

Council: Local elections have attracted more outside money

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address riverfront development and how to respond to a more visible homeless population.

Jones said housing will likely be the biggest challenge and priority for the rest of the year and for the new council next year.

The City Council is considering whether to move forward with a workforce housing project at Heritage Square. The proposal would include units for people undergoing mental health and substance abuse treatment. While the idea has drawn support from the community and city councilors, it has also provoked some strong reaction.

The mayor said the proposal gives the city an opportunity to

address affordable and workforce housing.

Jones said the city will also be meeting with leaders in the business community to discuss what can be done to help address housing shortages for workers earning higher wages.

In the meantime, he hopes to see other housing projects, including developer Cary Johnson's plan for apartments near Tongue Point, make progress.

Other priorities include working with the Port of Astoria on creating a new waterfront master plan in Uniontown to spur economic development.

Jones said there will also be focus on getting the city's Parks and Recreation Department on a sustainable path.

The City Council has supported closing Sprouts Learning Center, the city-run day care, at the end of June. Staffing has reached a critical shortage and the center operates at an unsustainable financial loss.

City Councilor Roger Rocka and City Councilor Joan Herman have also indicated they will not pursue new terms in November.

Herman, the only woman on the council, was elected in 2018 to represent Ward 3, which covers most of downtown.

The former reporter at The Astorian and college instructor said she made the decision not to run again about a year ago, citing her age and health. However, she said her commitment to serving the city has not wavered.

"Four years is a good run," Herman said. "I think it would be good for a new person to come in with fresh eyes and have a shot at it. I imagine, especially with the Heritage Square project, there will be considerable interest in the positions open on the council."

Rocka represents Ward 1, which covers part of the Port of Astoria, Uniontown and the western edge of downtown. He was also elected to the council in 2018 and ran with a plan to only serve one term. The former executive director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce has a dinner theater in California.

"It's really time for someone younger and energetic to step in and continue the work," he said.

But Rocka said he may consider a second term if he sees the race take a negative turn.

Local elections, he said, have attracted more outside money and negative campaigning in recent years. He pointed to races for the county Board of Commissioners in 2020 and the Clatsop Community College Board in 2021 as examples.

"If I saw that happening in the council race, that might move me to run again because I wouldn't want our council worked in that way," Rocka said. "I just don't think that serves anyone in the city or the county to have that kind of election campaign again."

"It just breaks my heart that that's happening here."

Astoria: 'This seems to me like we're playing from behind'

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there is not adequate shelter space, cities can adopt an ordinance that details the time, place and manner someone can sleep on public property.

Since there are few shelters on the North Coast, the city plans to update a camping ordinance.

Spalding said some cities have identified areas where people can sleep between 9 p.m. and 7 a.m. Some have allowed people to sleep on sidewalks if they leave at least 5 feet of space, while other parts of the city are off-limits. Some cities allow tents, he said, and some only allow sleeping bags.

Spalding said the police department is prepared to bring a draft ordinance based on examples from other cities to the City Council.

"However, the hard part of this one, of course, is who is going to make certain decisions as to what areas are off-limits, and what areas would we allow someone to sleep," the police chief said.

An expulsion zone ordinance — also referred to as an exclusion zone — is an enforcement tool designed to address people who repeatedly commit lower-level violations in particular parts of the city.

Under the ordinance, people who commit a number of these types of crimes in the same area would be temporarily excluded.

Similar ordinances have been approved in Lincoln City, Salem, Bend and Medford.

Depending on the city, the expulsion can range from 90 days to six months, Spalding said. More serious crimes, like sex offenses or assault, would result in immediate expulsion.

Downtown, Ninth Street Park and the Astoria Riverwalk are examples of places where people might be excluded.

"It's not something that we as a police department can arbitrarily pick an area," Spalding said. "It will



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Quality of life issues are a concern in Astoria.

always be based on some data that seems to indicate that there is a higher-than-usual level of negative activity that's occurring in a particular area that we feel we need to address."

The police chief said simply arresting or citing people doesn't always alter behavior. If expelled by the court, people would be subject to trespass if they return.

The City Council also supported converting the police department's part-time community service officer position into a role that handles quality of life issues and homelessness.

Astoria police and Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, Clatsop County's mental health and substance abuse treatment provider, are in the initial stages of developing a program that would embed a clinical staffer in the police department.

The officer position could work directly with that clinician and handle some crisis calls together in an effort to be more proactive than reactive, Spalding said.

"Right now, there's not the capacity within the police department to be able to fully engage with the social service agencies," City Manager Brett Estes said. "And when the social service agencies are stepping up and adding more positions to partner with us, we're needing someone on our receiving end to be able to move forward with that."

Other options supported by the council included ordinances to handle RVs, aggressive panhandling and abandoned grocery carts.

The City Council also supported the police department's work in creating a program where people who commit lower-level offenses would be diverted from the court to a support group where they can do community service in lieu of paying fines.

Mayor Bruce Jones said it is critical to identify parts of the city where people cannot camp, like the Garden of Surging Waves near City Hall and the Astoria Nordic Heritage Park under construction off Marine Drive.

"It's great to find that if you search far and wide there are some cities that have been able to find some workarounds and some ways to at least regain some of their public spaces and some quality of life for their community despite what the state Legislature has done and despite what the courts have ruled," he said.

City Councilor Joan Herman supported the prioritization of options, but also shared a sense of frustration.

"I feel small communities, cities, are pretty much being left to fit the bill for these huge societal problems, both literally and figuratively," she said.

While City Councilor Roger Rocka supported some of the ideas, he ques-

tioned whether they were the best step forward.

"This seems to me like we're playing from behind," he said. "It just seems to me that if we can focus our efforts on establishing a place where people can camp and park — where we would have sanitary facilities, restrooms, staffing with the help of our social service agencies so that it would be safe for the women that are escaping from abusive relationships and so on — then that would eliminate so many of the problems we're trying to deal with on an individual basis."

'Survive or thrive'

Social services advocates echoed Rocka's comments.

Teresa Barnes, the executive director of the Astoria Warming Center, and Billie Delaney, the warming center's coordinator, took issue with the tone of the work session and ideas like an expulsion zone ordinance.

"They talk about people not feeling safe, and it wasn't the people who are living in their cars, it wasn't the people who are actively fleeing domestic violence, and don't have anywhere to be to be safe," Barnes told The Astorian. "It was the people who have to witness people's broken down RVs or walk by people who are living on the sidewalk not feeling safe."

Barnes and Delaney said they felt like the tone was a departure from efforts of the city's homelessness solutions task force, which they say has acknowledged that criminalizing homelessness is ineffective and that there is a need for more shelter space.

"When the problem that they're trying to address is visibility of unhoused people instead of the fact that people are without housing, then you are focusing on criminalizing homelessness and not solving it," Delaney said. "Because the focus is to make those people less visible, not get them the resources they might need to survive or thrive."

Child care: 'This really saddens me that it's come to this'

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"I've always emphasized that this is a top priority for me to maintain the service. And it pains me to say this now, but I think we're at that point where it's unsustainable for the city to continue to provide the service. Especially when this important service is coming at the expense of other equally, or more important, community health programs, especially those for our youth that would benefit so many more people."

"I hate having to make that choice. It's a terrible choice to have to make, but I don't see any way out of it."

The city opened the day care a decade ago because of the need for child care in the community, and it remains one of the few of its size that provides care for infants.

The center, formerly known as Lil' Sprouts Academy, relies heavily on lower-paid, part-time labor, which has been especially challenging to hire and retain during the coronavirus pandemic. It has also continued to pull resources away from other services the parks department offers.

In an attempt to make operations more sustainable, the city requested proposals in October from parties interested in forming a public-private partnership. There were no responses by the December deadline, but in the days following, an interested group approached the city and formed into the nonprofit Clatsop Promise.

Trudy Van Dusen Citovic, a co-owner of Van Dusen Beverages who serves on the Clatsop Community College Board, was one of the people behind the nonprofit. She had hoped that through a partnership, the nonprofit could focus on raising funds to operate while the city continued to own and maintain the

facility. However, the nonprofit stepped back after realizing the plan was not financially viable. Citovic told The Astorian in January that even with the assistance the city was willing to provide on rent, the nonprofit estimated the child care program would need an additional \$300,000 to \$400,000 per year.

Since October, Jonah Dart-McLean, the city's parks director, said the parks department lost more staff, which forced the city to close a prekindergarten classroom that served the day care's oldest children in November.

Dart-McLean told the City Council on Wednesday that the parks department's operations manager, recreation coordinator and administrative assistant all work to provide support to child care as needed.

"We are really down to a critical threshold as far as our staffing is concerned where it's an hour-by-hour question of how we'll need to move staff members or the children from different rooms in order to have sufficient care and oversight during the day," Dart-McLean said.

While the city plans to move away from directly providing child care, it will continue to focus on ways to provide support to other potential providers.

City Councilor Tom Brownson said that during his time on the City Council he has watched the parks department struggle to find new ways to fund all of its activities.

"I think there has to be a bigger solution for this. We're just too small to continue to take this on," he said. "It's always been a struggle, and it's just not going to get any easier."

"This really saddens me that it's come to this."

Fitzpatrick: Hopes to hear input, concerns from people

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"I love Astoria," Fitzpatrick said. "My heart is here."

He said he started attending City Council meetings regularly in 2003. From then, his involvement in the city grew, leading to his appointment to the Planning Commission in 2013. He has served as the commission's president and vice president.

Fitzpatrick is a founding member of the Friends of the Astoria Armory and the founding president of the Kiwanis Club of Warrenton.

He sees his years of civic engagement as training for being mayor.

"I had thought about running for City Council, if that came first, but the people that ran, I supported," he said. "I didn't feel like I needed to run against these people."

Instead, he threw his support behind them. Fitzpatrick said he also supported former Mayor Arline LaMear and Jones during their mayoral campaigns.

After hearing about

Jones' decision — and being urged by several people to run — Fitzpatrick decided it was time to pursue the role.

If elected, he said he wants to make progress on issues such as housing and child care.

One of the biggest questions before the City Council is a workforce housing proposal at Heritage Square that would include units for people undergoing mental health and substance abuse treatment. The project has drawn support in the community and on the City Council, but also a lot of criticism.

While Fitzpatrick has publicly raised questions about the proposal, he said he does not plan to base his campaign on the issue.

"That is not why I'm running," Fitzpatrick said, pointing toward Heritage Square.

However, he said his over 40 years working in the housing industry gives him perspective. He has owned over 100 rentals in Astoria and has rented to more than

1,000 people, he said.

"And I have provided housing to people with mental health and addiction issues since 1983," he added. "So, I am familiar with the unique situation that providing housing to these people creates."

While Fitzpatrick does not know child care like he knows housing, he is eager to get a better handle on the barriers many providers have faced.

He said the issue is close to his heart, and one he struggled with as a single father for several years.

The city has opted to close Sprouts Learning Center, the city-run day care, at the end of June because of staffing and financial challenges. The closure is a significant blow to parents because child care options remain scarce.

By announcing his intent to run early, Fitzpatrick said he hopes to hear input and concerns from people in the community so he is better informed on city issues by the November election.

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