

Astoria Police: ‘We need to be more transparent’

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More than six years later, Johnston and Detective Nicole Riley continue to post various updates on the Astoria Police Department Facebook page.

The department’s social media presence and events such as Coffee with a Cop are part of an ever-evolving effort to modernize public relations.

In the aftermath of a fatal police shooting in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, a U.S. Department of Justice task force published a report with six pillars to modernizing police work. One of them, — called “building trust and legitimacy” — called for a culture of transparency, while another was specifically titled “technology and social media.”

“The business used to be pretty insular,” Johnston said. “That’s not the business anymore. We need to be more transparent.”

Off sidewalks

The Police Department has been operating since Astoria’s incorporation in 1876. In the first few decades of its existence, officers would patrol sections of the city on foot. But as cars began to flood roads across the country, police cars progressively became a staple of police work.

Pulling officers off sidewalks and into cars, while significantly expediting response times, also meant they would spend less time conversing with the public, Deputy Chief Eric Halverson said.

“We have to figure out ways to fill that void,” Halverson said.

One such attempt is Coffee with a Cop, held multiple times each year since 2015. Residents are typically invited to go to a coffee shop, where officers will be waiting to answer any questions they may have.

Some questions center on larger national issues, such as officers’ thoughts on the Ferguson shooting and how police would handle a similar situation here. Others may revolve around smaller issues like how to report when someone leaves their garbage can in a neighbor’s driveway.

Officers, who tend to focus on tackling some of the major issues in the community, benefit from hearing that smaller problems are also important to residents, Halverson said.

But community relations can also put a strain on police departments in small towns such as Astoria. One of the department’s 16 deployable officers spends overtime hours planning, scheduling and publicizing meet-up programs such as Coffee with a Cop.

“We have to be selective in what we do,” Halverson said. “We ask our people to do a lot. They believe in these things. That’s why we’re able to make it work.”

Daily posts

In 2010, debates, includ-

ing locally, still swirled about whether law enforcement agencies should create social media accounts. After Johnston shared the fire pictures, for instance, some of his supervisors questioned whether it was appropriate to continue the page.

“I think we won the argument,” a post from the page stated on the four-year anniversary of its founding.

Daily posts from the page include police logs, press releases, emergency alerts and media links and the occasional joke. Oftentimes the page serves as an alternative form of communication when certain pieces of information do not meet media outlets’ news threshold.

Johnston recalls a photo of an officer helping a stranded motorist change a tire — 332 likes and 49 comments — and a dashboard video of a jaywalker throwing a bag of heroin and oxycodone under a parked car — 323 likes and 83 comments — as some of the most popular posts.

The Facebook page tries to avoid police jargon so those who like it can follow along, Johnston said.

One of the decisions Johnston and others who posted to the account needed to make was whether to allow unedited comments. Though comments are allowed, they will delete those that are particularly nasty or advertise a product. Commenters occasionally do criticize the department or police in general.

“When people are unnecessarily critical of something, the community tends to police itself,” Johnston said.

Due to the amount of time it takes to maintain the page and the increased negativity associated with Facebook — especially since the November election — Johnston and Riley have posted fewer non-news items lately, Johnston said.

The department does have a Twitter account, but it serves mainly as a quick access point for emergency alerts and police logs.

“Facebook is like standing in the town square and talking to your friend,” Johnston said. “Twitter is like standing in the town square and yelling at everyone.”

Long-term fixtures

The social media and Coffee with a Cop programs, along with the department’s annual nine-week Citizen Police Academy, appear to be long-term fixtures. But as has happened in the past, new realities may shift the way police conduct community outreach, Halverson said.

With a new administration overseeing the Department of Justice, national news may affect future conversations between Astoria Police and residents.

“We can’t change the national conversation in our own little corner of the northwest,” Johnston said. “But we can work to inform our residents.”

Director: ‘I care about the artists I promote’

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She attended Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles before she decided to make the switch to study environmental science. She moved to San Diego and then to Oregon State University to study it, with the logic that this degree and her job as a consultant would be more practical. But soon she found herself missing making art.

“It wasn’t going to make me happy,” she said.

So she made a U-turn, and enrolled in the University of Oregon’s master of arts administration and nonprofit management program, where she

expects to graduate in June. She returned to her North Coast roots and started as program director in February.

“Now I get to spend my entire day with artists, and have paint all over me, and I get paid for that,” she laughed.

As director, her primary work will be to promote local art in the gallery, as well as act as a bridge between the needs of the artists and board of directors. “Part of what drew me into working at a gallery was because I genuinely care about the artists I promote,” she said.

As the director, Mico plans to maintain and sustain the scholarship and internship pro-

Youth camp: ‘Program we ought to protect’

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so I felt pretty good that we had a good argument based on the savings,” he said. “I worked the budget people on the House and Senate, both D and R, and there was support” for keeping the camp open, he said.

He and fellow lawmakers remain convinced the youth camp is effective at turning young lives around.

“Over the years I think we have shown that this is a good program,” Takko said. “Even though it is important to jobs, I always talk about how well the program works for kids.”

GOP support

Sen. John Braun, R-Centralia, who serves as chief budget writer in the Senate and sponsored the budget that protects funding for the camp, said last week in a GOP press release that freshman Rep. Jim Walsh’s work was instrumental in getting the camp added to the Senate’s proposal.

“The Naselle Youth Camp



EO Media Group/File Photo

The school at Naselle Youth Camp has proven successful in helping youthful offenders complete their diplomas.

in Pacific County offers a unique and potentially life changing opportunity for young men who have made mistakes in the past, but can have a productive future with the right intervention and training,” Braun said. “Rep. Walsh has been a tremendous advocate for this program that the governor proposed cutting. I want to send a strong message to the community and employees that this is a beneficial program we ought to protect.”

The Senate’s proposed \$43 billion, two-year budget spends

about \$5 billion more than the current budget. It puts an additional \$1.8 billion towards education, paid for, in part, by a statewide property tax that would replace local district levies. It also relies on about \$200 million in transfers from other accounts and spending cuts in some state programs.

The House budget released this week proposes a capital gains tax on the wealthy to meet the state’s budget goals, including education. House and Senate negotiators will spend the rest of the legislative

session attempting to reconcile their tax and spending plans.

Walsh defends youth camp

Walsh, R-Aberdeen, testified before both the House Appropriations and the Senate Ways and Means committees requesting the youth camp.

“This is what representing the 19th Legislative District in Olympia is all about. We’re a rural area. But that doesn’t mean we have to take a back seat to other parts of the state. ... Naselle Youth Camp is important to the local economy in the southern part of Pacific County,” Walsh said in the press release. “But, more than that, it’s an important asset in our state’s juvenile rehabilitation ‘toolbox.’ The staff there does good work for the kids at the camp and for all of us who live here. Anyone who cares about this part of the state — or giving meaningful second chances to at-risk youth — should support this budget package.”

Water: Other cities are dueling with FEMA

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last week to answer questions and help them understand what the changing maps mean.

Other cities along the coast — including Warrenton — are also dueling with FEMA over whether there is adequate protection for high water, a costly, and some say, frustrating, regulatory experience.

New elevation

People with existing homes in those coastal zones are grandfathered in — they don’t have to raise their homes just because the maps now show a higher base flood elevation. But if they do a substantial home remodel or addition, or if the house is destroyed and must be rebuilt, they would have to rebuild at the new elevation, which, depending on the area, can be several feet higher.

Most at the meeting were worried about how and if the higher elevations will affect their insurance rates, because mortgage-holders must have flood insurance in those areas. Lundblad’s next-door neighbor, Chris Nichols, said he pays about \$6,500 a year for flood insurance and was told in January the rate will start going up 25 percent every year.

FEMA said that’s because the agency is phasing out flood insurance subsidies for homes, like Nichols’ and others in Titlow Beach and Salmon Beach, that were built before the city adopted its first FEMA flood maps in the 1980s.

In a letter from FEMA, Nichols was told his insurance rates will continue to rise 25 percent a year unless he gets an elevation certificate, which costs about \$1,000 but would give FEMA a firm understanding of his actual elevation and of the flood risk. Chances are he is below the base flood elevation, as are most of the houses in Titlow Beach and all of the homes in Salmon Beach, many of which were built in the early 1900s.

“For future work, it could influence insurance rates and, unless they get an elevation certificate, it may affect insurance rates if they can show that where they are relative to the base flood elevation is not as bad as the worst case that the



Lui Kit Wong/The News Tribune

Titlow Beach homeowner Julia Lundblad and her son, Marcus Raschkow, look at a view of Puget Sound.

insurance is being based on,” Coffman said.

Updated maps

Pierce County recently adopted FEMA’s updated flood maps as well for unincorporated areas of the county. Municipalities in the county have to adopt the maps separately.

Coffman said the upward creep of insurance premiums is not a Tacoma problem — it’s everywhere. FEMA is trying to recoup losses it incurred in the wake of major weather events.

“After Hurricane Katrina, they’ve been slowly increasing the insurance rates, so everyone is seeing increases in flood plain insurance,” Coffman said. “It’s my understanding that they’re

trying to get insurance rates closer to where they should be and not so subsidized.”

Dave Peterson, a 30-year Salmon Beach resident who works as a real estate broker, said the new maps and climbing insurance rates are going to make it harder and harder to sell houses in those coastal areas.

Peterson said it will be a game-changer. When a potential buyer finds out they must have flood insurance and researches the cost of premiums — a number that will only trend up — it may have a negative impact on home values. Cash buyers are an option, because they wouldn’t have to have flood insurance, but

they’re not as easy to come by.

Peterson said, for those planning to sell their homes, the increase in base flood elevation is cause for concern.

Hesitant on mortgages

Lenders may be hesitant to offer mortgages in places where homes are below the base flood elevation. Lundblad doesn’t have a mortgage and owns her home outright, so she doesn’t have to have insurance, and she doesn’t right now — it was too expensive. So she lives with the risk of something happening to her home and not being covered.

Lundblad said she couldn’t get a clear answer on whether FEMA or private flood insurance would even cover events like tidal waters rushing into her house. When shopping for insurance, Lundblad was told the policy wouldn’t cover tidal overflow or flooding caused by high tides. Insurance was too pricey, she said, given that she wasn’t sure she’d be covered if the Sound flooded her house.

Nichols said the rising cost of insurance has been a big concern.

“I think it’s going to get either more expensive to the point where it’s just not feasible — right now my backup plan is to empty my 401K and buy out my mortgage so that I can drop my insurance,” he said, “but I would rather not do that if I don’t have to.”

APRIL 6

Pulitzer Prize Winning Author and Journalist Buzz Bissinger

A Columbia Forum Presentation



Buzz Bissinger is among the nation’s most honored and distinguished writers. A native of New York City, Buzz is the winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the Livingston Award, the American Bar Association Silver Gavel Award and the National Headliners Award, among others. He also was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. He is the author of the highly acclaimed nonfiction books: Friday Night Lights, A Prayer for the City, Three Nights in August, Shooting Stars and Father’s Day.

Buzz has been a reporter for some of the nation’s most prestigious newspapers; a magazine writer with published work in Vanity Fair, The New York Times Magazine and Sports Illustrated; and a co-producer and writer for the ABC television drama NYPD Blue. Two of his works were made into the critically acclaimed films: Friday Night Lights and Shattered Glass. Three more are in active development. Friday Night Lights also served as the inspiration for the television series of the same name.

TO ATTEND:

For Members: Dinner & Lecture: \$25 each; Lecture only: no charge

For Non-Members: Dinner & Lecture: \$35 each; Lecture only: \$15 ea.

Appetizers will be available at 6 p.m. • Dinner will be served at 6:30 p.m.

The speaker will begin after the dinner service is complete and non-dinner members and guests of the audience take their seats.

Forum to be held at the CMH Community Center at 2021 Exchange St., Astoria.

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