

OPINION

the Astorian

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BEHIND THE NEWS

‘Warrenton for Warrenton is the new mantra’

Warrenton Mayor Henry Balensifer is not anti-development. Like others on the City Commission, the mayor has a record of being friendly to new business in Clatsop County’s fastest-growing city.

So it was a little eye-opening when Balensifer, in his first State of the City speech in August, took a sharp line against a relaxed approach to vetting projects.

“Warrenton for Warrenton is the new mantra,” he said, urging the city to take a careful look at development codes and examine growth more intelligently.

Appointed mayor after Mark Kujala stepped down in 2017, Balensifer, the communications manager at JBT Lektro Inc., was elected to a four-year term last November.

But he was first elected to the City Commission in 2012, and served on the Planning Commission before that, so he had a role in some of the policy direction he was critical of in his address.

The Warrenton High School graduate, whose grandmother, Barbara Balensifer, was mayor in the late 1990s, talked about the theme of his speech, and his thoughts about development, in an interview.

Q: What motivated your speech?

A: This is, in a sense, a cultural shift for the city. That’s why that theme came about, is to really kind of put the flag in the ground, so to speak.

Q: The city took a lot of grief over Wendy’s, especially the drive-thru. In hindsight, what would you have done differently?

A: Our Transportation System Plan should have been done a couple years ago, and it didn’t really get finished until just about the same time. That delayed new traffic standards, because ODOT (Oregon Department of Transportation) doesn’t generally have a conversation with you, just to have a conversation.

The TSP is really where you set the standard.

Q: You mentioned neighborhoods being built without streetlights. How does that happen?

A: That’s a good question. I shake my head, and scratch my head, all at the same time.

There’s roads that are tens of feet off the plat, so that people have skewed yards. My only conjecture is that certain individuals who were building those things, the city must have given a conditional approval, and then said, ‘Once you finish, it just needs to be done.’

And when it got finished, they signed off on it, and it didn’t get done.

Q: In Astoria, we have had debates over national chains like Grocery Out-



Lucy Kleiner/The Astorian

Mayor Henry Balensifer discusses economic development in Warrenton.

‘I DON’T HAVE ANYTHING AGAINST BIG-BOX STORES, I’LL BE STRAIGHT WITH THAT, AND NEITHER DOES THE COMMISSION. BUT IF THE CONNOTATION IS THAT WARRENTON HAS BECOME A DUMPING GROUND FOR THINGS — IT’S JUST AN INDUSTRIAL WASTELAND, SO TO SPEAK — IT’S A LOT MORE THAN THAT.’

Warrenton Mayor Henry Balensifer

let and Dollar General. We have heard people say, “That’s what Warrenton is for.”

A: It aggravates me, I’ll just say that. I don’t have anything against big-box stores, I’ll be straight with that, and neither does the commission. But if the connotation is that Warrenton has become a dumping ground for things — it’s just an industrial wasteland, so to speak — it’s a lot more than that.

Q: Some of the best potential for new development is around the Astoria Regional Airport and the North Coast Business Park. What kinds of

projects would you like to see happen?

A: Industrial projects. It’s zoned for that and I’m going to zealously protect the industrial zoning of that.

I know there is some friction between certain individuals and entities about the commercialization of the North Coast Business Park. There’s probably going to be some technicalities in law, but, right now, it’s industrial zoned.

I feel that we have a lacking of diversification of our industrial sector, and there are opportunities to capitalize on that.

Q: Warrenton is growing as a place

for younger families. We see it in the housing and school enrollment data. What can the city do to improve the quality of life?

A: We can get more creative with our zoning. I personally don’t like the kind of cookie-cutter style densities that we put into our housing.

... I think that there’s opportunities to get more creative. I think with tiny homes being developed in Warrenton — and we’re working on those codes — we’ve had a lot of local interest in that.

And that’s another key — citizen engagement, like the Spur 104 charrette process. So whatever comes out of Spur 104, you can’t say that the city didn’t open it up for other thoughts, because the community really had a very active hand in developing the plans for that.

In traffic-challenged areas like 104, that’s really going to be critical, is to get community involvement in what is going to be an acceptable level of development.

Q: What was the reaction to your speech?

A: With the exception of one person who didn’t live in the city of Warrenton, very positive. A lot of people said, ‘Finally.’

Derrick DePledge is the editor of The Astorian.

GUEST COLUMN

Grocery Outlet could bring jobs to Astoria

We are family representatives for the property proposed for a Grocery Outlet in Astoria.

We want to share a few thoughts. Our dad, Robert P. Heestand, owned Nehalem Valley Motor Freight, the facility now occupied by TP Freight Lines. He was a small-business owner who grew up in and loved Oregon. Dad offered many good union jobs in Astoria. Dave and Karen Johnson, owners of NAPA Auto Parts,

asked and he built them a building so they could fulfill their entrepreneurial dreams. Thus, more jobs were created in Astoria.

Now a developer wants to create more jobs and offer affordable groceries. The opposition makes little sense to us. Does Astoria have all of the jobs it ever needs and wants?

On July 30, reporter Katie Frankowicz gave what appeared to be a fair overview of the various interests, “New Grocery Outlet in Astoria would complicate intersection.” On Aug. 1, she wrote, “Online fight over Grocery Outlet echoes other campaigns.” On Aug. 27, the editorial department weighed in and voiced opposition to the Grocery Outlet development.

Fitting into the beauty and coastal environment of Oregon is a priority for Astoria.

Having seen the drawings for the building, it appears to be architecturally appropriate. Yet, when the design team fulfilled the need for attractiveness, new demands and new objections came forth.



Clatskanie Chief

A line outside Grocery Outlet when a new store opened in Rainier last year.

Mysterious letters from law firms arrived at the last minute. Now the site traffic is a major concern? Large trucks have been pulling in and out of the property from U.S. Highway 30 for over 60 years.

Through the property, we’ve paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in property tax to the region over more than 60 years. We are not some nameless entity, not outsiders — we grew up Oregonians. We contributed to the common good of Oregon. Yet, fallow land has little tax value.

It is now crunch time for the developer

and the development has to make economic sense to them.

The city, the citizens and the newspaper cannot demand that the developer find some other land. They are a private company and have every right to buy what they believe is viable. The same parties cannot demand our real estate representative just magically create some other developer to purchase and build some project, any project, it doesn’t work that way.

The land is private. It has a valid retail building on it, and a valid right to develop

retail there. It also has an ancient truck terminal which rightfully stands there — as long as viable development is not allowed to build in the location. It stands as a sore thumb today and will for years to come because your and our best option sits in front of the Design Review Committee now.

If this development fails, as citizens and visitors alike drive by, they may wonder why this property remains ugly and without an attractive new building. The reality is you can look to this date and time to know the reason.

We as owners will have no choice but to lease the building to any business wanting the space. Any retailer. Of any type. The land has automatic rights for retail and that is what you’ll get.

We don’t have to ask permission to sign a lease. You truly do not know, as we do not know, who or what will be interested. Maybe Astoria will like it. Maybe Astoria will not. However, if the lease offer is economically viable, we will sign it and they will move in.

Finally, maybe you are a citizen and you think one of those new jobs at Grocery Outlet would be good for your family. If so, maybe it’s time to let your voice be heard. New jobs are great. An attractive building offering affordable groceries is great.

Opposition might seem great until you put the whole thing into perspective — then it is simply a bad outcome for all concerned.

William Heestand is the family representative for the property owners.