

BEHIND THE NEWS

‘It’s wasting a whole lot of potential’

Arline LaMear has learned the gears of government often turn slowly.

The former librarian ran for mayor in 2014 on the promise of a new Astoria Library. As mayor, she created a homelessness solutions task force in 2017 to confront the growing number of people living on the streets.



DERRICK DePLEDGE

The idea for a new library has evolved into a renovation project that has stalled during the coronavirus pandemic. The homeless task force has struggled to find policy footing.

“We could live with the library that we have, and our library direc-

tor, Jimmy Pearson, has made it a very open and inviting place to go,” said LaMear, who is stepping down from the library foundation’s board. “However, it’s wasting a whole lot of potential.”

LaMear served on the Planning Commission and the City Council before she was elected mayor. She chose not to run for reelection, but has been active for the past few years on the library and other issues.

In an interview, LaMear talked about the library, the homeless and the potential for a bond that could combine the library renovation with moving the police and fire departments out of the tsunami inundation zone.

Q: You have been an advocate for a new or renovated library for the past several years. Why hasn’t the city made more progress?

A: It seems like every time we are thinking about the library, a larger priority comes up.

So it’s hard to make that the No. 1 priority for the city.

Q: A bond will likely be necessary to finance library renovation. What is your best pitch to the public to make this investment?

A: I think we’ve found how important the library is during this COVID crisis. A lot of people are using the library now. And if they can’t get in to use the library, they’re using the library to-go.



Arline LaMear is a former mayor of Astoria.

Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

So I think it’s proven that the library is really a very important part of our civic (life).

Q: Why not just live with the library that we have?

A: We could live with the library that we have, and our library director, Jimmy Pearson, has made it a very open and inviting place to go.

However, it’s wasting a whole lot of potential.

The basement is a 14-foot ceiling — a dry basement in Astoria, which is remarkable. We have amazing archives in that basement. And we would really very much like to make some kind of an accommodation for the archives downstairs so that they are humidity controlled and so forth. Actually, naturally, they’re pretty well controlled right now.

But we would like to have an area where we could have our Astoriana collection downstairs, along with the archives, so that anyone researching Astoria history has a nice place to go to view all the materials that are down there.

A renovated library would provide an expanded children’s area and a separate area for teens. It would also allow

for computers to be placed throughout the library rather than in just one area, making computer use much more flexible.

Q: You created the homelessness solutions task force. While the task force has brought people together to share expertise, we have been critical about what see as a lack of urgency. A homeless liaison, for example, has yet to be hired. What do you see as the challenges?

A: Apparently, they have advertised. The county has now advertised for the homeless liaison, and there have been a number of applicants. There’s a lot of them. So, hopefully, that position will be filled.

We were very excited when we saw a video of a homeless liaison in the Portland area, and the wonderful things that he was able to do, the connections he made with the homeless and so forth were very impressive.

And it’s certainly something that we want to have here.

Q: Did you expect, though, at this point, there would be more movement on that?

A: I have learned over the years that the gears of government move very

slowly. While we certainly were hopeful that it would have happened before now, it’s not totally unexpected.

We’ve had a hole in the ground by the old Safeway block for a long time, and I thought that would be solved before I left office.

Q: Did the city raise expectations about what was possible on the homeless issue?

A: No, I don’t think so.

I think that the person who’s heading it up, (Police) Chief (Geoff) Spalding, is exactly the right person to lead the group. He had a successful plan for the homeless going in Beaverton when he was there, and he has gotten together a really outstanding group of people.

Again, things just move slowly. And one of the ideas is to perhaps put tiny homes into a parking lot in the churches. Unfortunately, there aren’t a lot of churches that have a large enough parking lot or that are interested in doing that.

So there’s lots of challenges, that’s for sure. But, again, I think that the group that he’s gotten together are remarkable, because we have people from the hospital, we have people from the schools, we have people from CBH (Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare), the Hispanic council. So they’re trying to reach as many people as they can.

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

A: I think there are two, if I may.

One is the Riverfront Vision Plan, because about 50% of our city wants more development along the river, and about 50% doesn’t want any development along the river. So it’s always been that way, since we started working on the Riverfront Vision Plan, and I think it will be that way in the future.

The second is, do we move our police and fire out of the tsunami zone? If so, then there may be an opportunity to combine the moving of the police and the fire departments and the renovation of the library in one bond issue.

So that’s a possibility anyway, whether that will happen or not, I don’t know.

Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.

I HAVE LEARNED OVER THE YEARS THAT THE GEARS OF GOVERNMENT MOVE VERY SLOWLY. WHILE WE CERTAINLY WERE HOPEFUL THAT IT (A HOMELESS LIAISON) WOULD HAVE HAPPENED BEFORE NOW, IT’S NOT TOTALLY UNEXPECTED. WE’VE HAD A HOLE IN THE GROUND BY THE OLD SAFEWAY BLOCK FOR A LONG TIME, AND I THOUGHT THAT WOULD BE SOLVED BEFORE I LEFT OFFICE.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Shelter space

Open letter to Gov. Kate Brown: I know you have more on your platter than you could imagine, but your people need you.

As a recently retired veteran and general contractor, I know Oregon has some of the strictest building codes in the country. Some of these codes make it impossible to make small, temporary housing for our growing population of homeless. One example is the minimal space per person restriction.

Being an engineer in Mosul, Iraq, I assisted in assembling modulated temporary sleeping quarters that were placed on elevated platforms. Astoria, and most towns in this state, have a few miles of unused train track.

My idea is to place these small, but more than adequate, shelters on flatbed rail cars. Add an attached access platform, with steps and a rail, and you now can also adjust its location. Put two or three cars together, and we have shelter for 50 people.

If these shelters are good enough for our troops, are they not also good enough for our neighbors who have no shelter? These are also the people you work for.

Thank you for any effort with this issue.

TROY HASKELL
Astoria

Death panels

U.S. hospitals are openly discussing rationing medical care for thousands of Americans affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

One wonders if the irony of “death panels” cropping up amid an extremely conservative Republican administration is totally lost on ex-governor Sarah Palin of Alaska?

After mulling it over for two seconds, my conclusion: Yes.

R.D. SMITH
Gearhart



LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to The Astorian. Letters should be fewer than 250 words and must include the writer’s name, address and phone number. You will be contacted to confirm authorship. All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are allowed each month. Letters written in

response to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil. Send via email to editor@dailyastorian.com, online at bit.ly/astorianletters, in person at 949 Exchange St. in Astoria or mail to Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 210, Astoria, OR., 97103.