

Parks events go virtual amid pandemic

Funding future could be bleak

By EDWARD STRATTON
The Astorian

On Sunday morning, around 600 runners would have usually taken off along the Astoria Riverwalk to raise money for the Astoria Parks Foundation. Instead, around 350 have registered to run their own routes, staying socially distanced to help avoid spreading the coronavirus.

Astoria's main parks fundraiser has gone virtual, along with the open house for a new park in Warrenton, as parks face a funding future made bleaker by the pandemic's impact on city budgets.

Jennifer Benoit, a city staffer in Astoria and the race director for the parks foundation, said registration had already started to taper off when they decided to go virtual.

"It's definitely something I cannot stop thinking about, because this is the big fundraiser," she said. "I follow a Facebook group for race directors, and anyone who had anything coming up went virtual."

"A lot of participants are from Portland and Seattle," Benoit said. "We're asking them to run their normal routes (and) use social distancing."

Astoria is creating a budget for the coming fiscal year while not knowing how much revenue the city will have available. At a City Council meeting last month, City Manager Brett Estes warned that it might be some time before the parks department even gets back up and running because of the lack of lodging taxes and recreation fees.

"Our parks staff is looking at innovative ways to be able to open some parks facili-



PHOTOS BY HAILEY HOFFMAN/THE ASTORIAN
ABOVE: The annual Run on the River, hosted by the Astoria Parks Foundation and Buoy Beer Co., went virtual this year because of the coronavirus. **RIGHT:** Warrenton has hopes for a new trailhead at Skipanon River Park.



ties," he said. "They may be different from what you have seen in the past, to get shared facilities up and running."

Clatsop County began easing coronavirus-related restrictions Friday after getting approval from Gov. Kate Brown, allowing gatherings of up to 25 people and the reopening of some businesses.

A public bathing facility like the Astoria Aquatic Center, one of the city's most challenging parks properties, would likely not open until a final phase.

The city's focus now is on expanding child care for people returning to work and set-

ting up school-age day camps as school lets out for the summer, said Jonah Dart-McLean, the interim director of the parks department.

"We're focused on evaluating our capacity and budget to reopen programs and don't have a timeline for when we'd begin offering most of our former services," he said.

Warrenton has no parks department. The city's sparse parks funding goes mostly toward part-time staff hired under the city's Public Works Department in busier seasons to maintain properties.

The city has furloughed part-time help and canceled

Sunday Streets, an August event in which it planned to shut down streets to vehicles and encourage people to come out.

Warrenton has seen increased interest in parks, with AmeriCorps intern Morgan Murray hired for the year through the Resource Assistance for Rural Environments to help the city update a parks master plan from 2008.

That plan will include a new park in the Forest Rim subdivision at the corner of Willow Drive and Honey-suckle Loop. The city is trying to gather input on the project through a virtual

open house at tinyurl.com/forestrimpark.

The Forest Rim park and the master plan are the only two projects Kevin Cronin, the city's community development director, sees being funded in what is sure to be a lean budget.

Murray has also been documenting the trails that lace the Warrenton-Hammond area. Cronin is hopeful that work will result in at least a new trailhead at the city's Skipanon River Park, a trail atop dikes that runs

along the waterway through the middle of the city.

The coronavirus "provides a budget shortfall, but it also puts a kibosh on any kind of momentum you have for certain projects," Cronin said. "With Forest Rim, we really started to build some neighborhood capacity for interest and volunteerism in that park."

"It really put a stop to the momentum because of the physical social distancing, but also because people just have other priorities."

Pacific fisher denied protection in Oregon

By MONICA SAMAYOA
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Endangered species protections in Oregon and Northern California for a rarely seen, forest-dwelling mammal were turned down last week by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The federal agency did approve Endangered Species Act protections for the Pacific fisher in parts of the Sierra Nevada, where it was listed as "endangered" with extinction.

But it said such protections were not justified for the Pacific fisher in the forests of Northern California and southern Oregon. The decision rejected a 2019 proposal to list fishers as "threatened" throughout the West Coast range.

Pacific fishers are predatory mammals related to weasels, minks, martens and otters. They are about half the size of a cat and inhabit mixed conifer-hardwood forests.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided to separate the Pacific fisher into two distinct populations. Studies have shown the two populations are genetically different and are separated by a geographic gap of about 130 miles. The groups are the southern Sierra Nevada distinct population and the Northern California-southern Oregon distinct population.

The decision to not extend Endangered Species Act protections for the Northern California-southern Oregon population came down to a few factors. It was found to be more widespread within its range, have more diversity in ages between male to female ratios and have breeding and reintroduction success. This, along with current and proposed fisher habitat conservation efforts on public and private timberlands, enable this population to maintain balance and withstand setbacks.

A Fish and Wildlife Service official in Oregon praised the timber industry as a big



Greg Davis/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Fishers are rare in the United States.

reason the Trump administration was able to sidestep Endangered Species Act protections for the Pacific fisher throughout its range.

"Voluntary conservation efforts by state and private timber owners have contributed to the Northern California-Southern Oregon population of fisher appearing stable within a large range of suitable habitat," Paul Henson, Oregon's state supervisor, said in a statement.

He cited the voluntary adoption of conservation measures for fisher habitat across 2 million acres.

"The heavy lifting done by our partners greatly alleviates the need for regulation," Henson said.

Conservation groups said the failure to protect all Pacific fishers and their habitat under the Endangered Species Act heightens their risk of going extinct.

Noah Greenwald, endangered species director of the Center For Biological Diversity, said he doesn't disagree that there are two distinct fisher populations but that the Northern California-southern Oregon population would have been at one time part of a larger population that included all of Oregon and western Washington and extended into Canada.

"The loss of historic range is part of what makes that population at risk and in fact the isolation of the southern Sierra population is part of what makes it endangered as

well," Greenwald said.

He also said the decision to only list the southern Sierra population was purely political and a gift to the timber industry.

"The fisher, as clearly documented in that finding, faces numerous threats including logging of its habitat, rodenticides that are used for marijuana grow operations and climate change," Greenwald said. "There's really nothing to show that the fisher is now secure or doesn't need protection."

Greenwald said his group is currently reviewing the findings and will consider another challenge in court as most of the Pacific fisher population is in southern Oregon and Northern California.

Conservation organizations have been petitioning to list the Pacific fisher under the Endangered Species Act since 2000. In 2004, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a rule finding that listing was warranted but did not finalize the listing. In 2010, conservation groups sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to force them to complete the listing process. Again, the service proposed federal protection for the fisher in 2014, but then withdrew the proposal in 2016. The conservation organizations then filed suit alleging that the denial ignored the science in a politically motivated bow to the timber industry. But they've found little support from the current administration.

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