

# Bridge: Tools such as fencing and netting have proven to be good deterrents

Continued from Page A1

Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, the county's mental health and substance abuse treatment contractor, said in a statement that the agency supports "the implementation of deterrence measures to help prevent future loss of life by way of the bridge."

"Tools such as fencing and netting have proven to be highly successful in deterring and preventing tall bridges from being used to take one's life," the statement said, "and we would enthusiastically encourage ODOT to consider these measures with regards to the Megler."

There have been several suicides off the Astoria Bridge in the past couple of decades, but the state does not keep an official count, Don Hamilton, a Department of Transportation public information officer, said. "We really don't know," he said.

The deaths have prompted difficult discussions among county lead-

ers, social services agencies and law enforcement about mental health and substance abuse treatment on the North Coast.

While Neikes was in the county jail, he had two meetings, including one on Jan. 11, with Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare counselors, according to Sheriff Matt Phillips.

"He never indicated to anyone that he was suicidal, at least not to us," Phillips said. "So that was just a flat shock."

On Jan. 12, Neikes had a virtual hearing in Circuit Court with Judge Cindee Matyas. Neikes had been jailed 10 days earlier for two misdemeanors — criminal mischief in the second degree and criminal trespass in the second degree — and had two probation violations.

His attorney, Kristopher Kaino, noted at the hearing that cases like Neikes', where substance abuse and mental health issues interact, seem to be rising.

"We see more and more of these types of cases, and



Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

**Fencing, shown here at Vista Bridge in Portland, can help deter suicides.**

they become somewhat frustrating to try to help folks with, because I'm not sure what the best avenue is," the attorney said.

In an interview, Kaino said that when he started criminal defense work in the 1990s, he might have seen half a dozen mental health-related cases a year. "I've got three or four a month now with mental health issues, minimum," he said.

With few exceptions, people held in custody in

Oregon have a statutory right to be brought to trial within 60 days unless they waive that right. But getting an in-depth psychological evaluation to see what services a person needs often takes longer.

Kaino said that people in custody for nuisance-type offenses, such as those that Neikes committed, often don't want to wait if they can get out earlier, even if staying in jail would lead to a psychological evaluation that may help them, "which

I get," he said at the hearing.

Kaino and Neikes' probation officer, Barry Hazel, told Matyas that they weren't sure where Neikes was going to live after his release.

Neikes said, "I'm worried about how I'm going to — if I don't have a phone or anything — I'm worried about how I'm going to get a job and just manage all this at the same time. And I'm not sure really what I'm going to do right now."

Matyas dismissed the trespass charge and ordered that Neikes be put on 18 months of supervised probation. She also ordered that he get assessed for potential placement in a specialty court — either the drug court or mental health treatment court.

"I'll want to see you, every week, and check in to see how you're doing," the judge told him.

She urged Neikes to stay connected with people — from the probation officer to services such as Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare's Rapid Access Center.

"And I don't want you to lose hope, OK?" Matyas told him.

"OK," Neikes said. As the hearing ended, Matyas told him, "Look forward to seeing you in the future."

"All right," Neikes said. "Thank you."

Before he was released from jail, Neikes asked for, and took, his afternoon medications, Phillips said. Neikes also asked for bus tokens; he needed to check in with his probation officer in Warrenton.

Neikes was laying plans to move into Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare's sober living house in Warrenton, Phillips said.

"Those are all good signs that he was forward-thinking and looking to the future," Phillips said.

Neikes left the jail at 2:05 p.m. About 15 minutes later, he was seen walking up the Astoria Bridge.

"James, he was a good kid. Nice kid. Very nice kid," Kaino said. "I was sick when I heard he did what he did."



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

**A 'Senior Lives Matter' banner hangs in the window of the Astoria Senior Center.**

## Heritage Square: 'It's terrible when you don't have options'

Continued from Page A1

the City Council, the county Board of Commissioners and social services agencies such as Clatsop Community Action, but it has also provoked some strong reaction in opposition.

Astoria's homeless population has grown over the years and has become more visible downtown. The city has received frequent complaints about uncomfortable interactions, feces, urine and trash left in public places and people smoking, drinking and harassing passersby.

Dialogue on social media and letters to the editor of The Astorian have revealed some unease about providing more support downtown for people who are homeless or experiencing mental health issues.

Some have tied the increased visibility of homeless people downtown to outreach like LiFEBoat Services, a daytime drop-in center on Commercial Street, and the Astoria Warming Center at the First United Methodist Church at 11th and Franklin Avenue.

The Merwyn Apartments, an affordable and workforce housing project that opened next to City Hall on Duane Street last year, has also been a source of complaints in the neighborhood.

### 'Stop the encroachment'

Since the city decided to move forward with Edlen & Co.'s proposal at Heritage Square, banners reading "Stop the encroachment" and "Senior Lives Matter" have been posted across the windows of the Astoria Senior Center.

The senior center faces the parking lot where the four-story building housing Clatsop Behavioral Health-

care's clients would be built.

Larry Miller, the senior center's executive director, said that while he is not against the supportive housing, he does not think Heritage Square is the right place.

In a letter to senior center members about the project, he expressed concerns about the loss of parking and highlighted examples of negative interactions some seniors have had with homeless people in the neighborhood.

City Councilor Tom Hilton and Walt Postlewait, a developer and the senior vice president for nonprofit lender Craft3, have also questioned whether Heritage Square is the right spot for supportive housing.

Postlewait was one of six stakeholders on a panel appointed by Jones that recommended the city move forward with Edlen & Co.'s proposal. He was the only panelist to oppose the mental health component.

"You build out the downtown core to help deliver economic stimulus that feeds on itself," Postlewait said. "You want to attract outside dollars into the downtown core that spends money and supports the businesses that employ the citizens of Astoria and Clatsop County."

Postlewait said any housing at Heritage Square should serve people who earn enough to spend money at downtown businesses.

He thinks Astoria is coming to a crossroads.

One path, he said, would continue the momentum over the past decade toward becoming a destination, with the expansion of businesses and new hotels and shops.

The other is adding more social services in the downtown core, which he believes would only invite more homeless people.

"The word is out in that community that Astoria is a good place to come because we're lenient and compliant with their presence. And I'm concerned," Postlewait said. "I think that crossroads is coming where we have to decide what is more important for the long run, because the two do not coincide together."

"If a different strategy is not embraced, I think in two years the shine will be off of Astoria and we'll be seen as kind of that 'grungy former fishing and lumber town of the '80s,' and our shine as a destination location will have faded."

### 'An opportunity to address the issue'

While the mental health component at Heritage Square will not fix homelessness in Astoria or the county, Baker said it would help.

"What I've found throughout my career is that when humans feel like they're connected to community and that they have something to lose, they don't hang out and congregate on the sidewalks," she said. "I think that doing nothing — like say we put no housing in — we're still going to have a massive homelessness problem, and we're still going to have people who are congregating in the Garden of Surging Waves and all of that."

"This actually gives the city an opportunity to address the issue."

Baker has been reaching out to people individually and on social media and offering to discuss the project.

In recent years, Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare has pursued more housing options in the hopes of providing more effective men-

tal health and substance abuse treatment.

"If you could see the faces of our case managers and the frustration, and really the pain of trying to help support somebody when they don't have a safe place to sleep at night — it's terrible," Baker said. "It's a burnout for staff. It's terrible when you don't have options for people."

Housing has become critical to the agency's mission.

"From my perspective, I can't possibly do this job — I cannot do this job — unless we have adequate housing for our clients," Baker said. "And this is the best opportunity that I've seen since I've been in this job to actually be able to address that need."

## Outbreak: 'Everything is running as normal at the hospital'

Continued from Page A1

"OHSU (Oregon Health & Science University) data scientists report that the first few days of February will be the peak of the surge of this particular variant, and hospital beds will be challenging to find in Region 1. Please continue to practice safety, mask in public and curtail social activities not to overwhelm your local hospitals."

Nancee Long, the hospital's director of communications, said, "Everything is running as normal at the hospital."

"We do have a bigger mass of people that are out, but those positions are being filled, and nothing has been short-staffed," she said. "And sometimes people are working more shifts than normal, and everybody's kind of watching out for each other."

The Oregon National Guard recently sent five service members to Columbia Memorial to work in non-clinical jobs, such as laundry and housekeeping.

Columbia Memorial, a critical access hospital with 25 beds, is among the North Coast's largest employers.

Over the summer, during a surge of virus cases linked to the delta variant, the health authority reported 10 virus cases linked to the hospital.

Last winter, the health authority disclosed 14 virus cases tied to the hospital.

The Oregon Health Authority, meanwhile, reported 71 new coronavirus cases for Clatsop County on Thursday and 46 new cases on Wednesday.

Since the pandemic began, the county had recorded 3,939 virus cases and 37 deaths as of Thursday.

## Lodging: Top floor has been used for short-term lodging before

Continued from Page A1

entrepreneurs, small businesses and artists, and making it accessible for the public again.

"Possible cross pollinations and collaborative efforts amongst the people that use the building are a core strength of the Y today. Maintaining the top floor as temporary lodging gives us the opportunity to make this space available to everyone in the building, adding to these collaborative possibilities of the current tenants."

He said Gathered Bake-shop & Market has plans to host workshops in cake

decorating, and Astoria Design Studio would like to organize screen printing workshops.

Weber also plans to use the space for an artist-in-residence while artists use the studio in the renovated gym.

When the space is not being used by artists and people attending workshops, Weber plans to rent the rooms as vacation rentals.

He said using the top floor as short-term lodging is fitting since that is what it was used for when the YMCA was originally built.



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