

OPINION



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Homeless have heartbeat, just like us

When I finished reading the Property Watch story last week in The Daily Astorian (“Business leaders say Property Watch has worked well, but issues persist,” Jan. 11), I thought that the concept is 180 degrees wrong.

But after further reflection, I think it’s about 50 percent complete. Allowing police to monitor business properties after hours is certainly a tool in the community toolbox, but by no means the exclusive fix.

To my assessment of what’s right about Property Watch, there needs to be some way for those in a community who choose to play by the rules of the game to intervene when others who choose to live there, and don’t acknowledge the same rules, create problems. The rules to which I’m referring most are not the municipal rules and regulations, but rather the conventional social expectations and agreements like transacting with money, buying and renting property, and having more traditional forms of occupation (of course, the actual laws and rules matter too).

We make choices even in our non-choices. Some who conduct their lives outside the rules, yet live in the city, choose to treat the community they depend upon without integrity — it’s not okay to sleep on the doorstep of a business and leave waste there in the morning, for example. Some authority, some means, needs to be in place to work with anyone who wants it both ways. This already largely exists through law enforcement. Typical “crime” is another good example of



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Many businesses in downtown Astoria post signs asking people to avoid loitering and other disruptive behavior.

the impacts of citizens, with or without homes, who want it both ways. Examining behaviors alone, however, does not address the underlying causes. In this way, Property Watch is definitely one form of what’s needed.

However, the program is incomplete because there are many people in the world who cannot play by the rules of the game, or who are hindered in the process. These people might have the best of intentions, solid dreams and partial progress, but due to a litany of reasons cannot play like everyone else. Even those who choose not to play (but still expect to be allowed “in”) often have years of causes and conditions that led to their present situation. Sociology is ripe with studies of the homeless, the addicted, and criminals in our country (if we choose to narrowly identify people based on these basic classifications

alone) which show that trauma, abuse, neglect and difficult early life situations exist almost universally among them.

When we take action to address “non-players,” we have to remember that they are humans first. How would we want our own sons and daughters treated in their cities? I’d ask how we ourselves would want to be treated, but it’s too easy to imagine that “I,” as my present “me,” would never end up homeless. The fact is, there are homeless people. Whether we blame or bless them, these people exist. By posturing an entire community against this population, we’re turning our backs on obviously suffering humans — humans with 206 bones and a heartbeat, just like us.

And this is where the Watch’s basis strikes me as incomplete. So we don’t want the homeless people here, I get it (though our complaint is actually not

with the people, but rather the impacts of some of their behavior). Where should they go, then? Zoom out for a moment and think about the next town they might reach and how that community will deal with them. Where is there a Great Homeless City where they will finally be allowed without complaint? Will you face a homeless person and tell them that the best option is for them to disappear? It is absolutely this community’s responsibility to look after its “playing” citizens, but looking away from human beings without offering a constructive alternative is not a solution. And it needs stating — it is also absolutely this community’s responsibility to look after all of its citizens (because, it turns out, that it’s in the “players” best interest to do so).

Lastly, though the Astoria Warming Center is an excellent step in the right direction, it is not the ultimate solution either. The center is only open on select nights, during a narrow window of the year, in a residential neighborhood that distrusts its presence. Through integrative and honest-looking — truly seeing all others — we can dissolve the appearance of both sides and can most compassionately relate to all of the members who live in this community.

An actionable solution: what kind of place can we design in our community where homeless people can go on any night of the year? In the meantime, let’s put our money where our mouth is. If you’re concerned with any aspect of the homelessness issue, start a conversation about it with someone, volunteer for a shift at the warming center, or go meet a homeless person.

John Kopp is a government employee and concerned citizen who has lived in and around Astoria since 2015.

OTHER VIEWS

Selected editorials from Oregon newspapers

Bend Bulletin, on improving Oregon’s public records law

People seeking public records in Oregon get all kinds of abuse. Public agencies ignore them. Agencies overcharge them. Sometimes, agencies even sue requesters to stop from having to fulfill a request.

That’s not the way the state’s public records law is supposed to work. But that’s the way some public agencies choose to implement the law — especially when a requester is seeking information that could make the agency look bad.

Several bills in the Legislature propose changes in the law to improve it. Not all of them will.

Two would make things worse. House Bill 2345 would reduce the public record fees charged by state agencies to members of the news media by 50 percent. If a request is narrowly tailored, the agency would be required to waive any fees.

This would be great for members of the news media. But it’s the public records law, not the news media records law. The law is for any member of the public. The news media does not deserve a special discounted rate. The news media should pay or not pay the same amount as any other member of the public.

Senate Bill 609 would require that a requester tell a public agency how he or she intends to use the requested records. That’s no business of the government. It’s a public record. That means it’s the public’s information. Agencies could use the information from a requester to deny and delay requests. If a requester wants to disclose the information, that’s one thing. That may help in disputes over the costs of records or in disputes over why a record should be public. But the disclosure should not be required.

There are also two proposed changes in the law that could make things better. House Bill 2353 adds some teeth. It would allow the attorney general, district attorney or a court to award a penalty to a requester — and attorney fees — if a public agency fails to respond to a request or responds to undue delay. The bill does not put a dollar figure on the penalty.

For instance, last year the Oregon Department of Human Services put us through the public records ringer. We asked for details about how it was responding to a state audit that said the agency was guilty of “chronic management failures and high caseloads” that “jeopardize the safety of some of the



state’s most vulnerable children.” After more than a month went by without details, we asked for emails related to our request for information. The agency had 15 business days under public records law to tell us what was going on. It did not. It did not face any penalty for failing to comply with the law. We did eventually get what we asked for. But should public agencies be able to violate the law without even a token penalty? We don’t think so.

Ginger McCall, the state’s public records advocate, has pushed for another change in Oregon law that in a way has taken shape in House Bill 2431. The bill requires state agencies to make public the number of requests it received, the number of requests unfulfilled and information about how much was charged.

Passing the bill will enable Oregonians to better understand how well the public records law works — or often doesn’t.

Albany Democrat-Herald, on sluggish recycling rates

A recent report from the state Department of Environmental Quality about Oregon’s goals for recycling included bad news: The state is likely to fall short of its goals for recycling more than half of the waste generated in the state.

For calendar year 2017, the state found, Oregonians recovered or recycled a little more than 2.3 million tons of waste. That works out to be about 42.8 percent of the roughly 5.4 million tons of waste generated in the state.

The problem is that the state’s Legislature has set a goal of 52 percent recovery by 2020. (The goal for 2025 is 55 percent.)

Officials told the Statesman-Journal newspaper, which reported about the survey, that the 2020 goal now seems out of reach.

Looking at the trends, it certainly appears as if Oregon is moving in the wrong direction: The recovery rate for the state peaked at 49.7 percent in 2012 and has been sliding since then.

To be fair, the 2017 rate of 42.8 percent was a little better than the 2016 rate, 42.2 percent. And that 42.8 percent rate for 2017 represents about 2.3 million tons of recovered material. That’s all stuff that doesn’t need to be dumped at a landfill.

And the state report noted some unexpected developments that depressed the state rate. If you’ve been following developments in the world of recycling, you know about one of them: China’s decision near the end of 2017 to ban imports of unsorted paper and post-consumer plastics.

But a bigger factor, the state said, was the unexpected 2015 closure of a paper

mill in Newberg that was the state’s largest user of post-consumer wood waste as a fuel. Other mills stopped using wood waste because of federal air-quality rules.

That suggests one important lesson about recycling: Even the best intentions don’t matter much unless there are markets for that recycled material.

If you need more evidence about the connection between markets and recycling, consider what happened with bottles and cans in 2017: In April of that year, the deposit for those containers doubled, from 5 to 10 cents. Not unexpectedly, 2017 saw a substantial increase in the recycling of those containers.

Here’s another example: Scrap metal prices increased in 2017, and so did the amount of metals recovered, which jumped by some 14 percent.

Another hopeful trend involves manufacturers using lightweight packaging instead of heavier materials. The upside, the state said, is that the lighter materials tend to be easier on the environment. The downside is that increasing use of these materials could depress the state’s recovery rate, which is based on weight.

Hitting the state’s ambitious goals will require the development of robust (and stable) markets for recycled material. But here’s one more number to think about: Maybe we all could do something to reduce that 5 million tons of stuff we throw away every year.