



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Pacific Seafood has withdrawn a plan for worker housing at Astoria Pointe, a former drug treatment center.

Astoria Pointe: Neighbors expressed relief that dorm project was going away

Continued from Page A1

for most of the workers. The Astoria Planning Commission approved the project, but 13 neighbors appealed to the City Council, which was scheduled to discuss the issue Oct. 19.

Pacific Seafood could not immediately be reached for comment. The Clackamas-based company previously received approval from Warrenton to convert part of a machine shop in Hammond into a 70-bed dormitory.

Megan Leatherman, Astoria’s community development director, said the company didn’t provide a reason for pulling out of Astoria Pointe. “It was literally an email that just said, ‘We’re withdrawing our application,’” she said.

Pacific Seafood has been responding to a coronavirus outbreak among 95 workers at the Warrenton plant, the largest workplace outbreak in Clatsop County during the pandemic. Many of the positive cases, according to the company, were tied to Labor Day social activities among seasonal workers living at a hotel.

Neighbors around Astoria Pointe expressed relief that the dormitory project was going away.

David Gasser, who has lived just east of Astoria Pointe since 2001, said there was no way to make a large dormitory work in a neighborhood of single-family homes amid narrow, hilly streets with no sidewalks. The property hosted a nursing home when he moved in before a Memphis, Tennessee, couple started a drug rehab center there in 2005.

“The nursing home was appropriate,” Gasser said. “And to be honest, a drug and alcohol facility was a challenging neighbor. But ... the pluses are significant. People are trying to get clean and sober, and we’re hiring people in our area to help them. That didn’t seem inappropriate.”

Gasser said he hopes the building returns to one of its two previous uses.

William Dooner, a recovering alcoholic who with his wife, Ellie, opened several drug treatment centers around the country, died in 2017 from cancer. Ellie Dooner said he had first seen Astoria Pointe, then vacant after closing as a nursing home, from the Columbia River while fishing for salmon with a friend from Alcoholics Anonymous. Her husband, having been homeless in his youth and struggling with alcoholism, showed a lot of empathy toward people in recovery, she said.

“My husband was so compassionate toward the recovering alcoholic, because, he said, ‘I saw myself in every single person,’” she said. “And he said, ‘I know the pain.’”

After hearing from the friend about the need for local long-term drug treatment, William Dooner went up to the building, found a phone number and inquired about buying it. The couple funded Astoria Pointe, hiring local managers and a staff to operate the facility.

They later hired Sunspire Health, which operated the center until leaving without explanation in 2018. Part of Sunspire’s challenge was the lack of support from insurance companies to pay for high-quality providers and the long-term treatment necessary to prevent relapse, Ellie Dooner said.

Ellie Dooner had a contract with Pacific Seafood at Astoria Pointe until November while the company tried to get approval for the dormitories. She said there could be another nursing home operator interested in the property.

She recently sold the Rosebriar, a former bed-and-breakfast on 14th Street the couple had bought and opened in 2009 as a women’s-only treatment facility, and hopes to ultimately sell Astoria Pointe and other holdings around the country to finance her late husband’s dream of an opioid recovery center on a farm she owns in Memphis.

“I don’t know how to run it,” she said of recovery centers. “I just have dreams and ideas, and this is what Bill Dooner wanted to do with the piece of property we have here in Memphis.”

Outbreak: ‘What does the state give local officials? The sound of silence’

Continued from Page A1

“Additionally, local students are affected because the outbreak has caused the school district to revert to remote rather than in-person learning. Statewide, the Latinx community has been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and they are likely overrepresented in this outbreak as well.

“The public needs and deserves to know what the State of Oregon and Pacific Seafood are doing to protect the health of our community, now and in the future.

“These are challenging times for those in public service, but our work has never been more important.”

Jonathan Modie, a spokesman for the Oregon Health Authority, said in an email that “OHA’s utmost concern is for the health and safety of workers at food processing workplaces such as Pacific Seafood, where the COVID-19 virus can spread rapidly, and collaborating with local public health authorities and employers to protect other workers and community members who may not yet be infected.

“OHA is always interested in taking part in opportunities, such as a virtual community meeting organized by Congresswoman Bonamici, to communicate to people in Oregon about the state’s response to COVID-19 outbreaks and hear concerns from members of the community.”

Phased reopening

Bill Hueffner, the senior director of marketing and development at Pacific Seafood, said operations at the plant were suspended last week to facilitate testing. He said a phased reopening of the plant began Wednesday with the support of the health authority.

“We will continue to

scale operations back up over the course of the next several weeks as workers who are currently observing quarantine periods are cleared to return to work,” Hueffner said in an email.

The Oregon Health Authority, in a weekly report on workplace outbreaks, put the outbreak at Pacific Seafood at 86 cases. Cowlitz County in Washington state said nine virus cases there were tied to Pacific Seafood.

Bonamici told The Astorian that when she saw the news about a major workplace outbreak she reached out to elected and community leaders, and it was clear they did not have enough information.

“This is a small, tight-knit community with limited health care capacity,” the congresswoman said in a statement. “A virtual community meeting would help provide transparency and answer the questions of community members.”

Warrenton Mayor Henry Balensifer said in a Facebook post that he hopes the congresswoman can force the state to answer questions about the impacts of the outbreak on schools and the county’s phased reopening status.

“What does the state give local officials?” the mayor said. “The sound of silence.”

County Commissioner Mark Kujala, who represents Warrenton, said that when Bonamici’s office reached out to him he shared concerns about the Public Health Department not receiving information in a timely manner.

“The county health department needs to be able to do their job,” Kujala said.

“They need to have as much information as possible. And right now, because it’s going through OHA and it’s going through Clackamas, which is (Pacific Seafood’s) headquarters, things

get delayed and you don’t always get a full and complete picture when you want it.

“We’re only concerned about the employees and the community, and that’s first and foremost in our minds. So we need to be able to ensure that we’re getting as much information as possible and as soon as possible to be able to go out into the community and do the work that needs to be done for contact tracing, for wrap-around services for folks in quarantine.

“As has been witnessed (with Bornstein Seafoods) and Da Yang, those were handled differently. And this is an OHA investigation and they’re in charge of handling health of the community in this regard and county is there to assist.”

Early worries

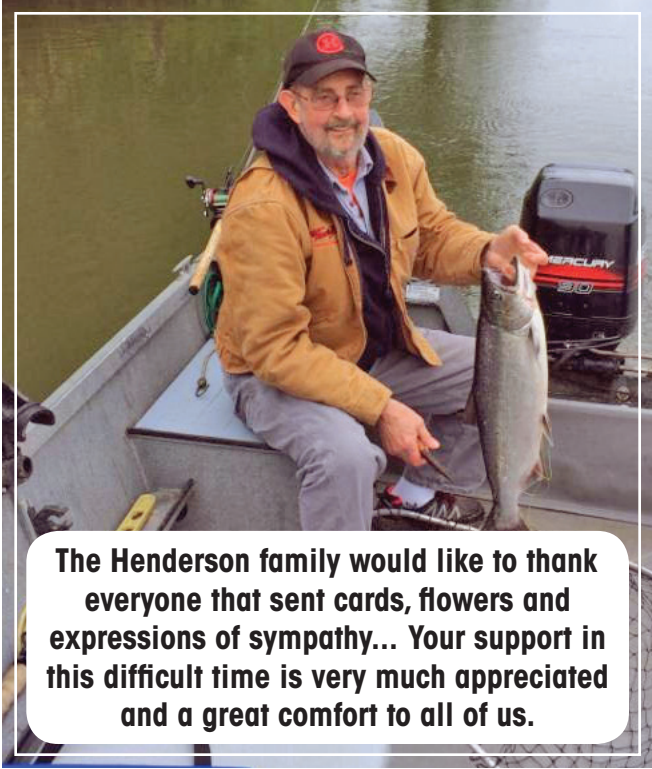
Kujala said the county and state talked a couple of weeks ago about the potential for an outbreak after a Pacific Seafood worker tested positive for the virus in early September. He said the county is not privy to what has taken place since that time.

“This has been an OHA investigation over the last couple of weeks that resulted in these cases,” he said.

The Astorian, using emails and other documents obtained through the state’s public records law, has reported on the tension between the county and Pacific Seafood since a coronavirus outbreak at the Warrenton plant in May. The first outbreak involved 15 cases — 11 workers and four contacts.

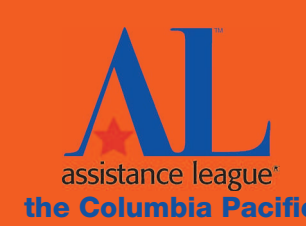
The county has wanted workers potentially exposed to the virus to quarantine, records show, while the seafood processor has argued that asymptomatic workers who test negative should be able to continue working.

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