Fire levy: 'We're already on a shoestring budget'

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If the levy fails again in November, Benedict said the district has about a year's worth of contingency funds that would pay for his position until the district could get the levy on the ballot again. Failing to renew this levy again would cut off the district's only funding mechanism to pay for a fire chief, leaving the board with the choice of finding a new way to fund the position, to make cuts in other areas of the general fund to pay for it, or to forego the position altogether, Benedict said.

"We're already on a shoestring budget, so we'd have to get creative and look at our priorities if this doesn't pass," he said.

Now that the levy will compete against the county's jail bond and marijuana tax on the ballot, Benedict hopes the work the district has already done to educate voters about the issues will carry forward as an advantage in November.

"It's always a threat, having competition, never knowing who is going to vote for what," Benedict said. "All we can do is educate. (Voters) are going to have to make that choice on what they are going to support."

Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Cannon Beach Fire Chief Matt Benedict makes the rounds of the garage doing routine maintenance and checking gear.

Ward 3: 'Development is inevitable'

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that march up steep hills and draw comparisons to San Francisco.

It is also where some of Astoria's bigger issues have been on full display, from empty buildings to homeless people sleeping in doorways to limited parking on busy streets.

City Councilor Cindy Price pushed for the city to finalize the last piece of the Riverfront Vision Plan. The plan guides development along the Columbia River and the final section, the Urban Core, addresses the portion of the waterfront between Second Street and 16th Street. Now a public process is in motion and is expected to continue through 2019.

Price intended to run for mayor instead of re-election to the City Council, but withdrew her campaign because of family matters, creating an open seat. Whoever replaces Price in November will have a crucial role to play over the next four years.

'Birds-eye view'

Herman first moved to Astoria in 1986 and has lived off and on in the city for 19 years. She worked as a reporter for The Daily Astorian covering county government and police and writing about the area's history, co-founded the bicycle shop Bikes & Beyond downtown with her first husband and later taught English at Lower Columbia College in Longview, Washington.

She now hosts two radio programs for Coast Community Radio — a short-fiction show and a public affairs show — and serves on the station's board of directors. She volunteers with the progressive group Indivisible North Coast, which formed after the 2016 presidential election.

"It's been nice for me to be able to witness the transition from sleepy town to this booming tourist economy," she said. "It's given me that perspective. But also I literally ride over much of the town in my wheelchair, so it gives me really a bird's-eye view much more so than somebody can see in a car. I meet people that I might not otherwise."

Herman is a familiar face at city meetings, and was appointed to fill a vacant Planning Commission seat last year. Zilli also applied for the position.

At her first Planning Commission meeting last November, Herman was out-voted 6-1 over a decision to approve a conditional use permit by developer Chester Trabucco to build a dialysis center near the Astoria Riverwalk. Herman's concerns were that Trabucco's building was going on a valuable chunk of riverfront property that was intended for tourism and tourist-related uses.

"Obviously, I'm sensitive to the need for such a facility," Herman said at the time, "but I do have a concern about siting it in the shoreline zone. Especially since there are so few such sites left in Astoria along the waterfront."

"I think it's really important that a city councilor study the issues, be willing to devote a good amount of time to learning about the issues — all sides — before coming to a decision," Herman says now. "Of course it's important that we attend the meetings, that we are not reticent about speaking our positions and hearing from those who disagree with us. I think we really need to be out in the public and just listening to what residents have to say. But at some point we have to go out and make a decision and be willing to do that and have the courage to do that and stick by what we feel is best for the community."

'Development is inevitable'

Zilli moved to Astoria from Arizona and has lived in the city for 24 years. He works for the Oregon Department of Forestry as the field operations and policy manager for the department's state forest division.

His job with the state can be demanding. He oversees annual plans for harvests and timber sales statewide and is involved in major policy decisions, among other duties. He spent weeks away from home this year to support firefighting efforts around the state.

Firefighting is not one of his primary duties now, but as the fire season increases in severity across the state each year, he would likely spend more time on fires and with fire incident management teams if he's not elected.

Zilli previously worked as a unit manager for the Department of Forestry, overseeing half of the Clatsop State Forest, and then, later, as assistant district forester. He says the skills he has honed with the state would be important assets to the City Council.

The council race may be Zilli's first time running for office, but he has years of experience working within government processes, implementing plans and engaging the public.

"The work is different, but the process, I've got a lot of experience with those processes," he said.

Zilli served in the Navy and remained active in the Navy Reserve. It turned into a kind of second career, tracking parallel with his forestry work. He completed four different deployments: two of them in the Middle East and another, most recently, in the Horn of Africa.

This exposure to the world has been on his mind as he runs, especially following a town hall meeting on the Urban Core section of the Riverfront Vision Plan last week. He has concluded that, though development should respect Astoria's character and unique culture: "Development is inevitable. Change is inevitable. … It happens and it's an adjustment for everybody."

City goals

But in some cases, Zilli has fought development. In 2016, he appealed decisions by city boards to approve plans to build a new Verizon Wireless communications tower in Shivley Park. He argued that the tower was incompatible with the park. The experience informed a goal at the top of Zilli's campaign list: Transparency in city government.

"For me that's of the utmost importance," he said. "The citizens need to have confidence that someone is looking out for accountability, looking out for costs, looking out for budgeting, being very deliberate about asking questions when we're doing contracting and really reading into the services provided."

For Herman, many of the issues Astoria faces come back to housing. Finding ways for the city to encourage or develop workforce housing would be one of her top priorities if elected. Rising rental and move-in costs have made it difficult to find affordable or workforce-priced housing. Lack of housing impacts everything from business development to homelessness, she said.

Herman wants city councilors and city staff to take a hard look at vacant or underutilized parcels, particularly along Youngs Bay, where plans to build a large hotel are in the works. She is adamant that Astoria does not need more hotels.

Housing is an important point for Zilli, too. The city has to grow, but the city has a chance to think through any future growth, he said.

"The urban development boundary goes way out into the forest on lands that aren't even owned by the city right now," he said. "When you look at the expected growth, I think maintaining the green spaces, particularly some of the unique areas that we have within the city right now, is important to the character of our communities. I don't really want to personally see all of our forested green areas, nooks and crannies that are still around the city, all developed."

"I think we need to look at things that are a little longer vision," he added. "What's not just a house here or there but where are we going to really go that's linked with transportation systems, infrastructure support, power, sewer, etc."

Zilli also plans to push to include goals and strategies outlined in the city's five-year economic strategy, Advance Astoria, drafted under former Community Development Director Kevin Cronin's watch.

For both candidates, one big piece of improving livability in the city is to address "the hole" at Heritage Square, a portion of a city block near City Hall that caved in after heavy rains in 2010. Surrounded by chain-link fence, the hole has remained highly visible in the heart of downtown. They aren't sure exactly what could go there, but both believe it is work they could achieve in a four-year council term. Herman looks at the square and sees a potential for housing, something like what was proposed when the city considered building a new library at the site.

Zilli and Herman only just met and they do not think about the election in terms of running against each other. They say they saw an opportunity to run and jumped at it.

"I think that our democratic process is successful only if people participate," Zilli said. "When I look back at many of the council seats there's been a few unopposed races in recent years and now we have two people running for (Ward 1 and Ward 3) but that's still only two people. So I think people need to have a choice and diversity."

Herman describes herself as socially progressive but fiscally conservative, saying, "I would be a very careful steward of taxpayers' dollars, particularly in light of the fact that we have a high property tax rate in this city already because we are such a small community trying to provide so many services that a larger city provides with only a 10,000-resident tax base to draw from."

Port: 'With the freezing of the tax base, where do the funds come from?'

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could have opportunities to be able to utilize the enterprise zone."

Jim Knight, the Port's executive director, commented on how far the agency's reputation has improved since 2015, with the city now looking to partner.

Local transit agency Sunset Empire Transportation District, the regional bus provider, has raised concerns over how increased development from the enterprise zone expansion could exacerbate existing employee and housing shortages, along with traffic issues.

"This increase will likely increase the need for various services not only (for) transit, but other municipal services such as water, sewer and public safety," Kathy Kleczek, chairwoman of the transportation agency's board, wrote in a letter. "With the freezing of the tax base, where do the funds for this come from?"

With Estes in the audience was Melanie Olson, a regional development officer with economic development agency Business Oregon. She assured that the enterprise zone does not affect existing property taxes already being paid. The enterprise zone property tax benefits only apply to new building improvements, she said.

The expansion of the enterprise zone still needs to be approved by the Warrenton City Commission and Clatsop County Board of Commissioners.

Forum: Weak to moderate El Nino possible this year

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The salmon returning to the Columbia River this year are fish that entered the ocean during the Blob years, into conditions that were not expected to be friendly to their survival, Bond said.

And now there is the possibility of a weak to moderate El Nino occurring this year, which, said Bond, "is not great news for some parts of the marine ecosystem."

Bond's work is in predictions and forecasts, a role that becomes more complex when confronted with anomalous conditions like the Blob and conditions that are expected to become longer-lasting with climate change.

He is also a senior research scientist with the University of Washington's Joint Institute for the Study of Atmosphere and Ocean, and calls the Blob and the years that followed a sort of "dress rehearsal for climate change" — a taste of what might become the West Coast's new normal. As climate change becomes more and more of a reality, he and others in the field are trying to develop ways to predict ocean conditions further out than they have before.

People already use climate models that look at conditions in the atmosphere and ocean to predict seasonal weather conditions. Now, Bond said, "We're starting to use them for seasonal ocean conditions in kind of the same way so marine interests have a heads up about what's happening."

Armed with these kinds of forecasts, the fishing industry and fishery managers could make decisions in very different ways, he said.

But: "If you think we're at a stage where we can say, 'Oh yeah, you know, come March 2019 it's going to be kind of warm out there and we're not going to have the right kind of forage conditions for salmon'… Can we do that?"

Kind of yes. Kind of no.

Even harder to predict are biological responses to shifting ocean conditions.

As the long hangover continues, Bond and other researchers are still looking into what the ocean conditions during the Blob and harmful algal bloom years meant for the ocean's animals and plants.

"What we're waiting to find out is whether this event kind of reorganized the marine communities or how fast populations will recover," Bond said afterwards.

"Will there be some wholesale changes in the ecosystem that will persist for a long time? We've seen in the past when there's been environmental change there has been a whole different mix of species," he added.

"So will this be an example or will it be, in a couple years, just a distant nightmare?"