



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Three waterfront bridges in downtown Astoria will close on Friday.

Bridges: 'This has been a roller coaster'

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In addition to the fear that the bridges might have to be closed immediately or undergo expensive repairs right before being replaced, the project hit another snag this summer when bids for the replacement work came in over budget. Now, Cindy Moore, assistant city engineer, says she is "95 percent sure" construction will go ahead as planned, but she won't know until she meets with the contractor next week to determine the schedule.

It has been a balancing act to keep the bridges open — and at a load limit that could still accommodate vehicles — with temporary fixes until

the structures could be permanently replaced, Moore told the City Council in July.

After receiving inspection reports from the state, city staff recommended closing the Sixth Street bridge, located near a Chevron gas station and city viewing platform over the Columbia River, this year. They also recommended closing the Seventh Street bridge near Buoy Beer Co., since Eighth Street provides alternative access to the business.

The 11th Street bridge they hoped to keep open up to the date of construction, but were prepared to close it to all but pedestrians as early as Sept. 1. The city added extra flagging and signs to keep all motor

traffic except passenger vehicles from crossing over the bridge, which operates under a load limit.

The early closures aside, a number of business owners have been worried about what the bridge replacement work will mean for their businesses. The city also has several agreements in place with property owners for use of their land during construction.

Moore met with many of the stakeholders Wednesday morning to see what the city could do to help them weather the project.

"I think, hopefully, we got some of the rumors contained, some of the anxiety contained," reported David Reid,

executive director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce.

The chamber plans to aid business owners with marketing and advertising to let customers know the businesses are still open during the bridge replacement work.

"This has been a roller coaster, frankly, over the past couple months," City Manager Brett Estes said. He praised city staff's ability to be nimble and respond to sudden changes. Meanwhile, partnerships with groups like the chamber provide "more robust community outreach."

"This is the best outcome we could have foreseen," Estes said.

Ward 1: Housing is one of the top issues

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Since he moved to the city in his mid-20s, Drafall has watched Astoria change. Over the years, as money and resources went to the slice of town between Seventh Street and 17th Street — the historic downtown district — and tourism became the dominant industry, he believes Uniontown and many of the people who long called Astoria home were left behind. Astoria is not just the downtown core. The city stretches from Tongue Point to Smith Point, he said.

"There's a whole city here and we've got to love it all or it will go away," he said.

"When I moved to Astoria, I exhaled," he added. "Now I'm concerned about what we're going to hand off to our great-grandchildren. Astoria is at a turning point."

For him, and for Rocka, that turning point includes the increasing number of hoteliers and developers with their eyes on the waterfront. Rocka was part of the group that helped create the Astoria Riverwalk and organize one of the first big riverfront cleanup events. He has long been involved in discussions about development along the waterfront.

Future development

Neither Drafall nor Rocka says they are against development or tourism. Rocka spent years promoting the area for those very uses. They are looking for balance.

Drafall wants to make sure development is "smart and usable."

"There's got to be something different than hotels and drinking and pot stores," he said.

Rocka, who is married to Astoria Planning Commissioner Jan Mitchell, thinks Astoria could become a hub for web and computer-related enterprises — what he refers to as the "next century" economy.

"The pat answer you usually get from people is they want family wage jobs and they think in terms of what we used to have here," Rocka said.

Both men say the top priority is setting an appropriate stage with zoning that reflects local people's wishes.

Drafall can speak from experience. The Holiday Inn Express, built in the early

2000s, cut off his own view of the Columbia River.

"As soon as it happened, we went, 'No!'" he said. "But it's going to happen more and more."

Both Rocka and Drafall hope to address city zoning that, in some areas, allows hotels as an outright use and means the projects, potentially, receive no public review at all if the construction doesn't trigger other types of scrutiny through the presence of historic landmarks or overlay zones.

Drafall believes Uniontown is where the bulk of Astoria's future development could occur. Much of the city's urban renewal funds are poised to go to the neighborhoods on either end of Astoria. Meanwhile, Astoria Warehousing is closing in Uniontown.

"That's a lot of acreage," Drafall said.

Both men are concerned about the state of the major roads running through Astoria and the aging chairwall systems that support roads in portions of downtown.

Drafall believes more could be done to enforce speeding violations and the use of compression brakes by large trucks. But Rocka is the only one proposing another look at a bypass to address Astoria's summer traffic. A bypass could help the city deal with traffic now and avoid further traffic-related complications in the future, he said.

City and county leaders pushed for a bypass in the 1990s, and even paid for an environmental impact study. The project was included on the state's construction schedule but was later dropped. Debate about the project revived in the early 2000s, but funding and regulatory hurdles remained — and remain today.

Housing dilemma

One of the top issues for all of the candidates running in Astoria is housing.

Drafall has watched neighborhoods disappear as people buy homes and turn them into vacation rental, Airbnb-type operations. He and Rocka say enforcement of city rules forbidding this kind of use is crucial, especially as housing for workers and lower-income residents appears to be dwindling.

Astoria allows homestay lodging, where rooms may be

rented on a short-term basis, but the property owner must live in the home, too. Vacation rentals — where entire houses are rented out to tourists and the owner is absent — are illegal. Many of these illegal operations are not paying business license fees or taxes, but the Community Development Department does not have the staff to go out and enforce city laws consistently.

"Why can't we have someone whose work is covered by the fees and fines they collect?" Rocka asked.

To Rocka, vacation rentals, tourism, housing and homelessness are all linked, each influencing the other. Creative use of tax dollars could help alleviate some of the pressure, while enforcement of city code could bring housing back to long-term renters, he said.

Rocka pushed for the early version of the state's lodging tax program in 2003, which provides funding to tourist-related projects. Astoria already uses some of this money for maintenance of city parks, and recently raised the tax to help fund parks operations, arguing that tourists, not just locals, contribute to wear and tear.

Rocka would like to see those dollars acquire even more flexibility. Much of the city's growing expenses are related to tourism, he said.

Ultimately, neither man has a solution for the housing issues or increased levels of homelessness. Like Astoria's three mayoral candidates, the two men believe the issues require creative solutions.

It's a bigger problem than Astoria, they both say.

"We give them food, we give them shelter, but we don't have the social services to help them," Drafall said of the homeless.

"I wish I had an answer," Rocka said. "I don't."

He does think the city could do more to work with people who own vacant buildings and ask: What would it take for you to put this property on the market for workforce housing? Uniontown has a number of larger, older buildings — some that escaped Astoria's infamous fires. This is important, but complicated, infrastructure, Rocka and Drafall said.

"Somehow, with older districts, we need to find a way to be more flexible," Rocka said.

For Drafall, it comes back to zoning. Could the city open

up existing properties for higher-density housing?

"The homes that were built here, yeah, they need a lot of work, but they were well-built," he said. "They're still standing."

County: Sheriff's office has responded to more than 30 calls at the property

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The county has not been able to contact Scott Wood. He is ill and was not able to attend Wednesday's hearing, said Tyler Morehouse, a friend.

Recently, a number of people have inhabited a three-bedroom house and a host of recreational vehicles on the nearly 1,400-square-foot lot. Morehouse said the majority of the people living there were squatters who have recently left.

"We don't want nothing to do with these people out there," Morehouse said. "They're running over Scott."

People on the property have allegedly stolen about 20,000 gallons of water from the Lewis and Clark Water District after cutting a lock off a meter. James Niekas, a next-door neighbor, reported that they had tapped into his electrical system. Niekas also said items have been stolen from his property.

The squatters, who haven't had sewer services for about 1 1/2 years, also allegedly have been using a nearby ditch to dump buckets of human waste. Niekas said he built a concrete structure to prevent sewage from running onto his land. Rats, garbage and abandoned vehicles have also accumulated.

The Clatsop County Sheriff's Office has responded to more than 30 calls at the property since it was foreclosed, including six warrant arrests, six emergency medical responses and one assault. Drugs have also been recovered, Chief Deputy Paul Williams said.

"We've seen the number of calls dramatically increase as time moves along," Williams said.

When a county Public

Health Department employee approached the property with three sheriff's deputies in July, one person fled and was eventually arrested on a warrant. After the chase, a deputy — covered to his waist in human waste — reported he had "found the ditch."

The Lewis and Clark Volunteer Fire Department has responded to three fires at the property this year, all of which appeared to be intentionally started, Chief Jeff Golightly said. One involved a woman setting fire to a bath tub, while another featured burned garbage that caused two-story flames.

"When it is the Woods' house, generally law enforcement is on the way to meet us there," said Brandin Smith, a volunteer firefighter.

The county posted public health hazard signs in August.

"I just know that it was a very unsanitary property that, honestly, nobody should have been living at that time," County Environmental Health Specialist Nancy Mendoza said.

Commissioner Lianne Thompson asked Williams to advise the county on how to better manage similar issues if they arise in the future.

"I think this is an example of the county doing just that," Williams said. "I also am hopeful that we can actually revise the code so that it has some teeth so that we don't have to wait around for the person to pass away or to sell the property for the county to actually do something about it without incurring a significant cost on the county's part."

Commissioners are expected to adopt an official order to take possession of the property later this month. The county would seek to claim the deed within 30 days.

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Nick Bond

University of Washington College of Atmospheric Sciences

Nick Bond is a principal research scientist with the Joint Institute for the Study of the Atmosphere and Ocean of the University of Washington and affiliated with NOAA. A Climatologist for Washington since 2010, Nick's research focuses on the weather and climate of the Pacific Northwest and its link between the climate and marine ecosystems of the North Pacific.

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