

Director: 'We feel our role is to support the community'

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"That was back in the early '70s. It was a crazy time in this country. There were lots of people searching for answers. It took a period of time of exploring to see if it was something I believed in," Carlsen said. "And after awhile it just made sense."

It's a decision that changed his life, leading him to combine his love of faith and teaching as a program director at a Christian camp in California the following summer. That's where he met his wife, Jean. They have two children, Adam and Erin.

The Seattle native's journey to Cannon Beach began when he saw a job posting for a program manager at the conference center in 1983. He remembered being impressed by the facilities and enamored by the beauty from past conferences he had attended, and decided to make the leap from California.

When he arrived, the conference center in many ways still operated like a mom-and-pop operation, he said. Still a relatively small outfit, in the mid-1980s the camp faced financial and cultural challenges. Much of the clientele was steady but aging, sourced mostly from the original generation that came to the conference center when it first started in 1945. Money was tight — not an unusual sit-



Brenna Visser/The Daily Astorian

Jeff Carlsen is set to retire after 35 years with the organization.

uation for nonprofit camps that rely heavily on volunteer labor and donations to survive.

As program director, he focused on making the center more attractive to younger families in the hopes of inspiring the next generation of guests and conference participants. With the increased efforts, over the course of two decades the budget ballooned from \$600,000 to

about \$4 million a year.

"There weren't younger families coming, so it's been encouraging to see that change," Carlsen said. "Seeing the next generation develop over time is exciting."

A spiritual purpose

As the institution continued to grow financially and geographically, the center con-

tinued to keep a notably low profile — sometimes so low it leaves some in the community wondering what exactly the institution does, Carlsen admits.

To a certain extent, that's by design.

"We feel our role is to support the community in any way we can, but not to be political. It's not our calling," he said.

"Our purposes are spiritual. It doesn't do any good to be divisive."

While Carlsen avoided divisiveness in a public sphere, some long-term coworkers say difficult times and moments of conflicts are where he has shined brightest as a leader.

"Whether it was hard times or good times, you always felt respected, no matter who you were," said Sam Ortig, who has been maintenance manager for 40 years.

That served the organization well during the recession, when visitor volume dropped dramatically, leading Carlsen to implement across-the-board pay cuts to stay afloat.

"Even in '08, when we were all trying to find cuts and it was stressful, he always was reasonable," Ortig said. "He always wanted input. He was always fair."

Paul Knoch, the human resources director, recalled a time when a very difficult guest was berating someone at the front desk. While Knoch's first inclination was to give the guy a piece of his mind, Carlsen listened and decided to upgrade the room.

"I was so frustrated," Knoch said. "But then he said 'This guy needs to be here. Let's not make his behavior distract us from why we're here, which is to serve people.'"

"His focus was solely

about someone having a spiritual experience," Knoch said. "That's a good representation of who he is."

The path forward

While the conference center is on good financial footing and seeing record attendance, Carlsen feels confident he's giving his successor a healthy institution to grow upon, he said. But the conference center will always have to be ready to evolve.

Like many other employers on the North Coast, staying fully staffed remains difficult. Part of what has kept the conference center stable has been its unique ability to house about 75 percent of its staff, mitigating the affordable housing issue most employers point to when hiring.

But between not paying comparable wages to the other businesses in town and finding workers who are professed Christians, hiring will continue to be a challenge.

The conference center, like other Christian entities, will have to adapt and evolve to stay relevant to a generation growing more secular.

"The new director gets to face that challenge," he said.

No one can predict how the center will evolve in the next 20 years. But Ortig did have some advice for Carlsen's successor.

"Copy Jeff," Ortig laughed.



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Seaside mayoral candidates Jay Barber, left, and John Chapman participate in a forum Wednesday at City Hall.

Forum: Region's housing crunch discussed

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"When I first moved here to Seaside, me and my wife ... we had little to nothing," he said. "The community opened the door day one. One family said we'll put you on (their) couch, we'll look after you until you have enough for rent and that took a month. You can imagine how hard that was ... but Seaside made that happen."

When asked about whether food carts should be allowed in Seaside, Chapman said while he supports free enterprise, he has concerns about out-of-town food trucks negatively impacting brick-and-mortar businesses that make up a large part of the city's tax base.

"You have some businesses in town that make most of their income in three to four months, but pay rent and staff 12 months of the year," he said. "Do I think (food carts) are bad? No. Do I think there needs to be more thought into this more than a yes or no vote? Yes."

Barber, however, was more open to the idea, seeing food carts as a way to cater to a younger demographic of visitors. He supports the city

developing an established food court, where carts can operate year-round.

"I think it's something worth exploring, but I agree with John you have to protect the businesses that are here all year long, so it's a balancing act," Barber said.

In Gearhart, a newcomer, Jack Zimmerman, is looking to unseat Kerry Smith, who was elected to City Council Position 1 in 2014. Paulina Cockrum, who was appointed in 2015, is running unopposed for Position 3.

All three candidates mentioned the need to find housing solutions and preserve the environmental and cultural characteristics that make Gearhart unique.

But the candidates' views splintered when it came to where each believed a new fire hall should be built. Recent proposals include rebuilding the station in its current location, a private plot of land in North Gearhart called the Highpoint property, or rebuilding at higher elevation at Gearhart Park — an idea that would take the station out of the inundation zone but has drawn ire from residents.

Smith and Cockrum said the decision should be driven by the opinion of the residents through a series of listening sessions and town halls.

"They will be the ones paying," Smith said. "These are tough decisions. One place costs a lot of money. One place costs us the park. And the other costs us all of our equipment eventually when the tsunami comes."

Zimmerman, however, argued rebuilding the fire station where it is would be the most fiscally responsible option. He also objected taking away parkland.

"I'm conflicted about how much money should be allocated to the fire department ... it's a volunteer service with four or five pieces of equipment. Does that call for a \$4 million, \$5 million structure?" Zimmerman said.

Health care and environmental issues dominated most of the discussion for House District 32 candidates Tiffany Mitchell, a Democrat, and Brian Halvorsen, an independent. Republican Vineeta Lower had another engagement and did not attend the forum.

Mitchell emphasized find-

ing housing solutions that work for rural areas, expanding essential medical services to treat mental health and addiction to the coast, and supporting green energy.

Halvorsen supports addressing what he calls "income inequality that is out of control" through higher taxes on the richest Oregonians, as well as the need for campaign donation reform.

While the two agreed on expanding health care for all, the two butted heads over the best way to reach that goal.

Halvorsen advocates for a single-payer health care system.

"A lot of people think Obamacare fixed gaps in coverage, but it didn't," he said. "If we had single-payer health care that mandated equal care regardless of income that would resolve those problems."

Mitchell agreed, but sees it more as a long-term option. In the meantime, she advocates taking smaller steps to keep costs down, like keeping prescription drug prices transparent and increasing competition in the health care industry, until the state can reach a single-payer model.

Fire chief: Curtis started volunteering at 16

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The city is working with a recruitment agency, but Estes expects it to be a difficult position to fill because of the particular demands of the job. Rather than working in a purely administrative or managerial role, an Astoria fire chief is also expected to respond to and manage fire-fighting efforts alongside the department staff.

It's a job that requires what Curtis calls "a working fire chief."

"There's not enough staff for the fire chief not to respond," he said. "(The chief) is an integral part of the team."

Curtis is probably not interested in the job long-term, he said. Though, he added, "I never say never."

Earlier this year, the Astoria Police Department found a new chief in Geoff Spalding, who had been hired as an interim and who, initially, was not interested in taking on the job permanently.

"But I think probably not," Curtis said. "I'm interested in helping the city of Astoria out ... One of the selling points was the staff. They're just great to work with."

Curtis retired from the Anacortes Fire Department in Washington state in August after 22 years with the department as chief. He has spent his entire adult life, and most of his teen years, fighting fires. He got his start as a 16-year-old volunteer in Hoodland, Oregon.

When he retired, Curtis knew he still wanted to do something else, but after 22 years in one spot, he also wanted a breath of fresh air. The interim job in Astoria presented the perfect oppor-

tunity, he said.

"My goal is really just to be here as a stabilizing force," he said. "I'm not looking to come in and make a whole bunch of changes. ... I don't want to start something I personally couldn't see through."

He has had a whirlwind introduction to the department and the city, however, and feels a little bit like he's "drinking water from a fire hose."

Call levels this year at the Astoria Fire Department are on target to be above last year's numbers — and calls hit record levels in 2017. From June through August, the department responded to 389 emergency calls, Gascoigne wrote in his report. These calls included several structure fires and wildland blazes and a high number of medical calls.

With increasingly severe wildfire seasons in Oregon, the department has also worked to bring training and certifications up to a level where Astoria firefighters could respond to a wildfire if needed. The department mobilized three times this fire season as part of the Clatsop County task force — something it had not done since 1996.

In his report, Gascoigne noted his pride in the department.

"Having spent the last 31 years working for the Astoria Fire Department, I have had the privilege of working with a great number of highly skilled firefighters and, more importantly, an amazing group of people," he wrote, and added, "The members of this department are top notch and my hopes are that the department continues to move forward in a positive manner."

Intersection: 'They weren't handling the yellow lights the way they should be handled'

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When pulling up to a flashing yellow turn signal, drivers are supposed to wait behind the white line before beginning a turn. But some tend to pull into the intersection as they wait for oncoming traffic to clear, Torres said. When the light turns red, drivers sometimes hesitate and cause minor crashes.

"They weren't handling the yellow lights the way they

should be handled," Torres said. "It's an easy mistake to make."

Warrenton officials contacted the state after noticing issues. The department checked its data, showing seven crashes from left-hand turns between May 2015 and May 2016. Department policy requires signals to be reprogrammed to "protected only" if more than five crashes occur in one year.

A "protected only" green

arrow allows the driver to turn as soon as it appears without yielding to oncoming traffic. It is the most commonly used turn signal and does not flash like the "permissive" arrow.

While the change appears to have made things easier, the department will not know definitively for some time.

"Motorists are kind of funny. They don't always handle change well sometimes," Torres said. "With any traffic change, you really need to

look over a span of time."

The signals are not the only traffic issue in the area. Police have spotted drivers making illegal U-turns on parts of Ensign Lane. Others drive the wrong way to maneuver around a median — called a "pork chop" island for its shape — near Discovery Lane.

The opening of a Walmart earlier this year exacerbated the issue, prompting officials from the state, county and city to discuss potential changes.

Additional or clearer signage, a stop sign and changes to the "pork chop" island are all in play.

The potential traffic impacts were some of the main reasons Balensifer, a city planning commissioner at the time, voted against the Walmart arrival, he said.

Due to the traffic issues, the Warrenton City Commission delayed a vote last month on a potential zone change in the area that would open up

20 acres for housing and more business development.

"It's really unfortunate that we have to go this route," Balensifer said. "We're doing as much as we can with the funding and staff we have, but we're experiencing some growing pains."

The city is finalizing its 10-year transportation systems plan. A town hall meeting will be held Oct. 10 to present the plan and discuss other traffic issues.