

OPINION



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GUEST COLUMN

Use common sense on chain businesses

The Astoria City Council is looking to take steps to prohibit more large chain-type restaurants and lodging in town.

For government to actually prohibit, rather than to regulate, specific legitimate businesses would be a game-changer for residents. Government’s prohibition of specific businesses will affect all Astorians’ way of life — either good or bad, depending on your point of view.

For at least the past 60 years, Astoria has advocated the opposite to what the City Council has suggested. In the past, the city has encouraged the town’s economic growth and development by whatever means it could.

With the influx in recent years of new residents, along with the dramatic growth of Warrenton businesses, the issue for Astoria has apparently become whether times have changed about economic growth. And when is enough, enough.

A Google search shows large and small towns across America believe they’re unique, just like Astoria does. And government’s ways to foster and maintain that “uniqueness” are as varied as there are cities that tackle the issue the council has now introduced to Astoria.

Government’s direct interference with businesses and general market conditions can be a slippery slope. If the City Council prohibits large chain restaurants and lodging businesses, residents will rightly ask themselves whether the council will later prohibit big chain retail stores and big chain grocery stores. Then what else after that?

Perhaps Astoria has become too successful in the way local government has planned the area’s renaissance after some pretty tough economic times.

There’s no doubt, for example, the Port of Astoria has had remarkable success in marketing Astoria as a great stop for cruise ships. A record 75,000 passengers were scheduled to visit Astoria this year before the coronavirus scare became worldwide news. How many will now arrive in town remains to be seen. Of those that do visit, however, many will think Astoria is, in fact,



DON HASKELL



Colin Murphey/The Astorian

Astoria has moved to restrict chain restaurants and hotels.

a unique small town. Many will want to visit again or move to the area. Others might buy a second home. And some may want to retire here.

There seems to be little doubt a substantial portion of today’s Astoria residents would like to see no more large chain hotels or restaurants in town. These folks say a diversity of smaller and independently owned hotels and restaurants can increase economic well-being and keep the status quo’s quality of life.

They want government to prevent the proliferation of businesses that project a sense of familiar sameness that hinders a goal for Astoria to remain unique. In other words, they don’t want Astoria to look like any other small town in America. And they disapprove of more big hotels that would, in some cases, diminish or eliminate views of the Columbia River.

On the other hand, another substantial part of the community sees no good reason to adversely affect Astoria’s economic development by prohibiting specific businesses altogether. These folks argue that position shows a selfish attitude, in the sense that folks who move here and want to keep the status quo have no sense of Astoria’s recent history of struggles with economic health.

And it’s arrogant in the sense that prohibiting development by certain businesses is a presumptuous belief that people know today what’s best for future generations. From the obvious demand for new hotels, these folks contend there’s plenty of room for growth.

They also point to the huge financial windfall city government would give existing chain businesses if it eliminates competition from other chains. And contend it’s poor public policy for city government to legislate a huge benefit for specific private businesses like that.

Astoria already has the same type of chain restaurants targeted by the City Council. McDonald’s is an example. McDonald’s opened in Astoria in 1990. Yet Astoria is still “unique” 30 years later. Astoria’s Holiday Inn and the Best Western are examples of the hotel businesses the council has taken steps to prohibit more of.

Everybody knows we live in highly partisan times where compromise of contentious issues sometimes appears almost impossible. But it seems to me Astorians can, as they have in the past, resolve tough issues and still remain neighborly.

For cities around the country that have tackled growth issues, solutions have ranged all over the place. Some

have outright prohibitions when the prohibited business, like a fast-food restaurant, doesn’t yet exist in the community. Other communities consider development issues individually, by analyzing proposals from developers to determine how one restriction or another would affect their city over the long haul.

Few cities appear to have prohibited specific businesses altogether to simply satisfy a current, but fleeting, wish of one segment of the population’s cry about too much economic growth.

Above all, the eventual resolution to the new, some consider radical, idea the City Council has introduced must be based on what is best for the city’s future. The Planning Commission no doubt will take a sensible and thoughtful approach. And it’s not just the loudest voices that should prevail. Nor the most politically connected. Nor to satisfy a desire of some folks for government to legislate the status quo “because that’s why I moved here.”

Common sense, along with a sense of Astoria’s history, should play a pivotal role in what the Planning Commission and City Council eventually do about Astoria’s future.

Don Haskell is a retired attorney and former Clatsop County commissioner who lives in Astoria.

GUEST COLUMN

State braces for virus impact

Oregon’s reaction to the coronavirus pandemic got off to a rocky start.

The economic shockwaves are rippling worldwide. But the global impact was still unknown on Feb. 12 when State Economist Mark McMullen told legislators in passing that the coronavirus could become the catalyst for a recession.

“Recessions are really a psychological phenomenon at heart. It’s really this coordinated pessimism when everyone pulls back at once because of fears or uncertainty in terms of the outcome. And a lot of times, what’s needed is a shock or coordinated event to create this pessimism all at once,” McMullen said while delivering the state’s quarterly economic and revenue forecasts.

Sixteen days later, it was Oregon health officials’ turn.

On Feb. 28, Gov. Kate Brown convened her state Coronavirus Response Team.

In doing so, she issued a statement saying: “Let me be clear, as of today there are zero, confirmed cases of coronavirus in Oregon, and the risk to Oregonians of contracting the coronavirus remains low.

“However, in an escalating global health crisis, we must make sure we are ready and informed as we can be. The purpose of the Coronavirus Response Team is to ensure we are taking every precaution necessary, in coordination with local health authorities, hospitals, community health partners and school districts, to make sure that Oregon is fully prepared to respond to any outbreaks of the coronavirus and that Oregonians know how they can keep their families safe.”

Oregon Health Authority director Pat Allen continued that theme in the afternoon as he testified before the state House Health Care Committee: “The disease is not in Oregon today, and today that means the risk to Oregonians is low. Certainly, that could change quickly.”

Allen wanted legislators and the public to understand that health officials had experience managing these situations and knew what to do.



DICK HUGHES

Within hours, Brown and Allen were holding a press conference to announce Oregon’s first case.

Nine days later, on March 8, Brown declared a state of emergency.

Last week began with legislators on the Emergency Board asking whether the \$5 million that Brown and the health authority had requested in emergency funding for the coronavirus response was enough.

At the Monday meeting, state Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, noted that the number of Oregon cases had doubled since the funding request was put together three days earlier.

“I’m nervous that this may or may not be enough money,” he said.

Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, D-Beaverton, said she’d had extensive conversations with the health authority during the weekend, and health officials were confident that the \$5 million in state money, along with the authorization to spend additional federal money, would be adequate at the moment.

“I think we have a lot of flexibility with this funding and other funding,” Steiner Hayward said, adding that the health authority is not shy about letting legislators know when they need more money.

Steiner Hayward, Findley and others praised the health authority for its daily teleconferences and other updates that kept legislators informed about the coronavirus.

“The risk is actually pretty low unless you were within 3 feet of that person when they were sneezing or coughing, or you were actively contacting surfaces shortly afterward,” said Steiner Hayward, a physician at Oregon Health & Science University.

“At the risk of sounding monotonous about this subject, wash your hands frequently. Sing ‘Happy Birthday’ twice while you’re doing it. Use hand sanitizer if you can’t wash your hands. And don’t touch your face.

“Those are the best things you can do to protect yourself. Knowing who’s been infected doesn’t make a lot of difference in your own ability to protect yourself, so please respect people’s privacy on this.”

Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, suggested that OHSU should be beefed up in



Gillian Flaccus/AP Photo

Shoppers visit a Costco in Tigard in February after Oregon’s first case of coronavirus was announced in nearby Lake Oswego.

the future to better prepare for pandemics.

“Undoubtedly, there will be this in the future,” she said. “I would just hope we look for long-term infrastructure and not just immediate response.”

Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, had the last word, telling Findley, “We don’t know. We don’t know.”

Courtney said he asked Brown several weeks ago whether the Legislature could do anything to assist in handling the coronavirus. “She said, ‘No, I think we’re all right.’ And then as we moved on, I kept asking, ‘Do we need anything?’ She said, ‘I think we’re all right.’”

State and local health agencies are working hard, but the financial costs remain uncertain. “This thing is very dynamic, and I have to say we may be back again for more money,” Courtney said.

“Anybody who says, ‘This is it, this is it,’ is mistaken. We don’t know all that is going to happen yet.”

The Emergency Board unanimously approved the funding request. Afterward, I asked Courtney whether he was satisfied with Oregon’s response.

At age 76, Courtney is considered part of the vulnerable population. He also is recovering from a hip injury that included

a severe infection. He recounted visiting one of his OHSU doctors last week and asking about the coronavirus situation: “All he would say is, ‘You need to take this very serious. I don’t know where it’s going to go.’”

Courtney went on to tell me, “I think anyone who says today that we’re doing a good job getting the word out, that we’re taking very bold steps, that we’ve got this expert — they shouldn’t be saying stuff like that because I think this is something none of us has ever seen, ever experienced before.”

Courtney reiterated that much is unknown. And politics gets involved.

“This thing is enough of a monster that the best thing to say is, ‘It’s a monster. We’re doing everything we can. We’re working each day. But I cannot assure you that we know exactly what we’re doing.’”

Courtney added that he couldn’t even convince his relatives not to depart on a cruise, despite government warnings against doing so. Cruise lines have now announced they are suspending cruises.

“I don’t want to be an alarmist,” he said. “But I’m very scared.”

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.