

LaMear: Housing crunch, homeless loomed large during her term

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Dusen. She decided to run for the post after Van Dusen, the city's longest-serving mayor and part owner of Van Dusen Beverages Inc., announced his retirement in 2014.

Large shoes to fill, everyone said. But under LaMear's watch, the city formed a task force to address homelessness, made the decision to renovate the Astoria Library instead of building a new one, took steps to control development along the riverfront, approved tricky public works outlays and weighed in on several contentious construction projects.

LaMear is a person who likes to find win-win solutions, yet there haven't been many in front of the City Council this year. Instead, the final months of her four-year term have been riddled with difficult issues — new permits for homestay lodging, or land use knots like the four-story waterfront hotel that involved several rounds in front of city boards, multiple denials, two appeals.

LaMear was one of three votes to uphold the developer's final appeal and push the Fairfield Inn and Suites on to its next phase, but it was not a decision she found easy to make. Around the same time, she listened to business owners at the end of Pier 11 who were worried about losing money as a state and city project to replace waterfront bridges turned their storefronts into construction zones.

Though LaMear has served on the City Council since 2008 and, before that, was on the Planning Commission, she said nothing had prepared her for her first month of being mayor.

"I kept thinking, 'Why in the world did I want to do this?' And, 'Can I do this job?'" she remembered.

Now the last six months have been just as daunting as the first. While she is proud of what the councilors and city staff have accomplished together during her time as mayor, she leaves City Hall with mixed feelings.

"Sometimes I felt like I couldn't make up my mind about an issue," she said. "I often empathize with both sides. There are things I wish we would have accomplished."

Leadership style

LaMear wonders what would have happened if she had been more forceful in her leadership. Maybe the



Arline LaMear poses for a photo outside of the Astoria Library.

council could have gotten an earlier start on developing codes for the Urban Core, the final piece of the city's Riverfront Vision Plan, which guides development along the Columbia River. Maybe they could have made headway on Heritage Square, where an empty, caved-in lot still yawns downtown. Or maybe they could have implemented a citywide plastic bag ban, an issue LaMear personally considered very important though she let it drop after others argued it was minor compared to other looming priorities.

The mayor strove toward consensus and was often willing to change her mind if a councilor or resident brought up a point she had not considered.

If people arrived at a City Council meeting concerned about an agenda item, she would pause and open the meeting to public comments to let them share their opinions. When it came time for the councilors to debate with each other or ask questions, LaMear was usually the last to speak.

In an effort to encourage openness, LaMear also established informal, monthly "Meet the Mayor" events at City Hall. She would sit with constituents around a table, answer their questions, discuss issues, make notes to take back to the council later. Some-

times, only one person might show up. Other times, as many as a dozen would attend.

"I wanted to be sure I was in touch with what people were feeling," she said. "I wanted them to feel free to speak their mind."

Van Dusen, who first joined the City Council in 1985 before being elected mayor in 1990, served with LaMear on the council. He said he is proud of the job LaMear did as mayor and he has high hopes for her replacement.

"I think it takes a real disciplined effort to listen," Van Dusen said. "To be able to listen to the community. And you have to balance what your constituents want, what the taxpayers want, and also what you think is the best for the town. Normally, they line up together. Sometimes they don't."

He is most proud of how LaMear, a retired librarian, stuck to her commitment to improve the library.

The project — approved after protracted debates about whether to construct a new building or renovate the existing 50-year-old building on 10th Street — did not have as broad support as projects like the Astoria Aquatic Center or the Astoria Senior Center, Van Dusen said.

"It meant a lot to her, it still means a lot to her, that

we improve our library," Van Dusen said. "I was very proud of her, the way she stood up (for it)."

LaMear pushed hard for a new, modern library. In 2015, the City Council considered building a new library in combination with housing and retail at Heritage Square next to City Hall. The Garden of Surging Waves memorializing the contribution of Chinese immigrants to the city had opened on Duane Street the year before, but a caved-in lot remained on the east side of the garden. The City Council backed away from the mixed-use project, however, after seeing the estimated multimillion-dollar cost.

LaMear was not ready to

fully abandon the idea of a new library, but she did not want to keep expending city resources on the question of what to do. She joined the rest of the council in 2017 to unanimously support a plan to renovate the existing library.

Now she serves as president of the foundation that is working to raise money for the project, work she plans to continue after her term as mayor ends.

Library Director Jimmy Pearson is happy to have her aboard. She has consistently been a staunch advocate, he said, and she has been the public face of the renovation for as long as Pearson has been the director.

"I think she's the perfect spokesperson for the library," he said.

Housing and homelessness

LaMear also hopes to remain involved in finding solutions to Astoria's housing crunch and issues around homelessness. Both topics loomed large during her term.

This year, the City Council added forestlands to the city's "no camping" ordinance to address homeless camps in the woods. At the same time, LaMear and a homelessness solutions task force she led with Police Chief Geoff Spalding discussed the best ways to move people out of the woods humanely and connect them to services.

The results were mixed. Many of the people simply moved their camps elsewhere and are still homeless. The task force's work remains vital, though, LaMear argued. Jones said he is interested in continuing the task force as mayor.

"We wanted some concrete things to come out of this task force and we wanted to have some solutions," she said. "A lot of relationships were forged

between agencies that perhaps weren't as strong. We have a better understanding of what each group does and what their limitations are. We have a long way to go."

LaMear still believes one of the best ways to help the homeless would be to establish a daytime drop-in center where people can take showers, do laundry and access other resources. Efforts by the nonprofit Filling Empty Bellies to open a center stalled this year.

As mayor, LaMear lent city support to a new Helping Hands facility in Uniontown. The nonprofit offers services to homeless people looking to land jobs and find housing.

Members of the task force and LaMear identified the lack of low-income housing as a barrier when it came to helping people who are homeless.

Over the last two years, the City Council supported the purchase of the historic Waldorf Hotel, between City Hall and the library, by a Portland-based affordable housing developer. Innovative Housing plans to create as many as 40 units of workforce housing in the neglected hotel.

Overall, LaMear is proud of the strides the city has made to improve. She is thankful for the part she had in making some of it happen, but she doesn't feel she can take much of the credit. She and the councilors have all benefited from an "outstanding" and hard-working city staff, she said. She will miss working with them and her fellow councilors.

But what will she not miss?

"Well," LaMear paused, considering her words carefully. "Part of what I won't miss is people who have complaints but who don't offer solutions."

Business: Sales have grown every year

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including Little Denmark and Nordic Batik. Matthews and her husband purchased Finn Ware from the sisters in 2010 during the trough of the recession.

"It was a little scary, because everything had just crashed, but I thought there was potential in the store," she said.

Matthews updated the website and added an online store. Sales have grown every year, she said. There aren't many stores like hers, even in the Portland area, and Matthews feels the new location is providing a service to fellow Scandinavians.

Lisa and Kevin Malcolm announced in August they would be adding a second location to Frite & Scoop near Pacific University in Forest Grove in a vacant former ice cream shop. But the couple recently announced they would not be moving forward with the expansion.

"The scope of the project expanded to the point to where it wasn't responsible for us to continue on with it," Kevin Malcolm said.

Gimre's Shoe Store was one of the last Astoria businesses to expand into the Portland metro area, opening a location in downtown



Saara Matthews

Saara Matthews, owner of Finn Ware in Astoria, opened a second location called Nordic Finn Ware in November inside the Nordia House in Portland.

Hillsboro in 1986. Brothers Pete and Jon Gimre were approached in the 2000s by one of their biggest vendors, New Balance, about opening a concept store in Pioneer Place shopping mall in downtown Portland. They would eventually grow to include more locations in the Seattle metro area.

Several years ago, Pete Gimre took sole ownership of the Astoria location and left his brother to run the rest of the shoe stores as a separate business.

"It was too much for me," Pete Gimre said. "My love has always been in Astoria. The travel, time and energy was too much for me."

The key to success in a far-flung location is a good staff, managers and a reasonable landlord in areas with higher rent, he said. Gimre's also had the backing of New Balance, similar to Matthews' support from the Nordic Northwest group.

"It's exciting. It's fun," Pete Gimre said. "But it does take dedication and constant work."

Matthews has a three-year lease in the Nordia House with Nordic Finn Ware.

"I think it will take that long to get a handle on it," she said. "I'm optimistically nervous about the coming year."

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