

OPINION

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THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873

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OUR VIEW

What gives us the right?

Over the next week, this newspaper will turn over much of its editorial space to endorsements of candidates for local, state and federal offices.

We'd like to take the opportunity, before you read those endorsements, to explain why we do it.

In this day and age — when everyone has an opinion and everyone else is going to hear about it — many newspapers are rethinking the endorsement. They can be contentious. Almost every election season we hear from someone who so heartily disagrees with our recommendation that they cancel their subscription.

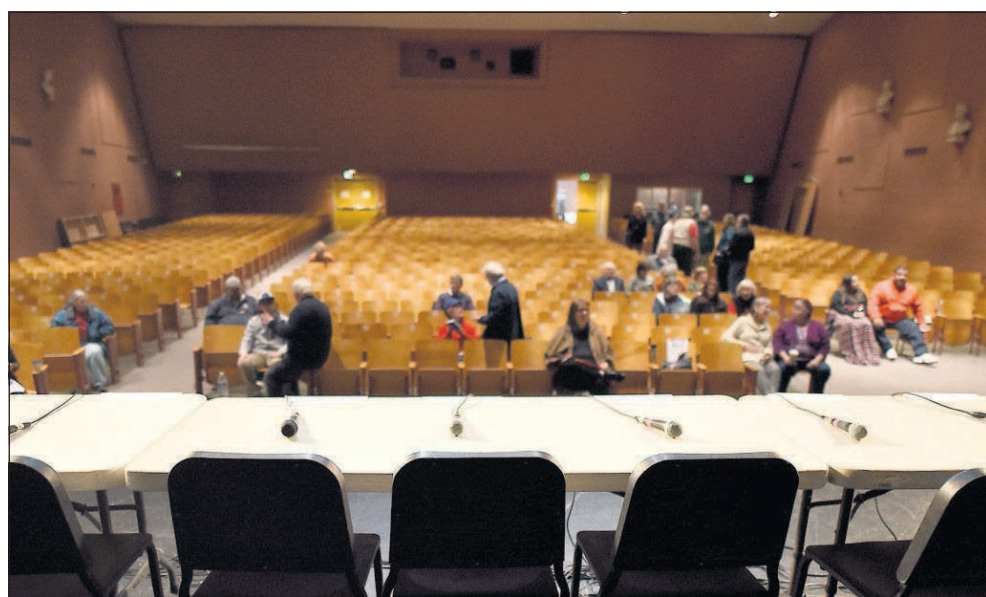
And they are especially fraught in local races, when we're not arguing about dense economic policy or the far-away concerns of peace in the Middle East. We're talking about people who we see on a regular basis in our jobs and on our sidewalks. And who we will likely have to work with if they win, whether we endorse them or not.

Yet we feel that as an editorial board, we can offer some helpful insight to

voters. We have the opportunity to discuss issues with and ask questions of all of the candidates running in local elections. We sat down with all eight Clatsop County commissioner candidates, all five state House District 32 candidates and all six 1st Congressional District candidates. The discussions were frank and fruitful.

We believe that has some value. And we'd like to tell you what we heard, thought and learned. You are certainly welcome to disregard our advice. But we do our best to present an independent summation of our meetings, as well as our thoughts about who we think will make the best use of the tax dollars we entrust them with, and will do the best work for all of their constituents.

It is possible to do that. Sit down with enough people running for political office (especially in a primary), and political distinctions seem to fade away. We look for people who are experienced. We look for people who have new, interesting ideas. We look for people who answer our questions honestly.



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

An audience begins to gather at Astoria High School for an April 3 candidate forum.

We look for them to be knowledgeable about the position they are running for and committed to learning more if elected. We look for people willing to work hard. We look for people with a record of accomplishments, and time spent as partners and leaders in our communities.

Federal and state representatives and county commissioners ought to be held to high standards. They play key roles in how our tax money is spent, what

projects get priority, and in determining the values under which we are governed. Those running for those positions require a critical eye to their qualifications and their proposals.

But you have the final say. And your vote is powerful in local elections. With our endorsements, we're not trying to influence your vote as much as we're trying to empower it. We'll tell you what we know because we want you to know it, too.

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

Gearhart to tsunami: Wait until 2020

It was almost a year ago when a Gearhart committee presented an option for a new firehouse on parkland at Pacific Way and North Marion. Reaction was swift and generally unfavorable from longtime residents and newcomers alike, who spoke of the need to protect open space and the park's historic location.

"The fire station is the one thing here we need to work on most of all," Chad Sweet, a Gearhart firefighter and the city's administrator, said at an April 7 emergency management town hall.

Only 22 feet above sea level and constructed of hollow-core, nonreinforced cinder-block, a "little-bitty shake" could bring the building to the ground. "Hopefully we can dig the trucks out," Sweet said. "We'll see."

With fewer than 1,000 full-time residents and limited land out of the inundation zone, the city's geography and demography has focused on preparedness as the first line of defense.

Members of the firehouse committee hope to identify one of three sites for relocation of the 60-year-old building and to present a bond to voters in 2019. Now they're stalled, according to firehouse committee chairman Jay Speakman. "We've come to a place where we've kicked it into neutral," he told Gearhart's City Council on April 4. "We're not racing ahead."

Remaining at the existing site at 670 Pacific Way is not an option. "This building should be condemned," Speakman said.

'Costs, traditions, aesthetics'

The Gearhart Fire Department faces complex issues of geography and historical perspective: a low-elevation location at the current site and a city park that comes with a glorious heritage — open parkland preserved at a cost of political and social equity of generations of Gearhart residents.

Alternatives are limited to inflexible criteria: need for a centrally located site, enough elevation to survive most Cascadia Subduction Zone disaster scenarios and a budget determined by voters. The state's Department of Geology and Mineral Industries told fire committee members that if another site existed, they would not recommend replacing the station in its present location.

Gearhart Park and a privately owned property on North Marion Avenue referred to as "High Point" remain the only serious options after the committee reviewed locations throughout the community, east and west of U.S. Highway 101.

Despite a less-than-enthusiastic reception from the public, the park is clearly the favorite. While its elevation is 48 feet to High Point's 63 feet, the North Marion



Photos by R.J. Marx/The Daily Astorian

The Gearhart firehouse is said to be unable to withstand the impact of even a small quake.



Of sites for a new firehouse, Gearhart Park remains one of three in consideration.

site comes with a hefty price tag, starting at \$4 million for purchase.

"We're up against costs, traditions and aesthetics," Speakman said.

Plans include extending the west side of the park, regrading, replanting and creating an open space that's as big as the existing space, Speakman said. The city would be required to work with the county to lift deed restrictions allowing rezoning.

The committee plans to increase the park's area with fill. "We would do everything we can to replace park space that would be lost by the addition of the fire station," Sweet said.

Size matters

The Gearhart fire station at 670 Pacific Way was built to standards of the late 1950s, years before anyone understood the extent or potential consequences of a Cascadia Subduction Zone event.

Subsequent scientific studies provided evidence that Gearhart and other coastal communities are at ground zero for a Cascadia event.

In 2015, the City Council reopened with city councilors discussions about renovating or replacing the station, making it one of the city's top priorities.

Any earthquake that is going to happen in Gearhart is going to "shake us up

pretty good," Sweet said.

When the school bond went to voters in 2016, superintendent Doug Dougherty and bond supporters presented worst-case scenarios — a wave of up to 120 feet — when advocating a new campus in Seaside's Southeast Hills.

Gearhart doesn't have the luxury of that kind of height outside of the inundation zone. According to state geologic maps, while none of Gearhart's 1,729 buildings would survive an extra-large tsunami, almost half of those would survive a medium-sized event.

"There are going to be some homes that come down," Sweet acknowledged.

That doesn't mean residents shouldn't prepare. Chances of the Big One hitting — with waves reaching more than 75 feet — are only 3 percent. "There's no guarantee the tsunami that comes in is going to be the big one, the 'XXL' that will cover Gearhart," he said.

"Gearhart will fare very well in 90-some percent of all scenarios," Sweet said.

A well-equipped firehouse on higher ground could prove a matter of life and death after waves recede. "The more resilient we are, the faster we're going to recover."

Wait until next year?

With two new county bonds on the

November ballot and voters still feeling the pinch from passage of the \$99.7 million Seaside School District bond to move schools out of the tsunami zone, the firehouse committee elected to roll back the bond timetable to November 2019.

"If you work backward for approvals, plans and council readings, that's probably the soonest this could happen," Speakman said.

By delaying the bond vote to 2019, the committee and proponents have another 18 months to make their case.

Speakman hopes a town hall meeting this fall will educate the public and "help people get their mind around this is something that really should be done."

He anticipates resistance from second homeowners who objected to taking the park out of public use. "We really don't know what to expect. It's anybody's guess."

Estimated costs for a firehouse project, not including land purchase, reach about \$5 million, of which \$3.4 million would go to a 12,800-square-foot public safety building. Costs to voters could run an estimated 78 cents per thousand dollars of assessed home value if a station is built at the park site. Costs would be "just about double that" for the High Point location after land purchase.

Along with replacing the fire station, the bond issue would also fund a new fire truck, with a potential price tag of \$500,000. For taxpayers owning a \$300,000 home, the bond cost would be about \$234 per year. For a \$500,000 home, taxes would increase about \$390 per year.

"It's an expensive proposition," Speakman said. "But we're kind of in a box. We can't put it to the voters this November. These things can take a long time, but in the end if we prevail it will be worth it."

R.J. Marx is The Daily Astorian's South County reporter and editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette.