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BEHIND THE NEWS

‘Diverse representation is crucial’

One of the unfortunate aspects of this year’s elections was the younger political leaders on the North Coast who chose to step aside.

Gearhart Mayor Matt Brown, Seaside City Councilor Seth Morrissey and Astoria City Councilor Jessamyn Grace West decided not to seek new terms. While each gave their own reasons, our region



DERRICK DePLEDGE

has had some difficulty in attracting younger people to public service.

Elected local boards function best when they reflect a cross section of our communities. Younger people, especially those who are trying to build a business or balance work and family, can bring interesting perspectives.

“I think the weight of being a politician during the pandemic — it negatively impacted my health, my relationships, my jobs, my art,” West said. “I know many out there who have been struggling for the past year can say the same because they’ve been working just as hard.”

An equine massage therapist and the executive director of the Astoria Arts and Movement Center, West was appointed to the City Council in January 2019 to replace Bruce Jones after Jones was elected mayor.

West represents Ward 4, which covers Uppertown and Alderbrook. Political newcomers emerged to replace her in the November election. Tom Hilton, the owner of Hanthorn Crab Co., and Lisa Morley, a behavioral workplace safety consultant, are tied at 360 votes ahead of a hand recount this week.

In an interview, West talked about the importance of diverse representation, the challenges of balancing public service with a job and a personal life and the biggest policy issue facing the city.

Q: Our elected local boards have often been dominated by people who are older or who are retired. How do we attract more younger people to public service?

A: That’s a very good question. I think attracting younger people to



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Jessamyn Grace West represents the east side’s Ward 4 on the Astoria City Council.

public service has a lot to do with representation.

I think a lot of times people are more willing to step into roles where they see themselves.

So if that’s not happening, and they constantly feel like that’s a world that they don’t belong in, I think that they get jaded and they just kind of throw their hands up and don’t want to get involved in that particular realm, which politics is definitely one of those.

Q: Editorially, we’ve said that we would prefer our local boards to be more like a jury — a cross section of the community — because they are nonpartisan. What do you see as the value of having people with diverse backgrounds on the City Council?

A: I personally feel like diverse representation is crucial to making balanced decisions.

There can be a lot of identity polarization in politics and communities. So we hear a lot about urban or rural, born here or just moved here, liberal or conservative. I think those dichotomies are

harmful because they assume that people fit into a category when most of us fall somewhere in between, so having more in common with each other than not.

But the truth is that as many of those voices need to be heard as much as possible. Otherwise, as a councilperson you’re directing an outcome that will inevitably leave way too many people behind.

Q: What are some of the challenges of balancing public service with a job and a personal life?

A: I’ll be honest. I completely failed at that. And it is the main reason I did not file for reelection.

I think the weight of being a politician during the pandemic — it negatively impacted my health, my relationships, my jobs, my art. I know many out there who have been struggling for the past year can say the same because they’ve been working just as hard.

Whatever I do, I always want to give 100%. But when you’re giving yourself to five different things, it just becomes

too much.

I think in anything one takes on, especially a service role, balance has to remain the priority. Otherwise, certain things in your life will inevitably suffer, and you become less effective in the roles that you should be growing in, if that makes sense.

Q: What’s the most surprising thing you learned about city government that you didn’t know before your appointment?

A: That I love it. After saying all that about suffering ...

Seriously, though. I was raised on Bob Dylan and generally distrustful of politicians, and still am. I never imagined myself in this role. But I care about it, and I do think that there are good people out there doing — or trying to do — good work.

Humane work, environmental work, creative work — and that’s all work that I love to do, that I never thought I’d be given the opportunity to do in city government.

And I’ve also really liked working with the current council.

Q: What’s the biggest policy challenge facing the city?

A: Housing — both affordable and transitional.

That’s not particular to Astoria. I feel like it’s a nationwide, systemic issue largely based in greed that won’t be solved by loosening development code or adding a few units here and there.

I think I feel like one of the only ways to address it is to partner with agencies whose goal is housing and not profit, which is what we see happening with the Merwyn apartments (where workforce housing is being developed at the former Waldorf Hotel by Innovative Housing Inc.).

Q: What advice would you give to your successor?

A: I don’t think I have any. I think whoever is elected is going to do a great job, and they’ll find their way just fine.

I’m obviously still going to stay involved and here as a resource, if they do need advice, but they’re going to do great.

Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Shame on you

Open letter to Sen. Brian Boquist: In response to your weekly update email to me, “The Government that Cried Wolf,” a couple of facts and a humble opinion:

I have been a registered Republican for well over 40 years. The surge in COVID-19 cases in the U.S. has been exponential over the last month. The vaccine must be thoroughly vetted to ensure all Americans are confident of its efficacy.

Masking is our front-line measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19. And it is in our voluntary capability to do our part to help slow the spread until that vaccine can be safely distributed.

I could go on but, suffice it to say, the drivel of partisan and selfish hype you are spreading is one of the reasons the country is experiencing the maxing out of intensive care unit negative-air rooms and the number of hospital staff required to work in those rooms.

Refrigerator semitrailers in Iowa full of the deceased, shortages of personal protection equipment, lack of sufficient reagents for testing kits, medical staff overwhelmed and resources strained to the breaking point, and you’re attacking the very system we rely on to keep us safe?

Shame on you. The story you are spreading should be titled “The Senator who cried Lamb.” COVID-19 is not a political football. It is a deadly and virulent disease that is killing us, man, woman and child, while you insist on failing to help contain that scourge.

PAUL DUEBER
Cannon Beach

Goodbye

I love my community, and I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to many of you before our family left earlier this year.

Unbeknownst to many, we’d been working on moving to Washington for most of 2019. The reasons are threefold: I longed for more career opportunities, we wanted to transfer our daughter to a larger school district and we have family here.

We planned to throw one last shindig at our favorite dance spot, the Astoria Arts and Movement Center, shortly after moving. Instead, COVID-19 hit, and our new state went into lockdown days after our



arrival.

Clatsop County was good to us. You welcomed us with open arms and hearts. I love that you are well-read activists, artists, philosophers and scholars.

Thank you to my students, who will always be in my heart, to my college crowd, to my Harbor folks, to Matt Stanley and the Astoria Co+op, to my beloved KMUNies, to my activist rabble-rousers, to the elderly folks I was lucky to serve at the Clatsop Care Health District and to the many dear friends we made over the years.

We’re still thinking about throwing one last dance party.

MINDY STOKES
Olympia, Washington

Voting fraud

I find it interesting that President Donald Trump and his Republican allies

have found massive fraudulent voting irregularities only in states that went for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris?

I find it so reassuring that all the states won by the Republican Party have such nice, safe voting practices in place.

To me, the only fraud in the 2020 election resides at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

CHUCK MEYER
Astoria

Worried sick

I am worried sick about our country. As I write this, President Donald Trump has lost 27 of 28 cases challenging the vote totals in the recent election. Georgia just certified their vote count.

Lawmakers have been summoned to the White House in a clear attempt to intimidate. People are dying in this country, literally by the thousands, daily. Basic health and safety measures have

been politicized to the point of rioting in the streets.

Extreme conspiracy theories have been repeated as fact. Emergency funding has been denied based on the political affiliation of the particular state. There remains no plan to stop COVID-19.

We had a measure on this year’s ballot to forbid the county sheriff from enforcing local, state and federal gun laws.

I do expect citizens to express their opinion, however a clear and repeated attack on the U.S. Constitution — in an effort to extend the term of office for Trump because he cannot accept losing — is childish, and reflects a complete disregard for the citizens he has sworn to protect.

This level of delusion and deceit needs to be treated as an attack on the Constitution.

RICHARD McINTOSH
Astoria