had one outlook and the audience had another outlook."

Goody said he was surprised to hear that many property owners were not aware of the classifications in 2016. The state had sent postcards 10 months prior to the letter sent in early January, so residents may have disregarded them as junk mail, he said.

"They get a lot of mail, a lot of junk mail, and a lot of that gets overlooked," Goody said. "It definitely was not the intent to blindsides people."

Appeal process

The classification process is now final, but the Department of Forestry received 29 appeals of the assessment prior to Monday's deadline. The

appeal process will likely last until sometime this spring, Goody said. Once the process is completed, the reclassified land will be added to the Forest Patrol Assessment Roll in July.

While the state sent out postcards, held public meetings and sent notices to newspapers, it typically sees little involvement from the public until late in the process, Goody said.

"We typically don't get much public involvement until it starts hitting the pocketbooks," he said. "Our honest intent is to make forestland assessment honest and equitable to all."

County Manager Cameron Moore said at Wednesday's Board of Commissioners meeting that the county was not notified in advance about the letter sent out in January. He also said Department of Forestry officials apologized to the county for the confusion during a meeting on Friday.

Sen. Johnson said she had preliminary discussions with top officials at forestry earlier this week about making adjustments to the assessments in Clatsop County. Adjustments would be based on the apparent failure of communication, she said.

"The number of people who attended the town hall meeting gave rise to the fact that there was some kind of failure to communicate," Johnson said. "If we had this kind of disconnect in communication, something is wrong."

Tax: 'The idea is, we're trying to create more residential'

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Last year, the state Legislature legalized the use of a construction excise tax, which is based on building-permit valuation.

Cronin said after the work session that Astoria sees enough construction in commercial and industrial zones for the excise tax to be worthwhile.

"Since we don't generate as much valuation as say a larger city, the rate will need to be set higher to capture an amount that makes an impact," he explained in an email.

Astoria's tax wouldn't touch residential construction, he said.

"The idea is, we're trying to create more residential, so we don't want to put more burden on the residential side," Cronin said.

Increase housing supply

Among the City Council's goals for this fiscal year is to increase housing supply, in part, by creating incentives for people to restore vacant and derelict residential property for long-term housing.

City Manager Brett Estes said the construction excise tax could be a funding mechanism — perhaps in the form of loans or grants — to persuade people to rehabilitate these "zombie" properties.

Cronin said he doesn't



Astoria is looking to increase housing supply.

Danny Miller/The Daily Astorian

think the tax would reduce growth in commercial and industrial zones. "The coolest thing about this approach is that we're already doing it," he said.

The city taxes permits in these zones and gives the

money to the Astoria School District, which uses the funds to improve facilities.

In addition, the City Council asked Cronin to compile a list of the most developable city-owned parcels, with a focus on areas where multi-

family or workforce housing could be built.

Short-term rental problem

One thing the city could do to protect and increase Astoria's finite housing supply,

City Councilor Zetty Nemlowill said, is to restrict short-term rentals — such as Airbnb operations — in residential neighborhoods.

"Short-term rentals may have a better place in some cities than Astoria. But I believe,

given our limited housing stock, and our lack of viable options to solve our housing crisis, they don't belong here," she said.

Nemlowill said she understands that some homeowners want to offset living expenses by renting out rooms or a portion of their homes to temporary renters. This is more profitable, she pointed out, than renting to long-term renters.

However, "10, 20, 30, 40, 50 years from now, we won't have a year-round community. We won't have a place where workers can live in Astoria," she said. "And so, while there might be a slight benefit to a few people right now who are making some money on short-term rentals — renting out to tourists instead of the locals who really need them — it's a plague, and it's going to corrupt our city."

She said there's no reason why the City Council cannot consider limiting all rentals within residential neighborhoods to 30 days or longer.

Councilor Cindy Price said she is in "complete agreement."

A recent Planning Commission recommendation to allow the development of accessory dwelling units — for example, attached and detached structures, such as garages, and converted spaces, such as basements — prohibits using the units for short-term rentals.

Data: Housing and Community Services scheduled to select contractor Friday

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"I think it is really important for the housing agency to have the information," said Alison McIntosh, a member of the nonprofit Oregon Housing Alliance and former Housing and Community Services spokesperson.

In the meantime, housing advocates have worked to fill the void. During the past two years, the Oregon Housing Alliance has compiled a list of federal affordable housing with 30-year contracts on the verge of expiration.

When such contracts expire, property owners have the option of renewing the contract, which maintains requirements to keep units affordable, or going to the open market for higher rents or selling the property.

"Some of the people have lived there for 20 or 30 years. They build a community. They rent at a subsidized rate so a lot of people stay until they can't walk anymore," said state Rep. Alissa Keny-Guyer, D-Portland, chairwoman of the House Committee on Housing and Human Services.

"If the property is sold on the open market and became a nice new condo those people would be totally out (of a home). That is why preservation for me is a very high priority."



Paris Achen/Pamplin Media Group
Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, addresses a recent housing forum in Portland. Kotek backs a \$250 million plan to address affordable housing.

The housing alliance's list provided the basis for a proposal that Keny-Guyer and House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, would like to advance.

Legislators previously wanted "to see a clear need" if they were going to put money into affordable housing, Keny-Guyer said.

If the Legislature can come together to raise additional revenue, Kotek would support \$250 million in additional state support to help local communities deal with the housing crisis, said Lindsey O'Brien, Kotek's spokeswoman. That includes \$100 million for financing construction of affordable housing, \$100 million for preserving existing state- and federal-funded affordable housing and \$50 million for emergency housing and shelter assistance.

"That will be a major challenge because the state budget has a \$1.8 billion gap between current services and forecasted revenue," Kotek said.

Completing the statewide affordable housing inventory and housing plan are an "overarching priority" for Housing and Community Services Director Margaret Salazar, said Ariel Nelson, an agency spokeswoman. Gov. Kate Brown hired Salazar in September — while the audit was still underway — to direct and steer improvements at the agency.

The housing inventory is being completed in-house at the agency. Housing and Community Services is scheduled to select a contractor Friday to conduct a strategic plan and statewide housing plan, Nelson said.

The agency has made some

progress toward creating an inventory. The agency now has a list of federal and state-backed affordable housing units with locations but has not yet added expiration dates. Policymakers and investors need to know an expiration date for affordable housing contracts in

order to target the right properties for preservation.

Rep. Keny-Guyer said she would like the agency to take its data collection a step further.

"I want to make sure we are collecting the inventory and to see how far behind we are for

different income groups and different parts of the population, like the elderly and people with disabilities," Keny-Guyer said.

"The more we can disaggregate and understand who needs the housing, the better the OHCS and (the Legislature can respond)."

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