

Tourism: There are concerns that ‘infrastructure can’t keep up’

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“We wanted to show-case ... how tourism was the transforming engine in Astoria’s community well-being after the challenges it faced when the natural resource industry crashed,” Phillips said. “That’s the idea, show how tourism is a piece of the economy.”

The three-day conference featured presentations from a number of governmental organizations, including the U.S. Travel Association, the National Park Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

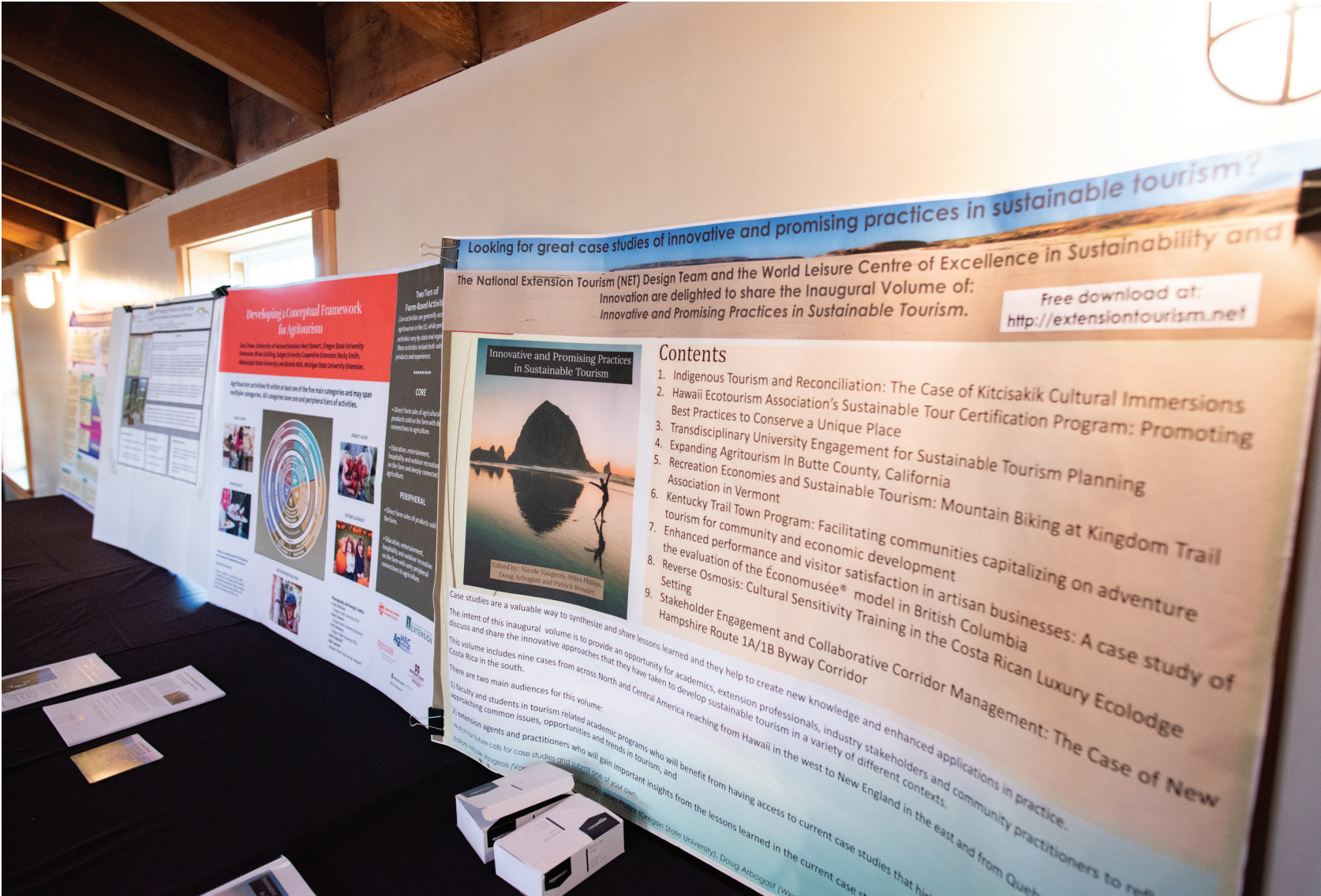
State Sen. Betsy Johnson pointed out that the major industry shift is not specific to Clatsop County.

“There are lots of you from all over the country, so I’m sure that you have, in some variation, experienced the same thing that’s happening in Clatsop County,” the Scappoose Democrat said at one of the conference’s panel discussions, “and that is the shift from a natural resource based economy to more orientation along the lines of tourism and hospitality.”

Tourism is an expanding economic driver in every state across the country and is a top 10 employer in 49 states, including Oregon, according to the U.S. Travel Association. Due largely to the fact that tourism requires extensive local labor, travel supported 15.7 million jobs U.S. in 2018.

“Once upon a time, fishing was master here,” Johnson said. “We cut trees, we fished, we packed fish. It was a different kind of economy. As the regulatory environment has tightened down on those industry sectors, towns like Astoria needed to find ways to reinvent themselves.”

Johnson pointed to successes like the renovation of the Liberty Theatre, which has undergone major restoration projects throughout the past two decades and is raising \$3.3 million to upgrade the interior and exterior of the building.



Displays highlighting different sustainable tourism and outdoor recreation projects from across the country were available for participants to view.

The theater has been “catalytic in taking back the streets of Astoria,” Johnson said, “and by the way, 17,000 visitors took in some kind of event at the Liberty last year.”

Astoria Mayor Bruce Jones and Clatsop County Commissioner Mark Kujala also highlighted ways locals are engaging with the travel industry by promoting off-season tourism and investing in multiuse hiking trails, all while working to keep the character of the region alive.

“Really for tourism, we’re focusing on getting people to go out in the county and use the county’s trails that they’re expanding,” Jones said, “and then come stay in Astoria and have a beer in one of our brew pubs after you’ve been hiking all day.”

However, some local business owners who have lived through the economic shift have some reservations about the change.

Chris Holen, the chef and owner of Baked Alaska, has been in Astoria for nearly 20 years. “We’ve been here since the beginning of this extension,” he said.

His main concern is that “the infrastructure can’t keep up,” or at least has struggled to so far. Overall, he has mixed feelings about fostering the tourism industry. His business was built for locals, but would not be successful without the influx of visitors, he said. Despite his skepticism, he recognizes that tourism has helped sustain the city.

“We brought something really special back to life,” Holen said.



From left, Clatsop County Commissioner Mark Kujala, Astoria Mayor Bruce Jones and state Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, discuss tourism at the Sustainable Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Conference on Wednesday.



Government leaders may hire a homeless liaison.

Homeless: Roughly 1,000 homeless people in county

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Thursday evening between county, Astoria, Seaside, Gearhart and Cannon Beach leaders to gauge their interest. Representatives from Warrenton, which has one of the highest concentrations of homeless people, were not at the meeting.

The police chief summed up the need for a liaison with a quote from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, which has pushed for communities to move from a collection of individual programs to a coordinated, data-driven approach.

“Some of the things we see this person doing would be coordinating all the efforts of all the different agencies,” Spalding said. “... The other part of this is collecting data. We don’t necessarily have really good data on the individuals and what their needs are.”

A subcommittee of the homelessness task force has been researching the position and cost. Spalding estimated the potential salary at between \$50,000 to \$60,000 and said Clatsop Community Action has offered to host the position. Some have raised concerns

that there would need to be multiple people in such a role.

Underscoring the difficulty in tracking the homeless population, leaders quibbled briefly over the homeless count across the county.

The closest to a county-wide figure is Clatsop Community Action’s Project Homeless Connect in January and the U.S. Census next year. But leaders noted the shortcomings of trying to count homeless people who may move to warmer climates in the winter or not participate in surveys.

Social service providers have estimated there are roughly 1,000 homeless people in the county.

“Merely to bring this to, say, our City Council or the county commission, we don’t necessarily have to have an exact number,” Astoria City Councilor Joan Herman said. “I could foresee just asking our local bodies, ‘Would we be open to considering sharing funding for such a position, or perhaps two positions?’ Because we’re all paying for it now, in police response and various other responses.”

Respite center: ‘It’s a resource that’s been embraced by the community’

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“It’s a facility that I think the board knows and the community knows that you could not site again and build again without a significant amount of time and resources invested. And it’s a resource that’s been embraced by the community that it resides in.”

He said the county will continue to communicate with GOBHI and sup-

port Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare.

The mental health agency has operated the respite center for a coalition that includes the county, GOBHI, Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria and Providence Seaside Hospital.

“I think I can speak for the commission that we want to see it remain as it has been,” Sarah Nebeker, the commission chairwoman, said.

Phillips: Commissioners could mull appointing interim sheriff at a November meeting

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“He’s done an amazing job. We needed someone to run the jail three years ago and he went over there without hesitation from patrol and took the lead and has done anything and everything to turn that place around.

“Obviously, he’s a very integral part of the building of the new jail, as is Chief Deputy (Paul) Williams. So, these two, I have no qualms of leaving this all in their hands.”

Debbie Boothe-Schmidt, a representative of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 2746,

encouraged commissioners to follow Bergin’s recommendation and appoint Phillips.

“Lt. Phillips has exhibited superior leadership and unwavering commitment to the sheriff’s office and to the community throughout his 18 years in law enforcement,” Schmidt said.

“He builds collaborative relationships within the agency, within law enforcement and with community stakeholders. He has earned the respect of his colleagues and subordinates.”

Commissioners could consider appointing an interim sheriff at a meeting in November.