



Katie Frankowicz/The Astorian

Astoria contractor Tim Kennedy begins one of his regular swimming sessions in the Columbia River.

Repeal: Tides that wash in and out can be extremely swift

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As Kennedy swims east, crawling steadily against the river chop to his turnaround point at the Columbia House Condominiums, he is parallel to the Astoria Riverwalk. The paved, 6.4-mile trail is a city park and, for much of his swim, Kennedy is technically adjacent to it.

But around 10 hours later, at a City Council meeting, city leaders voted to repeal the swimming and wading prohibitions.

The rule was nearly impossible to enforce. It was drafted long before the creation of the Riverwalk and no longer applies to modern-day Astoria, city councilors said. While this doesn't mean city leaders are recommending everyone take a dip in the river, they don't see the point in fining people for it, either.

The rule has likely been a part of city code since the early 1900s, along with other "no swimming" rules like one that forbade nude bathing in the river during certain hours, according to City Attorney Blair Henningsgaard.

He imagines the rule was drafted in response to a particular problem at the time — though it's anyone's guess what that problem was exactly.

"Well," Mayor Bruce Jones joked with Kennedy as the City Council prepared to repeal the rule, "we look forward to you joining the ranks of law-abiding citizens."

Clad in a black wetsuit, Kennedy swims in the river around three times a week. He is the only person Jones knows who does so regularly.

It's a practice Kennedy started last year when the coronavirus pandemic shut down the Astoria Aquatic Center for months. His work as a contractor brought him to the Astoria Warehousing site off Marine Drive where Fort George Brewery was building out its distribution, canning and production operations, an easy access point if someone wanted to take a quick dip in the Columbia.

Kennedy is an avid outdoorsman, not deterred by cold or a bit of risk, a strong swimmer and an experienced kayaker who has tackled any number of challenging river and ocean conditions.

He looked at the Columbia River and figured: Why not?

But some people onshore who spotted him swimming were alarmed. He's had the fire department and the U.S. Coast Guard check on him. In the past month, he's also had several conversations with Astoria police officers who responded to calls about a swimmer in distress. Kennedy started wearing an emergency whistle as a precaution to put them at ease.

Astorians don't frequently see people swimming in the water for exercise, Deputy Police Chief Eric Halverson explained.

Police are more used to encountering people who ended up in the river by accident or because they were struggling with mental health issues or suicidal thoughts.

The tides that wash in and out can be extremely swift — and cold. A person without experience in the water, and with the Columbia River in particular, could quickly find themselves in trouble, Halverson said.

"In all seriousness, swimming in the Columbia River is not for the faint of heart," City Councilor Tom Brownson said as he

prepared to cast his vote in favor of repealing the rule.

"I'm OK with this but people do need to be absolutely careful when they mess around with the Columbia and being in it," he said.

Kennedy hopes to introduce other seasoned swimmers to the experience, however.

When he tells others about his swims, most people's first question is about water quality: Is it clean?

Kennedy times his swims with the high tides that send an infusion of salty ocean water upriver and that, he reasons, dilute any river nastiness. He'll swim when the wind is whipping up a light chop, but not when there are full rollers.

He's figured out safe routes that avoid maritime traffic and most of the old pilings that lurk at various levels below and above the water. He's more likely to run into a log than a sea lion, though he can hear the large mammals bark and yip at each other when he's underwater.

He's puzzled why he's alone in the water. Given the choice between the river and the pool, he'd choose the river every time.

Term limits: 'Getting younger, fresher ideas on the commission ... is always a good idea'

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"I don't know why one would want to get rid of institutional knowledge by the term limits," Stricklin said.

County Commissioner Pamela Wev said she is "very much in favor of term limits," adding that they're common for planning commissions.

"We're in a county where there is a lot of growth and change taking place — and, in fact, people often speak to me about their wish to be on the Planning Commission. And we have newcomers who have other experiences, and we have people with a lot of technical expertise, etc.," she said. "And so getting younger, fresher ideas on the commission, I think, is always a good idea."

Institutional knowledge, she said, is "useful, and I think it's very accessible" in the county. "I can pick up the phone and ask old-timers historical questions about all kinds of things," she said.

County Commissioner John Toyooka said he believes that "institutional knowledge is wonderful, but over time it'll lead to institutional inefficiency." He said he's for term limits at all levels — county, state and federal — for appointed positions.

Nadia Gardner, the chairwoman of the Planning Commission, said she's generally a "big fan" of term limits for organizations like nonprofit boards.

But the Planning Commission's case is different, she said: Every time an incumbent's term is up, the board has the option to replace that person at the end of the incumbent's term. "So it's not like they just keep going forever without opportunity for fresh blood," she said.

Because of the difficulties recruiting people, especially from unincorporated areas, the importance of institutional knowledge, and the opportunity to remove planning commissioners, Gardner said she opposes the proposed term limits.

She suggested that if term limits come to pass, planning commissioners whose terms have expired could get reappointed after a



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Clatsop County commissioners and planning commissioners are sparring over land use planning.

certain number of years.

Planning Commissioner John Orr appreciates both "the need to encourage new blood" and the need to maintain institutional knowledge: "There's just no replacing that," he said.

But, he added, Gardner has a strong point:

The commission's ability to replace a planning commissioner allows for those times when the board has lost confidence in that person. "Wouldn't that protect both interests?" Orr asked.

Mark Kujala, the chairman of the county commission, said "I don't feel too strongly

about term limits myself."

County Manager Don Bohn reminded the group that the draft of bylaw revisions is "just a starting document, so all feedback we have heard is important as we move forward." He added, "There's a lot of openness about what the final version looks like."