

Bus fares, passes might decrease

Transit district looks to boost riders

By EDWARD STRATTON
The Daily Astorian

Sunset Empire Transportation District is proposing to slash and simplify fares and passes as the bus provider tries to further increase ridership and get a bigger slice of grant money that subsidizes the service.

A \$1 flat rate would cover each one-way trip, rather than the zoned system that can cost \$3 to go from Astoria to Seaside. Daily passes would drop from \$5 to \$3. A monthly pass would cost \$30 and the discounted monthly pass \$20 — both 33 percent reductions.

One thing critics of public transit point to is empty seats. “The goal is always to increase ridership, and lowering fares does that,” said Jeff Hazen, the transit district’s executive director.

Only 7 percent of Sunset Empire’s proposed \$4.3 million operating budget next fiscal year would come from fares. State funding accounts for nearly one-third of the agency’s budget, cash reserves more than one-quarter and taxes nearly 22 percent.

Grant funding is determined by ridership and the percentage of operational costs recovered at the fare box, Hazen said.

The recent \$5.3 billion transportation package passed by the state Legislature included a \$1 billion carve-out for public transit, funded by a 0.1 percent employee payroll tax. The funding required transportation agencies to show how they are helping low-income riders access transportation.

The new discounted passes, expanded to include low-income households, met that requirement, Hazen said.

Simplifying the pass structure is also an effort to reduce the use of cash on buses, Hazen said, allowing drivers to focus on driving and cutting down wait times. Under his proposals, only daily passes and the flat fares would be sold on buses. Monthly passes would be sold at the Astoria Transit Center and Seaside kiosk.

In the coming year, Hazen said, the bus agency will also be transitioning to electronic fares, further reducing the cash handled on buses.

The bus agency will hold a public hearing June 28 on the budget, including the fare and pass changes. If the proposed fare and pass changes are accepted, they would become effective with the new budget in July.

The agency also recently started using the smartphone application Transit, allowing riders to track bus locations online. For those who don’t have smartphones, the agency provides a phone number for riders to call for arrival times.

OPEN HOUSES

Sunset Empire Transportation District is holding four open houses on proposed fare and pass changes.

- June 18, 1 to 2 p.m., Bob Chisholm Community Center, Seaside
- June 18, 3 to 4 p.m., Cannon Beach Chamber of Commerce
- June 19, 1 to 2 p.m., Astoria Transit Center
- June 19, 3 to 4 p.m., Emerald Heights Apartments community room.



Photos by Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Business owners are concerned about the homeless downtown.

Task force struggles to confront homelessness

Divisions over approach, labels

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Daily Astorian

Homelessness is everywhere in Astoria.

It sits next to discussions on the lack of affordable housing. It winds through debates over public safety. It slips into concerns about the eroding quality of life.

As people talk about how to address the challenge, they sketch uncomfortable and contradictory lines.

Volunteers who feed the homeless are discouraged by questions over whether they are helping or enabling. Residents see the need for emergency shelter, but not in their neighborhoods. Some are eager to reach out to the needy, but draw distinctions with the homeless who are on the street by choice.

Homelessness is not unique to Astoria. It is a local, state and national issue, a fact that can be both comforting and confounding, since how can a small town with limited resources figure out a problem Portland and Seattle cannot?

“Really, whose problem is it?” Astoria Police Chief Geoff Spalding said. “Is it Astoria’s problem? Is it a state problem? Is it a county problem? If each community



Renovations to this former Uniontown boarding house are underway to help the homeless.

tries to deal with it individually, I don’t think we’re going to be as successful.”

After months of deliberation, a homelessness solutions task force is brainstorming concrete ways to confront homelessness.

Here are some of the things they’ve been talking about:

Housing

Social-service advocates say the lack of housing options is affecting more than

the people who are already homeless.

Helping Hands, a nonprofit that operates re-entry shelters and programs in several counties and plans to open a facility in Uniontown this summer, maintains that both cost and inventory are issues. For many families or individuals who are struggling, wages, especially in tourism-related jobs, haven’t kept pace with the cost of living.

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‘WHATEVER OUR SOLUTION IS, I THINK IF WE ACCEPT THAT THIS IS NOT WHETHER YOU’RE GIVING A HAND OUT, THIS IS ABOUT HELPING PEOPLE BECOME CONTRIBUTING MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY.’

Amy Baker | executive director of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare

A fixture of Astoria homelessness moves on



Chase Allgood/News-Times
John Wedell is a well-known figure in Astoria and Forest Grove.

Wedell was told to move possessions

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Daily Astorian

About a month ago, John Wedell — one of Astoria’s most well-known homeless residents — packed up his shopping carts and left the section of 11th Street where he was a downtown fixture.

His departure set off a whirlwind of rumors, including one that police had forbidden him from coming downtown. A rumor that he also faced arrest circulated Wednesday on Facebook. People who know him or know of him protested in a comment thread,

asking why he was being singled out when many consider him part of the community.

But in fact, police were targeting Wedell’s possessions, spilling out of several shopping carts at the corner of Marine Drive and Second Street where he had moved — not Wedell himself.

Astoria Police Chief Geoff Spalding received complaints from drivers who said the carts blocked their view of oncoming traffic on Marine Drive. Spalding and another officer spoke Tuesday to Wedell about moving his possessions. They gave him 24 hours to clear his stuff away or risk it being seized.

Wedell seemed confused about whether or not he could go downtown

and what the 24-hour notice meant — this confusion later morphed into concerns about an impending arrest, leading to the Facebook rumor.

But police had told him Tuesday: “You can go wherever you want in town, John, but you have to move your stuff every 24 hours.”

“If you can pare down your stuff,” they said, “you can probably fly under the radar and we won’t get complaints.”

Wedell was seen loading his possessions into a taxi Wednesday. The corner where he’d spent the recent weeks is now empty.

As for the other rumor: Spalding said Wedell was not told to leave

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