

Astoria: 'It's imperative to have the right person, the right fit'

Continued from Page 1A

interesting planning activity going on," she said. "It seems like it would be very attractive both from a quality of life perspective but, especially for an urban planner, being able to work in a smaller urban area and see the benefits of your efforts, of your work."

The state doesn't help jurisdictions recruit for these jobs, but Phipps ends up hearing a lot from city and county leaders about their struggle to find people. In the past year, Astoria, Warrenton and Cannon Beach have all had a hard time finding someone to head their planning departments.

Cronin, Astoria's former community development director, served as Warrenton's interim planning director while City Manager Linda Engbretson worked with a recruitment agency to find candidates for the job. In the end, the city decided to hire Cronin.

Management experience

A planning or community development director is not an entry-level position, Barnes noted. Ideal candidates need both planning and management experience.

In her talks with regional groups, Phipps has come to realize there is a pool of young planners and, at the other end, a pool of older planners who are looking at retirement. As for people with years of experience and many more years left in their career? "That middle group seems to be pretty small," she said.

But, she added, in the end you never know what's going on in people's lives when you post a job.

"Maybe the person you end up with wasn't ready at that time, but when you go out for that second or third recruitment, they're in a different place."

Astoria has gone through

several rounds already.

Estes, who now serves as interim community development director as well as city manager, brought two candidates in for interviews earlier this year, but decided to repost the job. He was prepared to interview more people last month, but several candidates removed their names at the last minute for a variety of reasons. The city posted the job again this week.

"If you look at the City Council goals and how many of those goals are community development-focused — even the discussions of where we are headed (as a city) — it's imperative to have the right person, the right fit," Estes explained.

In the meantime, the Community Development Department has had to figure out how to operate shorthanded in an even busier landscape than usual.

Permit numbers are up slightly, said Nancy Ferber, Astoria's city planner. And there have been some very big, complex projects that came in around the same time, swallowing staff time and resources — the proposal for a new Astoria Co-op Grocery in the Mill Pond neighborhood and plans for a new hotel, the Fairfield Inn and Suites, along the Columbia River.

Both projects required multiple meetings with multiple boards. Both resulted in appeals to the City Council. A new design for the hotel is scheduled to go back to the Design Review Committee for consideration at a meeting tonight.

"And Fairfield isn't done by any means," Ferber said. "It could be appealed again."

But even small permits can be time-consuming, requiring multiple meetings between staff and the applicants to get a proposal to a point where its ready for presentation at a meeting. Permits also come

with timelines for turnaround that staff can't just ignore no matter how many projects they have going.

In January, the City Council came up with eight goals, most of them requiring work by Community Development Department staff. At recent meetings, Estes commented that both he and the department have no capacity to take on more projects.

Consultants

City Council goals, like developing a process for people to provide homestay lodging, didn't stop when the department lost its director — but work on these requests has definitely slowed.

The city has supplemented with consultants like former Astoria planner Rosemary Johnson, or former interim community development director Mike Morgan, to work on specific projects. These are not long-term solutions, Estes said. He is looking to hire an interim planner just to help handle day-to-day needs, but the workload isn't likely to lighten anytime soon.

The city just kicked off a long-term public process to draft policies for development in the city's Urban Core, the last piece of an overarching Riverfront Vision Plan that guides development along the waterfront. Other potentially time-consuming projects are on the way, including a subdivision proposal in the North Tongue Point area and a grant program for facade improvements, as well as the redevelopment of a caved-in lot at Heritage Square. Developers have floated the idea of building a 90-plus hotel next to Youngs Bay on land zoned general commercial, where lodgings are permitted outright.

Even though some projects won't trigger review by city boards, they will still take a lot of review at the staff level, Ferber said.

Claims: Separate investigation ongoing

Continued from Page 1A

Hands, a nonprofit that works with the homeless, mismanaged public funds.

The summary argues that many of Sims' claims do not match up with emails and other records available, nor do they square with other people's recollections or records regarding the events, behaviors or decisions she references.

"I think the report speaks for itself," said Scott Lee, the chairman of the housing authority board and the Clatsop County Board of Commissioners. "There was no

case of any negligence on (the part) of executive director Johnston or the other staff so the board has confirmed our support of them."

Alan Evans, director of Helping Hands, attended the meeting last week to hear whether investigators believed there was any merit to Sims' allegations about his organization and the alleged misuse of public funds.

"At the end of the day I wanted to make sure we could publicly clear our name of that accusation," he said. "That was basically it."

Helping Hands works hard

to be transparent and claims like the ones Sims made can hurt credibility, he added. Still, the nonprofit did not feel a need to defend itself against Sims' claims earlier.

"We never gave any energy to that," Evans said. "We were more concerned about rumor when stuff like that happens."

A separate investigation by an outside firm into complaints lodged against Sims by housing authority staff is ongoing. Johnston would not provide details about the complaints against Sims, but he characterized the allegations as "pretty serious."

Camping: 'We get blamed for a lot of stuff'

Continued from Page 1A

The city prohibits camping on a variety of public lands, including parking lots and parks, but city-owned forestland is not included, an omission city councilors believe was simply an oversight when the rule was written.

This summer, police received numerous complaints about camping and suspicious activity in wooded areas on the east side of Astoria and near Columbia Memorial Hospital. Police later located around a dozen camps, some of them abandoned or filled with trash and others that were well-organized and tidy.

Neither LaMear nor Spalding want to begin moving people from the camps immediately. LaMear feels the city shouldn't move people "until we have something permanent to provide for them."

"We need to look at each one of these homeless as individuals and see if they would respond to services," the mayor said. "There's the thought that some of them really want to live in the woods and not partake of any kind of social services."

Jack Fisher is one of the latter. A veteran who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, he grew up in Astoria and has been homeless off and

on throughout his life. He has been homeless for the past five years by choice. He told the task force Monday that he is not interested in the trappings of settled life: a house, cars, bills.

"A job is alright, but if you're paying to live, it's just not something that I really personally want to do," he said.

Then there are others, like Kim Hayward. She has a job downtown and is trying to save money to move into housing. The upfront move-in costs many landlords and rental agencies require, such as first and last month's rent with a security deposit, have been a big barrier.

Even if the City Council passes the updated ordinance at the next council meeting on Monday, Spalding said it is unlikely police will ask anyone to move this winter. He is primarily concerned about how difficult it would be to get into the woods if there were an emergency or criminal issue at the camps, as well as the health and safety hazards due to a buildup of trash and human waste. "There's just no easy way to get up there," he said.

People who live in the neighborhood near the wooded areas say camping has escalated in the past three years. Those who attended the task force meeting said

they were sympathetic to the plight of the homeless, but police have had to respond to numerous complaints this summer. Some property that neighbors reported stolen, they later found in the woods.

Bill Van Nostran, pastor at the First Presbyterian Church, said he was frustrated the task force spent two hours discussing the issue and not coming up with solutions. He added that he attended the meeting ready to share two solutions, though he did not go into further detail.

Others suggested placing dumpsters and portable toilets near the woods to help cut down on the trash and human waste left at camps. But Vernon Hall, who has camped in the woods for several years and is an advocate on behalf of other homeless people, said this is not a solution.

"They'll get abused," he said.

A number of people living in the woods are trying to make a difference in their lives, he added. "Then there's other elements up there. Like you said, a lot of criminal activity going on," he said.

Still, Hayward noted, anyone can leave behind trash in the woods or be a bad neighbor.

"We get blamed for a lot of stuff, a lot of stuff," she said. "It's easy to blame the homeless."

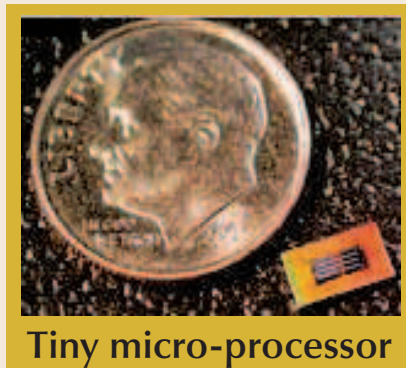
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