

OPINION



the Astorian

editor@dailyastorian.com

Founded in 1873

KARI BORGEN
Publisher

DERRICK DePLEDGE
Editor

JEREMY FELDMAN
Circulation Manager

JOHN D. BRUIJN
Production Manager

CARL EARL
Systems Manager

OUR VIEW

An embarrassment and a liability

The hole in the middle of Astoria celebrates its ninth anniversary this year. Are we going to have a party on the 10th?

As we look around at the astonishing renaissance of our downtown, there is one piece that is missing.

For newcomers and people who may have forgotten, here is some background. Astoria used to have one of the smallest Safeway stores in the grocery chain’s inventory. It was a handy place for people who worked downtown to pick up groceries before heading home. Parking, and getting in and out onto Duane or Exchange streets, was always a pain. But we ignored that because it was convenient.

When Safeway moved and built an expanded new store on the east entrance of town, it was cause for celebration. The store brought more items, more variety and some convenient gas pumps. It also added good jobs.

The old store was demolished in 2005 and community leaders started talking about all sorts of ideas for redevelopment of the plaza. However, the concrete slab



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

A hole sits empty and surrounded by a chain-link fence at Heritage Square.

that covered the empty space began to fail in summer 2010 and then caved in after persistent rain that winter. The collapse made national news.

Since Safeway moved, there have been plenty of suggestions on what to do with this prime area at Heritage Square.

Clatsop Community College

leaders participated in creative discussions some years ago, pondering a central campus or satellite classrooms, but went in a different direction. There was talk of a little amphitheater. A mixed-use project with housing and a library was nixed.

There must be something better than a gaping, ugly hole. Even

more parking might be a solution. Sooner or later, someone is going to fall into the pit and out-of-town lawyers are going to get rich suing the city.

We reported a year ago that major cleanup work to deal with contaminated soil in and around the hole is more or less complete.

So what gives? The Garden of Surging Waves, which celebrates the Chinese community’s contribution to Astoria, went up to the west of the hole five years ago, on the corner of Duane and 11th Street.

Wrapping the chain-link fence to mask the hole with banners — so visitors aren’t put off — should have been a temporary solution rather than an annual ritual.

The redevelopment of Heritage Square has been a goal of the City Council, but the momentum is missing. The city’s difficulty in finding a new community development director is not a valid excuse.

So, City Hall: Fill the hole. Make it a priority.

It is an eyesore, an embarrassment to all. If we have to mark the 10th anniversary a year from now without a strategy the negative headline will be even bigger.

WRITER’S NOTEBOOK

Robinson brought energy to Astoria

A small town like Astoria is at the mercy of who shows up. By that I mean it is new blood that has given the place new ideas, connections and cultural investment. Jo Robinson was one of those who in the 1990s brought a sunny personality and energy to the town. She died on Aug. 24.



STEVE FORRESTER

It is common these days to learn of new residents coming here on a weekly basis from Portland, Seattle and beyond. It was much less common 30 years ago.

Having grown up in Olympia, Washington, Jo was married to a U.S. Air Force officer. She was 32 when Maj. Robert Robinson died. She and her children settled in Oklahoma, where Robert’s parents lived. Decades later, in retirement, she sought a new home on the Oregon Coast.

I met Jo in the living room of my parents, on Eleventh Street, at a party that included John Buckley, then co-proprietor of Cannon Beach Book Co., and Astoria’s mayor, Edith Henningsgaard. Also Buckley’s partner, Valerie Ryan.

Some years later, when a group of us attempted acquisition and restoration of the bedraggled Liberty Theatre, Jo was an obvious recruit.

Jo had spent part of her life in the performing arts — as part of the Oklahoma Symphony Guild and with a family connection to the Metropolitan Opera. When Jo joined the board of directors of Liberty Restoration Inc., it was natural to ask her to create a Liberty Theatre Guild, to raise funds through concessions and recruit ushers. That board contained a remarkable array of personalities and talents, including Michael Foster, Hal Snow, Cheri Folk, Mary Davies and Marge Bloomfield.



Jo Robinson was on the board of Liberty Restoration Inc.

Through the many reversals that our cause encountered, Jo remained enthusiastic. Her level of optimism was essential to this nascent endeavor that needed to attract allies.

In addition to her Liberty work, Jo was instrumental in reviving the local Retired Officers Association. The former U.S. Coast Guard commanders, Capt. Rod Leland and Adm. Ed Nelson, were

among her colleagues. Astoria’s cultural ferment in those days included a group of women who dubbed themselves the Uppities. They included Jo; Rae Goforth, whose cause was Uniontown’s renewal; the photographer Diane Beeston; Jan Mitchell; Donna Gustafson; Darlene Felkins and Sue Davies Collins.

Their automobiles carried decals proclaiming “Uppity Women Unite.” They met monthly for dinner. Some of them created an Astoria Arts Celebration, which was sort of a progenitor of the monthly Art Walk. And there was a wonderfully eccentric event called the Umbrella Parade, as well as Jane Barnes Day. That period fostered a lot of free-lance innovation.

Once Jo and I discovered our common affinity for opera, we traded anecdotes. Maj. Robinson’s uncle was Francis Robinson, who was the Metropolitan Opera’s press agent. When Jo and Robert visited New York, Francis hosted them in his box at the Met. She described after-opera dinners at which some of the Met’s biggest stars would let their hair down. Jo’s big crush in the opera world was the Illinois-born baritone Sherrill Milnes. As time marched on, Jo frequently despaired that she did not recognize the new crop in the Met’s roster.

Long after she left the Liberty board and the guild, Jo did not stint in her support. Enthusiastic about the initiative of the theater’s director, Jennifer Crockett, Jo delighted in delivering checks to “Jenny.”

Jo did not let life’s reversals get her down. Her fortitude in the face of cancer was inspiring. And she maintained that quality that is essential in old age. She did not stint in staying up to date and having a good time.

Steve Forrester, the former editor and publisher of The Daily Astorian, is the president and CEO of EO Media Group.

LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to The Astorian. Letters should be fewer than 250 words and must include the writer’s name, address and phone number. You will be contacted to confirm authorship. All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar, and, on occasion, factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are allowed each month. Letters written in response to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and, rather than mention-

ing the writer by name, should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil and people should be referred to in a respectful manner. Letters in poor taste will not be printed. Send via email to editor@dailyastorian.com, online at dailyastorian.com/submit_letters, in person at 949 Exchange St. in Astoria or 1555 North Roosevelt in Seaside, or mail to Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 210, Astoria, OR 97103.

WHERE TO WRITE

- **State Rep. Tiffany Mitchell** (D): State Capitol, 900 Court St. NE, H-285, Salem, OR 97301. Phone: 503-986-1432. Email: rep.tiffnymitchell@oregonlegislature.gov. Web: oregonlegislature.gov/mitchell
- **State Rep. Brad Witt** (D): State Capitol, 900 Court St. NE, H-374, Salem, OR 97301. Phone: 503-986-1431. Email: Rep. BradWitt@oregonlegislature.gov. Web: oregonlegislature.gov/witt
- **State Sen. Betsy Johnson** (D): State Capitol, 900 Court St. NE, S-209, Salem, OR 97301. Phone: 503-986-1716. Email: sen.betsyjohnson@oregonlegislature.gov.

- gov. Web: oregonlegislature.gov/johnson. District Office: P.O. Box R, Scappoose, OR 97056. Phone: 503-543-4046. Astoria office phone: 503-338-1280
- **U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici** (D): 2231 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515. Phone: 202-225-0855. District office: 12725 SW Millikan Way, Suite 220, Beaverton, OR 97005. Phone: 503-469-6010. Web: bonamici.house.gov
- **U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden** (D): 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510. Phone: 202-224-5244. Web: wyden.senate.gov