

OPINION



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OUR VIEW

Speak up about ocean dangers

Another season, another tragedy on the beach. Every year as spring turns to summer, we hope we will get through the busiest visitor season without the loss of a person venturing into the Pacific Ocean.

And just about every year, our hopes are dashed.

Sneaker waves, dangerous currents, frigid water and heavy crushing logs are just some of the dangers lurking in the attractive-looking surf.

There are warning signs at locations up and down the Washington state and Oregon coasts. But are they enough? They clearly are not heeded by all.

As the U.S. Coast Guard noted some while ago, it is out-of-area visitors who are most at risk because they are “unaware of the unpredictable and extreme dangers posed by beach surf along the Pacific Northwest coast.” Are there better ways to make them aware?

We love our beaches. Their beauty and appearance of tranquility are the reason many people live and work here. With about 43 miles of ocean seashore, the Long Beach Peninsula and Oregon’s North Coast are magnets for hundreds of thousands of inland visitors each year. Our economy relies greatly on our beach and tourists’ fascination with it.

But the surf is dangerous, and Mother Nature can be unforgiving for the unwary. The most recent tragedy was the loss of a 14-year-old boy in Long Beach on the Memorial Day holiday weekend. Innocent fun on the beach morphed into a tragic loss, from which his family will never recover.

Coast Guard personnel and local searchers from law enforcement and rescue agencies spent hours on the beach, in the water and in the air looking for the boy. His fam-

WHICH IS WORSE? SAYING NOTHING AND WATCHING THE ANGUISH OF A FAMILY AS THEIR LOVED ONE DISAPPEARS INTO THE WAVES? OR SPEAKING UP TO A STRANGER AND RISKING A REBUKE?

Practicing for a tragedy that is all too familiar, Pacific County Fire District No. 1 and the South Pacific County Technical Rescue Team ferry a victim from the surf to a waiting ambulance during an annual drill.

Patrick Webb/For the Chinook Observer



ily has since continued the search, praying for some degree of closure.

Public comments online reveal how residents struggle with this deadly issue, acknowledging that, “The ocean is huge and extremely active. There are rip currents, sneaker waves and crab holes to fall into.” Some point to a recurring problem with unsupervised teens being turned loose to play on beaches clearly marked as hazardous. Some blame victims or their parents, while many others simply long for ways to end this needless sacrifice of innocent lives.

Although teenage boys are often the victims, this is by no means always the case. The most recent peninsula drowning before this one was of a 23-year-old Olympia man last August. And over the years,

some of the saddest cases have involved adults trying to extricate children from danger.

Advice on signs and leaflets should be unambiguous, even though some will go in the water despite any admonitions. So what can be said? Children and teens should never be permitted to go in deeper than their knees. Younger kids should stay within reach of an adult at all times. Parents visiting the beach with small children should buy life jackets for them and insist they are worn. And everyone must avoid logs — if you see any in the water, get out of the surf and move well away immediately.

We’ve previously suggested it is incumbent on residents of southwest Washington and the North

Coast to play their part in alerting visitors to dangers. Speaking up and intervening when you observe potentially dangerous behavior takes moxie. No one likes to be told what to do. And in these less-than-tranquil times, where individual freedoms and community obligations sometimes appear as competing values, there is a danger of provoking a less-than-positive reaction.

But which is worse? Saying nothing and watching the anguish of a family as their loved one disappears into the waves? Or speaking up to a stranger and risking a rebuke?

A nonconfrontational way to convey this information is via a low-wattage radio signal — with the frequency posted at all beach access points. This should be implemented to provide safety guidance in at least English and Spanish, along with a summary of beach-driving laws and, when appropriate, clamming rules.

Other issues are evident. Emergencies rarely occur in random locations, but are concentrated in a few predictable places near access points and restrooms. This Memorial Day tragedy was on one of the busiest weekends of the year. But research has shown that most happen on relatively warm 68-degree days in July and August, from Friday afternoons through Sunday. Perhaps beach patrols and outreach efforts can be made feasible and more effective by focusing on these areas and times? There is no excuse for whining that there is no budget for this — we must find the money. We have it within our power to save human lives. We must do so.

Meanwhile, a family mourns and awaits the Pacific Ocean to return the body of a teenage boy.

It must be considered a preventable tragedy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A facade

The newest feasibility study on the North Coast Business Park is out. It shows that out of 141.69 acres, only 30.61 acres are developable, due to wetlands.

The study also shows that a cost of over \$6.2 million will be needed to get the property to sellable standards, showing the proposed economic benefit in taxes both with the Clatsop County public works facility on site (\$177,760.52) and without public works (\$415,918.26) a year, given there are no tax break incentives for going there.

The Tsunami Evacuation Facilities Improvement Plan (TEFIP) is also out. It shows the most vulnerable areas are between Clatsop Plains and Fort Stevens. Moving the public works facility to the sort yard would put them further away from the citizens who will need help the most. What does Warrenton want?

This whole plan is a façade that’s been put together for years behind closed doors. It is now being taken through the final steps in a pandemic. There has been little outreach, and most of the taxpaying public is still unaware of this plan.

There have been name changes, lack of answers, information removed from the website, removal of citizen advisory committees and the recent resignation of the two citizens sitting on the Road District No. 1 Budget Committee.

This is exactly why we’ve had to take our concerns to court. Something isn’t right here.

A series of in-person meetings need to happen before any final decisions to build, or even move, are made. It is our money, after all.

SUZETTE BERGESON
Astoria

Open the meetings

I believe it is time to open up the Clatsop County Board of Commissioners meetings to the public again. People are safely



gathering in offices, restaurants, libraries and other public places.

It’s time our elected officials come out from behind their virtual Zoom shields, and the comforts of their home offices, and look us in the eyes and tell us why they are making the decisions they are making that affect us all.

MATHEW PARDES
Astoria

Seize this moment

We are in the midst of a housing crisis, on both sides of the river. There is no available housing for either the homeless, at one end of the economic spectrum,

or for professionals, at the other end of that spectrum or, in fact, anyone in between.

Meanwhile, Clatsop County has vacant land opposite Costco that it does not know how to develop. Why is that land not being offered to developers to build multiincome housing?

I look at that land and I see opportunities for 100 to 1,000 units of modern, efficient housing. There are numerous local architects and builders who would know what to do if given the opportunity to make proposals.

I understand that we are currently in the midst of a shortage of building materials, but by the time construction could actually begin, that shortage is very likely to have eased, or disappeared altogether.

The Biden administration is planning to release funds for these kinds of projects. Incentives for landowners and builders will be plentiful. Using zoning restrictions as an obstacle to multiincome housing development would be nothing more than a red herring in an emergency such as the one we are in.

This chance to make real progress in easing our housing crisis across the economic spectrum needs decisive action by the county and the support of local municipalities.

If we don’t seize this moment and address this critical shortage of housing, we will surely regret it in the future.

BARRY PLOTKIN
Astoria