

Astoria public works director set to retire

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Daily Astorian

Astoria's public works director announced his retirement this morning after 35 years with the city.

Ken Cook started out as a utility worker in 1982 and worked his way up through the ranks. He has served as the public works director for the past 11 years, overseeing a busy department responsible for water treatment and distribution, waste water collection and treatment, street maintenance, engineering services, fleet maintenance for city vehicles, forestry management, city facility maintenance, trolley line maintenance, and mapping with geographic information systems.

Cook also frequently stepped in as acting city manager when City Manager Brett Estes was out of town or otherwise unavailable.

His retirement is effective Nov. 30.

"I'm leaving at a time when the department is at

its best and I credit past and present employees for getting us here," Cook said in a statement. "So many individuals along the way have worked really hard and have been dedicated to this city. I am confident that this is the right time for me to make this transition."

In past interviews, Cook praised his team, saying he is proud to work with such a collaborative group.

"We are grateful to Ken for his long service to the Public Works Department," Estes said. "He has led the department in a direction that has allowed the city of Astoria to evolve. We wish him the best in his retirement."

The announcement comes on the heels of two other department heads leaving: Astoria Police Chief Brad Johnston retired abruptly in August and, last week, Community Development Director Kevin Cronin put in his two weeks' notice.

Cook's retirement announcement, however, had been anticipated for some time.

Dam: Water district can't remove dam without a city permit

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"One of the beauties of having a model is you can do all sorts of things without actually physically going out and doing that," said Shane Cline, the levee safety program manager for the Army Corps in Portland. "So I think it is possible to develop a model that represents a condition with the tide gates on."



Joshua Bessax/The Daily Astorian

Warrenton wants more study of the Eighth Street Dam before reconsidering a proposal by the Skipanon Water Control District to remove the aging structure.

intended as a fresh start after a \$1.2 million deal to remove the dam and construct a single-lane bridge over the river for city emergency access dissolved last year into a political and legal confrontation.

While Balensifer and Commissioner Tom Dyer pressed for a new study on the dam that might reassure residents concerned about flooding, water district board members defended previous studies that found that removing the dam would not significantly increase flooding.

"What I'm saying is it doesn't hurt to be certain," Dyer said. "And we're never going to be 100 percent."

Tessa Scheller, the chairwoman of the water district's board, said there is no evidence the dam has ever worked as intended. She said the structure — originally built for a 10-year flood, then later downgraded as protection for a two-year flood — actually poses a flood risk to property owners by trapping water upriver. "It floods us," she said. "The Eighth Street Dam floods us. It doesn't protect us."

Warrenton, while backing off on ownership claims to the dam, has some leverage because the water district cannot remove the dam without a city permit. The water district would also likely be unable to convince previous partners — the Bonneville Power Administration and the Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce — to help finance another project unless the city was an eager participant.

"Someone's got to bend here a little bit," Bergin said.

Face-to-face meeting

Earlier Tuesday, city commissioners and water district board members met at City Hall to discuss a compromise on the dam. The work session, moderated by Clatsop County Sheriff Tom Bergin, was



Photos by Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Lead Dispatcher Jennifer Peden, left, keeps a close eye on her computer screens during a recent shift at the Astoria 911 Dispatch.

Dispatch: 400 overtime hours logged in July

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Operations supervisor

The assessment, based largely on interviews with staff, found that Johnston would often micromanage Rusiecki without providing actual training or mentoring. Dispatchers raised concerns about Rusiecki's communication style while saying he could occasionally be "steam-rolled" by an outspoken subordinate.

"We've tried to open the lines of communications better," said Rusiecki, a 19-year veteran with the police department who speaks in a succinct, serious manner and often exudes a dry sense of humor.

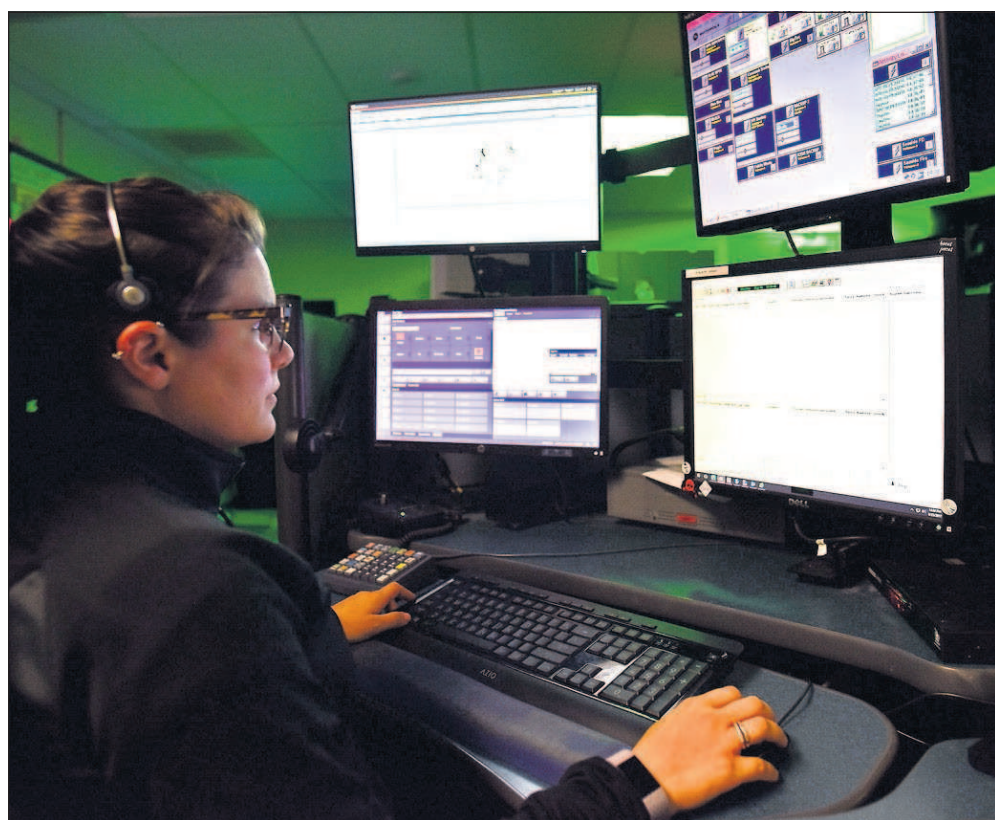
Rusiecki had attempted to address the problem for months by advocating for an operations supervisor position. The supervisor would oversee the day-to-day operations of dispatchers by handling schedules and providing oversight, guidance and accountability.

He or she would report to Rusiecki, who would then have time to perform external duties such as managing direction of cellular traffic and coordinating with the public safety agencies that utilize the dispatch center. The freedom would allow him to effectively execute a full-time job while dispatchers' needs are satisfactorily met, Rusiecki said.

Though Rusiecki had requested the creation of the position months ago, it was barely addressed by Johnston, the report found. The police department opened the application process soon after his departure and are considering eight candidates, some of whom live locally. Interviews were conducted last week and the position will likely be filled in a month or two.

Long shifts

Dispatchers often work 10-hour shifts during which they handle numerous calls



Candace Pozdolski, lead dispatcher at the Astoria 911 Dispatch, closely monitors her computer screens during a recent shift at the facility.

and constantly divert their eyes between four computer monitors. Green lighting was even installed inside the dispatch center recently to counteract the visual strain.

"This is the ultimate customer service job," Lead Dispatcher Jennifer Peden said. "You can quietly make a difference that no one sees. That's important, and I like that."

After questioning 911 callers, dispatchers then decide what level of priority the call receives and which available officer or agency will respond.

"They truly are the gateway for people accessing public safety services," Rusiecki said.

This year has been more stressful than usual.

The city has allocated 11 positions in the dispatch center, including nine dispatchers. In July alone, typically one of the busiest times of the year for 911 centers, the six dispatchers on staff at the time

logged 400 overtime hours.

Since then, another dispatcher has been hired, and overtime hours were cut below 100 in August. One more dispatcher is undergoing background checks, and just one more position will need to be filled after that.

"We've been short people before. We'll be short people again," Rusiecki said. "Currently we're in the uptick of the cycle. It's not as if Astoria is unique."

External factor

An external factor adding to dispatchers' strain is the growing number of calls this year. The most recent data reveals calls have already surpassed last year's totals.

Rusiecki pointed to a larger homeless population, more road traffic, easier cell-phone access and more medical emergencies as possible reasons, but the police department will not know for sure until its annual report is

released next year.

"I can't put a finger on why we've seen an uptick in calls," Lead Dispatcher Candace Pozdolski said. "I just know we have."

Rusiecki said he is proud of the performance of dispatchers who have trudged forward despite management issues, staffing shortages and higher service demands. As operations at the center slowly begin to normalize, he said he hopes to provide more training opportunities for dispatchers who he said will have ample opportunities for career advancement.

"They're highly dedicated, highly motivated. Regardless of what's going on external to the center, they're going to do the best job possible" Rusiecki said. "It's a stressful job as it is. Having the additional burden of command problems just aggravated that, but now with Chief Spalding on board, we're looking ahead, not back."

Strickland: Governor's office invited Knappa mom

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D-Oregon, and Oregon's U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley.

Opportunities for political advocacy came to Strickland as she was in the early stages of grieving her son's death. Around the same time she founded Jordan's Hope, Strickland was asked to sit on a number of panels, including some organized by Wyden.

"That kind of snowballed into my political arena," she said. "I have a personal story and I talk a lot. I have a lot of thoughts."

In July, Strickland participated in a work session with the Clatsop County Board of Commissioners in which she advocated for a pilot needle exchange program. Commissioners unanimously approved the program the following month.

Her increasing political voice eventually led to the governor's office inviting her to the Sept. 19 events in Salem.

"We've been out there tell-



Submitted Photo

Gov. Kate Brown held a ceremonial signing last week for a new law intended to improve access to Naloxone and other drugs that can reverse opioid overdoses.

ing my story," Strickland said. "It puts a face to it. If something comes to me and I agree with it, I'll say something."

Strickland said she was encouraged by the task force's

diversity of expertise — lawmakers, doctors and medical professionals. Still, though, Strickland and her organization plan to continue pushing for additional resources and

treatment that could curb the opioid epidemic.

"We didn't get here overnight," she said. "We're not going to get out of it overnight either."