

Cemetery: 'It was in the worst shape I have ever seen'

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"I just think it's shameful," Baldwin said about Ocean View.

He recently saw people pulling grass around their loved one's graves. "They paid for that service," he said. He says dandelions have taken over much of the grounds and mowing is spotty. In some areas, long grasses grow between grave markers.

Limited funds

"The City Council is already working to try to address park funding issues," Astoria City Manager Brett Estes said Wednesday when told of Warrenton's concerns. The Astoria Parks and Recreation Department has been front and center this past budget cycle and discussions are ongoing about how to fund the department into the future. At their next meeting, city councilors and city staff plan to discuss several potential funding options including the implementation of a water meter fee and an increase to the hotel tax.

Estes said recruiting seasonal part-time maintenance workers has also been diffi-



Katie Frankowicz/The Daily Astorian

Long grass and dandelions flourish at Ocean View Cemetery in Warrenton, say Warrenton City Commissioners. They asked staff to contact Astoria and open up a discussion about how to address poor conditions at the cemetery.

cult. The limited money available means mowers for the Parks Department are actually paid less than mowers with the Public Works Department.

In addition to caring for over 300 acres of park land, 11 miles of trail, multiple facilities including the Astoria Aquatic Center and organizing a variety of recreational programs, the department is also

in charge of preparing full and cremation burials, disinterment services, selling graves, locating graves, caring for the grounds and ornamental plantings and enforcing rules and regulations at Ocean View.

Complaints

Complaints about the cemetery's condition have dogged Astoria in recent years.

"It was in the worst shape I have ever seen," wrote one newspaper reader after Memorial Day this year.

In 2015, people, including plot owners, said Astoria's staff and budget cuts during the recession left the cemetery in poor condition. That year, the Astoria City Council implemented the first fee increase to burial and crema-

tion fees in 19 years, hoping to offset the city's annual subsidy, and also approved more than \$70,000 for weed eradication and reseeding at the cemetery. The City Council did not release the \$70,000, however, because of concerns over whether parks staff could maintain the cemetery after the initial work was done.

The cemetery lost its last full-time worker in 2013.

Currently, a small crew is responsible for maintaining the department's 69 sites. Last week, Astoria approved a contract with a landscaping company for work on parks frequented by summer tourists, paying for this labor with money dedicated to tourism-based activities.

Astoria funds maintenance projects at the cemetery using the interest from an irreducible fund to provide perpetual care. What the interest doesn't cover is supplemented by Astoria taxpayers, though everyone in Clatsop County is able to use the cemetery, Estes said.

Astoria city officials have floated the idea of forming a cemetery district, which would mean all of Clatsop County's taxpaying residents would end up paying for Ocean View, a

concept Warrenton rejects.

"That would be akin to dumping it on everybody," Mayor Balensifer said Tuesday.

"I think it's worth noting that we don't have a parks department, yet our parks, for the most part, are maintained," he said.

'Challenging'

The cemetery was established in 1897 and includes more than 16,000 plots across its 100 acres.

In a parks master plan finalized in 2016, Astoria park staff note a variety of maintenance needs.

"Operating a 100-acre historic cemetery located in Warrenton has proven challenging over the past five years," states the master plan.

Perpetual care of gravesites is guaranteed as part of the cemetery deed purchase.

"Some community members believe maintaining the cemetery should be a high priority," the plan continues, referencing community surveys, "while others agree but believe operations of the facility should not be a core service of the Parks and Recreation Department."

Providence: 'We are a safety net for many patients'

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In 2016, Providence Seaside Hospital saw more than 1,000 inpatient admissions, with 146,000 outpatient visits, including more than 10,000 in the emergency department.

"In 2017, we are running ahead of those figures, and definitely expect to exceed those 2016 totals," Providence Health & Services Communications Director Gary Walker said Tuesday.

Higher costs, lower reimbursements

Lower government health care reimbursements are driving higher costs throughout the system, Underriner said.

Since the start of health care reform in 2011, Providence cut \$340 million in costs in Oregon, he said. But new state taxes on hospitals and health insurance, along with uncertainty at the federal level "means we need to continue to focus on meeting the needs of the community in light of the revenue we receive," Underriner said. "We are busier than ever, serving thousands more patients, but there continues to be a fundamental shift in reimbursements to cover the costs. It's unlikely that reimbursements will improve anytime soon."

Providence's 50 hospitals handled more than 1 million Medicaid patient visits in 2016. The Renton, Washington-based company was forced to subsidize the unfunded portion of Medicaid at a cost exceeding \$1 billion, said Providence spokeswoman Colleen Wadden.

The current year is bringing more of the same, she said.

This is all a dramatic contrast to 2014 and 2015, when many large hospitals enjoyed windfall profits, in large part because Medicaid eligibility was loosened and millions of Americans joined the program. Oregon alone added more than 400,000 to the Medicaid rolls, and many flocked to hospitals for long-delayed treatment.

"This trend is continuing into 2017," Underriner said. "We are a safety net for many patients, especially those with Medicaid, and we are deeply committed to continuing to serve this vulnerable population."

Safety net

The state Legislature passed the \$550 million Oregon Health Authority budget and a hospital and provider tax package that allows the state to continue covering health care for low-income families.

In Clatsop and Tillamook counties, 30 percent of the population receives health care coverage through Medicaid or insurance on the Oregon Marketplace, according to state Rep. Deborah Boone. In Oregon, more than 50 percent of births occurred on Medicaid. Across the country nearly half of all children get health care through the program.

Fifty-five percent of Providence Seaside Hospital patients are covered under Medicare, Walker said. Twenty-five percent have Medicaid and another 20 percent are commercially insured, self-pay or have other forms of coverage.

Underriner said he is "profoundly disappointed" by the U.S. Senate's Better Care Reconciliation Act. "Its proposed Medicaid cuts are deeper and more devastating than the House's American Health Care Act," he said. "It will increase the burden on low-income Americans, dramatically roll back Medicaid, reduce the number of insured, and end coverage for some critical services like mental health. This is not acceptable."

Politics in play

Providence Health & Services in Oregon is in a "good position," wrote Underriner, but he said he expects to consider operational improvements and changes in the way people access health care.

Services like Elder at Home — which provides care for frail elderly in their homes — and lower-cost express care services are bringing down costs. Telehealth services connect rural and smaller hospitals to access specialist consultations within the community.

"We are focusing first on process and cost efficiencies, and will do everything we can to avoid affecting jobs," Underriner said.

Employees were advised to await a planned financial update in the next month. At that time, Providence Health & Services will look at the region's finances for the first six months of the year.

"Here's the bottom line," Underriner said. "Health care funding will continue to evolve at both the federal and state level. As a leader in providing services, Providence has the responsibility to create the best organizational model that allows us to serve our community's changing needs in the most cost-effective way possible."

Jeff Manning of The Oregonian contributed to this report.



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Students at the RiversZen Studio participate in a yoga class for veterans and family members in Astoria on Tuesday.

Class: 'Military is so hard on their bodies'

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"It feels great," said Brian List, 70, of Astoria. List is a Vietnam War veteran who served in the Marine Corps from 1966 to 1968. He typically attends classes at the studio two to three times a week as part of his constant effort to remedy his own case of PTSD.

"People from the military are geared to keep going and going," he said. "This is more calming."

Connections

Christopher, 34, said his

neck and back pain has eased since working with Kimberly, 33. She brought up the idea of hosting the class soon after the couple moved to Astoria.

"The military is so hard on their bodies," Kimberly said. "There is a lot of strength training."

They also hope to fill what they've noticed as a lack of local physical therapy options for military personnel.

"We have a huge military community here, so it's also a way for military people to connect with each other," Kimberly said.

At the end of the class, participants receive a packet with some brief information about Ki-Hara, as well as some directions for stretches they can complete at home.

"I'm hoping we can give them the tools for self care," Kimberly said. "It's all about support."

The couple hopes to make the class a regular event at the studio, possibly even once a week depending on interest level, when the studio moves to a riverfront building on 14th Street in August. At the next class, those with military iden-

tification are welcome along with first responders.

Christopher has become familiar enough with the stretches that he even led the class for the first few minutes Tuesday. But he did err slightly at one point after asking the class to sit upright with their legs crossed. "Now, spin," he said, meaning instead to ask the class to move their upper bodies in a circular motion.

"He's still used to boot camp," Kimberly kidded.

"I'm trying to be more gentle," Christopher said. "I'm still getting used to it."

Immunity: 12 parks closed in Oregon after ruling

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There were also concerns that this lack of immunity would lead to higher insurance costs for cities.

The League of Oregon Cities and others pushed to change the statute so it would once again recognize recreational immunity for city workers. "The words on the bill were pretty simple, but the impact around the state was profound," Winkels said.

Astoria parks

In Astoria, the uncertainty before the new law was passed did not halt any park activities or close down any sites.

City Attorney Blair Henningsgaard was not convinced the ruling put the city at a higher legal risk.

"We make every effort to operate our parks safely," he



Alex Pajunas/The Daily Astorian

The Astoria Riverwalk and a set of railroad tracks snake eastward toward the Mill Pond housing development.

told The Daily Astorian last year. "I don't think that it creates a greater degree of liability in either the city or employees than existed beforehand."

Other cities, however, shut down parks, worried about what it would mean if their

staff and volunteers were not covered. In total, 12 parks around the state closed after the Oregon Supreme Court ruling.

Redmond only last weekend reopened a popular climbing bridge, which had been

closed after the court ruling, according to Winkels.

Though Astoria parks didn't close, the city was concerned about getting the bill through the Legislature, said City Manager Brett Estes. City officials wanted to make sure there was coverage for city staff.

Though a simple bill in theory, it was hard to get through the system, Winkels said.

"The votes were there on the floor, but getting it through the procedural process was a challenge," he said.

Some legislators in the House had reservations about moving the bill forward and there were conversations about possible amendments. The bill was up for its final reading multiple days, but kept getting carried over.

"We're gratified the votes were there," Winkels said.