

Park funds: Fee, tax increase would not take effect until next year

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Fee and tax options

City councilors have discussed a \$3 fee per unit attached to water bills, which would bring in \$153,540, and a lodging tax of 11 percent, which would bring in an estimated \$410,000. The bulk of the new hotel tax money — \$287,000 — would go to the Promote Astoria fund, which is intended for tourism promotion and has restrictions.

City Attorney Blair Henningsgaard, however, said the Promote Astoria fund can be put toward maintaining or improving “tourist-related facilities.”

“Our parks, pools and Riverwalk are tourist-related facilities,” he wrote in a June memo. “This means that 100 percent of all expenses for maintenance and improvement for these facilities can be paid with ‘new’ tax dollars.”

He also believes maintenance expenses could include a portion of city staff salaries for work that is closely linked to tourist-related facilities.

More responsibilities

Over the past 40 years, the Parks and Recreation Department has grown, building 42 new parks while maintaining the Aquatic Center and other facilities and a long roster of activities and programs. Staff levels have not kept pace. Instead, the number of full-



Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

Astoria Parks and Recreation Director Angela Cosby talks about Violet LaPlante Park in Alderbrook during a parks tour in 2015. The parks department is struggling to operate and maintains parks. The department has grown considerably over the past 40 years.

time employees has dropped by 50 percent.

The parks department has been able to generate an additional \$450,000 annually for the past 10 years by adding programs, marketing and building partnerships, according to a city staff memo prepared for the City Council.

“Because of these efforts, the deficit gap between available tax funds and funding needed to maintain our facilities has narrowed greatly,” the staff memo said.

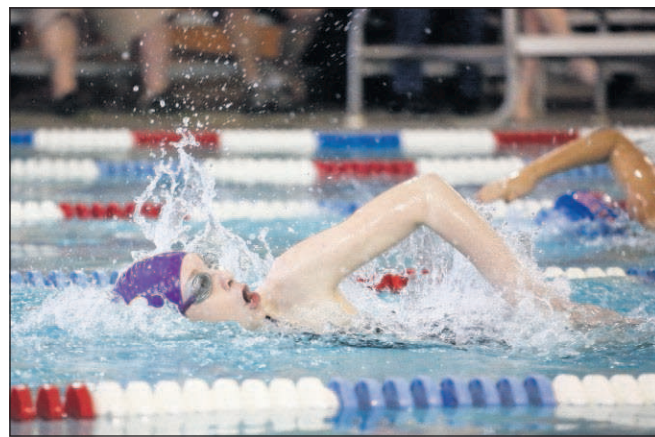
But costs continue to rise along with the need for more dedicated maintenance on the city’s 310 acres of park land. This budget cycle, the parks department had a \$100,000 hole that was filled by pulling funding from elsewhere in the budget.

Astoria has faced public criticism over the conditions at several parks. Families with loved ones buried at the city-owned Ocean View Cemetery in Warrenton have been particularly disappointed by the

maintenance of the cemetery. Last week, Warrenton City Commissioner Mark Baldwin called the cemetery’s upkeep “shameful.”

For six months, the City Council has discussed a variety of scenarios and solutions with staff, but made no decisions.

To cut costs, the city looked at reducing programs and services and selling park lands. New revenue options, meanwhile, have come down to the two main proposals: the parks and recreation fee on city water



Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

The Astoria Aquatic Center could close unless the city backs new fees or taxes for parks.

bills and an increase to the lodging tax.

Cosby has told city councilors several times that she worries about losing key staff the longer the department’s funding issues drag on.

Pros and cons

The two options on the table tonight both come with pros and cons.

First, they both take time.

City staff estimates that the fee and the tax increase would not take effect until January. Since the additional revenue would not be collected for the first half of the fiscal year that began this month, the city anticipates needing an end-of-year transfer of up to \$200,000 to \$300,000 to balance the parks department’s budget.

Both will also take a lot of work.

City councilors indicated they would prefer a per unit charge versus a per water meter charge for the \$3 fee. Several residents had pointed out that this would make the fee more equitable since some multifamily units share a single water meter.

The city does not have a breakdown of how many units are attached to each meter. Staff will need to analyze the city’s information, cross-reference it with information available from the county assessor and fill in remaining gaps.

City staff estimates this work could cost up to \$20,000. However, collecting the data could also give the city a better grasp on just how many multifamily units are in Astoria, information that is useful in analyzing and addressing housing concerns.



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Albacore tuna is packaged and ready for shipping at the Skipanon Seafood Brand processing facility in Warrenton. Members of the public toured the facility and the Warrenton Marina as part of the Shop the Dock event held Friday.

Seafood: Next tour coming in September

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Great response

Amanda Gladics of Oregon Sea Grant, who coordinated the two morning tours, said afterward that they had a great response from the community.

“I felt like we helped demystify commercial fisheries and successfully connected seafood consumers with high-quality local seafood,” she said.

The tour started on the docks at the Warrenton Marina where, under the watchful eye of several herons and at least one bald eagle, Gladics showed the group different types of fishing vessels and answered questions about how different fisheries, such as tuna, crab, black cod and salmon, operate.

For people looking to buy fish, she told them to look for a sign indicating a boat has fish to sell. She also told them what kinds of questions to ask:



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Genita Ross sharpens a knife before demonstrating how albacore tuna is processed at the Skipanon Brand Seafood facility in Warrenton as part of the Shop the Dock tour on Friday.

When was the fish caught? How was it kept cold?

Processing, canning

The next step was at nearby Skipanon Brand Seafood, a seafood processing plant and cannery owned by for-

mer Warrenton Mayor Mark Kujala and his family.

“Anyone here is welcome, if you get a fish at the docks, to bring it here,” said plant manager Bob Willkie. “Give me a call.”

The company will fillet or

even can fish for customers for a fee.

The company also offers “Fish Friday.” Similar to community-supported agriculture boxes offered by farms, where customers pay for a regular delivery of produce, Fish Friday customers can sign up to get prime cuts of fish weekly.

“They get the best stuff we get in,” Willkie said.

By the end of the tour, several people had signed up for the service, too.

Unlike Newport, where such tours have been taking place since 2014, there are not as many fishermen selling directly from their boats in the Warrenton Marina. Gladics and Oregon Sea Grant hope to connect with fishermen who are planning to sell off their boats in September, when the next tour is scheduled. Fishermen are encouraged to contact Gladics at the Oregon Sea Grant office.

Bar: Has been in Todd’s life for about 27 years

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operations to a property manager. Tenants will have to vacate at purchase, “only because we need to go in and do some repairs, and that’ll be really hard with people in there,” Kirk said. The apartments will then open up as rentals, she added.

Repairs will also be made to the exterior, she said.

The site is part of the city’s Astor West Urban Renewal Area, “an important gateway into town,” City Planner Nancy Ferber said in an email. This means the business is eligible for the city’s Storefront Improvement Program, which provides support and funding for property owners in Uniontown to “invest in facade improvements while maintaining the character of the area,” Ferber wrote.

“The program is the commercial counterpart to the recent State Historic Preservation grant funds that were available to homeowners in Uniontown for exterior restoration projects on historic homes,” Ferber wrote.

Once Kirk takes over, the tavern will start accepting debit and credit cards. The business is now a cash-only establishment.

A commercial spot adjacent to the tavern may become a coin-op laundry facility, Kirk said.

The laundry would require additional parking, Ferber wrote, adding, “there are a handful of options to address this if there’s not enough off-street parking at the proposed location.”

‘Bittersweet’

The beloved bar has been in Todd’s life for about 27 years. She has “very mixed emotions” about passing it on: “It’s kind of bittersweet,” Todd said.

“This is a huge thing for me,” she said, “but I feel in my heart that it’s the right thing for me to do.”

Todd, 57, has been on the wagon for nearly 6 1/2 years. Since she got sober and rediscovered her spirituality, her life has moved in a different direction, she said.

“I don’t need the chaos of being a bar owner,” she said. “I do run the risk of someday maybe taking a drink, being so close to it, and I believe it’s time for a change.”

In recent years, Todd has mentored young people



Edward Stratton/The Daily Astorian
Mary Todd’s Workers Bar & Grill in Uniontown has been sold to an Astoria author.

addicted to drugs and alcohol, and has served as a sponsor for several local girls.

‘Blood, sweat and tears’

Todd, who resides in one of the upstairs apartments, plans to move in with her aunt in Svensen.

“I want to just relax and hang out with her, and do what she needs me to do for her, and get some peace and quiet,” she said.

Todd said she’s grateful that she could preside over the tavern for so many years.

“I’ve been able to help a lot of people. I was able to feed a lot of people. I’ve been able to do good, I think,” she said.

“It’s been hard. Blood, sweat and tears. It wasn’t easy,” she added. “But it’s what I did. I feel very good about it.”

A ‘valuable commodity’

One factor that convinced Todd to sell the business to Kirk: their shared belief that Astoria needs a bar like Mary Todd’s.

“I’m really grateful that somebody else feels that way,” Todd said.

Kirk said the patrons need a place to see their friends and have community. Under her ownership, the Workers Tavern will continue that tradition, she said.

“I think it’s really important that every town has a place like Mary Todd’s, and I want to keep it that way for that reason — because it’s a valuable commodity in a small community like this,” Kirk said.

Kirk is the author of “Licking Flames: Tales of Half-Assed Husky,” a collection of personal essays published in 2016 by Black Bomb Books.

Hutchison: ‘Take care of business. Don’t stress’

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winter color. The summer closet is filled with blouses, trousers and skirts in shades of aquamarine and chartreuse with a scattering of black-and-white graphics and Monet-inspired prints.

“A lot of times I’ll have a scarf I really want to wear,” she said. “So I’ll plan my day’s wardrobe around it.”

Hutchison said her fash-

ion sense is innate. She’s never been a reader of fashion magazines. She said she got into clothes while working for the Department of Justice. “Nice clothes get attention,” she said. “I’ve always tried to fight invisibility.” She said she has always enjoyed being a head turner, and regrets, just a little, that her chosen beach lifestyle doesn’t afford many opportunities to dress up.

‘Don’t stress’

Now in her 80s, Hutchison said she enjoys her pinochle games that take place twice a week. “It’s a mixed crowd,” she said, meaning there’s men and women. She plays at the Seaside senior center and also at the senior center in Astoria. “It’s something to look forward to.”

Nell’s advice for living well into her eighth decade is pretty simple. “Take care of business. Don’t stress over things.”

She says she’s not overly sentimental and remains the practical person she’s always been. She has a cat who goes by the name of Ms. Truffle. Ms. Truffle has been a kind of artistic muse, inspiring photographs and the writing of haiku. “She’s definitely a ms., not a miss,” Hutchison said of the feline. “She’s permitted to sit on any surface she wishes, but I never forget she’s just a cat.”

— Eve Marx