

OPINION



the Astorian

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OUR VIEW

A reflection of Astoria's policy values

Astoria has the best chance in more than a decade to redevelop Heritage Square.

Edlen & Co., a Portland-based developer, outlined a project that would blend workforce housing for people at the lower edge of the region's income range with supportive housing for people struggling with mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse.

The workforce housing units would be tailored by income for workers in hotels, restaurants and retail, as well as some who are starting out in education, emergency response and social services.

The supportive housing units would be reserved for Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare to create a more stable path from treatment to recovery.

Beyond addressing a critical need, the mental health component would bring down the overall income average for all of the units and enable the developer to qualify for low-income housing tax credits and other state financial help necessary for the project to pencil out.

No one should expect a single project to solve the housing crunch. But workforce housing at Heritage Square can serve as one of several building blocks. Apartment projects in the works near Tongue Point, Uppertown and Uniontown could add units at different price points and increase supply in a way that could finally bring some rationality to our rental housing market.

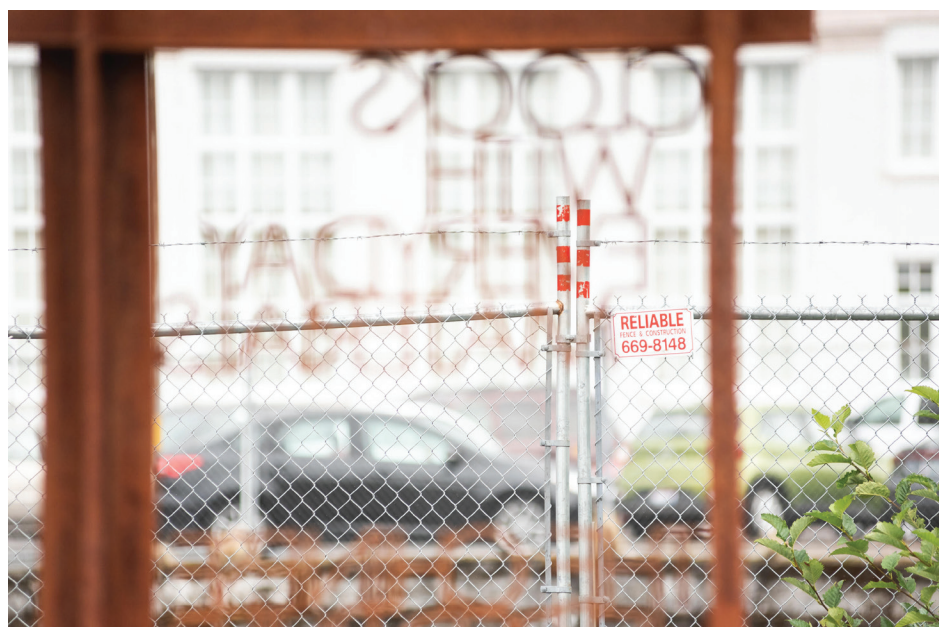
Unlike private developers, the city, which would need to sell, lease or otherwise transfer the land at Heritage Square to Edlen & Co., has to answer to residents.

Turning an empty pit near City Hall littered with trash and broken glass into a housing project for some of the most financially vulnerable in our community would be a declaration of Astoria's policy values.

We urge the City Council to enter into an exclusive negotiating agreement with Edlen & Co. and collaborate on redeveloping Heritage Square.

A substantive critique

The most substantive critique of Edlen & Co.'s outline, in our view, is that the income range for the workforce housing units would leave out many workers at businesses like Fort George Brewery and Buoy Beer Co., which are part of the Clatsop Enterprise Zone.



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Astoria should embrace workforce housing at Heritage Square.

The enterprise zone offers tax breaks on new investment in return for creating jobs that pay at least 130% of the county's median income.

The income range for the workforce housing units at Heritage Square would be 60% to 80% of the area median income — \$14.74 to \$19.65 an hour, or \$30,660 to \$40,880 a year, using 2021 figures. The developer would leverage the supportive housing units — at 30% of the area median income — to keep the overall income average for all of the units at 60% of area median income.

While workers who earn more money usually have more flexibility to find housing, the housing crunch in Clatsop County hits nearly every price point and makes it harder for businesses to recruit and retain workers.

We have noted for the past several years that as the North Coast becomes a more attractive tourist destination and a popular place for retirees and transplants to live, the cost of housing will likely increase and the gap between what many workers earn and what they can afford to pay for housing will continue to grow.

Economic diversity — like the production work at Fort George, Buoy Beer and Scoular, the new fishmeal plant near the Astoria Regional

NO ONE SHOULD EXPECT A SINGLE PROJECT TO SOLVE THE HOUSING CRUNCH. BUT WORKFORCE HOUSING AT HERITAGE SQUARE CAN SERVE AS ONE OF SEVERAL BUILDING BLOCKS.

Airport — is essential so our region does not become overly reliant on tourism. Our local governments have a policy interest in helping businesses in the Clatsop Enterprise Zone and others with the potential to create higher-paying jobs succeed.

Had a developer stepped forward with a housing project that would serve some of these higher-wage workers at Heritage Square, it would have presented the City Council with a more difficult choice.

But that is not the choice before the City Council.

The pit has languished at Heritage Square since the foundation of the old Safeway collapsed after heavy rains in 2010. The City Council discussed a mixed-use project with a new library and housing at Heritage Square in 2015 before abandoning the concept in 2016 over concerns about cost and public support. The City Council made housing at Heritage Square a policy goal in 2017.

Last fall, the City Council called for workforce housing at Heritage Square and invited developers to pitch ideas.

Developers have had ample time. Even if someone were to come up with a project today with housing units closer to market rates, the City Council would have to carefully weigh the potential rewards against the Edlen & Co. outline and

determine which workers should get priority.

To suggest lower-wage workers are not part of the "true workforce" — or that it would be better for the city to wait or even do nothing than to help them with housing — misreads the economic realities of our community.

Preferences

If the city enters into an exclusive negotiating agreement with Edlen & Co., the contours of a project at Heritage Square could be shaped over the next year.

We hope the city and the developer would immediately reach out to the American Legion about the long-term plans for Clatsop Post 12. Redeveloping the entire block between Duane and Exchange streets and 11th and 12th streets opens up more possibilities.

We accept that a project would likely prompt changes to Astoria Sunday Market and make it less convenient to park in the neighborhood.

We should not paper over the concern that Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare's supportive housing units could draw more people struggling with mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse downtown. For the mental health component to work, the agency has to follow through with the staffing and program-based structure described in the outline.

The Not In My Backyard gene is in all of us — it often comes out the closer new development is to where we live and work.

But since the city is a partner at Heritage Square, the City Council has an obligation to hear everyone's views. The public should have meaningful chances to participate at every stage before a final decision is made.

Our preference would be to sacrifice parking for more community space.

Edlen & Co.'s outline envisions ground-floor space with the potential for child care or community activities.

We believe the addition of a small plaza or park with a covered bandstand would complement the Garden of Surging Waves. An open space component would be a nod to some of the original ideas for the block. It would also function as a reminder that the public has a stake in the vitality of the neighborhood.

Done right, Heritage Square can be a reflection of Astoria's policy values and unique aesthetic.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Slow down, pause

Astoria has an opportunity to retain the last open space in downtown, Heritage Square, a great space for our Astoria Sunday Market, a venue for music, art, speakers, various seasonal events and a gathering place for seniors and families to enjoy. All great cities have had an open plaza.

After considerable discussion, Heritage Square has been left vacant, a parking lot with a hole. There are endless possibilities for an urban plaza, a safe and attractive space that we can take pride in for generations to come — even an amphitheater, no digging required.

Developers build it, then they are gone, and the opportunity for Astoria will be gone. If more low-income housing, addiction services, other free services for those in need are required, is there not another property besides Heritage Square?

The name "heritage" does not ring true for what is being proposed. Compassion, yes; housing, yes; but downtown areas that are unsafe, unsightly hangouts, no. Consider the negative effect on downtown businesses.

Another location, another solution? Decision-makers: Slow down, pause.

Only a partial inventory of what we do have: The Helping Hands yellow building in Uniontown for those in need; the Merwyn, recently restored for workforce and low-income housing; Clatsop Behav-

ioral Healthcare, established on 12th Street; LiFEBoat on Commercial Street; the Astoria Warming Center; the low-income Astor apartments; Emerald Heights affordable housing; and Edgewater at Mill Pond senior living.

Additional housing and services downtown? Or an urban plaza for all residents and visitors to enjoy, supportive of downtown businesses? Call your Astoria City Council member.

LaREE JOHNSON
Astoria

Opportunity

Oregon has the opportunity to support its future workforce in achieving our dreams. Across the state, hurdles like affordability of transit, housing and technology make it difficult to find good-paying careers. I know firsthand how hard it is to get the credentials needed, while also working to pay the bills.

Before I finished high school, I knew I wanted to work as a maritime engineer. But it was a struggle to do my maritime program and finish high school at the same time, and I also needed to work night shifts in order to support my family.

It's hard to describe how exhausting it is to juggle so much, but many Oregonians across the state live this struggle. My



GED program advisers at Clatsop Community College connected me with Oregon's Youth Development Division and Northwest Oregon Works. I gained access to rent assistance, and got the computer I needed to complete my school work during the pandemic.

The support I got was crucial in getting where I am today. Now, I've earned my GED and am enrolled in a seamanship program.

Every Oregonian should have the opportunity to work hard and achieve their dreams, just like I am doing. That's why I hope the state of Oregon makes more investments in the education, apprenticeship programs and support services I was able to access so that anyone across this state, in the same situation as I was in, has the same shot at success that I did.

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