

OPINION

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OUR VIEW

Loss of magazine signals bellwether change

For all who care about the fishing industry and Columbia River heritage, the end of the Gillnetter is a sad occasion marking the close of an era (see “Magazine documented the life of fishermen,” The Daily Astorian, Jan. 8).

Combined with the atrophy of the Columbia River Fishermen’s Protective Union and the death Jan. 8 of legendary Ilwaco fish processor Pierre Marchand Jr., the loss of fishing’s longtime trade publication signals a bellwether change.

Run from 2003 to 2015 by fisherman John Westerholm, the Gillnetter with luck may eventually publish a valedictory edition ending a proud history that started in 1969 under the equally dedicated Don Riswick. Westerholm, Riswick and many dedicated contributors, readers and advertisers were united by a belief that strong advocacy for gillnetting meant equally strong support for salmon conservation and recovery. The end of the Gillnetter and deep troubles for the industry for which it advocated removes a key ally for Columbia salmon and the whole biological/economic web that relies on them.

In addition to being terrifically nice men, Westerholm and Riswick were united in using their publication as a way to nudge political decision makers and to preserve fundamental knowledge about river traditions and history. Every edition provided both an update on the pressing issues of the day and a concise course in subjects as diverse as snag diving and double-ended boat building. Imbued with knowledge that can really only be acquired by spending long nights out on the river in the company of earlier generations of fishermen, they were able to give all local people a small taste of the satisfactions, mysteries and worries of the fishing life. Even



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian
Jon Westerholm looks over historical artifacts documenting the history of the Columbia River fishery at the old office of the Columbia River Fishermen’s Protective Union.

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in this era that is far less fishing-dependent, that education served to more closely bind us to the Columbia and all the diverse species that rely on it.

Gillnetting is blasted by those who fail to understand how it evolved into being a reasonably selective means of harvesting hatchery-origin salmon. Others use it as a convenient boogeyman for fundraising, while for some

it is merely unwelcome competition for salmon they would prefer to catch themselves. Without a doubt, most residents of Astoria, Warrenton, Ilwaco and Chinook recognize the huge economic importance of sports fishing. But we also wish for a continuing role for commercial gillnetting as a source of income for our neighbors and of delicious salmon for our dinner tables.

The Columbia River Fishermen’s Protective Union was, for more than a century, a powerful and irreplaceable voice for the commercial fishery. It looked after fishermen in an array of ways, including making certain of decent burials and negotiating prices with the Columbia estuary’s once-mighty cadre of salmon processors. Now, with fishing boats confined to a small number of designated off-channel sites where net-pen salmon have been raised specifically to be commercially netted, the union’s reasons for existence have frayed and faded — a victim of dams, urban politics and changing circumstances.

Still, union president Darren Crookshanks deserves support in his quest to keep the organization alive. Not only does our area still derive real benefits from the commercial salmon fishing that endures, but salmon benefit from hardworking people having a real stake in their survival, people for whom they are much more than a hobby.

The death of Pierre Marchand, longtime operator of Jessie’s Ilwaco Fish Co., on some level almost seems comparable to the extinction of salmon runs. He was such a colorful figure on the Ilwaco waterfront for so long, his death shifts the earth on its axis a bit. Son of Al and Jessie Marchand, who bought their photogenic red waterfront processing plant in 1962, Pierre sold the operation in January 2014. But despite failing health, he remained a credible advocate for fishing and channel maintenance.

Marchand, Westerholm and our entire commercial fishing community represent a key part of the personality of this place. We must all do our best to cherish and encourage what is left.

GUEST COLUMN

Housing for all, not the lucky few

Astoria, rightly so, has had a housing goal for the past three years in response to one of the worst housing crises the city has seen since World War II. The lack of housing options across all income levels — not just workforce housing — is abysmal and has been well-chronicled by The Daily Astorian.

The response from the city has been tepid, if not ineffective. After completing a housing study in August 2015 that identified the problem and suggested solutions, the City Council approved a basic strategy a few months later. The strategy blended actions by the private and public sectors for increasing the supply of affordable housing, but very few things have been accomplished.

As the former community development director and author of the strategy, I awaited direction from the council, but received little constructive feedback and no consensus on how to proceed, despite the options clearly laid out on the table.

On the plus side, a vacant house registry was established where investors and buyers could review a list of blighted homes. This simple but transparent tool has led to multiple homes being renovated without fanfare. Secondly, an extensive list of recommendations was proposed to reduce red tape and increase flexibility in local development regulations, but the council got cold feet and refused to even bring the proposal that was approved by the Planning Commission. Why not discuss the concepts in the open?

This approach is a proven solution driven by the private sector that doesn’t cost the city a dime, or require any subsidy, and would actually lead to more housing units in areas of the city where reasonable housing development should happen inside the city limits where utilities and services are readily available.

Instead the council feared a backlash from NIMBY constituents more concerned about precious views and preserving old Astoria in amber.

To the council’s credit, they did approve more flexible regulations to encourage new “granny flats” (accessory dwelling units), which has led to more applications

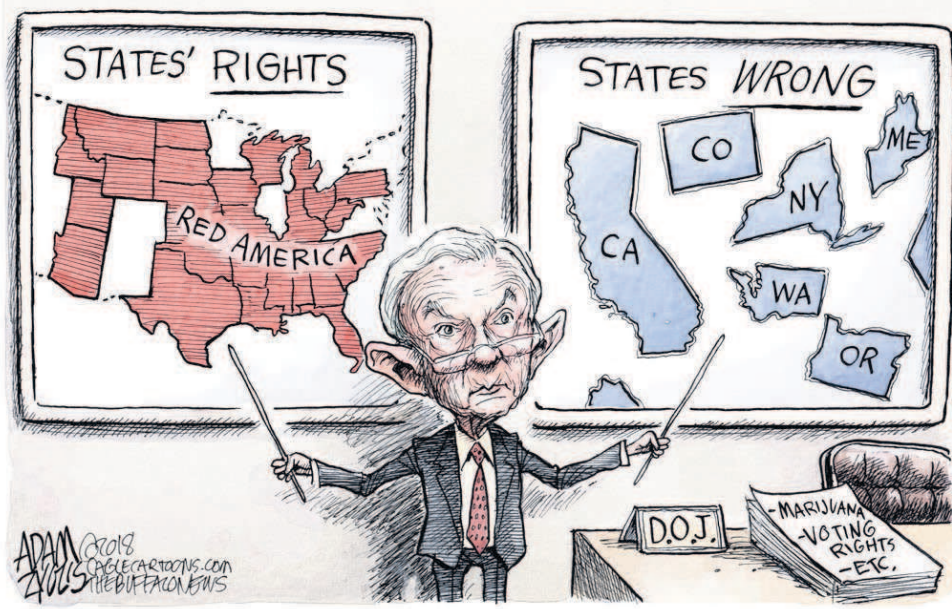
since adoption in April. Unfortunately, a part of the proposal that was deleted from consideration was the inclusion of “tiny homes” that could be placed on a property with an existing single-family home. In fact, a community partnership was developed to pilot a tiny home on city property, but the proposal never saw the light of day because the enabling legislation failed. The state Legislature recently passed a law that would allow tiny homes, but local restrictions could nullify this new law.

The only other accomplishment from the original housing strategy was making application through the Community Action Team for federal housing funds to renovate a limited number of single-family homes for income-qualified homeowners. The jury is still out whether the city will receive the funds, but it’s a positive step for preservation of existing housing — not new housing, which is what Astoria needs.

As a youth soccer coach, I preach to my players about making the most of your opportunities. This lesson rings true with our housing situation. For example, a construction excise tax which would assess a very reasonable 1 percent fee on commercial construction was brought forward for consideration, but was never requested to be presented as an ordinance to implement the new program. The additional funds could be allocated to reduce the inventory of vacant homes, provide a locally controlled “gap financing” tool to help get projects off the ground and build sorely needed apartments in historic buildings such as the Waldorf Hotel property, Uniontown Apartments, or the old State Hotel. It could also be employed to help finance the redevelopment of Heritage Square into a gleaming, new, mixed-use building that could house dozens of new apartments, but again the track record on this project will need its own separate airing in due time.

If the city truly wants to maintain a tight urban growth boundary where development doesn’t sprawl towards our lush urban forest, then it needs to be supported in other areas inside city limits including downtown. Surely, this simple financing concept makes sense to someone looking for housing, but for some reason the concept is lost with our policymakers. I hope the council seriously reconsiders this proposal.

Class is in sessions...



The latest twist is the council is now considering new regulations to the homestay lodging businesses operating in the city that would theoretically address health and safety concerns (that have not been documented), nor would it do little to create new housing. Short-term rentals and long-term rentals are two completely different business models. One is to provide hospitality and the other is to provide habitation. The regulatory headaches and potential problems with bad renters is a hard sell for most homeowners who might consider the proposition.

For those in the short-term rental business (Airbnb), it makes total sense to have someone stay for a night or up to a few months for temporary housing of our increasingly mobile workforce. The short-term units that have come online in the last three years were never envisioned as long-term units, so to allege the Airbnb phenomenon has created a housing shortage is patently false and at best misleading. New regulations for short-term rentals will do absolutely nothing to increase our housing supply in the near term and will only exacerbate the shortage through unintended consequences in the marketplace. Ironically, short-term rental income is very often used to make repairs to existing homes that can support the build out of long-term rentals in single-family homes.

If the council is serious in its task of achieving any progress on a housing goal in 2018, why not take a leadership role, try new approaches, and stay on task. The overall fear that has beset city government from innovation is paralyzing the local marketplace from providing the necessary housing our workforce desperately needs. We ask a lot of our volunteer elected officials, but one thing we demand in a representative government model is leadership.

Staying on task has been a challenge for a council with competing priorities. No doubt it’s a tough job with no pay. However, agendas often times can be filled with issues that are not council-adopted goals or directly relate to city governance, including resolutions on liquefied natural gas, inclusivity, coal trains on the Columbia River, and — my latest favorite — pawn brokers. These distractions blunt the council’s policy agenda and reallocate valuable staff time away from the bigger-picture issues.

If the council was still on my team, I’d give them a halftime pep talk about sticking to your goals with unwavering commitment and fervor, stay on course, and don’t miss those wonderful opportunities to lead. I’m excited to see the results and the final score in the new year.

Kevin Cronin is the former community development director in Astoria.



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