

Astoria finalizes hotel tax hike

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Daily Astorian

Astoria's hotel tax is officially going up to help pay for parks.

The City Council reopened a public hearing Monday night to include comments from hoteliers and others in the hospitality industry concerned about the city's decision to raise the hotel tax, but ultimately voted to approve the tax increase and hold a final reading of the ordinance.

The ordinance will increase the hotel tax from 9 percent to 11 percent. The new tax will begin in January. City staff estimates the tax increase could generate approximately \$410,000 annually. Under state guidelines, the bulk of this money would need to go to tourism-related facilities, the rest to the city's general fund. City Attorney Blair Henningsgaard maintains that since tourists often use city parks such as the Astoria Riverwalk or the Astoria Column, the Parks and Recreation Department meets this criteria and all the money can go to defraying some of the department's costs. The City Council accepted this interpretation at a public hearing in July.

Don West, owner of Astoria Crest Motel and general manager of the Cannery Pier Hotel, and others who spoke against the ordinance Monday debated Henningsgaard's interpretation of a tourist-related facility. They said tourists who stayed with them did not come for Astoria's public parks or public pool, though they might use them while they were in the city. Bed and breakfast owners Loretta Maxwell and Rebecca Greenway, who had both spoken at the public hearing in July, told the council

that they would lose business over the tax increase.

"I have seen communities tax themselves and the businesses to a point that causes the very businesses they rely on for a tax base to drop dramatically," West said.

He said the lodging industry provides thousands of jobs in Clatsop County and brings in hundreds of thousands of dollars. He and others said a similar tax increase was voted in by city councilors in the early 2000s. The money levied then was intended to go to a conference center that was never built; they wanted a guarantee this time that the money would go where the city said it was going.

Before making a motion to hold a second reading of the ordinance, City Councilor Cindy Price assured the people who spoke that the council had heard their concerns.

"I realize that there may feel like a lack of discussion here for some of you, but we have been talking about this," she said. "We had a very long public hearing. We've had work sessions. We've been talking about this for about six months."

She said while she and the other councilors aren't anxious to raise taxes, they agree that the parks are an important amenity and are part of what makes Astoria attractive to visitors. The council voted unanimously to hold the second reading and finalize approval of the ordinance.

The proposal to increase the hotel tax came out of various discussions about how to sustain the parks department for the long term as the department struggles with increased responsibilities and higher costs but less full-time staff. The council had originally considered raising the hotel tax to 12 percent, but settled instead on 11 percent.

Feds want to give states more flexibility in protecting wild bird

Sage grouse is threatened across the West

By MATTHEW DALY
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Interior Department on Monday unveiled a plan to protect the threatened sage grouse that gives Western states greater flexibility to allow mining, logging and other economic development where it now is prohibited.

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke announced the strategy for the ground-dwelling bird that has suffered a dramatic population decline across its 11-state range, which includes Oregon. Zinke insisted that the federal government and the states can work together to protect the sage grouse and its habitat while not slowing economic growth and job creation.

While the federal government has a responsibility under the Endangered Species Act to protect the bird, officials also have an obligation "to be a good neighbor and a good partner," Zinke said. The new plan ensures that conservation efforts "do not impede local economic opportunities," he said.

The plan comes after a 60-day review Zinke ordered in June of a 2015 plan imposed by the Obama administration. The plan set land-use policies across the popular game-bird's 11-state range intended to keep it off the federal endangered species list.

Mining companies, ranchers and governors in some Western states — especially Utah, Idaho and Nevada — said the plan ordered by former Interior Secretary Sally Jewell would impede oil and gas drilling and other economic activity.

Environmental groups said Jewell's plan did not do enough



AP Photo/Cathleen Allison

A sage grouse is seen near Fallon, Nev., in 2005. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke says a new federal plan to protect the threatened sage grouse will better align with conservation efforts in 11 Western states where the bird lives.

to protect the sage grouse from extinction.

The ground-dwelling sage grouse, long associated with the American West, has lengthy, pointed tail feathers and is known for the male's elaborate courtship display in which air sacs in the neck are inflated to make a popping sound.

Millions once roamed

Millions of sage grouse once roamed the West but development, livestock grazing and an invasive grass that encourages wildfires has reduced the bird's population to fewer than 500,000 across 11 states from California to the Dakotas.

States affected by the plan are California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

Zinke said in June that "state agencies are really at the forefront of efforts to maintain healthy fish and wildlife populations" across the country, adding that the Trump administration is committed to ensuring that state voices are heard in decisions affecting land use and

wildlife management.

In particular, Zinke said he has received complaints from several Western governors that the Obama administration ignored or minimized their concerns as the 2015 sage-grouse plan was developed. Republican governors in Idaho, Utah and Nevada want more flexibility and have urged that conservation efforts focus on bird populations in a particular state rather than on habitat management that frequently results in land-use restrictions.

The new plan is intended to provide flexibility to states instead of a "one-size-fits-all solution," Zinke said.

On the other side, Democratic Gov. John Hickenlooper of Colorado and Republican Gov. Matt Mead of Wyoming told Zinke earlier this year they opposed any changes that would move "from a habitat-management model to one

that sets population objectives for the states."

"Wholesale changes to the land-use plans are likely not necessary at this time," they wrote in a May 26 letter.

Task force

Hickenlooper and Mead co-chair a federal-state sage grouse task force that worked to develop the 2015 plan, which was backed by more than \$750 million in commitments from the government and outside groups to conserve land and restore the bird's historic range.

Nada Culver, a senior policy official at The Wilderness Society, denounced the new plan as an attempt to "abandon habitat protection for unfettered oil and gas development" in the West that "puts the entire landscape at risk."

The 60-day review "shows a callous disregard for nearly a decade of research and collaborative work by states and agencies, while ignoring the Western communities who weighed in with millions of comments and who simply want to see the (Obama-era) plans left to work as intended," Culver said.

Kathleen Sgamma, president of the Western Energy Alliance, a Colorado-based group that represents the oil and natural gas industry, said offering states more flexibility was a step in the right direction but did not go far enough to rewrite the 2015 plan.

"Until Interior bites the bullet and starts amending these plans, it's merely postponing a real, needed correction," she said, adding that the revised sage grouse plan "will cause needless job loss and loss of economic opportunities" throughout the West.

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