



Robert Stricklin has represented Clatsop Plains on the county Planning Commission.

Stricklin: Served on the Planning Commission off and on since the mid-1990s

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Members appointed by the board to other county commissions and groups will be required to sign a similar statement, County Counsel Joanna Lyons-Antley said.

Stricklin, who represents Clatsop Plains, has served on the Planning Commission off and on since the mid-1990s and has been involved in regional planning issues for decades. His most recent term would have ended in June 2024.

The Planning Commission now has five of seven seats filled. Planning commissioners are appointed by the Board of Commissioners.

Nadia Gardner, the chairwoman of the Planning Commission, said after the vote to remove Stricklin, “I’m very thankful for Planning Commissioner Stricklin’s many years of dedication to Clatsop County and our people, and we will definitely miss him.”

Gardner said she regrets his loss. “I think having institutional knowledge on bodies like the Planning Commission and other committees for the county is very valuable,” she said.

‘Kangaroo court’

Stricklin did not attend the board meeting on Wednesday but later said in an interview that he had received a heads-up from the county counsel that some votes against him were already lined up. “I was more or less fully informed well in advance of the event,” he said.

He called the proceedings a “kangaroo court” because of its predetermined nature.

The vote to oust him came at a time when the Board of Commissioners is asserting more control over the Planning Commission. Stricklin has objected to what he views as the board’s “command-and-control” approach.

In the statement of rules and responsibilities, beneath “Planning Commission members shall,” the first bullet point reads: “Assist the Board of Commissioners and land use planning staff in preparing and implementing the annual planning work plan, in order to enhance and augment the goals of the board as identified in the adopted strategic plan.”

Stricklin viewed this order as a move toward stifling independent thought on the Planning Commission. In the version he submitted, Stricklin wrote next to it: “The Planning Commission will think and discuss planning topics unsuppressed by board of commissioner dictates.”

The statement’s second-to-last order says that the Planning Commission shall: “Interact with elected officials, members of the public and staff with civility, respect and dignity.”

Between “staff” and “with,” Stricklin wrote “eschewing fascism, but otherwise” — a response to a board that he believes has taken an authoritarian turn. With the May 2020 election, the board’s poli-

tics shifted in a more conservative direction.

At the bottom of the document, near his signature, Stricklin asked two questions.

The first alludes to interactions between commissioners and county staff outside of public meetings. “Who spearheaded the revision of Planning Commission bylaws via one-on-one meetings with the community development director?”

Stricklin asked this question at the joint meeting in July. “I could not get a straight answer,” he said, which he called “a total lack of open government.”

The second question references a comment Commissioner John Toyooka had made at a previous meeting: “What are John’s concerns about a progressive/green drift of the Planning Commission?”

Again, Stricklin said, he never got a good answer.

He does not view his decision to submit a modified statement, which he knew could lose him his seat, as an act of protest.

“I wasn’t protesting anything,” he said. “I was saying what I was willing to do.”

Stricklin said he has no ill will toward anyone. “I’m fine. My heartbeat doesn’t go up over this,” he said. “I have free time.”

Mark Kujala, the chairman of the Board of Commissioners, said at the meeting, “Robert I’ve known for decades and certainly respect him 100%.”

However, he said, “what we put together is a very standard document. It’s boilerplate. It’s something that isn’t objectionable in any way. And I think it’s unfortunate that Robert couldn’t sign on.”

Kujala said he does not view the board’s decision as “removing someone” but as Stricklin “removing himself by not signing a clean document.”

‘Forceful’

At the meeting, Patrick Corcoran, who serves with Stricklin on the county-wide citizen advisory committee and has facilitated meetings with him, did not weigh in on whether Stricklin should be removed. But he acknowledged his colleague’s service as “an engaged community member.”

“And boy is he engaged,” Corcoran said. “I have been in many meetings with Robert. Nearly every time I have come away having learned something new and interesting and relevant.”

For people who don’t know Stricklin, Corcoran said, “I think his communication style would be described by facilitators as” — Corcoran paused — “‘forceful’ might be a word.”

“But after the dust settled,” he said, “there was, very often, very useful information and always very thoughtful.

“So if Robert’s service on the Planning Commission ends tonight, I remain heartened, knowing that Robert is irrepressible and will remain engaged in community life and contribute his energy and perspective as new opportunities arise.”

Classroom: Staffing issues across North Coast

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But Sprouts has been operating with a skeleton crew for months.

October has been particularly challenging, Dart-McLean told parents. Five staff members resigned for various reasons. While three new hires are set to begin next month, the center is still in a vulnerable spot if an employee is not able to come to work because of illness or car trouble or is otherwise unavailable to give their full attention to a class, he said.

If a teacher needs to take a bathroom break, Dart-McLean or another administrator will often need to step in to



Sprouts Learning Center will close a prekindergarten classroom in November.

maintain state-mandated student-to-teacher ratios.

The parks department opted to close the prekindergarten classroom because administrators felt older chil-

dren would have an easier time finding alternative care. Sprouts is one of the few day care facilities in the area to offer infant care.

However, in his letter to parents, Dart-McLean warned further reductions in service could follow if the parks department loses more staff.

“We will do our best to provide as much advance notice as possible and will try to make accommodations as much as we can,” he wrote.

Staffing problems are not unique to Sprouts Learning Center. The child care industry — like many others — has struggled during the coronavirus pandemic to recruit

new employees and hold onto existing ones.

The parks department has also had issues with staffing at the Astoria Aquatic Center.

City leaders say they support moving to a different model to ease the burden on the parks department. The city wants to establish a partnership with a private child care provider to take over operations at Sprouts Learning Center and free up more resources for other parks programs.

Dart-McLean is still gathering information. He hopes to have a better sense of what a potential partnership could look like by early next year.

Social workers: It’s important to practice self-care

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“I have never worked as hard as I have in the last 18 months, in my whole career,” Whisenhunt said. “I’ve been a medical social worker for 16 years, and it’s fascinating and kind of terrifying what’s going on in health care.”

Her duties expanded over the pandemic, with her team serving more clinics in the hospital. They began covering the hospital’s surgical and specialty clinics after Misty Ingram, who directs the clinics, saw how the pandemic was impacting staff.

“It kind of brought to my mind, as a manager at the time, that my team was having struggles that we weren’t having whenever people weren’t as stressed out, and weren’t as spread thin,” Ingram said. “And so I identified that I needed to do something extra.”

That’s when she reached out to Whisenhunt, who embedded a social worker into her clinics.

They also organized group meetings where staff could talk about their struggles, their coping techniques and reflect on things that brought them joy.

“We are still in a place, we’re in a society, where we don’t like to acknowledge that maybe we’re struggling, and it’s been a taboo I think up until COVID,” Ingram said. “And now with COVID, people feel like they’ve been given the OK to talk about things. I think we’re finding that through doing that we’re able to heal, and help each other heal.”

The outreach has also helped Ingram’s staff resolve internal arguments, many related to politics and COVID vaccines. The subjects, she said, had torn apart relationships between co-workers.

A focus has been on recognizing good intentions, meaning to give someone the benefit of the doubt and recognize they may be acting out due to unseen pressures at work and home.

Ingram said she is grateful to work at a place that recognizes the benefits of mental health care.

“I think that not only will that be able to continue forward, but the whole awareness of resilience being a really important part of the workplace,” she said. “I think it’s kind of a revolution, not just in health care, but in workplaces all over the United States.”

Along with assigning social workers to clinics, Whisenhunt has opened her office to people who want to talk about their experiences.

“A lot of what I’ve done is really just validate for them that what you’re feeling is normal in this really abnormal situation,” she said.

In March, they opened up a hotline, previously used for patient referrals, to offer caregivers support. Whisenhunt said many caregivers have used it to ask for help.

The hospital has also expanded financial incentives for working extra shifts, provided more leave days and giveaways.

‘When you’re sitting with someone and all of their concerns or



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

A sign from the hospital’s campaign to combat burnout is displayed at an entrance.

their frustrations are the same ones you hold, day after day after day that gets really wearying’

Columbia Memorial employs over 700 people. With so much ground to cover, Whisenhunt said it’s important to practice self-care and make sure her team isn’t overwhelmed.

“It’s one thing to pro-

vide support to a colleague. It’s another thing to provide support to a colleague, and patients and everyone when you’re having that shared lived experience,” she said. “When you’re sitting with someone and all of their concerns or their frustrations are the same ones you hold, day after day after day that gets really wearying.”

Paige Sutton, a social

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