

Housing: Apartment complexes could make serious dent in needs

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the bucket, because there’s so much demand.”

A countywide housing study estimated that Astoria’s population would grow to 10,578 by 2038, by which point the city would need 345 additional housing units. Housing prices have ballooned in recent years, driven by an influx of new residents with higher incomes. The trend has only hastened as some people leave urban areas amid the coronavirus pandemic.

New apartments

Several new apartment complexes still in the planning stage could start to make a significant dent in housing needs.

Developer Chester Trabucco hopes to break ground this year on more than 70 two-bedroom apartments built out of converted shipping containers stacked three to four stories high in a complex between Portway Street and Marine Drive in Uniontown. He described the apartments, each about 640 square feet and planned to rent at less than \$1,000 a month, as ideal for students and seafood processing workers.

Trabucco, who pitched the idea in March, said he plans to submit a building application to the city in the coming weeks. He said he has tentative approval from the state on a plan to clean up fuel contamination at the former gas station and bulk oil plant. He hopes to install a mockup of one of the units in a state-owned parking lot along Marine Drive near Burger King in April to show off the apartments.

“I’m pretty optimistic this will be a spring, summertime project,” Trabucco said.

Meagan Leatherman, the city’s community development director, described several projects in varying stages of planning.

The city approved developer Walt Postlewait’s 66-unit NorthPost Apartments complex near Safeway in 2019. Postlewait had



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

The former Central School property between Eighth and 10th streets along Irving Avenue has been vacant since the 1980s.

planned to break ground more than a year ago. Leatherman said there is still no timetable for construction, but the city is reviewing a grading and erosion control permit and has received building plans.

“They more than likely will be starting grading at this site more extensively, probably in the next couple of weeks,” Leatherman said.

Developer Cary Johnson, who proposed a 120-unit apartment complex at Tongue Point, is asking for a one-year extension on the building permits while legal access to the site is established.

The roads into Tongue Point, a former military housing center, were never designated as rights of way, leaving Johnson’s apartments legally marooned. The City Council agreed in July to survey 54th Street and Maritime Road, beginning a process of dedicating both to help Johnson’s and other nearby properties move toward development.

In 2019, the First Presbyterian Church bought a former hotel building on Marine Drive to create an affordable housing complex known as Copeland Commons. The church discussed a partner-

ship with Innovative Housing, but later learned the project likely doesn’t fit the nonprofit’s funding model, Garver said. Leatherman said the housing project has since been put on hold.

Leatherman said the city has been approached by another group that wants to turn the former Sears on Marine Drive that closed in March into a mixed-use commercial and residential development.

City Manager Brett Estes anticipates more discussion this year about how to approach redevelopment of Heritage Square, a former Safeway downtown where the City Council has envisioned a mixed-use development of ground-floor commercial spaces with market-rate housing above.

“I’m going to be working with the City Council and developing a process to be able to go out and see what sort of interest there is,” he said.

Looking at zoning

Part of the issue for multifamily development is the lack of high-density residential zoning. Take the two vacant city blocks along

Irving Avenue between Eighth and 10th streets that once housed hundreds of students attending the four-story Central School.

The property, zoned for lower-density development, has been mostly vacant except for a few houses on the periphery since the school was torn down in the 1980s. Developers have attempted everything from townhouses to apartments. But neighbors have opposed each project and any attempt at rezoning the property to higher density, which developers argue is necessary to make a project pencil out financially.

Peter Tadei, a real estate agent for the property, said affordable housing developers have looked at and passed on development because the property can only hold up to 26 units without a rezone. Garver said she looked at the property as a future project for Innovative Housing, but the group needs a location able to house 40 to 60 units.

“The neighborhood has been reluctant to want to see any kind of increased density,” Tadei said. “And again, understandable. But is that the highest and best use of that property? No.”

Workers: Income limits apply for the units

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are reviewed, building managers will consider applications from the public starting Feb. 15, Cooper told attendees at a recent downtown association meeting.

The building contains 40 units, most of which are studio apartments. Income limits apply for nearly all of the units. Monthly rents will range from \$284 to \$624. The handful of units that are not specifically for lower-income tenants are available at \$875 a month for a studio and \$925 for a one-bedroom apartment.

Low-income tenants will not lose housing if they secure a better job or receive a raise after they move into an apartment, Cooper said. “No, you will not qualify out,” she said.

The project secured key funding in 2019 and renovation work began later that year. Innovative Housing hoped to complete all work in late 2020. The project faced temporary set-

backs after contractors encountered unexpected dry rot, while the coronavirus pandemic caused other delays.

Now, Innovative Housing plans to open the building to tenants in late February or early March.

The effort to turn the former hotel into affordable housing units received strong local and regional support. City leaders continue to prioritize ways to address the area’s lack of affordable and workforce housing.

The former hotel, sandwiched between City Hall and the Astoria Library on Duane Street, had been neglected and vacant for years. Earlier efforts by a group of Astorians saved it from demolition, but no concrete plans about what to do with the property emerged until Sarah Lu Heath, the executive director of the downtown association, began talking with Innovative Housing about possible affordable housing projects.

The city’s Planning Commission in December approved state-mandated housing rules that, among other changes, allowed accessory dwelling units outright in single-family residential zones. The commission saved more locally controlled efforts to increase housing density for a joint session with the City Council in February.

At the joint meeting, Estes anticipates a rehashing of potential code amendments to increase density that the City Council pulled back from several years ago, but

that the countywide housing study recommended.

“It’s going to be a good dialogue, because it always comes down to these discussions about — especially when you’re looking at infill (housing) — discussions of impacts to neighborhoods, and those trade-offs. So I think that’s going to be a really good conversation, and something I know that the Planning Commission seemed to be looking forward to be having a better understanding of what the City Council’s focus could be.”

Gearhart: Second reading in February

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When the Gearhart Crossing market and pub closed in 2018, planning commissioners identified a need to address business vacancies in the commercial core, City Planner Carole Connell wrote in a November report.

The Planning Commission sought to modify the zoning code to improve the vitality of the city center while maintaining the quiet residential character called for in the city’s comprehensive plan. The amendments bring downtown businesses into code compliance while eliminating some of the outdated and restrictive language.

If the amendments are approved in subsequent readings, downtown busi-

THE AMENDMENTS BRING DOWNTOWN BUSINESSES INTO CODE COMPLIANCE WHILE ELIMINATING SOME OF THE OUTDATED AND RESTRICTIVE LANGUAGE.

nesses will be able to use 50% of their property for residential purposes. Parking requirements for eating and drinking establishments will be eased, and a 10 p.m. closing time eliminated. Cafes may offer outdoor and sidewalk seating for patrons.

Mayor Paulina Cockrum said downtown should reflect the city’s family feel. “It’s hard for me to be on board with hard liquor alcohol,” she said.

City Councilor Dan Jesse disagreed. “I don’t

see the difference between beer and wine and hard alcohol,” he said. “The idea of controlling something like this just seems really counterintuitive to society’s wants and wishes.”

Cockrum, Smith, City Councilor Brent Warren and City Councilor Reita Fackerell voted in favor of the zoning amendments in their first reading. Jesse voted against the amendments.

A second reading will come at February’s City Council meeting.

Gagnon: Support ‘really awesome’

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were that I wanted to marry Jordan, and I wanted to own a food truck. But I never pursued that after high school. I didn’t think I had the resources to do it, or the knowledge to do it.”

She started working for On Tots in 2017. Two years later, the food cart came up for sale.

“I was 20 years old, and I figured I’d ask,” Emily Gagnon said. “I figured the worse they could do was say ‘no.’”

Things went great initially, with the food truck fully booked. The couple traveled to events from Renaissance festivals to book fairs. Last Christmas season, they took up residence at the Oregon Zoo during ZooLights.

But the last major event the couple served was the Portland Winter Light Festival in February, after which public gatherings, and much of their income, was canceled. Collective Oregon Eateries, a 36,000-square-foot pod of food carts and miniature restaurants the couple signed up to join, was announced in August but still hasn’t opened.

The couple introduced themselves to Astoria last year, setting up shop twice in the parking lot outside Buoy Beer Co.’s beer hall at the former Video Horizons.

“Locals were really calling us here after the two times we came,” Emily Gagnon said. “It was incredible how many people were commenting on stuff, or messaging us on Facebook, asking us when

we were coming back out to Astoria.”

While visiting around Halloween, the couple was encouraged to move permanently to Astoria Station, a courtyard on 13th Street where several food carts gathered around Reach Break and Reveille Ciderworks. On Tots joined Mai Tong Thai Food and CS Fishery, a food cart supplied by fishermen in Garibaldi. It replaced Sasquatch Sandwich, which will reopen this month in the pod at 11th and Duane streets.

“During these crazy times we’re living in right now, to have a true community for support is definitely going to be really awesome,” Jordan Gagnon said.

On Tots opens similar hours to the brewery Thursday through Monday.

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