

Homeless: City reaction to reports of ‘bad behavior’

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One of the City Council’s two-year goals is geared at supporting the efforts of advocates and social services agencies to reach people in need, but councilors want to draw the line on what they term “bad behavior.”

Police say they are seeing an uptick in more aggressive behavior on homeless-related calls. Overall, there has been an increase in calls for service tied to the homeless.

At the same time, Police Chief Geoff Spalding has discovered that many people are no longer calling the police regarding behavior that concerns them. He hears that people think police don’t have the tools to address the issues, or that police won’t do anything.

“Unfortunately,” Spalding added, “I almost feel that we have come to a new norm and that’s not a place we want to be.”

Exclusion zones
City councilors discussed the possibility of introducing exclusion zones — areas where people, if they are caught repeatedly breaking city laws, will not be allowed



Homeless people protest at Heritage Square in 2018.

Katie Frankowicz/The Daily Astorian

to go — among other alternatives to the more typical law enforcement actions of citations and jail time. These concepts still need to be fleshed out, Spalding said.

One solution — crime prevention through environmental design — includes actions like removing the picnic tables next to the American Legion at Heritage Square.

The tables have become a place where homeless people and others sit, socialize and often, according to police reports, drink. An advocate

for the homeless staged a protest there last year when the city planned to dismantle illegal homeless camps in city-owned forestland.

Increasingly, it is a place where police are being dispatched, City Manager Brett Estes said. Police report everything from liquor violations to fights.

“This by no means was the City Council’s overall approach to homelessness in our community,” Mayor Bruce Jones said at the end of the work session. “We’ll have

a lot more work sessions in the future on different aspects of work that’s ongoing to assist people suffering from homelessness.”

“This was our session on dealing with one tiny segment of the overall problem,” he added. There is a small percentage of people, “many of whom are suffering from homelessness, but it’s a small percentage of that population that has been directly, negatively impacting livability, quality of life and our local economy.”

The presentation Thursday left City Councilor Roger Rocka feeling frustrated and helpless.

The city faces a shortage of services and legal restrictions on what it can do. He feels empathy for the homeless, but from volunteering at the Astoria Warming Center, he knows there is a percentage of people “who are aggressive and the other homeless don’t like them either.”

“I’m just not sure where we go with this,” he said.

Fragile economy
A small audience at the work session included downtown business owners and representatives, social services agencies, several homeless advocates and at least one couple that is homeless. The economy of Astoria, and all small towns, is fragile, David Reid, the executive director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce and a member of the mayor’s homelessness solutions task force, told councilors. Bad behaviors are hurting downtown businesses and their employees, said Reid and Pete Gimre, owner of

Gimre’s Shoes. “A dead downtown is a dead town,” Reid said. He encouraged the City Council to stop looking for “a solution” and instead look for multiple, small solutions. Sarah Jensen and Cody Lawrence, who are both homeless and camping at legal sites for now, attended the work session curious to hear the discussion and official line on homelessness. Both were skeptical of the city’s plans to move picnic tables out of Heritage Square. People will just relocate somewhere else, Lawrence said. He had friends who spent most of their time in the woods, but who are now in town because of the sweep of camps last year. “I understood why that was a problem,” he said about the camps, “but you pretty much cleared out their whole living space. You don’t want them in the woods, you don’t want them in town. Where do you want them?” “There are legitimate problems with some people,” Jensen added. “But there are also housed people with jobs getting drunk and causing trouble in the streets, driving drunk.”

Cutters: New ships would replace the Steadfast and Alert

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both homeported at the 17th Street Dock in Astoria, and are expected to enter service in 2025.

Astoria is in competition with Everett, Washington, and the Seattle area for the two cutters.

Astoria Mayor Bruce Jones, a retired commander of Sector Columbia River, said he reached out to congressional representatives after learning Everett sent a delegation to Washington, D.C., to stump for the cutters.

“We want to be sure the Coast Guard knows we can support them,” Jones said.

The Alert and Steadfast each have 70 to 75 crew, meaning Astoria could lose upward of 150 good-paying, year-round jobs when they are decommissioned, Jones said.

Astoria was recently chosen over Newport as the homeport of two new fast response cutters to enter service by 2021. The 154-foot Sentinel-class cutters are meant to replace 1980s-era 110-foot Island-class patrol boats nearing the end of ser-

vice life.

But each fast response cutter has about 30 crew and 10 support staff, Jones said, not enough to replace the jobs that could be lost with the Alert and Steadfast. Astoria could be in line for two additional fast response cutters, which could bring in up to 130 positions, but the Coast Guard is still deciding where to base the two, he said.

The Oregon delegation’s letter points toward Hyak Maritime’s burgeoning shipyard at North Tongue Point as an ideal location to co-lo-

cate the fast response and off-shore cutters.

“There are clear efficiencies in staffing and costs to be realized by co-locating the (cutters) at North Tongue Point, with its rapidly growing shipyard facility and proximity to Portland’s dry docks,” the letter read.

The Coast Guard is still deciding where in Astoria to station the two confirmed fast response cutters. Jones sees a potential economy of scale by locating all fast response cutters and any off-shore patrol cutters at North

Tongue Point. “It seems the greatest capacity for growth is at North Tongue Point,” he said. “It’s sheltered from the heaviest wind and currents.” The piers at North Tongue Point could be repaired to accommodate the ships, while the area has space for a logistical base and barracks to help with the influx of Coast Guardsmen, Jones said. Developer Cary Johnson is planning a large apartment complex nearby, while bringing in utilities that could lead

to the development of other properties. North Tongue Point, previously leased by the Port of Astoria, was recently purchased by Hyak with the hopes of developing a shipwright center at the former Navy seaplane base. Robert Dorn, CEO of Hyak, said he’s had discussions with the Coast Guard but has not heard whether any cutters will be based at his docks. “They’re a perfect fit,” he said. “They’ll have vessels, and their vessels will need to be maintained.”

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