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ASTORIA BRIDGE

County wants to partner with state to deter suicides

Several fatal jumps over the past few decades

By ERICK BENDEL
The Astorian

In the wake of another fatal jump off the Astoria Bridge, Clatsop County has asked the Oregon Department of Transportation to consider ways to prevent more suicides.

In a letter to Bill Jablonski, the district manager of the Department of Transportation, the county Board of Commissioners requested that the state partner with the county and local mental health professionals to assess a full range of prevention options.

On the afternoon of Jan. 12, James Neikes, a 29-year-old Astoria resident, jumped off the bridge. He landed on the grass east of Suomi Hall. Still breathing when police officers arrived, Neikes was taken to Columbia Memorial Hospital, then flown to a Portland-area hospital, where he died.

"These deaths not only impact the individual families who experience the tragic loss of life, but also their community peers, co-workers, and bystanders," the county's letter, signed by Mark Kujala, the board's chairman, said.

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State reports virus outbreak at hospital

By ERICK BENDEL
The Astorian

The Oregon Health Authority has reported 18 coronavirus cases at Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria.

The most recent onset was Jan. 16, according to the state. The investigation began Jan. 19.

The virus cases were disclosed Wednesday night in the health authority's weekly report on workplace outbreaks. Workplaces with 30 or more workers appear in the report when at least five test positive for COVID-19.

"As with most of our health care colleagues, CMH has had COVID-19 exposures due to the omicron variant," the hospital said in a statement.

"All these exposures originated outside the hospital," the statement continued. "Every caregiver exposed or positive is following strict employee health guidelines. Staffing has been affected, but not to the extent that services are canceled.

"CMH has always been vigilant about wearing PPE (personal protective equipment), social distancing and other methods of containing exposure potential in our organization. We are a safe place to come for anyone who needs care and encourage assistance to utilize our services.

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Judge Matyas to retire from Circuit Court

Brown announced the vacancy

By ERICK BENDEL
The Astorian

Judge Cindee Matyas will retire this summer after serving 15 years on the Clatsop County Circuit Court.

Gov. Kate Brown announced the vacancy on Thursday. Matyas' retirement takes effect June 30, the governor's office said.

Brown will make the appointment to fill the vacancy. The appointed judge will finish Matyas' six-year term and will have to run for the post in 2024 to stay on.

First elected in 2006, Matyas ran unopposed in 2012 and 2018.

Before that, she served as a Municipal Court judge in Cannon Beach and ran a private practice.

In the 1990s, Matyas worked as a prosecutor in the county district attorney's office.

Matyas is one of the county's three Circuit Court judges, along with presiding Judge Dawn McIntosh and Judge Beau Peterson.



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Judge Cindee Matyas will retire this summer.

New lodging space planned at former YMCA

An upper floor for artists, vacation rentals

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

The Astoria Planning Commission has approved a conditional use permit to allow lodging on the upper floor of the former YMCA downtown.

Over the past several years, Noel Weber and his family have restored the historic building at 12th and Exchange streets.

Gathered Bakeshop & Market and Shift+Wheeler, a clothing store and sewing studio, moved into the ground floor in 2020. The

Webers recently renovated an attached gymnasium, and plan to use it as a work space for creative businesses and artists.

The permit, approved on Tuesday, will allow Weber to use the 2,000 square-foot space on the upper floor to house artists and people who travel for workshops. The space will also be used as vacation rentals.

"Over the years we have restored and transformed this building into what it is today," Weber said in his application. "We have thoughtfully curated a creative community within the Y, providing space for local

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Photos by Lydia Ely/The Astorian

A workforce housing project at Heritage Square would include a mental health component built in the parking lot next to the American Legion.

Mental health component at Heritage Square draws some unease

Project would include 33 units of supportive housing

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

A mental health component of a workforce housing project at Heritage Square would provide low-cost housing for people undergoing treatment and help fill a gap countywide.

The concept by Edlen & Co., a Portland-based developer, involves two buildings spanning the downtown block next to City Hall. The main building, planned along 12th Street between Duane and Exchange streets, would include up to 75 units serving mostly lower-wage workers.

A four-story building on the block's smaller lot at 11th Street and Exchange would provide 33 micro units of supportive housing for clients of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, Clatsop County's mental health and substance abuse-treatment provider. Services for the residents would be on the first floor, and there would be an outdoor area for residents.

Many of the people would be part of the agency's Open Door program, which provides intensive wraparound services. The program serves between 70 and 80 people at a given time and is centered around those who need support in finding and maintaining employment.

Amy Baker, the agency's executive director, said clients outside of the Open Door program could also live in the building. The common denominator for choosing who would be suitable for the housing is some level of stability, she said.



Some at the Astoria Senior Center are concerned about the supportive housing proposed across the street.

Offices for the Open Door program are planned for the ground floor, with the micro units on the upper floors. Unlike the main apartment complex at Heritage Square, the building would not include parking, since the agency's clients typically do not drive.

The units would be priced at about 30% of the county's median income, using project-based housing choice vouchers.

Creative approach

The mental health component of the project not only fills a gap, but functions as a creative way to make the project more affordable while serving a wider range of incomes.

Heritage Square is challenging and expensive to develop, so Edlen & Co. proposed using income averaging. With income averaging, the project can receive tax credit equity for all the units if the average affordability is at or below 60% of area

median income.

Because the project would include Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare units at 30% of area median income, the project can have units for people earning wages up to 80%, which means up to \$19.65 an hour for someone living on their own in the county.

The City Council will discuss entering into an exclusive negotiating agreement with Edlen & Co. during a meeting on Feb. 7. The council is also expected to weigh code changes to enable development at Heritage Square. Mayor Bruce Jones said the council will use the meeting as an opportunity to consider public input and will likely hold a vote on the agreement on Feb. 22.

The mental health component of the workforce housing project has drawn broad support among

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