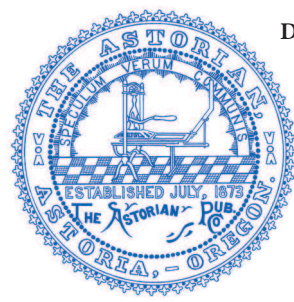


THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873



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OUR VIEW

Taxpayers deserve answers from the Port on Riverwalk Inn

Clatsop County taxpayers deserve answers about a \$4 million verdict against the Port of Astoria, but they've heard mostly silence except from the jury and judge.

And what little they've heard isn't good.

The verdict, another black eye for the Port, was the result of a breach of contract lawsuit filed by a Portland hotelier, Param Hotel Corp., which sought in 2015 to take over the lease of the Astoria Riverwalk Inn on Port property. Although Port Executive Director Jim Knight was dismissed as an individual defendant, the jury's verdict found Knight knowingly made fraudulent misrepresentations to Param's owner, Ganesh Sonpatki.

The Riverwalk Inn at the time was being operated by Brad Smithart, who was heavily indebted, and Param was negotiating to take over the lease. Testimony showed the Port Commission approved contracting with Param, but the lease wasn't executed. The Port eventually terminated Smithart's lease and awarded it on a short-term basis to a local firm, Astoria Hospitality Ventures, which had been formed by Chester Trabucco and Astoria native William Orr, a brother-in-law of then Port Commissioner Stephen Fulton.

During testimony Knight said terminating Smithart's lease before the deal with Param closed was necessary because of the rundown state of the hotel, bad operations, Smithart's growing debts and his pursuit of other suitors behind Sonpatki's back.

Afterward, however, at a hearing to determine whether Param should be granted a seven-year lease for the hotel or get up to the \$4 million in damages, Clatsop County Circuit Court Judge Dawn McIntosh said she "did not find the testimony of Mr. Knight to be particularly credible." Param's attorney has indicated the hotelier would opt to assume the lease in November 2018, after Astoria Hospitality's Ventures' term expires.

Following the verdict, there wasn't much fallout:

- The Port's attorney instructed commissioners and staff to remain quiet while future legal strategy is determined.
- Port Commission President Frank Spence said he supports Knight "wholeheartedly. I have no doubts whatsoever on his capability."
- Spence placed much of the blame for the verdict on Fulton, who publicly recused himself during Port discussions on the Riverwalk Inn, but testimony showed he was in contact during that time behind the scenes with Trabucco through text messages — some of which didn't show up on his phone but were found on Trabucco's. Fulton lost re-election in May.
- At its only public meeting since the verdict, Port commissioners did not discuss the verdict but gave Knight a vote of confidence by inking him to a three-year contract extension with a 4 percent pay increase.

Taxpayers deserve more answers than just statements of support and blame. There are questions that need explanations:

- Will the Port appeal and how will it cover its legal costs?
- How will it move forward with a relationship with Param as a result of the more-than-rocky start?
- What will happen to Trabucco's and Orr's vision for a Marina Village at the Uniontown property with the hotel as a centerpiece after Astoria Hospitality Ventures relinquishes operation of the facility?

A huge legal battle was fought over the hotel property and it could be an amazing asset for the Port and city. It's vital that relations be rebuilt with Param in order to arrive at the best possible outcome for the local economy and the aesthetics of the waterfront.

Importantly, commissioners and staff should also be discussing what lessons were learned to prevent future legal mistakes in contract negotiations, and what steps can be taken to raise the confidence of businesses who contract with the Port. Knight, who has gained the community's trust as a low-key, sensible manager during his tenure, should address the questions with the commission and staff, and with the public to boost that confidence.

That will take more than silence.

LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to The Daily Astorian.

Letters should be fewer than 350 words and must include the writer's name, address and phone numbers. You will be contacted to confirm authorship.

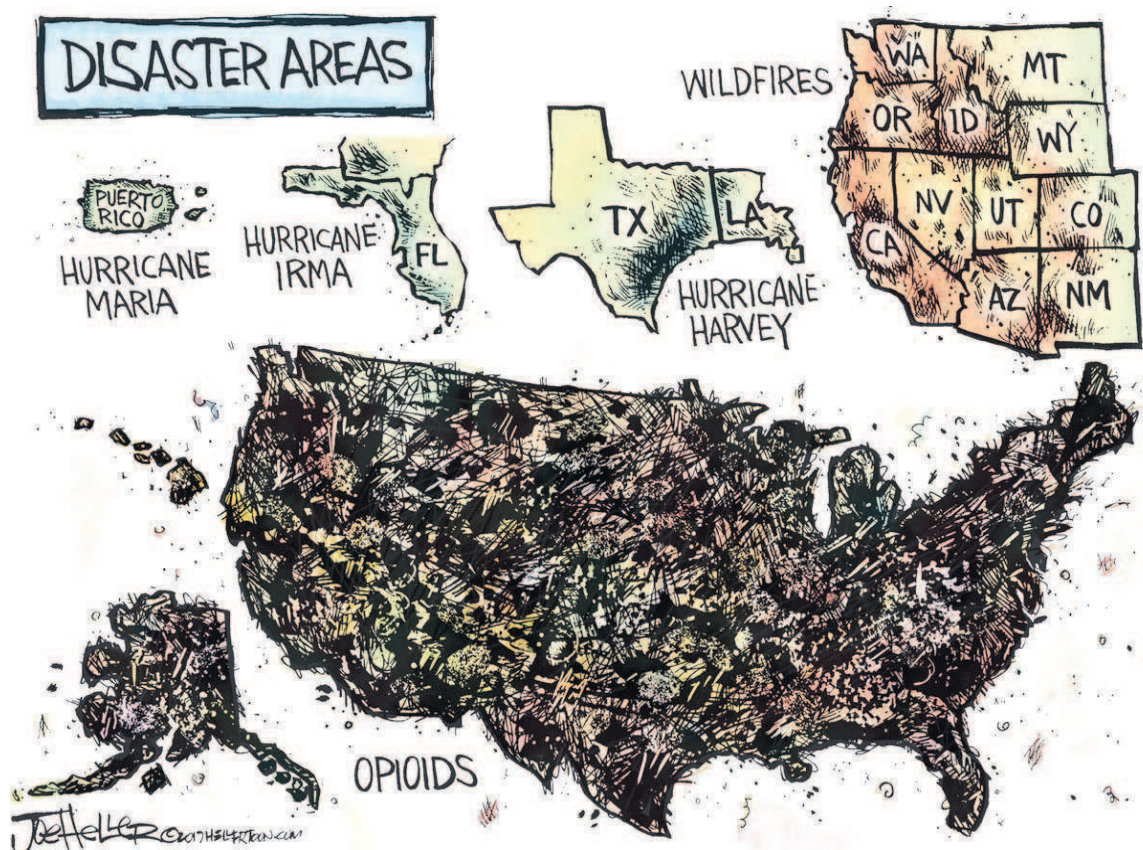
All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and, on occasion, factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are printed each month.

Letters written in response to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and, rather than

mentioning the writer by name, should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil and people should be referred to in a respectful manner.

Submissions may be sent in any of these ways:

E-mail to editor@dailyastorian.com; online at www.dailyastorian.com; delivered to the Astorian offices at 949 Exchange St. and 1555 N. Roosevelt in Seaside or by mail to Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 210, Astoria, OR 97103.



SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

Why every child needs a library card

By R.J. MARX
The Daily Astorian

Failure to publish legitimate news" was the headline of an editorial in a January 1943 edition of the Seaside Signal. The headline came after reports from Portland that "that's where they shoot people on the beach." The report



came after a report from the Army and the FBI that a man had been founded mortally wounded on the beach by a sentry "after an exchange of shots."

A clarification didn't come for a week.

The editor lamented the attempt to get a news story "is like playing a game of ring around the rosie by long distance."

That year Gearhart and Seaside considered a merger of the two cities, with the goal of merging police, fire and water supplies.

That year was also the last year that Clatsop County directed funds to local libraries for more than 70 years, until the Clatsop County Board of Commissioners delivered \$5,000 for Libraries Reading Outreach Clatsop County in 2015.

"When the county gave money, that was the first time since 1943 that they supported library services," Seaside Library Director Esther Moberg said.

Collaborative effort

Such musings may seem aimless, but the possibilities of historical comparison and analysis are directly dependent on our access to information.

To think that huge swaths of our population are not just underserved, but unserved by our local libraries, stretches the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

In Seaside, 30 percent of residents have no access to broadband internet.

"There is a lot of poverty and a lot of politics in Clatsop County," Jane Tucker, former director of the Astoria Library, said at an October visit by U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici to the Seaside Library.

Bonomici responded to an invite by Moberg and other county librarians seeking federal support for the library reading outreach program, focused on low-income youth in rural areas not served by Seaside, Astoria or Warrenton libraries. The program is a collaborative effort between the three public libraries, the Northwest Regional Education Service District and the county.

A card for all kids

The program began eight years ago when Seaside librarian Reita Fackerell, Tucker and others approached the state to see if there were ways all county kids could receive a library card.

"At the time, if you lived in the city, you could get one — if you didn't, you couldn't," Tucker recalled. "And if parents couldn't afford a card, the children didn't get one either."

During summer break, they didn't even have the option of using a school library.

The program started in Seaside and Astoria and spread to Warrenton with state funding, based on the goals of being "scalable, replicable,



R.J. Marx/The Daily Astorian

Seaside Library Director Esther Moberg; former Astoria Library Director Jane Tucker; Warrenton Library Director Nettie Calog; Astoria Library Director Jimmy Pearson; ROCC outreach coordinator Suzanne Harold; Seaside children's librarian Marian Rose; and U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici.

creative, sustainable," Tucker said.

Today, students from Jewell, Knappa and Hamlet can now participate.

Astoria's Jimmy Pearson said he is working with kids at Tongue Point to provide library privileges.

"They need a card as well," Pearson, a retired Army sergeant, said. "That's part of their growth and development and the ability to read and read freely, which is what I love. The other side of that means you cannot read at all."

"We want every child to have that barrier removed," added Moberg. "We feel getting those books in the hands of kids is really important."

Today, the situation of not having a library card unless your parents can afford it is past, Tucker said.

Every child who walks in gets a library card. Courier services between schools and libraries aid the return of library materials for rural children and a countywide summer reading program includes satellite school libraries open in the summer months.

Results are in the numbers. Seaside kids logged 1,538 hours of reading this summer. The three libraries issued 2,091 library cards over the course of five years. More than 21,000 resources were circulated in 2014-15.

According to a library survey, 75 percent of children participating say they have read more books and 55 percent enjoy reading more than they did before they got their card.

Another 47 percent think they are doing better in school and 49 percent "feel better about themselves."

Funding needs

Of the county's library outreach budget total for the current year of \$25,000, the county pitches in about \$5,000.

A state Ready to Read grant brings in \$3,500, with another \$8,000 coming from local fundraisers.

Funds go to a contractor to run the program, supplies, and fees, all with the goal of the 2,900 children unserved by libraries in the county.

The first five years of the program were fully funded by a Library Services and Technology Act grant. The program transitioned to local community support after Libraries ROCC formed as a 501(c)3 in 2015.

Additional funding comes with events like the annual fundraiser at the convention center, including the sale of homemade "little free libraries."

Intergovernmental agreements

help the county leverage more money from the state and to apply for grant funding.

More funding brings more program options, including better delivery services for hard-to-reach areas.

"In 2017, it is hard to understand there are still some places without access," Bonamici said.

Bonomici said federal funds for infrastructure upgrades could include internet access to rural communities.

'Challenging time'

Acknowledging "it's a challenging time with government funding right now," Bonamici said she plans to explore funding possibilities at the federal level.

Bonomici serves on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, and is especially interested in early learning.

"It's such a good investment to make sure kids are reading," she said.

Reading helps kids be more prepared, successful and reduces the dropout rate, she said, ultimately contributing to the economy.

"It requires long-term thinking — which is sometimes in short supply in my world," Bonamici said.

The Trump administration's budget proposed at the beginning of the year would have eliminated funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities, Bonamici said, but the House of Representatives almost fully restored it in their appropriations bill, which has not yet been signed into law.

Trump's budget also would have eliminated funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services, which includes the Library Services and Technology Act. That funding was restored by the House in July.

Since budget negotiations in Washington, D.C., are ongoing, funding levels for the coming year won't be known until December.

But this is a long-term mission.

Preserving the record — and making it available to all — has never been more important. Reading Outreach begins in every home and spreads from the county to our highest levels of our civic life.

Seventy-five years from now, when a researcher goes to the library, they may look at this moment in time, just as we did when turning back to 1943.

That is, if there are still libraries. R.J. Marx is The Daily Astorian's South County reporter and editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette.