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A cluster of Astoria High School students in the lunch line.

Photos by Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Childhood poverty rates improve, but concerns linger

Struggle behind the statistics

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

Rates of childhood poverty, child food insecurity and student homelessness have all slightly improved in Clatsop County, according to a report from Children First for Oregon.

However, the rates of childhood poverty and student homelessness are still higher than the state average.

According to the 2019 report, children who live at or below the federal poverty level have decreased by about 1% to 1,272. Children facing food insecurity have dropped by 2.5% to 1,370. And students described as homeless have dropped about half a percent to 315.

Astoria School District Superintendent Craig Hoppes credits any improvements to increased awareness and local services available to children and their families.

“From the school district standpoint, I have a group of counselors that are just more than aware of the kids’ needs than they ever have before. And they’re constantly trying to provide services to the kids and to the families,” he said. “I just think there’s more services in our community, more outreach, which is just more helpful to families.”

Hoppes said school counselors help connect families to local services through groups like Clatsop Commu-



Students grab apples, pears and condiments in the cafeteria.

nity Action.

Some of the services Clatsop Community Action provides are utility assistance, personal care items and homeless outreach like rent assistance and subsidized housing programs.

Viviana Matthews, Clatsop Community Action’s executive director, said if the county’s rates have improved, she hasn’t seen a difference yet.

“We have never seen so many people in our office like we’re seeing lately,” she said. “We have never seen so many people in line asking for food.”

Matthews has been working in social services in Clatsop County for the past 20 years. She said the last time

she saw so many people seeking help was during the Great Recession.

“We see a lot of families struggling working two, three jobs to even make it a little bit. Not even putting money into savings, just paying the rent,” she said.

She said it is important the county gets a complete census count in 2020, so there is accurate data to help obtain proper federal and state funding.

Both Hoppes and Matthews said poverty takes a toll on children’s mental health.

Hoppes said schools have had to play a bigger role in mental health support for students. The school district has an office for a Clatsop Behavioral

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SUNSET EMPIRE

Free bus rides for students

Program starts in January

By EDWARD STRATTON
The Astorian

The Sunset Empire Transportation District will make buses free for students starting in early January.

Jeff Hazen, the director of the transit district, introduced the idea Thursday, saying he got it from the Grant County Transportation District at a recent conference.

Providing free rides builds children’s familiarity with mass transit, creating a potential pool of future riders and drivers, he said. The district struggles to attract drivers, and much of its funding is based on ridership.

“None of our buses are overcrowded,” Hazen said. “We have seats on the bus, and why not let that child ride for free?”

Students from kindergarten through 12th grade will be able to ride free starting Jan. 6.

Sunset Empire will be reimbursed for transporting high schoolers through the Statewide Transportation Improvement Fund. A payroll tax to finance the fund was part of a \$5.3 billion transportation package the state Legislature passed in 2017. The Legislature required that 1% be spent on improving transportation for high schoolers.

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County drops flavor ban

Controversial part of tobacco rules

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

A tobacco retail license ordinance is going back before the county Board of Commissioners on Wednesday, but this time it will not include a ban on flavored tobacco products.

The ordinance was expected to be approved by county commissioners in October. However, they decided to delay a vote after claims were made during public comment that cities and local tobacco retailers had not been informed about the flavor ban.

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Fire destroys house near Tongue Point

No injuries were reported

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

A fire that destroyed a home near Tongue Point on Thursday afternoon sent smoke across Astoria.

The fire at the end of Blue Ridge Drive was brought under control within an hour, but firefighters remained on scene until 10 p.m. mopping up hot spots.

The cause of the fire is under investigation.

The Astoria Fire Department said the home was vacant. But there were signs of people who may have been staying on the property.



Firefighters battled a fire at a house off Blue Ridge Drive in Astoria on Thursday afternoon.



Edward Stratton/The Astorian

Smoke from a house fire near Tongue Point could be seen across Astoria.

Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian



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