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CORONAVIRUS



Photos by Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Baker's General Store and the Elderberry Inn off of U.S. Highway 26 are among the businesses in the rural region of Clatsop County that suffer from the lack of reliable internet.

Broadband issues worsen in Elsie and Jewell

A technology gap in rural areas

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

Sandwiched between two parking spaces in front of the Elderberry Inn off of U.S. Highway 26 sits a banged up junction box with a bundle of exposed cables.

Operated by CenturyLink, the junction box serves the Elderberry Inn, Baker's General Store, nearby homes and the Elsie-Vinemaple Rural Fire Protection District.

"It has been knocked over and run over at least once every two months. All there is out there is a pile of cables that are taped together," said Brian Baker, the owner of Baker's General Store. "It handles everything. And we're totally dependent on that box that's laying on the ground that they continue to run on."

"With the slow connections like we have, people come in and business walks out because they've got to pay with cash, because you can't use a credit card without the internet," he said. "So we literally lose a lot of business."

And it is getting worse.

The coronavirus pandemic has made the broadband gap too difficult to ignore, as network capacity in rural parts of Clatsop County has been overwhelmed by more people working and



Rene Armstrong works the checkout station at Baker's General Store off of U.S. Highway 26. When the internet cuts out, Armstrong and other workers struggle to process credit card payments.

schooling from home.

The barrier for communities like Elsie, Jewell and Knappa is the "last mile" of fiber — extending lines that bring high-speed internet connection.

Over the past several months, improving internet access has become a higher priority for county leaders.

Commissioner Lianne Thompson, who represents most of the southern part of the county, including Elsie, said the county is working on several possible solutions.

"The need is huge," she said. "I think COVID has shifted the world in terms of how education is going to be run, and health care and commerce and employment."

'Extremely costly'

Baker also works full time from his home in Elsie as the director of sales and service for Legacy Automation Inc., a Washington state-based company that manufactures machinery for the pulp and paper industry.

"And there's times when I can't make targets, there's times I can't communicate data to my customers around the world," he said.

"The way we do orders for the store here, for the grocery store part of it, is we have to do that with our supplier over the internet. So if it's down then we can't get our order in for the week. It's just a cascading, horrible effect that hits us, and extremely costly."

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Fishermen seek relief from observer coverage

Waiver sought amid coronavirus

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Astorian

West Coast trawlers and fishing industry leaders looking to minimize the risk of exposure to the coronavirus are asking for an emergency waiver from a requirement to carry human observers.

The National Marine Fisheries Service provided a two-week waiver from observer coverage in the spring. Chris Oliver, assistant administrator for NOAA Fisheries, clarified in a message posted Thursday that waivers remain available on a vessel-by-vessel basis.

According to a spokesman, the federal agency has issued some individual vessel waivers for trips in the past three months — all were for times when observers were not available, not for other reasons, such as a vessel operator's concerns about the coronavirus.

Industry representatives argue that further steps are needed as the threat of the pandemic continues and case numbers rise.

In a letter to the agency, they said social distancing is impossible on commercial fishing boats. The information human observers collect, they said, can be temporarily collected through monitoring cameras already installed on many boats, logbooks and by the fishermen themselves.

"There is no debate that an emergency exists, and the emergency was unforeseen," the industry letter states. "The emergency regulations being proposed are not controversial within the industry ... and they pose no conservation or biological risks."

In his message, Oliver maintained that observers "create no more risk than a crew member." But Heather Mann, executive director of the Midwater Trawlers Cooperative, said vessel operators have a level of control with crew members that they do not have with observers.

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Oregon Trawl Commission
Some fishermen want waivers from a federal observer requirement.



Coast Guard outlines disaster response

Plan designed to protect marine transportation

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

U.S. Coast Guard Sector Columbia River has outlined a plan to respond to natural or man-made disruptions to the marine transportation system, from a damaged dam to a Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake and tsunami.

The plan, finalized in February, is standardized so crews from other sectors can carry out the response.

Sector Columbia River serves coastal Oregon and southern Washington state and the 33 ports along the Columbia, Snake and Willamette river systems that extend from the Pacific Ocean to Lewiston, Idaho.

The \$20 billion maritime transportation system

includes 8.5 million tons of grain exports, 1,500 foreign vessels, 50,000 cruise ship passengers, 295,000 recreational boaters and 2,000 commercial fishing vessels.

Capt. Gretchen Bailey, the deputy commander at Sector Columbia River, called the busy waterways a "little hidden gem."

"A major disruption to this maritime transportation system would be felt around the world. We are the major exporter of grain in the United States, so it would have a world impact. It is the top gateway for America's wheat for barley export, as well as a major exporter for corn, bulk materials, timber and paper products," Bailey said.

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Erickson reflects on the '60s

He sees music as positive change

By GARY HENLEY
The Astorian

He is Astoria's man of many talents.

Professional musician, teacher, bus driver, world traveler, disc jockey, the voice of Fishermen football and restorer of old homes.

He has not done much of the above this summer, but Mark Erickson still keeps busy, despite coronavirus travel restrictions.

"My wife (Ann) and I had our first European trip planned, paid for, then canceled," Erickson said. "We have dear friends in the Azores, and we were going to spend a week there. Then we were going to Portu-

EVERYDAY people

gal and Spain for a week. We were also going to Boston on the way there, and a few days in Philadelphia on the way back.

"It was a nice big loop that we had planned. Instead, we're just restoring rotten parts of some homes around the area."

But, no worries. Erickson still enjoys life wherever he happens to be. His work in home restoration and being a grandfather of six keeps him busy.

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Deb Kloeden Photography

Mark Erickson sings and plays the saxophone.

