

Cemetery: ‘It looks a lot better’

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The 70-acre property, set on bucolic, rolling dune hills surrounded by woods, wetlands and lakes, was established by the city in 1897 and serves much of the region. The city has faced criticism from some families and Warrenton leaders over a perceived lack of maintenance. The cash-strapped Parks and Recreation Department cut the last full-time position there in 2013.

Perceptions of the cemetery have improved, with the city experiencing a drop in complaints. The parks department recently dedicated a part-time seasonal worker who Jonah Dart-McClean, the parks maintenance supervisor, said has improved the property’s appearance.

“Compared to the last five years, it looks a lot better,” he said.

The City Council made financial sustainability of Ocean View Cemetery a goal. In the spring, it contracted Lees and Associates, a Canadian-based landscape architect and cemetery planning firm, for \$88,000 to create a master plan by early next year for enlivening operations.

Catriona Hearn, a senior associate with the firm, recently reported to the City Council and Parks Board that the cemetery is breaking even operationally, with an opportunity to tap into changing interment trends.

The city needs to focus on building a perpetual care fund, established with the cemetery in 1897, to cover maintenance, Hearn recently told the Parks Board.

“The idea is that a portion of every service and sale you make at the cemetery goes into the fund,” she said. “It’s a trust fund. The income from that will pay for your future maintenance. The fund itself



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

The cemetery was established in 1897 and holds hundreds of traditional graves and cremated remains.

is never touched.”

James Hencke, a landscape architect with the firm David Evans and Associates supporting Lees, recommended highlighting surrounding habitat restoration for the silverspot butterfly and improving trail access.

Hearn has also pushed the city to hold more events at the cemetery, such as runs and ceremonial celebrations. The city holds a Memorial Day event at the cemetery, which also recently played host to the Clatsop County Historical Society’s Talking Tombstones living history feature.

Hearn recommended sharing the maintenance costs with surrounding governments like Warrenton and Clatsop County, and encouraging people to pay in advance for future interments. The city should also look at discounted rates for locals, children and veterans as a goodwill gesture, she said.

Breaking new ground

Lees estimates Ocean View has between 75 and 82 years worth of lot space for casket burials, and 128 years for buried cremated remains. About 700 caskets are esti-

mated to be installed over the next 25 years, along with 1,600 cremated remains. The city has space now, but can’t count on more land for cemeteries and needs to smartly develop the property it controls, Hearn said.

“You also have to diversify your interment options,” she said. “Right now, you just bury. You bury in the ground the cremated remains or the caskets.”

More than half of the people who die in the U.S. choose the cheaper interment route of cremation, according to the National Funeral Directors Association. Clatsop County has the highest cremation rate in Oregon at 82%, Hearn said. With its focus on burying bodies and remains, Ocean View is only accommodating 13% of those deaths, compared to half the county’s traditional burials, she said.

“You’re not ignoring them,” she said of cremations. “But I think there’s huge potential to offer them more, to capitalize on that changing choice.”

The city could significantly stretch its capacity at Ocean View with options like columbaria, vertical shelves

used for the storage of urns, and scattering gardens. The city has also discussed ways to better market the empty spots in the Ocean View Abbey Mausoleum, owned by the people with family members interred there. The city owns some empty crypts inside the mausoleum.

“It needs some work, but we’ve identified it as an asset,” said Josh Bernsen, a landscape architect with Lees. “And there’s also some opportunity to do some indoor niches for cremated remains.”

Natural burial

Another area for expansion, especially with the city’s unused land at the north end of the cemetery, is natural burial, in which bodies are allowed to decompose, often in biodegradable containers or shrouds. The practice was more common before the Civil War, when the bodies of soldiers were embalmed for shipment home.

“We think you have a super site for some green burial ... and we know we have people interested in that,” Hearn said.

The California-based Green Burial Council, a national certification organization, has approved two Oregon cemeteries in Estacada and Portland as natural burial sites. Washington recently became the first state to allow human body composting.

Many people perceive cremation as more environmentally friendly because the remains don’t take up as much space, Hearn said, but natural burials are the greenest option. The burial council has estimated a cremation produces the same emissions as driving 500 miles in a car.

Lees recently completed a survey of people’s opinions about the cemetery. The firm plans to present a draft master plan in January.

Director: Port has been trying to rebuild credibility with state, regional partners

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The Port Commission enlisted the Special Districts Association of Oregon, a support agency for local governments, to perform a 360-degree review of Isom’s performance.

George Dunkel, the association’s administrator, queried more than 40 staff, customers and stakeholders at the Port, receiving 21 responses.

“Those results came back really positive,” he told the Port Commission on Tuesday. “The responses from the list of respondents was that he more than meets the expectations, and in many areas was distinguished and commendable.”

The Port has been trying to rebuild credibility with the state and regional partners after years of drama, dysfunction and growing distrust of executive leadership. The Port recently submitted a strategic business plan to Business Oregon, the state’s economic agency, which has funded many of the Port’s infrastructure improvements. Business Oregon will share its opinion of the plan with the Port Commission on Dec. 17.

“In general, I think they’ve been really pleased with the Port under Isom’s direction,” Dirk Rohne, the president of the Port Commission, said of the state.

Commissioner James Campbell and Commissioner Frank Spence noted the improvements in the Port’s financial report-

ing under Isom, who was named director of finance in December 2016. He has received plaudits for bringing the Port’s auditing functions back in-house after the agency had to hire outside consultants to correct numerous errors before his tenure.

Accounting firm TKW will present its review of the Port’s audit for the most recent fiscal year later this month.

“The last two years, Will has turned in a perfect audit,” Campbell said.

There’s a lot of risk in being the sixth director of the Port since 2012, Isom said. He has proposed a significant pay cut from previous directors in exchange for a longer-term, three-year rolling contract. Each time he receives a positive annual review from the Port Commission, Isom’s contract would be guaranteed for at least three years.

Isom said the longer term eases his fear of falling out of favor with newly elected commissioners, as has happened to some of his predecessors.

“My fear would be on a short-term deal that we could sort of have a different vision or opinion on how things should be done, and I could kind of be shown the door through no fault of my own,” he said.

Rohne and Commissioner Robert Stevens will work with the Special Districts Association of Oregon to negotiate a new contract for the Port Commission’s approval as early as Dec. 17.

Petition: Signatures fell short

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chamber a quorum. Timber and trucking interests had protested the bill, fearing it would lead to job losses and higher energy prices that would disproportionately harm rural communities.

#TimberUnity also criticized Mitchell over her support of the successful Student Success Act, a gross receipts tax on businesses projected to raise \$1 billion a year for education.

On Wednesday, Mitchell declined to commit one

way or another on a new climate bill until she sees specific legislation. But she said she is likely to support policies that help Oregon meet its climate and environmental objectives.

Mead’s was the third recall petition launched against a state Democrat this year. The Oregon Republican Party and Michael Cross, a Lincoln City resident, failed to collect enough signatures for recall campaigns against Gov. Kate Brown.

“Voters know that recall elections should only be used

when absolutely necessary, not just because one side is upset at the outcome of an election,” state House Majority Leader Barbara Smith Warner, D-Portland, said in a statement. “The failure of this assault on our democracy shows that North Coast voters saw right through #TimberUnity’s dishonest tactics.

“Rep. Mitchell is a fierce advocate for the families in her district, and I can’t wait to continue working with her to protect the future of the great state we all love.”

Bond: Could cost between \$4.7M-\$5.4M

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City councilors again voiced support for the full renovation of the library, but not with a loan repaid from the city’s operating funds. They also hesitated to commit to another bond after voters in 2018 agreed to a \$70 million bond for renovations throughout the Astoria School District and part of the \$20 million bond for a new Clatsop County Jail.

“I could be supportive of a bond measure in the future,” City Councilor Jessamyn West said. “But as of right now, when you want to turn to the taxpayers and ask them to support something, I think a lot of folks want to see that you’ve done everything that you can to kind of raise funding.”

Councilors supported potentially contracting with someone to help raise money in advance of a bond, pointing to successful capital campaigns for the Liberty Theatre and Coast Community Radio. Jimmy Pearson, the library director, cautioned against comparing a city government to a nonprofit like the theater, and said the library and foundation have gone searching for grants.

“We are affluent compared to other communities within the state our size, and that makes a difference in the

funding as well,” he said.

The library foundation estimates each \$1 million in a bond measure would cost a property owner 8 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

Mayor Bruce Jones estimated a bond for the renovation could cost between \$4.7 million and \$5.4 million, depending on a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities the library foundation will hear back on this month. The grant would require the foundation to raise another \$3 million within five years, not including money from the Logan fund.

Arline LaMear, who pushed for a new library as mayor and now leads the library foundation, predicted other large donors would chip in if the fundraising effort reaches the halfway point, lowering the cost of a potential bond.

City Councilor Roger Rocka backed the push for a bond measure, arguing it would be of minimal cost to the average taxpayer, while a better library and meeting space would have a big impact. Councilor Joan Her-

man initially preferred a scaled-back renovation amid high housing costs, but also favored hiring someone to help raise money. Councilor Tom Brownson supported a bond and additional fundraising.

Celia Davis, a resident who favors a bond, blamed the city for allowing the library building to accumulate so much deferred maintenance.

David Reid, executive director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce, said chamber members supported the school bond last year. He said similar arguments could be made for the library renovation.

Estes cautioned that the City Council has also discussed a possible bond measure to relocate the city’s public safety building out of the tsunami inundation zone. The city will come back next year with findings on a new location.

Jones suggested he, Estes and Pearson sit down with the library foundation next month to discuss an interim plan.

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