

Underground: 'It's going to be millions of dollars'

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Underground

If you could slice a street in half and view the bones of a chairwall, the name would immediately become clear. In a cross-section view, the structure looks like a chair that begins directly below sidewalk curbs. Sand fills the empty space between opposing chairwalls.

For each chairwall section, a wall drops down underground — the back of the chair. Another section extends out. This is the seat of the chair. Then another wall drops from the end of this seat. The legs of the chair.

Climb into the tunnels with Public Works Superintendent Ken Nelson and he will emphasize the danger. These are small, enclosed spaces. The air could turn dangerous quickly. At any time, anyone could flush anything into the sewer system. If the ground started to shake, it's the last place he would want to be. When he goes underground, he keeps a small gas detector on hand and is in constant communication with another Public Works employee outside.

On a recent afternoon, Nelson took Astoria city councilors Cindy Price and Bruce Jones down into a section of tunnel near City Hall, between two chairwall segments. Gravel crunched under-



Public Works Superintendent Ken Nelson, second from left, leads a tour for city officials of a short tunnel system under the streets of Astoria on Monday.

foot as they ducked under a low, looping wire. Their hard hats knocked gently against the top of the tunnel. Their flashlights illuminated a crumpled can of organic grape soda.

At a work session last month, councilors learned that the city is in the middle of talks with the Oregon Department of Transportation for regular inspection services that

will eventually inform a strategy for shared responsibility of chairwall maintenance.

Public Works staff hope the structures will be included on the National Bridge Inventory, which could make them eligible for outside funding sources — an important point since the cost of repairing and, inevitably, replacing the chairwalls will be well beyond what the

city can afford.

"(There's) not even a ballpark," City Engineer Jeff Harrington said of the costs of future replacement work. "It's going to be millions of dollars."

Historic legacy

Before the chairwalls and tunnels were built, the streets and buildings downtown were

raised above a tidal flat and the tides by wooden beams and driven timber pilings. Most of the buildings were timber as well.

On Dec. 7, 1922, a massive fire swept through the city. Thanks to Astoria's wooden underbelly, the fire was able to spread quickly, almost out of sight until it soared into the buildings above. Buildings were blown up with dynamite in an attempt to check the flames.

"This is not Seattle," said local historian and preservationist John Goodenberger, referencing that city's famous underground network of passageways and basements that contain storefronts and sidewalks, remnants from when Seattle rebuilt after its own disastrous fire in 1889.

"Yes, we did raise the downtown, but it's not like you're going and seeing former storefronts and rooms," Goodenberger said. "You're seeing a structural system."

Homeless people have since used these tunnels as hideouts and bedrooms. Even further back, the daughter of A.G. Spexarth, a prominent Astoria businessman in the late 1800s and early 1900s, remembered a trip she took with her father through the underground. Spexarth dipped under the sidewalk to adjust a client's sewing machine, she wrote. Father and daughter

walked past cramped, underground rooms where Chinese families lived. The stale air smelled of incense, dried fish and sewage.

Woven in with other myths about the tunnels — giant spiders, giant rats, a forbidden and hidden shadow city — is the belief that people used them to shanghai sailors. Though shanghaiing was certainly an Astoria legacy, local historians say there is no reason to think the tunnels were ever used for this purpose.

Today, the city's underground mostly consists of narrow, confined areas, pipelines, spiderwebs and litter. There's some rude graffiti, a quick sprawl of words etched in quick sweeps of a spray paint can. Entrances are sealed off behind fences, gates and walls.

Goodenberger says it's helpful to think about the era when the chairwalls and tunnels were built.

"After the fire, people were, rightly, afraid of another fire," he said.

The structures, built amid setbacks and squabbles, allowed pipelines to be stowed safely underground in a sort of vault and established a new foundation.

"All these ethnic groups were colliding," Goodenberger said. "And we had to come together and rebuild downtown under the greatest of odds."

Audit: New data system will centralize investigations of abuse, neglect

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case manager performance than on the welfare of people receiving services, auditors said.

"There is no aspect of the quality assurance process or consumer monitoring or assessment reports that looks at consumers' well-being," auditors wrote.

Auditors also recommended that the state's Home

Care Commission work with the union representing home-care workers — the Service Employees International Union — to establish basic training requirements.

Home-care workers are given an orientation, and the commission offers voluntary training, but home-care workers are not required to undergo any formal training.

And auditors found that case managers had "exces-

sive" workloads that include duties that some other states don't have their case managers handle. For example, some case managers are required to do time-consuming annual verifications of whether patients qualify for the CEP program and other government benefits like food stamps.

The Department of Human Services says it is starting to reassign eligibility determina-

tion to other staff as part of a pilot program to redesign case manager duties.

Auditors also noted that in recent years, the agency has not filled all of the case manager positions funded by the Legislature.

Department of Human Services Director Fariborz Pakseresh wrote in a response to auditors that the agency was working to improve training for case managers, comply with federal requirements regarding

contact between case managers and clients, and enhance the agency's data collection and analysis.

The Aging and People with Disabilities division of the department is also implementing a new data system to centralize investigations of abuse and neglect. It is expected to get fully under way in January.

The federal Older Americans Act requires the state to investigate complaints at

licensed care facilities through its long-term care ombudsman, but Oregon law doesn't include in-home care complaints within the duties of the ombudsman.

The Legislature would have to change the law and provide funding for the ombudsman to serve in-home care patients, auditors said.

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