

Steam baths: ‘The sauna was a hub for Finnish people of all ages’

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The all-ages, gray-and-white marble baths, heated by an oil boiler and steam pipes, included eight private rooms and one large public area for men nicknamed “the bullpen.”

“The sauna was a hub for Finnish people of all ages,” Helen Pitkanen told The Daily Astorian in 2013. “My husband used to go there once or twice a week. It was a really nice, clean and sanitary place. It was always immaculate. I grew up going there at least once a week.”

Koskelo died in 1953, and the business passed to his son, Elmer, and daughter-in-law, Naimi. The couple operated the steam baths until they retired and sold the business in 1976. The baths changed hands multiple times and eventually closed.

Developer Erick Moore purchased the building in the mid-2000s. He began demolishing the baths to make way for a commercial space before locals expressed dismay about the landmark being taken apart.

After learning more about the history, Moore said he wanted to restore the baths but needed to gauge community interest before embarking on the expensive restoration. In 2004, he estimated it would cost \$15,000 to restore each private sauna and adjoining changing room.

A group of local builders assembled to help guide

Ordinance: Signs will be put up at problem locations

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Bill Van Nostran, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church and a board member for the Astoria Warming Center, opposed the ordinance. He presented a resolution “regarding the treatment of those experiencing homelessness in Astoria” from the Clatsop County Democratic Central Committee that he wrote with party activist Larry Taylor.

The resolution asked the City Council to abandon the ordinance given the homelessness crisis.

Later, Van Nostran said he agrees the ordinance is not a ban on panhandling, but he worries this will be the real-world effect.

Some people who are homeless have said they feel the city and business owners are using a few aggressive panhandlers to characterize the entire homeless community. They do not cause trouble at McDonald’s, but feel singled out because of how they look, they told The Daily Astorian following a meeting of Mayor Bruce Jones’ homelessness solutions task force in January where McDonald’s owner Todd Tobey spoke about his concerns.

On Monday, city councilors agreed with Spalding. They felt the traffic safety issue must be addressed, though several councilors said it was a difficult decision to make.

City Councilor Joan Herman said all the city is doing is asking people to park legally before giving someone a donation.

“That’s all,” she said. “I don’t see a big deal in that.”

Over the next 30 days, the city plans to put up signs at problem locations and reach out to people through social media and news publications before beginning to cite anyone.

Based on what other Oregon cities have experienced after enacting similar rules, Spalding expects he and his officers will not have to issue very many citations.

Moore in the restoration. One was Jay Raskin, an architect who frequented the sauna in the 1970s when he came to the North Coast as a lifeguard trainee. Moore was receiving help with financing through nonprofit lender ShoreBank Enterprise Pacific, now Craft3, but for some reason didn’t follow through on the project.

“It was quite disappointing,” Raskin said. “He had it all lined up. There were a lot of contractors ready.”

Moore eventually sold the building to RWI Inc., which in 2013 sold the bathhouse to Bechard. He said

the fundraising for his restoration effort is in the initial stages. He has also employed a grant writer to seek other sources of funding.

“We are thrilled at the response from the community thus far,” he said via Instagram messenger. “In addition to donations, community members have offered electrical, plumbing, architectural, construction and labor services. The rejuvenation of the Uniontown and Steam Bath Building is something the community and the city seem to be very excited about.”



The Daily Astorian

Eric Bechard purchased the Union Steam Baths on Marine Drive in Astoria in 2013 with the intent to reopen the sauna.



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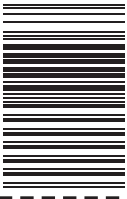
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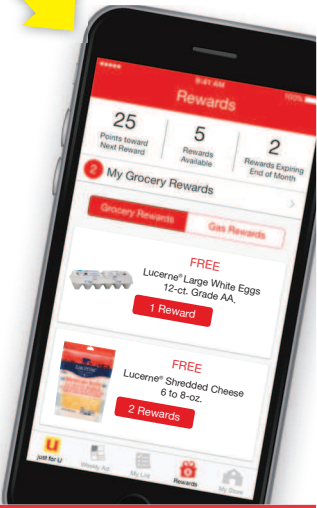
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