

Deadline looms on Performing Arts Center

Backers have until May to decide to buy

By EDWARD STRATTON
The Daily Astorian

The coalition covering the operation of the Performing Arts Center in Astoria will have until May to decide whether to buy the building from Clatsop Community College.

The Partners for the PAC, a coalition of arts groups that use the center for rehearsals and performances, has been leasing the property for \$23,611 a year. The group last year announced its interest in buying the center from the college, which no longer uses the building academically and wants to sell.

The former church faces



The Daily Astorian

The Partners for the PAC has until May to decide whether to buy the Performing Arts Center from Clatsop Community College.

significant deferred maintenance and costs to meet building codes. The Partners last year began a due diligence phase before making a decision. Chris Breitmeyer, the college president, said Tuesday he recently met with the group about their progress.

“We talked about the fact

that in December, when the lease is up for negotiations, that it will increase significantly,” Breitmeyer said. “I think some Partners would like to have the decision made before that lease is negotiated, as to whether they would be able to purchase the building. But definitely we said

we would need something by May.”

Dave Ambrose, a local artist and representative of the Partners, said the group is going through what it will cost to upgrade the building, make repairs and deal with potential past issues such as asbestos.

“There’s roof problems,” he said. “There’s other things that need to be addressed. They all seem to be manageable.”

Breitmeyer also announced that another undisclosed party has come forward with interest in buying the PAC. The college board previously voted down an attempt by a developer to buy the center and include it in a housing project along with the former Lum’s Auto Center. But the new party is like-minded with the Partners and the college and could assist in keeping the center a community performing arts venue.

Clatsop County sells land in Warrenton for CMH care clinic

By JACK HEFFERNAN
The Daily Astorian

Clatsop County agreed Wednesday to a \$463,200 sale of nearly 8 acres in the North Coast Business Park in Warrenton to Columbia Memorial Hospital for a relocated and expanded care clinic.

County commissioners voted 3-0 to approve the sale. The clinic will be located on Ensign Lane a few hundred feet east of 19th Street.

The hospital opened a care clinic in the nearby Warrenton Highlands shopping center in 2013. In the first full year after it opened, the facility saw more than 6,500 visits, said Erik Thorsen, the hospital’s CEO. In 2017, that

number climbed to more than 20,000.

“So as we watch the Warrenton community grow, we really believe our services and the need for our services will continue to grow,” Thorsen said.

Because the hospital is a nonprofit, it is exempt from property taxes. As a result, its bidding price was higher than others, and it will accept responsibility for any wetland mitigation costs, Clatsop County Manager Cameron Moore said.

The hospital will now look to pay off wetland mitigation costs and pursue a design for the care facility, Thorsen said. A timeline for when it will open has not been established.

Debate: All three mayoral candidates pushed for zoning changes

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Michael “Sasha” Miller, a community activist, would devote the money to helping the homeless in numerous small ways, addressing a need for foster parents and retrofitting the city for natural disasters like earthquakes.

Questions about how to address homelessness, the housing crunch and economic development continue to dominate the mayoral race. Under Breitmeyer’s questioning at the debate — sponsored by the American Association of University Women, Coast Community Radio, Clatsop Community College and The Daily Astorian — the candidates delved into the specifics of what they plan to do if elected.

When asked to name three solutions on affordable housing, the candidates said getting a handle on Airbnb-type vacation rentals is key. The City Council took a first look at a new permit process to address illegal rentals at a work session Wednesday morning,

Jones said.

Taylor floated the idea of taxing the owners of vacant houses.

“They are stealing from us, sort of, so why not tax them and get some revenue from those places?” she asked.

Miller, in an answer that elicited laughter from the audience, noted that Pioneer Cemetery — a grassy site off Niagara Avenue dotted with old grave markers — is sitting on basalt.

“So we have the dead people that are going to be safe from an earthquake while down below everybody’s going to die from the earthquake and the tsunami and I would love to move the dead down to the river ... and build housing on that nice, safe basalt,” he said.

Zoning changes

All three candidates pushed for zoning changes to allow higher-density housing. Jones and Miller said there is land available on the city’s eastern edge in the Tongue Point area and in the Emerald Heights

apartment complexes, which remains a source of lower-income housing.

The City Council has discussed a construction excise tax to raise money to increase the city’s housing stock. Such a program could be key to funding affordable housing projects, Jones said.

The candidates diverged slightly when it came to homelessness and offered few concrete solutions.

Taylor and Jones believe the mayor has a role in encouraging housing projects and coordinating with social-service providers. Miller favors legalizing urban camping, an issue the other candidates did not mention. The City Council is in the process of amending an ordinance that prohibits camping to address homeless camps in the woods.

Asked to list the top challenges and opportunities for economic development, Taylor said Astoria Makers, a collective of artists, craftsmen and entrepreneurs downtown, could be “an incubator space

for light industry jobs.”

She believes a proposed data center in Warrenton is also a good opportunity for Astoria. Taylor, a former illustrator at Microsoft, envisions a partnership between the data center and the college to develop a curriculum.

Jones highlighted decisions made by the City Council during his tenure, such as the expansion of the Clatsop Enterprise Zone to include Tongue Point, a move that could allow a marine fabrication and repair facility to take root.

Miller is cautious about economic development, especially as it gets more difficult for some people to afford to live in Astoria. If the city is moving toward a tourism-based economy, he would like to see more historic interpretation to showcase the city’s history.

No hotels

Public meetings on the Urban Core, the final piece of the city’s Riverfront Vision Plan to guide development along the Columbia River, are in process. It is work that the new mayor will oversee next year.

Taylor said she would not vote to allow any additional building in the Urban Core, an area that stretches from Second Street to 16th Street.

None of the candidates supported building more hotels. Developers have proposed a 60-plus room hotel along the Columbia River — a plan the city’s Design Review Committee just denied for a second time — as well as a 90-plus room hotel along Youngs Bay on the South Slope.

Jones said he would look at rezoning waterfront areas on the South Slope from commercial to residential.

“I don’t think we need a 90-room hotel on the South Slope,” he said. “I think we need 90 apartments on the South Slope. That would help ease the housing crunch.”

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