

# Port OKs hotel transfer

Portland hotelier to take over operations

By EDWARD STRATTON  
The Daily Astorian

The Port of Astoria Commission on Tuesday approved a settlement and seven-year lease of the Astoria Riverwalk Inn with a new operator.

Param Hotel Corp., a Portland-based hotelier, will take over on Thursday.

Param had been trying to take over the hotel since 2014 from heavily indebted former operator Brad Smithart in exchange for paying his debts. The Port Commission approved a transfer in 2015, but the deal fell apart.

Param sued the Port after the agency terminated Smithart's lease, opened the hotel for bids and eventually installed another operator, Astoria Hospitality Ventures. A jury sided with Param, ruling the Port had breached a contract and that Jim Knight, the Port's executive director, had knowingly made fraudulent misrepresentations to the company's owner, Ganesh Sonpatki.

Judge Dawn McIntosh eventually ordered the Port to honor an agreement with Param to take over Smithart's lease. After initially appealing the ruling, the Port began settlement negotiations with Param.

As part of the new lease, Param will pay the Port \$5,000 a month in rent, along with 7 percent of the gross profits from the Riverwalk Inn. The company's initial lease runs until Oct. 31, 2020. By then, it must invest at least \$150,000 in the hotel to exercise a five-year extension.

Param's takeover of the hotel included depositing \$580,000 into an escrow account to pay off Smithart's debts. The city is owed \$115,858 for lodging taxes, along with \$4,633 to the county for property taxes.

The Port was to receive \$273,180 for Smithart's back-due rent and revenue sharing. But the settlement with Param included paying \$145,000 of the company's legal fees out of its portion.

The Port Commission on Tuesday also approved paying \$50,000 to Hospitality Ventures to ensure the company does not sue over being forced out of the hotel without compensation, as owner William Orr had intimated could happen. Param will pay Hospitality Ventures \$50,000 for equipment to make sure the hotel continues operating through the transfer.

The remainder of Param's escrow account — estimated at \$186,327 — would go to Smithart, who also owes significant amounts in taxes and has since relocated to New York.

"All the rooms in the hotel are ready to go when the hotel changes hands," Orr told the Port Commission Tuesday.

About 30 people work at the Riverwalk Inn. The parties are still trying to get resolution on what happens to the employees after the transfer, Orr said.

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Photos by Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

A housing study concludes many newer homes are not affordable for families with an average income.

# VARIETY OVER QUANTITY

More than 86 percent of new houses not affordable to families with average income

By JACK HEFFERNAN  
The Daily Astorian

Variety, rather than supply, is the biggest housing barrier in Clatsop County.

Consultants preparing a countywide housing study have noted sufficient housing supply and buildable land, especially in Astoria and Warrenton. More than 11,800 acres of potentially buildable land exist, though officials have cautioned that much of the property has hurdles such as wetlands, which make building more expensive.

The average household income in the county is \$69,000 a year, meaning the average affordable home price is \$240,000. But 86 percent of houses built in the past decade are sold for more than \$300,000.

The price gap is forcing would-be first-time homebuyers toward rental units.

"That is a key takeaway," said Matt Hastie, a housing policy specialist who has helped with the study. "Overall, there's availability and land for housing, but there are gaps in the types of housing people need."

Various causes have been explored, including a rise in vacation homes, economic development, regulations and municipal code quirks.

The result: houses are being sold at higher rates than what they've traditionally been worth. While homes are available at the \$200,000 to \$300,000 level — about 14 percent of the market — first-time homebuyers may be unsatisfied with the condition.

Kevin Leahy, executive direc-



A sign advertises a property for sale in Astoria.

## TOWN HALLS

- Astoria, Thursday, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., Judge Guy Boyington Building, 857 Commercial St.
- Seaside, Nov. 13, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., Seaside City Hall, 989 Broadway St.

tor of Clatsop Economic Development Resources, referenced real estate listings that summarize the quality of the area's cheaper houses.

"I would leave that to your interpretation as to what you get for that price," Leahy said.

The region, particularly Warrenton, has seen rapid economic development. But, due in large part to a shortage of

workforce housing, employers have had a difficult time finding workers.

"It's impeding economic development," Leahy said. "I would say that loud and clear."

Recommendations to change tax lot sizes and build housing in high-density areas make sense, Leahy said.

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# Gearhart woman will help decorate the White House



Brenna Visser/The Daily Astorian

Linda Goldfarb, of By The Way in Gearhart, was chosen to help decorate the White House for Christmas.

## Designer part of Christmas celebration

By BRENNA VISSER  
The Daily Astorian

GEARHART — While most everyone else will be eating Thanksgiving dinner, Linda Goldfarb will be on a plane to the White House.

Goldfarb, the owner of By The Way gift and coffee shop in Gearhart, has been chosen to be one of a handful of designers to help decorate the White House for Christmas.

"When I got the email, I was just so excited," she said. "It's the biggest honor to be asked to do this."

Decorating the halls of the first family never crossed her mind as a possibility until a friend mentioned there was an application open to do it earlier this summer, Goldfarb said. Having volunteers help set up the holiday decor is a long-standing tradition, with about 150 volunteers from 29 states helping to deck the White House halls last year, USA Today reported.

At first she was reticent, figuring the odds of being chosen would be "1 in a million." But after working in the world of interior design for the past 30 years, she couldn't resist the urge to throw in an application.

All was quiet until early October, when Goldfarb returned from an extended trip to Europe and found an email from the White House telling her she had been selected.

But before the excitement could take hold, slight panic set in. Because of her extended time out of the country, she had not received the email until the day after recipients were supposed confirm their attendance.

"My heart dropped," she said. "I thought that I had gotten this once-in-a-lifetime chance ... and lost it."

Much to her relief, the White House ended up accepting her RSVP anyway, and Goldfarb is now gearing up to spend about a week in Washington, D.C.

Goldfarb isn't sure what to expect — details concerning the specifics of how and what will be decorated are kept tightly under wraps to prevent leaks, she said.

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