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Transit district looks to former prisoners to help solve bus driver shortage



Photos by Lydia Ely/The Astorian

ABOVE: A Sunset Empire Transportation District bus heads out of Astoria on Friday. BELOW: Jeff Hazen, the executive director of the transit district, is leading the charge to establish the returning citizen program.

Program will help train new drivers

By ETHAN MYERS
The Astorian

One morning in early August, Jeff Hazen was checking his emails.

As the executive director of the Sunset Empire Transportation District, a bus driver shortage was crushing his agency, like the nationwide shortage was doing to transportation across the country.

It was a difficult time. Hazen and the transit district's board were looking at the gut-wrenching decision to cut off bus routes that provide lifelines for some of the most vulnerable people on the North Coast.

But one email stood out. The Community Transportation Association of America linked to a blog post from Julia Castillo, an executive director of a transit district in Iowa. The post considered two uniquely challenging problems: the driver shortage and helping people released from prison reenter communities.

Castillo saw a potential solution. "I was just blown away by it," Hazen recalls. "I said, 'I am just going to run with this thing.'"

He reached out to Castillo that afternoon, and since that day, he has been moving full speed ahead. In late January, as a part of a returning citizen program, people who are leaving the prison system will be trained to become bus drivers.

Thanks to interest from the Oregon Department of Transportation and the Oregon Department of Corrections, the program has been able to find its footing much quicker than Hazen anticipated. When the Department of Motor Vehicles caught wind of the project, they wanted in, as well. Teams from each organization have held meetings to put together the logistics.



They agreed to start a pilot program that is transit-specific. Down the road, the program could be rolled out to other industries that require commercial driver's licenses.

To Hazen's surprise, the Department of Corrections will allow selected trainees to leave prison to get their behind-the-wheel experience before their sentences are up.

If they are also able to get their final testing completed, there is the potential for trainees to walk out of prison with a CDL in their hands, Hazen said, which could land them an interview almost immediately.

Baker Technical Institute, out of Baker City, plans to provide the simulators and host the training. The training will take four weeks for each individual.

"I am on top of the world right now," Hazen said. "This has been so exciting to get this thing kicked off in Oregon ... and standing up a program in six months, I have to pinch myself that this is happening."

Local ties

The first trainees will come from the Powder River Correctional Facility in

Baker City before potentially expanding to other prisons.

Sunset Empire will host the training for people who have already been released from prison. Hazen has been in touch with the Clatsop County Sheriff's Office, which oversees parole and probation, to see if any people with local ties are a good fit.

In early conversations with Hazen about how the program would play out, Castillo said, they figured it would be difficult to get changes made at the state level. But she has been amazed at how quickly Oregon has pushed it through.

"It's one of those examples where everyone can see the end result and the potential for a win-win all the way around — that's why this thing is getting off the ground so quickly," Hazen said. "Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd get two state agencies — two huge state agencies — to work together on a project like this."

"Everybody has been on the same page and excited about it, and here we are. It's going to happen."

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Crab season gets off to strong start

Fishermen see high starting prices per pound

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Astorian

Oregon's commercial Dungeness crab fishery opened on the traditional Dec. 1 start date for the first time in years with one of the highest starting prices per pound for fishermen on record.

But it could be a while before consumers are able to buy exactly what they want as processors restock depleted freezers and struggle to find workers.

Malcolm Cotte, the owner of Fishstix seafood market in Warrenton, is able to stock whole cooked crab and crab meat again, though both cost a little more than people are used to paying. He doesn't have any fancy legs and some other products, but it's an improvement from this summer, when he had to stop carrying a wide variety of crab options because of rising costs and low availability.

Restaurants, markets and seafood distributors were all short on Dungeness crab this summer due to a combination of factors, including sudden, increased demand after a lull caused by the coronavirus pandemic, shifting markets, a relatively lower yield season, not enough crab in storage and a lack of workers to process the catch. Prices soared.

Many people looked to the 2021-22 season to restore some degree of balance.

Heading into week two of the new season, it is still too early to say if equilibrium will be achieved, but catches are strong. State fishery managers recorded 3.9 million pounds landed in Oregon as

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SEASIDE

Housing project concerns neighbors

Vista Ridge II development would have 17 lots

By R.J. MARX
The Astorian

SEASIDE — Neighbors remain concerned about the potential impacts of Vista Ridge II, a proposed 17-lot development east of Wahanna Road, to be accessed by Hemlock and Aldercrest streets and separated from the original Vista Ridge subdivision by a creek.

They say that engineering maps are outdated, water flows will cause flooding and additional houses could endanger lives in an emergency.

"This project is not responsible," Lief Morin, a neighbor, said at a Planning Commission meeting on Tuesday. "It is not sustainable. It will reduce property values and it won't build a single house. It will destroy the ecosystem and it will put people's lives in harm's way."

According to plans, the parcel — tract G of the Vista Ridge subdivision — is a little more than 6.5 acres and could be developed into 17 residential building lots from 7,000 to 15,000 square feet, with a single one- or two-story home on each lot. About 2 acres would be preserved for open space.

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Gearhart City Council advances ZIP code effort

Process will involve customer feedback

By R.J. MARX
The Astorian

GEARHART — When it comes to mail, Gearhart doesn't get any respect.

Sharing the 97138 ZIP code with Seaside, mail is mis-routed, packages are undelivered or delayed. The lack of an individual ZIP code could even make a difference when buying a home or receiving prescriptions.

'SO FAR, IT LOOKS LIKE WE HAVE BROAD SUPPORT, SO WE HAVE TO START THE PROCESS SOMEWHERE AND THIS IS THE WAY TO START IT.'

Brent Warren | Gearhart city councilor

Last week, the city took the first step toward a federal government request for a new ZIP code with a proclamation endorsing the process.

Some of the more economical insurance companies use a ZIP code as part of their underwriting process, City Councilor Brent Warren wrote in a report to the City Council. Some homeowners have been denied homeowners' insurance or may

have paid higher premiums because the distance to Seaside was mistakenly considered too far from their residence.

"Over half of Gearhart gets its mail directly delivered to residences," Warren said. "There is no reason to expect this would change as a result of changing our ZIP code. Having an independent ZIP code from the city of Seaside should not preclude the USPS (U.S. Postal

Service) from continuing to deliver our mail as the city of Gearhart host post office."

The population of Gearhart, at 1,800, far exceeds smaller communities with their own ZIP codes, including Arch Cape, Hammond, Manzanita and Tolovana.

"Getting our own ZIP code will not solve every issue such as having an insufficient number of P.O. boxes," Warren said. "But in my opinion, it is an incremental improvement for all of our residents."

City Councilor Dan Jesse said he was concerned that the change would prove costly to business owners with address and printing changes.

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