

Funeral home: ‘Back in the day, you needed this space, but not with new technology’

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“I’d like for more people to feel comfortable coming in,” Anderson said of the Astoria location. “Even on nice days, when the weather’s good, I’ll open up the doors here, and I’ll be running back and forth.”

Anderson offers cups of coffee and tours of the three-story, 10,000-square-foot building, from the chapel and viewing rooms down to the basement crematorium and embalming rooms, where he does his own body preparations.

“In the past, I think it used to be one of those kind of scary, dark things,” he said. “It’s the unknown portion that I think is really scary to people.”

The intersection of 12th Street and Franklin Avenue is an undertakers row, with Hughes-Ransom, Caldwell’s Luce-Layton Mortuary and Ocean View Cremation and Burial Service on three corners. The undertakers collectively handled the arrangements for around 90 percent of the more than 1,000 deaths reported in Clatsop County between 2016 and 2018.

Local funeral home owners say around 85 percent of their customers get cremations. The percentage of cremations first overtook burials for the first time in 2015, according to the National Funeral Directors Association.

The changes in the industry have left Anderson with a lot of empty space. Upstairs, he is turning a former casket room into a two-bedroom apartment, and a former urn room into a studio, hoping to start renting in the fall.

“It’s empty space up here, so why not for generating revenue and helping someone out with hous-

ing?” he said. “Back in the day, you needed this space, but not with new technology.”

Renee Caldwell, of Caldwell’s Luce-Layton Mortuary, said she lucked out with a significantly smaller building than Hughes-Ransom. Cremations only bring in around \$1,000 a customer, while burials bring in exponentially more, she said.

“If I had all burials, I’d be making more money,” Caldwell said. “The problem is your taxes and everything else still go up every year. I think people are just concerned with their budgets.”

Brian Dutton, who opened Ocean View in 2008, has an even lower overhead than Anderson and Caldwell. He rents a small, ground-floor showroom, attached to separate rental units above, with no mortgage or property taxes to cover. He’s skipped on an embalming room, finding many customers forego that step.

“I don’t have a chapel to have services in,” Dutton said. “Most people who are having a service ... are not calling it a funeral. They’re calling it a celebration of life. They’re wanting to have it somewhere more upbeat. A funeral chapel is not a fun place to have a celebration of life.”

Anderson is hoping his open-mindedness will bring in more people to the spacious Hughes-Ransom. He invites people to bring in props and decorate the chapel for their needs. They can even press the button for their loved one’s cremation.

“Those are things that healing-wise could be good for them,” he said. “I’m no one to tell them how their grieving process should be.”

Farmland: County lost 1,312 acres

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like the U.S. in general, is steadily losing farmland. That has raised concerns not only about food production and security, but also fish and wildlife habitat provided by working farms and ranches.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture conducts the Census of Agriculture every five years. It provides a full count of farms across the country, broken down by income, crops and production practices.

What the numbers show is a decline in the amount of farmland for every census taken over the past 20 years. Between 1997 and 2017, total land in farm production fell roughly 6% nationwide, from approximately 954.7 million acres to a little more than 900 million acres.

The downturn is even steeper in Oregon, from 17.6 million acres in 1997 to 15.9 million acres in 2017, or nearly 10%. That’s an average of 85,000 acres, or 132.8 square miles, of farms each year.

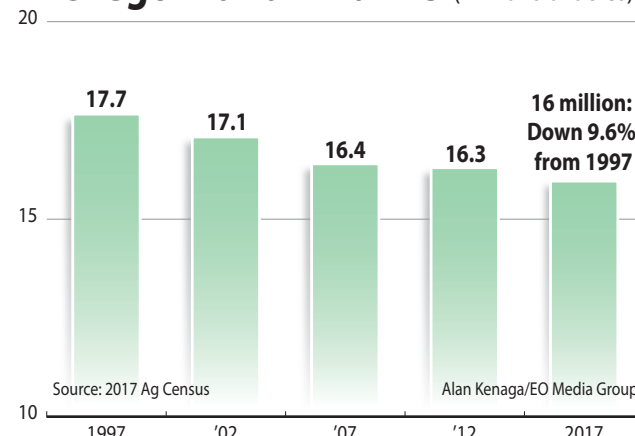
Jim Johnson, land use and water planning coordinator for the Oregon Department of Agriculture, said the state is clearly losing farmland. Less obvious are the reasons why.

“(The census) doesn’t tell us what the land that was in farms was changed to,” Johnson said.

Drawing conclusions practically requires a county-by-county examination.

For example, Klamath County, in southern Oregon, lost the highest percentage of farms and

Oregon land in farms (millions of acres)



ranches from 2012 to 2017 — 165,417 acres, or 25.7%. But Johnson said much of that land may only be temporarily out of production, due to lingering water shortages and uncertainty in the Klamath Basin.

On the other hand, Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties — which make up the Portland metro area — lost 40,807 combined acres, likely to urbanization, Johnson said.

“I can’t think of a lot of land, especially cropland, that wouldn’t be kept in production in the Willamette Valley unless it was being converted to something else,” he said.

Clatsop County lost 1,312 acres — from 16,382 down to 15,070 — an 8% decline.

Fiala’s grandparents bought the property that would become the Tualatin Farms, north of the Tualatin River, in 1906. The family had a small dairy and grew cabbage and other row crops to sell at a fresh market in east Portland.

Today, Richard Fiala runs the farm with his sib-

lings, Anne, Doug and Wes. They grow a variety of fruits and vegetables for sale at their farmstand, and host all types of events from about mid-July through Halloween.

Farming around the nearby suburbs of West Linn and Lake Oswego, Fiala said the area is well within arm’s reach of urban development — especially if farms do not have a succession plan or conservation easement to keep the land in agricultural production.

“What we’ve seen in the last 30 years is speculators and developers come in when a farm hasn’t stayed in the family,” Fiala said.

Oregon lawmakers are considering a bill that would provide \$10 million over the next biennium to fund the state Agricultural Heritage Program, created in 2017 as a voluntary grant program to help farmers and ranchers with succession planning, easements and other conservation strategies.

The funding measure, House Bill 2729, is up for

consideration in the Legislature’s Joint Ways and Means Committee.

Nellie McAdams, a consultant formerly with the Rogue Farm Corps, has advocated strongly for HB 2729. With two-thirds of Oregon’s farmland set to change hands over the next 20 years, McAdams said it is imperative to stem further losses.

“Those agricultural lands are not permanently protected,” McAdams said. “Once agricultural land is developed, it permanently falls out of production. You can’t un-build a Walmart.”

Johnson, with the Oregon Department of Agriculture, said land use planning goals adopted by the state in 1973 have slowed the rate of decline for farmland, but acknowledged that issues still remain. Goal 3, specifically, requires counties to identify farmland and establishes an exclusive farm use zone that limits its development.

“We’ve still got issues with conversion of farmland,” Johnson said. “We still have to get into policy discussions about urban growth, and where it’s going to occur.”

Otherwise, McAdams said she wonders when the losses will add up to a breaking point.

“For an urban city-dweller, that means you don’t have access to local food, you don’t have food security, and you would also lose open space habitat that almost every farm offers,” McAdams said. “We need to act now to reverse the loss of farmland from agricultural production.”

Hulti: ‘Some bills may just be there to start a conversation’

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“Being able to figure out the entire process has been very educational,” he said. “I had no idea the process of what

the bills go through. I’ve also learned about how some bills die. Some bills may just be there to start a conversation.”

Hulti’s internship ends with the semester in May,

although he sees himself taking on another while at Willamette. After graduating in 2020, he plans on taking a break before charting his next step, be it graduate or law school.

“Before taking the internship, I’d not really thought about any political career,” he said. “Definitely learning the inner workings ... it’s something I could think of doing.”

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