

# License: Sites like Airbnb and VRBO almost never list addresses and tracking down owners, operators of illegal rentals takes detective work

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realize they needed a license.

But, Estes added, “we have had some people who have said they’re not going to comply.”

Two weeks after the city’s deadline, the city has yet to start fining anyone.

Planning staff and consultants are still sorting out who has a permit and who does not, and will continue to refine data on where rentals that have not reported to the city are actually located.

## Detective work

A general search on Airbnb for homes and rooms available for short-term rental in Astoria brings up dozens (even hundreds) of matches — not all of them actually in Astoria. They include a mix of single- or two-room rentals that would likely qualify as legal and entire homes in residential neighborhoods, which are not legal.

Sites like Airbnb and VRBO almost never list addresses and tracking down the owners and operators of illegal rentals takes detective work.

Estes said it is still not clear exactly how many Airbnb-type rentals Astoria even has. In 2017, former City Councilor Cindy Price had compiled an informal list of more than 60 rentals, but Estes says her list was not comprehensive.

For people the city knows are breaking the law, Estes said, the next step is code enforcement.

But the city often still needs to track down the physical addresses of the rentals, names of property owners, their mailing addresses if they live elsewhere, their phone numbers.

People get into the Airbnb business for any number of reasons. Their decision to pursue an official homestay license — or not — varies just as much.

For some, the renewal and inspection fees associated with the license, an increase in the city’s hotel tax and a new county hotel tax are onerous. Astoria raised its tax from 9% to 11% in 2017 to help pay for parks. Then the county introduced a new 1% tax in January.

Richard Bracke relies on the income from his rental to help pay his mort-

gage after personal upheavals put him in a financial bind. He testified against the homestay license at city hearings last year. Other hosts, Bracke included, say their profits are relatively small, but the small income stream is important.

“Until I don’t know what happens, I will have to do this,” Bracke said.

When the City Council first discussed the possibility of a license, some councilors argued the rentals take away possible housing from people in need of long-term options. But former Mayor Arline LaMear worried about people who rely on Airbnb income to maintain older homes. She thought it unlikely that these same people were interested in having a full-time roommate.

For Bracke, the ability to rent out a room on a short-term basis is an important freedom.

“I don’t want a roommate,” he said. “I shouldn’t be forced to have a roommate and that’s what they’re trying to do, like I’m supposed to cure the problems of this alleged housing shortage.”

For Katrina Morrell Gasser, the community and business liaison at Tongue Point Job Corps Center, her Airbnb provided an important supplemental income. She complied with city rules when she started renting out a basement bedroom in 2016, but decided not to apply for the city’s license and has shut down her rental

rented out out an upstairs room and a basement suite in her home for the past three years. She decided to continue and apply for the city license.

Because she was already in good standing with the city, the fees she paid were slightly less — a \$150 renewal fee rather than the full \$500 required for new applications. Much of the information she needed to submit to the city she already had at hand from going through a conditional use process to operate the rentals in prior years.

“I don’t think there was any doubt in my mind that I was going to continue,” Brown said. “It’s kind of my summer job.”

She also loved hosting people, welcoming them into her home, showing off Astoria.

The license was more of an annoyance than anything, she said. Just another hoop she had to jump through, but Heidi Dlubac, a contract planner the city hired specifically to handle the homestay lodging license, walked her through every step.

“I think as much as I didn’t want to go through the process, she made it really easy,” Brown said.

But it doesn’t seem to be quite as lucrative a business as it used to be.

Brown was advised to pass the costs of higher hotel taxes to the visitors renting her rooms, a strategy she tested this spring to poor results.

“When I raised rates, I saw the impact on bookings,” she said. With the increased tax rates and additional city fees, she’s seeing more of the costs of running her business come directly out of her pocket. “If anything, I’ve had to lower my rates,” she said.

“I think it’s still working fine,” she added, “but I don’t know if it’s something I’ll do long term.”

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Lacy Brown | Astoria resident who rents out an upstairs room and a basement suite in her home

for the time being.

She understands and is sympathetic to the city’s position, but the license and inspection fees and increased taxes were factors.

“The space is a room in my basement,” she said. She didn’t think people would want to pay the price she would need to ask now to make the endeavor worthwhile.

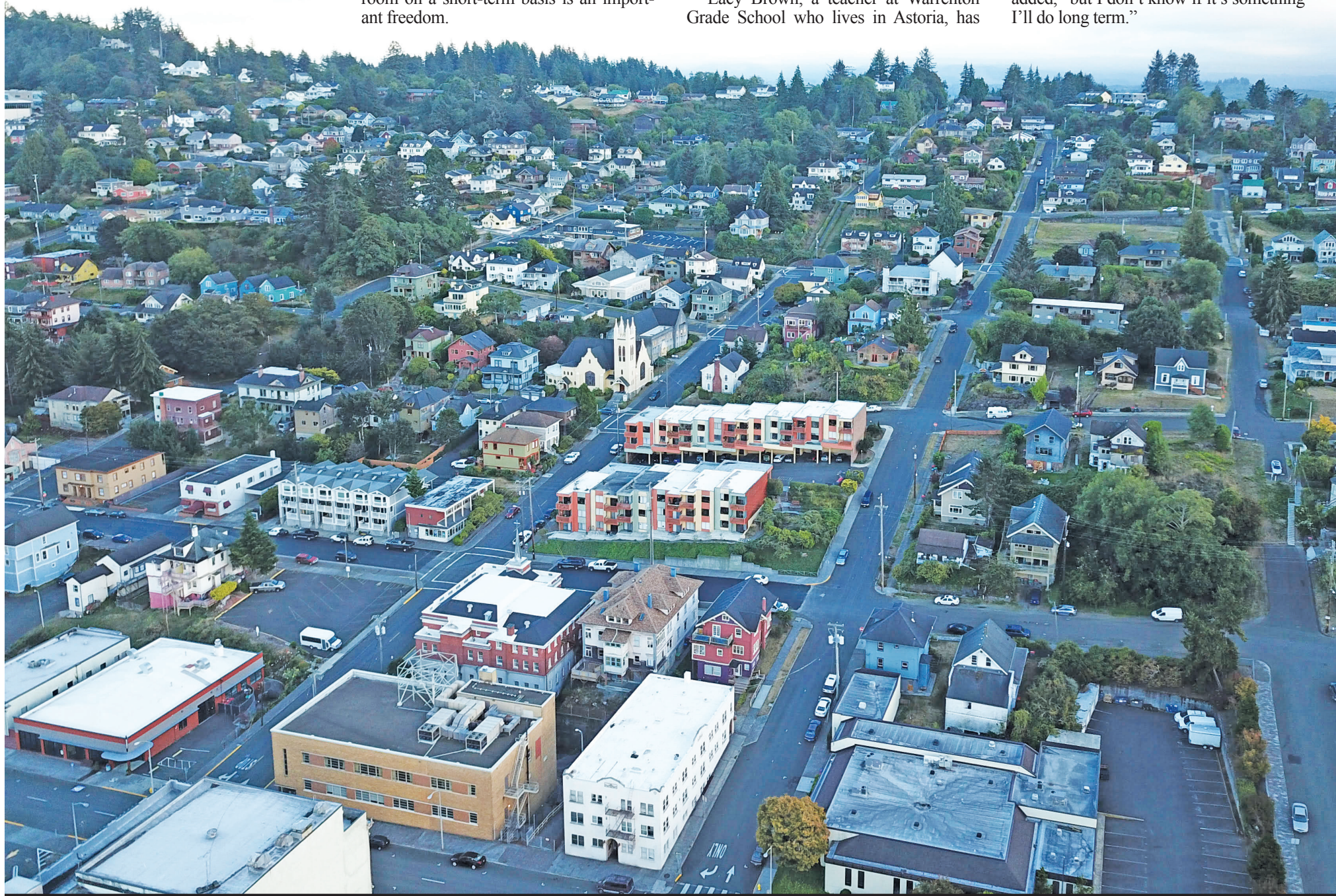
“I was uncomfortable with how much I would have to spend to break even,” she said.

It’s too bad, she thinks. She is a fourth-generation Astorian and proud of her community.

“I genuinely enjoyed saying, ‘This is my city, welcome,’” she said.

## ‘My summer job’

Lacy Brown, a teacher at Warrenton Grade School who lives in Astoria, has



## Project: Standard list of conditions include the need to submit landscaping, lighting plans

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Postlewait, who works as the executive vice president for the nonprofit lender Craft3, has said he plans to offer 32 apartments at the complex for long-term rental slightly below market rate. The 34 remaining units would be used as short-term rentals and help keep prices for the long-term units low.

For the past few years, city leaders have discussed the need for affordable and workforce housing, but have struggled with how to create or incentivize development.

City planning staff recommended approval of Postlewait’s Northpost Apartments with a standard list of conditions, including items like the need to submit landscaping and lighting plans.

Both the uses — multi-family dwelling and vacation lodging — are allowed outright on the property.

The only person to provide testimony at the public hearing Thursday



Katie Frankowicz/The Astorian

Property near Safeway is slated for an apartment project.

besides Postlewait and project manager Randy Stemper was Gai Williams, who owns property to the north next to the Columbia River.

“I must say I’m thrilled about it,” she told the committee.

She has had trouble selling her property because of the run-down appearance

of the land Postlewait is purchasing for the Northpost Apartments.

She hopes he can also do something about the property immediately next door to her, an empty lot covered in blackberry bushes that has long been home to feral cats and where she has seen evidence of drug use and homeless camps.

## Building: ‘These are working people who can’t afford to live where they work’

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Nostran sees it as a community effort.

“We’re hoping to make this a community project and First Presbyterian Church would just be the catalyst,” he said. “There’s every hope and certainty that we’ll be able to, in a couple of years I hope, turn this around.”

Van Nostran and members of his congregation began looking for buildings they might be able to buy and offer as low-cost housing last year. The pastor previously served on the city’s homelessness solutions task force and is a board member for the Astoria Warming Center.

“From everything we’ve read and seen, affordable and available housing is in a desperate shortage,” he said.

The congregants interested in financially backing an effort to provide housing believe churches and other nonprofits could perhaps have more flexibility than a traditional developer.

Social service organiza-



Katie Frankowicz/The Astorian

A building on Marine Drive could be used for affordable and workforce housing.

tions in Astoria have noted a need for low-cost housing as clients transition from a life on the streets or after weathering other setbacks. Van Nostran knows of people who slept at the warming center during the winter and worked during the day. They struggled to save up enough money to afford rising rents or cover the upfront costs of moving into an apartment.

“These are working people who can’t afford to live

where they work,” Van Nostran said.

Business owners at the homelessness solutions task force meetings discussed difficulties in hiring staff because people could not find affordable places to live.

Van Nostran believes all of these groups could be served by the kind of housing project church congregants and the advisory committee envision.