

IN BRIEF

Gearhart curtails Sunday contractor work hours

GEARHART — Commercial contractors must refrain from work in Gearhart on Sundays.

A new ordinance aims to provide residents a day of rest from a city with a growth spurt.

Measure proponents Bebe Michel and Eric Halperin said they recognized that houses need to be built and repaired and gardens need to be maintained. “We understand construction companies and landscaping companies have a job to do and need to be able to make a living,” they wrote. “But companies should also understand the needs of the people in the community. We think it’s important and fair that residents have one day a week of peace and quiet in their homes.”

The passage at a special City Council meeting last week comes over the objections of contractors who have said the ban would cripple operations and hurt their ability to serve customers.

In an August public hearing, Tim Mancill, of Mancill Lawn and Yard Maintenance, said sentiment was overwhelmingly against the ordinance. “That should tell the council what the majority of people want,” he said. “I think if it was on the ballot banning Sundays the ordinance would be voted down in a landslide.”

Mancill plans to pursue a court challenge to the new ordinance. “We’re not going to just lay down and crawl over,” he said after the meeting.

State clarifies details of virus death

The Oregon Health Authority on Friday clarified the details of a coronavirus-related death linked to Clatsop County.

The health authority reported that the case involved a 60-year-old woman who died on Oct. 8 after testing positive on Oct. 6. The state had initially said she tested positive and died on Oct. 6.

The county’s Public Health Department has said the person was from out of state and only happened to be visiting the area.

The health authority, meanwhile, reported six new virus cases for the county on Friday and seven new virus cases on Thursday. Since the pandemic began, the county had recorded 2,395 virus cases as of Friday.

— *The Astorian*

DEATHS

Oct. 18, 2021

SECORD, Jeanne Margaret, 95, of Warrenton, died in Warrenton. Caldwell’s Luce-Layton Mortuary of Astoria is in charge of the arrangements.

Oct. 17, 2021

CLAUSEN, Jerry, 63, of Astoria, died in Astoria. Caldwell’s Luce-Layton Mortuary of Astoria is in charge of the arrangements.

Oct. 13, 2021

PARMELEE, Cheryl Lynn, 50, of Hillsboro, died in Astoria. Caldwell’s Luce-Layton Mortuary of Astoria is in charge of the arrangements.

SULLIVAN, Barbara, 85, of Clatskanie, died in Longview, Washington. Groulx Family Mortuary of Rainier is in charge of the arrangements.

ON THE RECORD

Criminal mischief

• Brian Anthony Carlos, 46, of Astoria, was arrested Thursday in Astoria for criminal mischief in the first degree, a hit-and-run involving property damage and criminal trespass in the second degree.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

TUESDAY

Port of Astoria Commission, 4 p.m., workshop, (electronic meeting).

Lewis & Clark Fire Department, 6 p.m., main fire station, 34571 U.S. Highway 101 Business.

Seaside Planning Commission, 6 p.m., work session, City Hall, 989 Broadway.

Seaside School District Board, 6 p.m., (electronic meeting).

WEDNESDAY

Clatsop County Board of Commissioners, 10 a.m., work session, (electronic meeting).

Astoria City Council, noon, executive session, (electronic meeting).

Seaside Tourism Advisory Committee, 3 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

Knappa School District Board, 6:30 p.m., Knappa High School Library, 41535 Old U.S. Highway 30.

THURSDAY

Seaside Transportation Advisory Commission, 6 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

Tide gates: ‘A lot of money for a small producer’

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The aging tide gates block fish from swimming between the ocean and river estuaries, disrupting a crucial part of their life cycle.

Though some tide gates still function despite being as much as a century old, they’re considered outdated under modern regulatory standards.

“They’re at the end of their lives, a lot of them, so the need to replace them is something we can anticipate will be happening,” said Irma Lagomarsino, a senior policy adviser with the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Innovative new tide gates don’t obstruct fish but they’re much more expensive, potentially costing hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars, depending on their size and complexity.

“That’s a lot of money for a small producer,” Herman said.

In its most primitive form, a tide gate is basically a door attached to the end of a culvert or channel: The buildup of river water behind it forces the gate to swing open, draining estuaries and farmland of flood waters. Otherwise, the door remains closed against the rising ocean tides, protecting upriver property from an incursion of saltwater that damages crops.

“It kills the grass and it screws up the dirt,” said Zac Mallon, the coordinator of the Lower Nehalem Watershed Council. “You change up the soil chemistry. It modifies the pH,” a measure of acidity.

The trouble with this simple but effective mechanism is it doesn’t comply with fish passage regulations that Oregon lawmakers imposed two decades ago.

Farmers who want to replace or significantly repair old tide gates must comply with these standards, which means the structures must remain open to fish more than half the time. Water traveling through the opening also cannot be flowing so fast that fish are unable to swim upstream.

While engineers can meet those standards, some growers suspect that officials in the state and federal governments would rather see noncompliant tide gates removed than be replaced with more advanced devices.

“You get a sense from some of these agencies that they’d do anything not to allow a tide gate replacement, because they want fully reconnected waterways,” said Chad Allen, a dairy farmer in Tillamook.

Without a tide gate serving as a barrier, the natural rhythms of outgoing river water and incoming tide



Tom Josephson, left, the habitat restoration program manager with the Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce, discusses the function of a tide gate near Warrenton with Narayan Elasmir, the nonprofit’s habitat restoration biologist.

water would return to the estuary, restoring its ecological function — at the cost of productive farmland.

“We’re not going to be investing more high-value farmland,” Allen said.

Planning ahead

Even farmers who obtain funding for sophisticated tide gate structures still face permitting hurdles that can delay replacement projects for years. For that reason, they must begin planning long before tide gates break down.

“If we hadn’t gotten it done, eventually they would have forced me out,” said Steve Neahring, a dairy farmer near Nehalem. “If you get a failure, you can’t wait two or three years to get a permit to fix it.”

Without a tide gate, roughly one-fourth of Neahring’s farm would be vulnerable to inundation with tide waters.

However, the structure that had long protected his property had stopped functioning effectively — the culvert had partially collapsed, impeding the water flowing out of the estuary. While the tide gate still blocked saltwater, it contributed to flooding upstream.

“I was taking on more water than I could get rid of,” Neahring said. That decreased the quality of his forage and prevented him from letting cows out to pasture as often. “It was just a maintenance nightmare,” he said.

“Your field is sitting under water and you’re getting fewer rotations on it,”

said Mallon, of the Lower Nehalem Watershed Council, which helped the dairy replace the aging tide gate.

Luckily for Neahring, the Nehalem River’s estuary is considered valuable fish habitat, which meant that grants were available to replace the tide gate in 2017. About 70% of the \$460,000 project was covered by state and nonprofit dollars.

The new structure is a muted tidal regulator that stays open for fish by default, until a flotation device indicates that tides have risen to the point that the gate must close. Once the tide level drops again, the door reopens and stays that way.

While the device doesn’t allow tide waters to rise to historic levels, they still inundate part of the estuary while flushing sediment from ditches to the benefit of farmland, said Leo Kuntz, a tide gate specialist with Nehalem Marine Manufacturing who designed the mechanism.

“That’s what a muted tide is: It’s a small tide,” Kuntz said. “We’re trying to raise fish and cows together, and we’ve been real successful at it.”

The problem is that some tide gates only affect a relatively small number of acres, said Herman, the cattle and hay farmer. They’re not cost effective for the landowner to replace without financial help, but they’re also not a priority for habitat restoration.

“You’re not big enough to get any grants. The little guy is caught between a rock

and a hard place,” he said.

Farmers who are able to obtain funding don’t escape adverse impacts, since grants and permits are contingent on making operational changes to benefit habitat, said Sharon Waterman, a Coos County grower.

Fencing streams, planting trees and re-digging channels so they meander are common requirements that reduce the farmable acres and complicate management, she said.

“You can’t do anything without mitigation,” Waterman said. “Unless you do the mitigation they want, you’re not going to get a permit.”

New partnership

Five years ago, lobbyists from agricultural and conservation organizations convinced state lawmakers to create the Oregon Tide Gate Partnership, which is intended to bring state and federal agencies together to solve the modernization problem.

Lawmakers also allocated \$3 million to plan and construct new tide gates.

“They really sit at the intersection of working lands and natural resources,” said Jillian McCarthy, the state’s tide gate coordinator. “On the one side is the ag community side and on the other side is the fish side.”

At this point, the partnership has developed an inventory of the state’s 1,000 tide gates with help from Oregon State University and other partners. The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board is also funding two computer-based projects to help with replacement planning.

One software tool estimates the correct size of pipes needed for tide gate replacements that meet regulatory standards, which reduces some of the preliminary engineering costs.

The other is a decision support tool to help prioritize funding for tide gate replacements, based on the value of estuary habitat and the property protected.

“How do we pick which tide gates to replace? The answer really depends on who is asking the question,” said Jena Carter, Oregon Coast and marine director for The Nature Conservancy, which developed the tool.

The decision support software allows the question to be examined through multiple lenses to examine whether an investment is worthwhile, she said.

“Whether a project occurs on the ground requires a lot of factors to come together,” Carter said. “It will be imperfect because every property is unique, but it will give us a hypothetical ballpark estimate.”

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McCommons: Flotilla earns his highest praise

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The broad smile — noticeable even behind his COVID safety mask — made clear both his reaction and his answer.

He, his wife, Michelle, and their daughters, Rilee, 10, and Harper, 7, have returned to a locale they enjoy. “We love the area,” he said, noting the family savors the outdoor and historical opportunities of the region.

McCommons, 41, was originally from Monterey, California. He grew up playing football and baseball and enjoyed the team element. He attended junior college at San Luis Obispo and obtained his associate degree. “But I decided that college was not for me,” he said.

At 22, he joined the Coast Guard and immediately embraced the team concept of the service.

“I enjoy the aspect of helping people, the team dynamics and sense of teamwork,” he said. “The Coast Guard is a very rewarding organization and they take care of their people.”

“It’s a team. We cannot do these missions without each and every person, no matter what their role.”

After basic training, he had a brief posting in San Diego before the first of his two stints at the Motor Lifeboat Station in Yaquina Bay, which lasted six years. He taught at Cape D for five years between 2010 and 2015, returned to Newport as executive petty officer, then was back at the lifeboat school in Ilwaco in a similar leadership role for a year. Before taking his current command, he served as a training officer in Louisiana, working closely with the Coast Guard Auxiliary in New Orleans.

The local Auxiliary — Flotilla — earns his highest praise.

“They help out tremendously with the station and all we do,” he said. Members have painted the Coast Guard buoy, which is positioned next to the 1937 36-foot motor lifeboat at the station, and helped renovate base locker rooms. Representatives attend planning meetings and assist with educational projects. “I am very appreciative of their work,” he said.

McCommons said he is looking forward to partnering with other agencies. “We get a lot of great support in Clatsop and Pacific counties,” he said. One theme will be paramount. “Training is a very important piece of the puzzle to deal with the challenging environment of the Columbia River,” he said.

“I am very familiar with the Columbia River Bar — it is very humbling. The weather is very dynamic and challenging. One day to the next is never the same. We need to be able to respond any time, night or day.”

Station Cape Disappointment has traditionally had a

commissioned officer in command. His predecessor was Jessica Shafer, a lieutenant who transferred to Washington, D.C. McCommons has earned commendation and achievement medals, including a letter of commendation from the Coast Guard commandant. His rank bridges the level between enlisted personnel and the more senior officers. He said his appointment follows a trend at similar West Coast stations.

“This aligns it with Grays Harbor, Newport and Coos Bay,” he said.

McCommons’ specialty is as a boatswain’s mate, operating small boats in heavy weather in search-and-rescue and towing operations. He is certified to run all the rescue vessels at his disposal. With his surfman status, the highest level of proficiency, he expects to suit up alongside personnel on the 47-footers sometimes — but not every mission.

“It’s important to be there with the crew, but as the commanding officer, it is important to be able to take a step back to enable our people to grow,” he said.

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