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OUR VIEW

Astoria should re-examine the parks master plan

Astoria city councilors made two smart moves this week in taking steps to provide stable funding for the Parks and Recreation Department. Their work, however, isn't over.

For years, the parks department has been underfunded while its costs and responsibilities increased and its staff downsized. That dynamic came to a head earlier this year when the city had to transfer \$100,000 from other areas for parks operations, and then more recently with continued maintenance complaints about Ocean View Cemetery in Warrenton, which Astoria owns and the parks department maintains. A Warrenton city commissioner recently described the cemetery's conditions as "shameful."

Astoria city staff had told the City Council the cash-strapped parks department needs at least \$425,000 to sustain it going forward in what they called a "life-raft scenario," and had advocated closing the popular Astoria Aquatic Center and shutting down sports programs if the council couldn't provide the money.

The decisions

With a standing-room only crowd Monday night at City Hall and two options on the table for additional funding, Astoria councilors chose to raise the city's lodging tax from 9 percent to 11 percent. They also postponed making a decision on whether to impose a fee on water customers of \$3 a month and instead adopted a plan to seek voluntary donations that will also be used for parks programs and maintenance.

Both decisions were smart. The lodging tax increase, which will begin in January, is expected to generate \$411,000 and is borne primarily by visitors, and the donations from residents could raise the rest of the money while the council ponders other short- and long-term funding and examines efficiency options.

Although the city has a parks master plan, it should be re-examined.

What's happened over the years is that the department has had to do more with less and it can no longer do that. The parks budget has been cut from 12 percent of the general fund to its current 7 percent level even though its maintenance responsibilities increased with additional park acquisitions. The city now has 69 parks sites, including the cemetery. It maintains them with a small, overburdened crew. Those sites contain more than 300 acres of park land, 11 miles of trails and multiple facilities including the Aquatic Center. Parks staff also organize and oversee a variety of recreational events and programs.

The cemetery

At the cemetery, the department is charged with preparing full and cremation burials, disinterment services, selling graves, locating graves and caring for the grounds. Since 2013, there hasn't been a full-time worker assigned to it, and maintenance has drawn repeated complaints from loved ones about overgrown conditions around its plots, which is especially troubling.

Established in 1897, the cemetery includes more than 16,000 plots across 100 acres. Perpetual care of the gravesites is guaranteed as part of the cemetery deed purchase. An oddity is that while everyone in Clatsop County is able to use the cemetery, none of the other cities or the county contribute to its maintenance, Astoria City Manager Brett Estes said.

The city funds cemetery maintenance through interest from an irreducible fund to provide perpetual care. That money is augmented by taxpayer dollars to supplement what the interest doesn't cover.

When city councilors re-examine the parks plan, it would be a worthwhile discussion to consider whether the upkeep of the cemetery should continue to be a service of the parks department or a different department such as public works, or even whether the cemetery maintenance should be outsourced to a private company. No matter what option is chosen, a contract is a contract and the gravesites deserve better care.

As for the overall parks department, City Councilor Bruce Jones was right Monday when he said, "We really need to look at how this happened and how we avoid this happening in the future. We don't want to be back here in two years having the same discussion."

Councilors should heed Jones' suggestion and begin that re-examination.

'We really need to look at how this happened and how we avoid this happening in the future. We don't want to be back here in two years having the same discussion.'

Bruce Jones
Astoria city councilor



TV's wonderful women



Wikimedia Commons

Shailene Woodley, left, Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman starred in HBO's "Big Little Lies."

By FRANK BRUNI

New York Times News Service

I worship Charlize Theron, the "Atomic Blonde" trailer is a hoot, and I love the story she keeps sharing with interviewers about training so hard for the fight scenes that she cracked several teeth.



But please stop telling me that "Atomic Blonde," on the heels of "Wonder Woman," amounts to some hinge moment for movies, which are henceforth going to shower us with female action leads. I've heard that joke too many times before.

Let's talk instead about all the wonderful women — brawlers, bawlers, schemers, dreamers — on the small screen, a nickname that we have to retire because television is proving infinitely bigger in spirit and more in tune with the moment than most of the loud schlock shoveled into multiplexes.

And let's trade the usual, sadly necessary outrage about how poorly a given group of Americans is being represented for a hearty cheer about some heartening progress.

The Emmy nominations came out last week, and they affirmed not only that television is indeed enjoying a golden age but also that part of that is its juicy opportunities for female actors. In terms of gender parity, it puts corporate America, the Trump administration and the U.S. Senate to shame.

A Times television critic, James Poniewozik, pointed to the "murderers' row" of actresses nominated for best lead performance in a limited series: Jessica Lange and Susan Sarandon in "Feud: Bette and Joan," Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman in "Big Little Lies," Carrie Coon in " Fargo" and Felicity Huffman in "American Crime."

Five of them are over 40. Two (Lange and Sarandon) are over 60, playing roles that speak expressly to sexist double standards and the derision women face if they do something as audacious as age in the limelight.

Yes, there's a negative spin on this: Why have Lange, Sarandon, Witherspoon and Kidman, all winners of the best actress Oscar, fled to television?

Also, the disproportionate crowd of men nominated in the writing and directing categories this year suggests that despite the recent successes of such female writers, directors and show runners as Shonda Rhimes ("Grey's Anatomy," "Scandal"), Lena Dunham ("Girls") and Jill Soloway ("Transparent," "I Love Dick"), women still don't get enough opportunities behind the camera.

But television is hardly a last-resort medium anymore. And what's happening in front of the camera really does warrant celebration.

Often, in the wake of Oscar nominations, there's talk about how tough it was to fill the five slots in the best actress category credibly. Emmy categories accommodate six or seven nominees, and the chatter this year focused on how many deserving women couldn't be squeezed in. No Dunham for "Girls," no Oprah Winfrey for "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks," no Claire Danes for "Homeland" and no crime in any of that, because there was so much else that deserved — and got — recognition.

To compare the nominees for best supporting actor and best supporting actress in a comedy series is to be reminded that women rule the "Saturday Night Live" roost. From that show, only one recurring male performer, Alec Baldwin, got an acting nod, while three female performers — Kate McKinnon, Vanessa Bayer and Leslie Jones — did.

It's not just that actresses are

giving television's greatest performances but that many of the top-tier shows — "The Handmaid's Tale," "Better Things" — tackle gender-related issues.

The most recent season of "House of Cards" was in some ways about the tricky algebra of effacement, assertion, subservience and ingenuity behind many women's paths to power. It ended (spoiler alert!) with two triumphant words from Claire Underwood, played by Robin Wright, that pointedly evoked Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign: "My turn."

There's a world of fascinating women and fierce actresses on television now. Britain, which long ago conjured the miracle of Helen Mirren in "Prime Suspect," recently tripled down with the messy, mesmerizing sleuths played by Sarah Lancashire in "Happy Valley," Gillian Anderson in "The Fall" and Anna Friel in "Marcella."

And finally, this week, the producers of the BBC series "Doctor Who" announced that the role of the Doctor, which has changed hands repeatedly over decades, would next be played by a woman, actress Jodie Whittaker. That's a first.

But to watch Lancashire in "Happy Valley," Lange in "Feud" or Viola Davis in "How to Get Away With Murder" isn't to applaud social justice. It's to savor phenomenal artistry. Television proves what has been observed about all walks of life: For the best talent, cast the net wide and don't ignore any of the available pools.

Theron long ago worked on a movie with Tom Hanks, who signed her script with words that, she told Variety, "I bet he's eating." They were these: "Promise me you'll never do television."

I want her to promise that she'll do lots of television. She'll get meatier parts that way, and might not even need dental work afterward.

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