

Cruise ships: 'I doubt you'll ever see three ships again'

Continued from Page A1

and volunteers passed out flyers for attractions like historic walking tours or the Astoria Ale Trail exploring local breweries. Tour buses headed to regional destinations like Mount St. Helens, Fort Clatsop and Cannon Beach.

Outside of the Silver Salmon Grille, Melissa Faber handed out samples of clam chowder on a silver platter, a special offering to a steady stream of tourists. The restaurant tripled its wait staff and doubled its bussers for the arrival of the cruise ships.

"I drove an hour here just because we have three cruise ships coming in today," said Angela Fairless, who commuted from Rainier to provide backup at the Astoria Coffeehouse & Bistro. "Which is awesome. It helps our economy."

Astoria police added an officer on duty because of the influx of visitors. Sgt. Brian Aydt wouldn't typically be working Thursday, but said he was asked to come in and patrol the Astoria Riverwalk.

"It's kind of a twofold process: information for people as they have questions ... and trying to keep some of the other people who spend all their time on the Riverwalk under control a little bit," he said.

How much is enough?

"I doubt you'll ever see three ships again," said Bruce Conner, the Port's cruise ship marketer.

It helped that the three ships Thursday staggered arrival and departure times, and that two were smaller, he said. This season's lineup has been light compared to the previous three years, when Astoria hosted on average about 20 ships and 43,000 passengers annually.

Cruise ships are getting bigger, too. The number of people per ship has steadily climbed from 1,700 in 2015 to more than 2,000 this year. Next year, the average will top 2,300.

Only 65% to 70% of cruise ship passengers usually disembark and venture into town, Conner said, meaning around 3,000 visitors to Astoria on Thursday.

"We realize 3,500 to 4,000 ... is kind of a bar that we use," he said of Astoria's capacity. "We consider anything after that just using up resources we don't have."

Next year could tax that capacity. On Sept. 22, the Celebrity Eclipse and Star Princess are scheduled to bring more than 5,800 people into port. On Sept. 27, the Koningsdam and Ruby Princess could bring nearly 5,400 people. Conner and other local business leaders have already started planning.



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

A lifeboat from the Coral Princess brings tourists to the shore at the 17th Street Dock. The cruise ship anchored in the middle of the river.

David Reid, the executive director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce, said he has reached out to other busy cruise ports to see how they handle transportation, restrooms and other issues.

"They're going to be a test," he said of the peak days. "But we know when they're coming, so there's a little time to plan."

Part of Astoria's good reputation with the cruise lines comes from the Clatsop Cruise Hosts, volunteers who help shepherd visitors around town. Cyndi Mudge, the group's coordinator, who is also the director of Astoria Sunday Market, said more volunteers will be recruited this spring.

Sunset Empire Transportation District runs two additional bus lines on cruise ship days to shuttle passengers and crew. Cruise ships have compounded the challenge of finding drivers in a tight employment market.

"We're fine to complete this cruise ship season," Paul Lewicki, Sunset Empire's chief operating officer, said during a recent board meeting. "We just still need to add more drivers to our ranks to man all of the programs that we'll have going."

Jeff Hazen, Sunset Empire's executive director, said the transit district is looking to buy larger buses to increase capacity and could reach out to neighboring agencies for help if needed. The district has so far added two new drivers out of an estimated 10 needed for an upcoming expansion of services, he said.

"I think if we can get

enough drivers, we'll be OK," he said. "We've got new buses on order."

Unpredictable impact

Some businesses are skeptical about the financial benefits of cruise ship visitors wandering through town.

"When it comes to cruise ships, there's a pretty wide variety in terms of the type of customer," said Joey Ficken, front of the house manager at Street 14 Cafe. It's hard to know "whether they want to buy a cup of coffee and use your internet, or if they are looking to get a different food variety than they would get on the boat, or they are really just looking for the town experience."

Mudge, who sets up a miniature Sunday Market on Pier 1 to catch visitors on their way off the boats, agreed it's a gamble what cruisers will spend money on. But she said her vendors see a bump in business when ships visit.

"If it's not working for one segment, that doesn't mean you stop doing it," she said. She and Reid said there are ways local businesses can better market to passengers. Astoria doesn't rely on cruise ships for business, but would feel the impact if visitors — who don't exacerbate traffic and parking issues by bringing cars — stopped coming.

"I like the fact that we are just the offseason, just the shoulder season," Reid said. "It feeds folks in here when we need them. I don't aspire for us to be a year-round cruise port, because you trade your quality of life for building that infrastructure, that capacity."

Tobacco: 'Flavor ban is an overreach'

Continued from Page A1

The Oregon Health Authority supports the federal ban, calling flavors a "key component of youth use and initiation of tobacco products."

Amanda Dalton, a lobbyist representing Juul, testified against the county ordinance on Wednesday night and asked commissioners to work with the company if they wish to pursue the flavored tobacco ban.

"The ordinance before you will make you the first community in the state of Oregon to do a flavor ban and I think it will not only shut down your local retailer shops, but it will push your local consumers online and force them to counterfeit products that we really do have no idea what's in them," Dalton said.

She described the ordinance as overly restrictive and said there should be equal treatment for cannabis and vaping.

Steven Blakesley, the North Coast research liaison for Oregon Health & Science University, said when he heard Juul was responding to the county policy, "I actually gave a fist pump and thought that is great. Why? Because now we're moving past the state level in terms of

good policy and we're moving to the national level of good policy.

"I don't think if it were bad policy that they would be here fighting it."

He referenced statistics that show more than 95% of smokers started before they were 21 and those who smoke by 18 are twice as likely to become a lifelong smoker.

Mandy Madison, a long-time educator about the dangers of tobacco, said her son started vaping a couple of months ago after his friend gave him a flavored vape to try.

After his e-cigarette broke and he couldn't afford to buy another one, she said he switched to cigarettes. "Now my son is smoking cigarettes because he started with vape," she said.

However, some retailers are not convinced a flavor ban would prevent teens from accessing the products.

"The flavor ban is an overreach," said Oscar Nelson, part-owner of Sweet Relief and the Astoria CBD Co.

He said "it's taking freedom from law-abiding adults," and added that people can still buy the products online.

Nelson called the ban a

"paper dragon" and asked commissioners not to make an emotional decision as a result of the health crisis.

'Bait and switch'

John Harper, a regional cigarette and marijuana store financier, said the ordinance would cripple businesses. He said he supported a retail tobacco license early on but claimed he was never made aware of the flavor ban.

He asked commissioners to convene tobacco retailers and cities to discuss the flavor ban, saying he believes cities did not approve the ordinance with the flavor ban component. He called it a "bait and switch."

"Transparency is the issue here," Harper said, "and I feel this is not transparent." Sarah Nebeker, the commission's chairwoman, decided to continue the public hearing to clarify whether there was a lack of coordination and transparency regarding the flavor ban.

Nebeker, Commissioner Pamela Wev and Commissioner Kathleen Sullivan were otherwise supportive of the ordinance. But Commissioner Mark Kujala and Commissioner Lianne Thompson said they do not support the ordinance the way it is crafted.

Buses: Employees expressed safety concerns

Continued from Page A1

"If they red tag something, it doesn't roll — it stays on the lot," Hazen said of the inspections. "But we haven't had a lot of those."

Hazen also shared an email from the owner of Precision Alignment LLC, which conducted the annual inspections. The email claimed the mechanical condition of Sunset Empire's fleet of buses is generally above average.

The conversation before the board on Thursday came

after Lines and a number of current and former Sunset Empire employees reached out to The Astorian and expressed concerns about bus safety.

Hazen addressed one of those concerns in front of the board and acknowledged utilizing a bolt in place of a broken turn-signal switch.

"Yes, that's true, there was a bolt put in there in place of it because the turn signal arm had broken," he said. "That was just really for the comfort of the driver to know that the turn signal

was there. On that particular bus, there's also turn-signal buttons on the floor operated by foot, so it was never a safety issue." Kathy Kleczek, the board's chairwoman, accepted the assurances from Smith and Hazen.

"Is there room for improvement? There is always room for improvement. Can we always do things better? Yes," she said. "Are we sending unsafe buses out there on the road? I have every confidence that we are not."

Timber: Public meeting set for Monday

Continued from Page A1

exchange, Cox said, though it is too early to say if this is possible at Norriston Heights.

County commissioners agreed to send a letter to the Department of Forestry asking the state to delay the sale following concerns raised during the public comment period at a July meeting. Commissioner Mark Kujala was the only commissioner opposed to sending a letter.

In the letter, the county asked for a meeting to discuss possible alternatives to the sale to address concerns about notification, impacts to drinking water, landslides, habitat and view considerations.

"I know Oregon Department of Forestry listens to public input at every opportunity," Commissioner Lianne Thompson said in an email. "I'm happy ODF is looking into doing a land exchange. We'll keep working with all stakeholders."



Katie Frankowicz/The Astorian

The state will delay a timber sale off U.S. Highway 101 between Arcadia Beach and Hug Point.

The county will convene a public meeting on the issue on Monday.

"I'm relieved they are going to take some time to look at this," said Suzie Henry, an Arch Cape resident.

She said she was hoping the sale would be delayed and was "pleasantly surprised" by the news.

"I am so thankful to all the coastal people and elected

officials who have spoken up on behalf of wildlife and clean drinking water that is reliant on the Norriston Heights forest in the last six months," Nadia Gardner, an Arch Cape resident and environmental advocate, said in an email.

"We are hopeful that the Oregon Department of Forestry will work diligently with partners to permanently protect it from clearcutting."

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