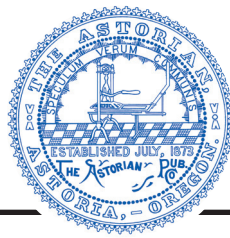


OPINION



the Astorian

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OUR VIEW

After retrospection, a roadmap

The end of a year brings retrospection. That involves the blessings of 2021 as well as the pains and struggles.

The coronavirus pandemic dominated life on the North Coast. The summer surge of the virus, driven by the delta variant, led to the highest numbers of cases, hospitalizations and deaths in Clatsop County so far.

As Erick Bengel reported in The Astorian in late December, the summer surge revealed the fragility of the system that cares for the elderly. His report also illustrated the gaps in virus data shared by the county and the lack of aggressive oversight by the county Board of Commissioners, which makes it difficult for the public to see a full picture of the pandemic's local impact.

For being on the front line of the pandemic, our county Public Health Department and our region's private health care professionals deserve gratitude, especially as they face a new wave of infections from the omicron variant. The many volunteers who help with vaccination clinics and phone banks are also essential to the county achieving among the highest vaccination rates in the state.

Looking back, beyond COVID-19, many positive things happened:

- The opening of the Merwyn Apartments showed a creative approach to affordable housing and revived a historic building near City Hall that was once nearly demolished.
 - The Astoria Nordic Heritage Park broke ground off Marine Drive downtown near the riverfront, a project that will celebrate the city's Scandinavian heritage.
 - The North Coast Land Conservancy took ownership of the Rainforest Reserve, an iconic coastal rainforest above Arch Cape and Oswald West State Park.
 - A new warming center in Seaside reflected the urgency in South County's response to homelessness.
- Moving forward into 2022, we



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

The North Coast Land Conservancy's purchase of the Rainforest Reserve above Arch Cape and Oswald West State Park was one of the highlights of 2021.

recognize it is hard to keep focus on the pressing issues facing the North Coast in the shadow of an unpredictable pandemic.

But many of these issues were identified as priorities before COVID-19, so policymakers have a roadmap.

• **Homelessness:** Astoria should pursue a year-round homeless shelter. The idea has been discussed by the city's homelessness solutions task force for the past few years, but federal court rulings and a new state law make it difficult to enforce restrictions on public camping unless there are adequate shelter beds.

• **Housing:** Several housing projects on the North Coast have the potential to bring hundreds of new apartments into the market. We believe we need even more units so more workers, particularly in the service sector, can afford to live here.

The county and cities should

lower the regulatory barriers for apartments and other multifamily housing and raise the barriers for vacation rentals and second homes.

• **Child care:** The lack of child care cripples the potential for job growth. The county and cities have to reach out to the private sector to find both short and long-term options to expand the number of slots.

The collaboration between the city and a new nonprofit on the future of the city's Sprouts Learning Center in Astoria has promise. But the slow pace of action at the government level countywide over the past few years is distressing.

• **Mental health:** Too many crisis response calls to police involve a small number of people going through mental health or drug- and alcohol-fueled breakdowns.

Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, the county's mental health and substance-abuse treatment contractor, and other social services agen-

cies should collaborate with law enforcement to shift a portion of crisis response calls away from police.

• **Economic development:** Everyone should be encouraged that the Port of Astoria and the city are completing a waterfront master plan in Uniontown and the county is seeking development bids for the North Coast Business Park in Warrenton.

Even small-scale data, manufacturing, assembly and industrial projects have the potential to create living wage jobs and reduce our reliance on tourism. Our region's economic security depends on diversification.

The pandemic presents significant challenges to our government and business leaders, but COVID-19 should not be used as an excuse for inaction.

Our hope is for measurable progress on these issues in the coming months.

GUEST COLUMN

Heritage Square project is critical

In 2010, a portion of the block now known as Heritage Square collapsed, leaving an unsightly pit. That pit is still there going on 12 years. In those years, our lack of affordable and workforce housing and our homelessness problems have grown exponentially.

We have an opportunity to help remedy that through at least one of the proposals being presented at the City Council meeting at 7 p.m. on Tuesday. This project is critical for several reasons, humanitarian as well as economic.



ARLINE
LaMEAR

Workforce housing

Astoria has a desperate need for workforce housing. The provision of more affordable and workforce housing has been a goal of

the City Council for many years now.

Local businesses, including Columbia Memorial Hospital, breweries, local retailers and restaurants, canneries, state and county employers and more, all lament the lack of affordable and workforce housing. Their employees simply can't afford to live in Astoria.

If you own a house, you know that the value of your property has risen astronomically during the past few years. I don't know about most of you, but I couldn't afford to buy my house in Astoria today. Rents are just as problematic. The rule of thumb used to be that you should pay no more than one-third of your monthly income for hous-



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Astoria hopes to redevelop Heritage Square.

ing. With rents of \$800 a month and up, many members of our working population are paying over 50% of their income for monthly rent.

Homelessness

As most of you know, Clatsop County has the highest rate of homelessness of any county in the state, with a rate of 17.4 homeless people per 1,000 in population. That's deplorable.

In 2017, when I was mayor of Astoria, I appointed a task force to work on the challenges of homelessness in our city. There were representatives from our downtown businesses, health providers, social services and mental health organizations, law enforcement agencies, city and county government entities, etc.

We soon changed our name from the homelessness task force to the homelessness solutions task force. We didn't want to

be another committee of talking heads that didn't accomplish anything. We wanted to identify solutions and bring them to fruition.

We developed partnerships within the task force that have proven invaluable, but much of our work has remained unseen by the general public. One goal of the task force has been to increase the inventory of affordable housing, including to those who are living on our streets.

Support the project

This project has the real potential to change the trajectory of Astoria but, to do so, the City Council needs our support to make it happen.

I encourage the City Council to vote "yes" on all the amendments approved by the Planning Commission. Multifamily housing must be an allowed use, and we need to recognize that parking right in front of our intended destinations should not come at the expense of providing housing for our workforce, our artists, young adults and those who need a little stability to join the workforce.

This development will address the urgent needs of our downtown businesses in need of workers, individuals and families who cannot afford to buy or rent in our city anymore, and those who are forced to live on the streets because they don't have adequate resources or services.

Be part of the solution and lend your support to this much-needed development.

Arline LaMear, a retired librarian, is a former mayor of Astoria.