

Hospital: New hospital expected to cost more than \$100M

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Thorsen said he doesn’t like describing any of the hospital’s procedures, including cancer care, as profitable or lucrative. “But, yeah, it’s one of the things that helps offset services that maybe aren’t, like the emergency room, where you’re seeing everyone irregardless of their ability to pay in the emergency room,” he said. “You probably need things that are a little more profitable.”

The hospital has steered people away from the emergency room, and buoyed its outpatient statistics, in part by opening primary care clinics throughout Clatsop County. The first

opened in Warrenton in 2013. The second opened in the Park Medical Building in 2018. A new clinic is slated to open next month in Seaside. The hospital is close to closing on property in the North Coast Business Park for a new Warrenton clinic to replace the one in the Warrenton Highlands shopping center.

Overshadowing all the new clinics and the hospital’s strong financials is the need to replace its 43-year-old campus in Astoria.

“The answer is ‘yes,’ we’re trying to build our financial strength so we can in the future — and the future is undecided — replace this facility that we’re operating in,” Thorsen said.

The current hospital is adequate but not well-suited to a new model where the large majority of hospital operations have gone from inpatient to outpatient services, Thorsen said. The current hospital is also built on a concrete slab without pilings to help it withstand an expected Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake or flooding.

Thorsen expects the new hospital to cost more than \$100 million. He envisions a three-legged funding stool: the hospital’s cash reserves, tax-exempt bonds or other low-cost financing and a capital campaign similar to the cancer center, for which the hospital’s foundation raised around \$3 million.

Columbia Memorial has a stated goal of becoming the largest rural hospital in the state, an achievement Thorsen said it has likely already reached. The hospital is also one of only several unaffiliated hospitals in the state, meaning it has no tax support or financial partners, he said.

“We have to have enough financial strength to weather the lean times, to invest in all of the expensive capital that’s required to keep up with technology and change and grow,” Thorsen said. “We’re doing that all off of the revenues that are generated here in this facility.”

The helicopter pad at Columbia Memorial Hospital.
Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian



Scholarships: Department also cancels annual Valentine’s Day Ball

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“We’re looking for ways to make it sustainable into the future,” Perez said.

By August, the city had put scholarships on hold while looking for a more realistic funding and award model. The city hopes to debut a scaled-back scholarship program by the end of February, after approval by the City Council, with a more sustainable \$16,000 a year committed by the foundation, said Brianna Bowker, the parks department’s recreation manager.

People applying for scholarships used to get three-month passes, most of them for the Astoria Aquatic

Center. But many scholarship recipients weren’t utilizing the facility enough to warrant the price, Bowker said. The new scholarship program instead funds daily visits up to the price of a three-month pass, she said.

The average user of scholarships visits six to eight times in a three-month period, Perez said. She has been crunching the numbers and formulating a discounted pass price for scholarship-eligible residents to help stretch the foundation’s funds further.

Many aquatic center passes have been used for access to the building’s showers. Providing a pass specifically for shower

privileges is difficult with their access to the entire aquatic center. Segregating pass-holders also puts city staff in the untenable position of judging people who come in to use the aquatic center, Perez said.

“I’ve seen, working for parks, that people want to blame the homeless for scholarships running out,” she said. “That’s not what the numbers say. People just aren’t making enough money.”

Jonah Dart-McLean, interim director of the parks department, said there will also be alterations to Parks After Dark, an after-hours summer movie and activity series started in 2015

to support the scholarships. Jim Holen, an Astoria Parks Board member, said a cost-benefit analysis showed a weak return from the fundraiser compared to the staffing and effort needed to put it on. The city still holds free family movie nights at Fred Lindstrom Memorial Park each Wednesday in August.

The parks department has also canceled the annual Valentine’s Day Ball. Bowker said attendance at the event, which brought in 60 people last year, was weak relative to the time taken to organize it.

“It wasn’t something we saw as feasible this year,” she said.



The Astorian
Most of the Astoria Parks and Recreation Department’s scholarships go toward passes at the Astoria Aquatic Center.

Homeless: Described as part of hard-to-count population by Census Bureau

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However, not everyone consents to be counted. The U.S. Census Bureau describes the homeless as part of the hard-to-count population.

“I think there’s still a stigma about experiencing homelessness and some people don’t want to be considered homeless,” Prettyman said.

Through the event and the survey, Clatsop Community Action and other agencies have identified unmet needs

and have developed additional services.

The point-in-time count, for example, has identified domestic violence as a leading cause of homelessness for women and children.

Through the local count, Clatsop Community Action was able to access a grant to house up to nine different families experiencing domestic violence.

They partnered with The Harbor and the Department of Human Services, which help refer people who are fleeing domestic violence.

Through the event, they have also learned that access to showers is in high demand.

“So then we started partnering with Providence Seaside Hospital and with CMH (Columbia Memorial Hospital) to be able to provide extra funding for shower vouchers throughout the year, so not only during Project Homeless Connect,” said Viviana Matthews, Clatsop Community Action’s executive director.

Now vouchers are available year-round for people to access showers at the Astoria Aquatic Center.

Matthews said a service they would like to provide at the event is pet immunizations, but they have not been able to find a veterinarian to donate their time.

“So many people experiencing homelessness have animals, too, companion animals,” Prettyman said. “And that’s so crucial, I think, even for women who are experiencing homelessness that are scared. They have their pet for safety.”

Enrollment in the Oregon Health Plan is one of the most utilized services at the event.

Matthews said about half of the participants are signed up or are connected to enrollment support during the event.

She recalled someone last year who was ill and needed to go to the hospital, but he refused to go because he didn’t have health insurance. Providence Seaside Hospital signed him up for the Oregon

Health Plan online within minutes and he was taken to the hospital.

Haircuts are another popular service. This year, several additional hairdressers will be at the event to meet the need.

“It’s not only a one-stop-shop for the participant, but also a one-stop-shop for the partner agencies,” Matthews said. “It’s a really good way of connecting agencies with each other.”

Guilty: Pickering asked for ‘mercy’

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His mother told the judge she fears her son and believes he is dangerous.

“When we’re talking about sentencing, most of the time we’re talking about trying to figure out a way to make the person whole, to make the defendant a productive and law-abiding citizen,” Brown said. “But with some people, we find that we have to just look to protection of society.”

Pickering’s attorney described a childhood of abuse and unstable housing beginning when Pickering was removed from his home at 9 years old.

According to testimony, Pickering lived in St. Mary’s Home for Boys in Beaver-

ton, Oregon State Hospital and a group foster home before coming back to Clatsop County as a teenager.

His attorney said Pickering has been homeless off and on and has not received sufficient mental health treatment.

Pickering asked the judge for “mercy” and suggested a 10-year prison sentence.

“I just really want to be able to show the court that I am not a lost cause. That I am not a monster or an animal, and that I do want to be a better person,” Pickering said.

Judge Cindee Matyas said that, given his criminal history, Pickering qualifies for a sentence of life in prison, and described the reduced sentence as a gift.

“I don’t view you as a monster,” Matyas said. “I view you as a very complicated, tragic individual. I have a lot of compassion for you, and how you got to this point. I also know that it is very difficult to supervise you in the community.”

Matyas said she is not assured he will engage in the treatment he needs without a “reboot” in prison. She said prison may be a blessing in disguise because it can offer him a structured environment and a measure of success.

“You do have different sides,” the judge said. “It’s complicated how our personalities can develop based upon our experiences in life. And you have another side that is dark, very dark.”

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