

OPINION



the Astorian

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OUR VIEW

A sharper focus on policy

The Clatsop County Board of Commissioners has adopted a strategic plan to guide policy priorities.

The plan focuses on five areas: governance; infrastructure; economic development; environmental quality; and social services.

We hope this useful exercise gives commissioners a sharper focus.

In our political endorsements last year, we observed that the county commission had identified the most important policy issues facing the North Coast, but had often missed opportunities to lead.

That pattern continues.

During the coronavirus pandemic, commissioners have not performed sufficient oversight of the county Public Health Department's response to local virus cases, conducted a critical examination of workplace outbreaks, or pressed for greater transparency so people might better understand the risk and spread of COVID-19.

Since November, the county has reported more than 500 new virus cases — about 66% of all the cases recorded since March — and six deaths linked to the virus, yet county leaders have provided little context to help people make sense of the case count. Many of the public health updates at county commission meetings are perfunctory, with few pointed questions from commissioners.

Even more surprising, commissioners have not raised any questions in public about the death of a Warrenton man last year in



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Dozens of health care workers got vaccinated against the coronavirus at the Astoria Armory in December.

police custody. Alexander Jimenez, 34, who had mental health and drug abuse issues, died in April after an arrest for disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. Warrenton police used a Taser on Jimenez during the arrest and sheriff's deputies and police wrestled him to the ground in the sally port of the county jail. His death was ruled accidental — caused by the toxic effects of methamphetamines, with fatty liver disease and the application of the Taser as other significant conditions.

Commissioners oversee the county jail and Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, the county's mental health contractor. They could have asked about the use of force, the medical clearance process at

hospitals before people arrested are brought to the jail, booking procedures at the jail and why a mobile crisis response team was never called.

The primary responsibility of our commissioners is to make sure the county manager we pay to run the county on a day-to-day basis and other administrators are doing their jobs. But the county commission also has the broadest geographic reach of any of our local boards, a unique platform to ask questions, set priorities and bring experts and advocates together to share ideas.

The new strategic plan is a helpful tool. In the coming year, we would also like to see more emphasis on these issues:

- **Mental health.** The number of crisis response calls has increased as people try to cope during the pandemic. Two people with mental health and substance abuse issues — Jimenez and Alaina Burns, a 31-year-old Astoria woman shot after a home break-in near Sunset Beach in December — have died after interactions with police.

While progress has been made over the past few years, significant gaps in treatment remain.

- **Homelessness.** Hiring a homeless services coordinator is a step in the right direction, but our county needs to be more aggressive in addressing the housing, social services and law enforcement challenges.

- **Child care.** One of the region's largest child care providers scaled back last winter, then restrictions on in-person classes at schools because of the virus intensified the pressure on parents who need to balance the demands of work and family.

- **Broadband.** The social isolation and school restrictions during the pandemic are reminders of the urgency to extend high-speed internet access to rural communities.

- **Transparency.** The county Public Health Department should publicly disclose workplace outbreaks of the coronavirus.

We do not place the burden on county commissioners alone to solve these problems. Everyone on the North Coast with policymaking ability has roles to play. But we do believe they should help lead the conversations.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Illusions

I am responding to the recent article, "Astoria to crack down on lawlessness at park" (The Astorian, Feb. 4).

While the article itself was a reasonable, albeit incomplete, report on the discussion held at the City Council meeting of Feb. 1, it failed to note that the Astoria Police Department is already working, and has been for years, with all its available resources and within the legal constraints of Oregon and federal law to limit this "bad behavior."

There is simply nothing more that the police can do to stop this behavior, other than to push it to a different location, where the cycle will repeat itself endlessly. The fact that this City Council decision was made near Groundhog Day is pathetically ironic.

No one should have any illusion that the police department can do any more than it has been doing, and doing with great restraint and sensitivity. The effort and mandate endorsed by the City Council is guaranteed to result in the failure of the objective it is intended to accomplish.

What has been accomplished is that several downtown business owners have gotten City Council action and a headline in this newspaper, neither of which conveys any meaningful substance.

BARRY PLOTKIN
Astoria

Rebuttal

A letter titled "Black stain," published in the Feb. 4 edition of The Astorian, cries out for rebuttal. The author apparently possesses divine insight and wisdom, or believes he does.

One sentence is utterly laughable, and bears repeating: "Flying banners bearing the name of an American traitor is an affront to proper thinking Americans."

In what Orwellian "reality" does the author reside? Who determines what thinking is "proper"? Is he the Minister of Truth?

In this letter the arrogance, sanctimony and outright dishonesty of the left is on full display. "Republican insurrectionists" intended to "murder members of Congress" and "hunted congresspersons to assassinate"?

President Donald Trump encouraged those in attendance at the White House

on Jan. 6 to "peacefully and patriotically" march to the Capitol. In what bizarre fantasy world are these the words of an "American traitor"?

SCOTT AMES
Astoria

End chronic homelessness

I'm writing in response to The Astorian's recent article (Feb. 4) about the "lawlessness" in the Ninth Street park, discussed at the Feb. 1 Astoria City Council meeting, and to address a theme I heard at the meeting: the safety of our residents.

In reference to business owners who feel threatened, councilors repeatedly expressed the importance of keeping Astoria's residents safe. I agree with them. But rather than view public safety as an issue with business owners on one side and the unsheltered on the other, I ask our leaders to pursue solutions which provide safety for all residents.

I ask them to resolve to end chronic homelessness in Astoria. I keep hearing that this problem is unsolvable, but that simply isn't true. Other municipalities have ended veterans' homelessness, and gone on to end chronic homelessness.

If what we really mean is that addressing it would cost too much, we must consider how much money we already spend. We pay in the form of policing, jail, emergency room visits and in loss of revenue and quality of life for both business owners and the unhoused.

Our current approach is actually a very expensive way to deal with homelessness; many studies show that providing housing costs less than year-round shelter, or endlessly shuffling people between taxpayer-funded services.

This is a public health crisis, and we need those in power to help resolve it. By acting swiftly and humanely to protect our most vulnerable residents, they could address the needs and concerns of everyone involved.

TERESA BARNES
Astoria

Valiant souls

I wonder how many of us understand the amount of work and stress our teachers have been under during this pandemic? These valiant souls have worked long hours



to ensure that our children have the best possible education under a difficult situation.

They had to completely redo the way they teach, creating many more hours of working time. We talk about how children are missing out without in-class experiences. So are the teachers, who miss the intimate contacts they share with students.

Let us not forget to respect and appreciate the dedication of these heroes, who constantly give their all to our children. As they are asked to return to in-class teaching, many are concerned about the health of the students, their own families and themselves, and rightly so.

Can we as a community please be empathetic and supportive of our teachers, our community heroes?

DIANA McLOUGHLIN
Gearhart

Made me think

The Feb. 4 editorial in The Astorian, "Rational immigration reform," made me think about the book by Andrew Yang, where he discusses the coming and accelerating loss of employment here and

abroad due to worker displacement by artificial intelligence and robotics. How do you factor in the need for immigrant labor with Yang's prediction, which is already happening?

I think President Joe Biden's approach to immigration, by addressing the cause, is far better than the Trump administration's attempt to treat the immigration symptoms with walls and deportation. However, Biden's approach — by helping poor countries build their economies — is futile if there is no additional effort to bring down birth rates into sync with job creation rates. Investing in economic growth can lead to increased carbon dioxide production.

I wouldn't consider the U.S. as a "low population country," except that it is not as crowded as others. Our conversion rate of farmland to development is alarming. We should remember that we should be sharing the land with other life forms, both animal and plant. Our anthropocentric egos make us think that we own it all, and that having dominion means it's valid to inflict destruction upon nature.

DAVE FITCH
Astoria