

Horse camp: Department of Forestry still accepting written comments

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September. In 2015 and 2016, campers used the site an average 21 percent of the available time in these months, according to the state.

Northrup Creek, which also accepts a limited number of other campers, is the lowest utilized of the campgrounds in Clatsop State Forest, Williams said.

On top of the added revenue, the special-use permit will allow the state to better track whether or not campers are paying for the full length of their stay.

"We've been discussing the use and lack of use for several years," Williams said, "knowing with these cuts we won't be able to offer the same level of service we offered in the past."

Guaranteed spots

Horse campers at Northrup Creek have complained in the past about not having a guaranteed spot to camp prior to their arrival. The permit is partially designed to guarantee spots to campers, making it more likely

they will make long trips to the site. Also, the fee may entice campers to bring larger groups to the grounds.

"People won't travel a long way out here if they aren't guaranteed a site," said Jennifer Bunch, treasurer of Oregon Equestrian Trails North Coast Chapter.

But Oregon Equestrian Trails, which helps maintain the state-owned campground, day-use area and adjacent 9-mile trail for horse riders, has strongly opposed the fee hike and two-night requirement. Bunch, of Svensen, and group member Diane Berry, of Astoria, who led the effort to build and maintain the camp before and after its opening in 2005, estimate they use the camp three to six times each summer. The group's members have spent hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars working on projects such as tree removal and construction of a storage shed. A trailhead at the camp is even named after Berry.

The main draw to the camp is the variety of terrain and



Danny Miller/The Daily Astorian

Jennifer Bunch, treasurer of Oregon Equestrian Trails, right, and Diane Berry, Oregon Equestrian Trails member, walk around at Northrup Creek Horse Camp on Tuesday.

wildlife on the trail, members say.

"They called us the jewel of horse camps in the state," Bunch said.

Though they say they will still make the annual trips, others may not be as inclined.

"It's totally unrealistic for this camp," Berry said. "That will effectively kill the camp."

available for special-use permit," Bunch said. "That's why we initially were up in arms, and we still are up in arms. We were under the impression it was a done deal."

But Williams recalls telling them the camp would still be open and that the special-use permit plan was just a proposal. He said he asked for alternatives from the group but did not receive any at the time.

"I told them I wanted to stop any rumors the horse camp is closing," Williams said. "I was totally honest and upfront with them from the get-go."

The Department of Forestry then announced in early March it would accept written comments from last Monday through May 4 on the department's webpage or at twilliams@odf.state.or.us. Williams so far has received dozens of phone calls and emails about the camp.

'Really cranky'

State Sen. Betsy Johnson has also heard from the public about the camp. "The contacts with my

office were really cranky," she said on her weekly radio show in early March. "Just calling them and saying, 'You're closed,' was not the right solution. I'm not really impressed with how the department is handling public outreach right now."

Proposed alternatives have included keeping the rate at \$15 per night for a period of time during the summer or scrapping the two-night requirement. Oregon Equestrian Trails has offered to handle more of the maintenance load and devise new ways to promote the camp.

The Astoria District Recreation Advisory Committee will hold a meeting with public comment on April 4 at 5:30 p.m. at the Department of Forestry's Astoria Office.

Williams doubts the current proposal will be the one the department finally decides to implement.

"It's not a perfect plan. I know that," he said. "There's been more awareness of the lack of use at Northrup Creek. I've seen that as a positive."

Parks: Deed restrictions limit city's ability to sell some park property

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'Some urgency'

In recent years, "the number of facilities managed, our requirements, continued to go up, and resources continued to go down. The percent transfer from the general fund continued to decrease," Cosby said.

The overstretched funding and staffing levels have led to a high turnover rate in part-time employees and a few poorly maintained parks. The department may have to close down some sites "due to hazards," Cosby said.

"We have a responsibility to keep playgrounds and swings up to a certain par. Same with trails and our recreational space," Cosby said.

City Manager Brett Estes said, "There is some urgency, from the staff's perspective, to move forward on this."

He, Cosby and Finance Director Susan Brooks are building next fiscal year's budget. Details of the fee may not be decided on by then.

However, "the longer we prolong this, the more of an impact we could be having to our general fund," Estes said.

He and Cosby may bring the proposal before the council again at a work session within a month.

Councilors Cindy Price and Bruce Jones said they would favor a higher rate than the figure Cosby proposed — perhaps closer to \$7 or \$8 so that the city has money for more than just the basics, Price said.

Councilor Zetty Nemlowill suggested that perhaps the fee should be based on a percentage of ratepayers' power bills rather than levied as a flat rate.

Selling parks

The City Councilors agreed that a utility fee is a promising idea.

A utility tax, however, would not extinguish the question of whether the city should sell off the least-utilized parks, an idea unpopular among people surveyed during the master-planning process.

"I do think that the master plan strongly suggests something should be eliminated in order to continue to decrease the requirements on your resources," Price said.

Jones, mindful that future cost-cutting measures might be necessary, said he had trouble thinking of a service in the parks purview that he would want to remove.

"I'd rather get rid of a few properties, frankly," he said. "That, I know, would be very controversial, to sell a few parks that are the least utilized. We've seen how controversial it is. But I'd rather face that heat than cut out youth sports, for example."

The income generated from selling properties traditionally goes into the capital improvement fund, and can be spent on other departments. However, the council can decide — as Nemlowill said she would prefer — to designate the money for parks department use only.

Although Price said she could support the sale of underused parks, she would not want to lose a park from an area with relatively few parks, even if that park is not frequently used. Alderbrook Park at Lief Erikson Drive and 45th Street, is not heavily used, but it's the closest park to an area underserved by parks, Cosby said.

Burdens and responsibilities

Nemlowill, who sat on the citizens advisory committee that guided the master plan last year, championed a quality-over-quantity view.

"Parks and Rec is extremely important to the quality of life in Astoria," she said, "but we know that we can't do everything well."

Nemlowill said she supported easing the park staff's burden by transferring underused properties.

Tidal Rock Park at Commercial and 15th streets, for example, is "really a blight on downtown Astoria," she said.

"It's in an urban renewal district — and an urban renewal district's aim is to cure urban blight," she said. "And here we have a city-owned property, which is the dumpiest property on the block. It's unacceptable."

The problem is not that the parks staff isn't doing a good job, she said. "It's that they simply can't keep up and maintain that site. And it's a low-priority site, and so they spend more time at sites that get more used. So it doesn't make any sense to me that we have that in our parks system."

Nemlowill acknowledged that, since the property comes with deed restrictions, the city can't simply sell it.

She added that the city should find partners in the community that could take over some of the services the Parks and Recreation Department provides.

"If we're going to ask citizens to pay more money for parks, we need to show that we're being really responsible and also offloading some of our burdens and responsibilities at the same time," Nemlowill said.



Erick Bengel/The Daily Astorian

Astoria Parks and Recreation Director Angela Cosby gives a presentation on the department's budget using teeter-totters during a City Council work session Thursday night.

Letter: Lack of a sales tax highlighted

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The city's economy is "diverse and robust, with a low (4.2 percent) unemployment rate, all of which fully supports continuing strong sales at the downtown Astoria J.C. Penney store."

Astoria, the councilors remind Ellison, is a "port of entry and regional trading center."

On top of national retailers already investing in the region and "achieving healthy sales," WalMart is scheduled to open a Warrenton store in 2018.

"Between 2007 and 2016 the retail component of our economy was the third fastest growth sector, after leisure & hospitality and education & health services, with a 7 percent growth in employment," the letter reads. "This speaks to our region's buying power, year-round sales, and the strength of the summer and cruise months when the population of the region swells with visitors and tourists."

Astoria's J.C. Penney is seven blocks from Columbia Memorial Hospital, the coun-



Danny Miller/The Daily Astorian

People walk by the J.C. Penney on Commercial Street Friday in downtown Astoria. The store is slated to start liquidating its stock April 17 and to close June 18.

ty's second-largest employer, and soon will be four blocks away from the new Mo's Restaurant, the letter points out.

In addition, "Astoria is one of only 13 cities across the United States that has received designation as an official Coast Guard City, home to more than 2,000 members of the Coast Guard, and attracting both air and afloat crews for training at the Advanced Helicopter Rescue School and the National Motor Lifeboat School."

The letter highlights Oregon's lack of a sales tax, which,

the letter says, draws shoppers from Washington state.

"License plates in downtown Astoria and throughout the county reflect that population and, we are certain, so would the J.C. Penney customer profile in Astoria. Very many of these customers do not shop online, so this is lost revenue forever if the downtown store is closed."

The letter concludes with a simple request "that our downtown Astoria J.C. Penney store remain open for many more years, and many more shoppers."

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