



A pedestrian walks by the historic Tidal Rock in Astoria.

Photos by Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Parks: Historic designations make some sites a tougher sell

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If the City Council wants to sell the parks, Rosemary Johnson, the city's consultant and a former city planner, recommends they direct staff to begin the steps for selling Birch Field, complete a relocation and engineering evaluation for the custom house and contact adjacent property owners about Tidal Rock.

The Post Office Park is not a good candidate for sale, Johnson said. Developing it for other uses is not really feasible and there are complications because of its status as a historic site. There is also an adoption agreement between the parks department and neighboring bed-and-breakfast owners, Pam and Dave Armstrong, to maintain the site. The State Historic Preservation Office has said it would not likely support removing the park from public ownership.

The other sites are still up for debate, though. The parks department has classed them as underutilized and potentially able to be developed, Johnson wrote. She identified Birch Field as "the most feasible to sell and redevelop."

"It has no improvements on the site other than a neighborhood ball field configuration," she wrote, estimating the field could accommodate a maximum of eight single-fam-



The backstop at Birch Field in Alderbrook is the only visible evidence of the baseball diamond.

ily residential units as an outright use, or up to 16 multi-family units with conditional use approval. Given the field's proximity to four sewer outfalls, additional city stormwater treatment facilities could also be placed there.

Master plan

The parks department's 2016 master plan noted that the approximately 1-acre field

is rarely used except by neighborhood dog walkers. To sell the property, the city would need to remove the field from Astoria's list of designated city parks. Given the marshy, wet nature of the site, Johnson also advised having the Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce review Birch Field as potential wetlands.

The other sites, with their historic designations and other

factors, are a tougher sell.

The customs house site, besides featuring a historic structure with some restrictions limiting what can and cannot be done with it, also provides a cul-de-sac access for nearby houses and parking for the Columbia Field baseball field. A major city sewer line that serves a motel runs on the east side of the property. Two other nearby city sewer

lines that serve the entire city run nearby. This site could also be a good location for a stormwater treatment facility in the future, Johnson said.

Tidal Rock would likely need further historic reviews before being sold or altered because of its archaeological features. The sunken park with its namesake tidal rock, a survey monument from 1853, cannot be filled in. The his-

toric rock and the chair walls — structures that tied into tunnels for city utilities — under Marine Drive must remain visible.

Johnson said the property could be divided. The portion of the lot that does not include the historic features could be sold. But the park may be of most value to the bakery and brewery across the street.

The city has an agreement with artist, landscaper and gardener Jessica Schleif to clean up and renovate the park as well as install temporary visual art installations this year with other collaborators.

Community opposition

A number of residents publicly said they do not support the sale of park land, worrying what it means to take green spaces out of public ownership.

George "Mick" Hague, who attended meetings when the parks master plan was being developed and finalized in 2016, has said selling park land goes against what people expressed during that planning process, and against other safeguards the city has established to maintain diverse park land.

The City Council is not expected to take any formal action Wednesday, and there is not usually a public comment period included during work sessions.

Murrelets: 'The next step has to be protecting potential, future habitat so we can actually build on that habitat'

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places were designated as marbled murrelet habitat many years ago. Several spots do not appear to have been used by the birds in five or six years.

"There's no policy whether to keep or get rid of those, so now we're treating them all as occupied even though they might not be," he said.

There isn't any known marbled murrelet habitat within the Lewis & Clark Timberlands managed by GreenWood Resources, but these lands are adjacent to the state land that does contain nesting sites.

In the days before the Fish and Wildlife commission's decision, Mark Morgans, area manager of the Lewis & Clark Timberlands, said an uplisting would be premature at best considering the research Oregon State University is conducting on the bird.

"I believe that a change in the status of the marbled murrelet from threatened to endangered is not warranted because the science on the marbled murrelet is unclear," he said.

He pointed to data that suggests murrelet populations in Oregon may be stable and improving and forest habitat may not be the limiting factor.

Marbled murrelets spend their time on coastal waters and in bays but nest inland. They appear to prefer trees in old-growth and mature forests, habitat that has become scarce. The birds are federally listed as threatened. In recent years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has predicted recovery of the species could take decades given the marbled murrelet's naturally low reproductive rate and continued loss of nesting habitat.

Near Arch Cape, a proposed RV park across the highway from Arcadia Beach has faced criticism from environmental groups who fear the development threatens marbled murrelet habitat.

For Nadia Gardner, an environmental scientist and North Coast resident, it is crucial to look at both of the environments where the murrelets spend their time — the forest and the ocean.

"We have the current occupied nesting habitat and old growth — which is very little at this point — on public lands and not enough to sustain the population in the long term," she said. "So the next step has to be protecting potential, future habitat so we can actually build on that habitat and in the long term there will be more, not less."

She thinks it's important to keep climate change in mind, pointing to shifts in the ocean that could result in a collapse in the food chain.

"That alone could kill them off," she said. "The only thing we can do as a state is on the land."

Though Oregon's version of the Endangered Species Act only applies to property owned by the state government, some private forestland owners worry the uplisting will effectively move Oregon toward more stringent regulations for all forests.

Bruce Buckmaster, a fish and wildlife commissioner from Astoria who voted against the change, said he shared their

concerns.

"They're old enough to know it's an ironclad law they will undoubtedly be affected," Buckmaster said.

Commissioners originally considered ordering the agency to develop survival guidelines without uplisting the species.

This proposal, set forth by Commissioner Bob Webber, would have had the effect of creating a roadmap for the murrelet's recovery that wouldn't be legally enforceable.

However, the motion resulted in 3-3 deadlock, after which Webber changed his mind and supported the uplisting.

"I stated my preference but my least favorite option would be to do nothing," said Webber, an attorney.

The federal government listed marbled murrelets as threatened in 1992 and Oregon extended the same status to the birds three years later.

Washington state and California consider the species endangered.

Perkowski reported from Portland.

Taxi: Favorite destinations are Indian Head Beach and Tillamook Head

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The Thornburgs' three children, Ray, Lila and Kiana, attend Seaside schools.

As full as their schedule is, Jennifer Thornburg still manages to fill in as needed, either in the phone dispatch rotation or as a driver.

She loves the tourists: "They're super-fun to deal with."

People come from all over the place, she said, with a lot of visitors from British Columbia, along with "a lot of hikers, bikers and campers."

Favorite destinations are Indian Head Beach and Tillamook Head. "It's on the to-do lists. Either drop off or pick

up. In the summer it's kind of crazy because the road to get up through Ecola State Park is just busy. You know the summers here are crazy!"

Part of their mission is to give back to the community, with special fares for the elderly and \$2 rides to area food banks.

The Thornburgs team with Providence Seaside Hospital and Project Access NOW, the nonprofit service connecting uninsured patients with medical care.

"The police department works directly with us for whatever they need. We're here to service our community and be ambassadors. It's really important to do good for the community."

'We're here to service our community and be ambassadors.'

Jennifer Thornburg

Taxi driver, who runs a taxi service with her husband Ray