

Heritage Square: Vote represents a big step forward

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which is that people that can't even dream of ever owning their own house will never be able to. They'll be paying too much rent wherever they are."

Over the next several weeks, Edlen & Co. and the city plan to host a series of open houses to collect public input and refine the concept. The developer will also prepare an application for the government financing needed to launch the project, which is due by late April.

The project faces several hurdles — both financial and political — before the city makes a final decision. In a last-minute amendment to the negotiating agreement, the city or the developer can terminate the talks at any time before a disposition and development agreement is finalized.

The vote on Tuesday, however, represents a significant step forward.

'We need this housing'

The empty pit at Heritage Square left from when the foundation of the old Safeway collapsed after heavy rains in 2010 has long been an eyesore downtown. Over the years, the city had discussed a plaza to enhance the Garden of Surging Waves and a mixed-use project with a new library and housing.

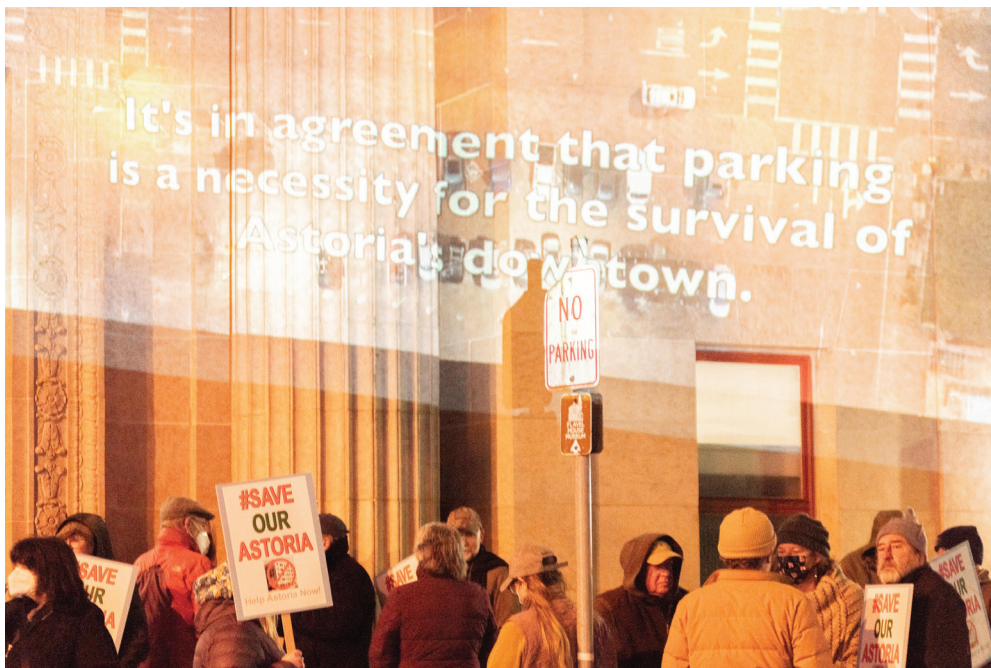
The City Council made housing at Heritage Square a policy goal in 2017. Last year, the council called for workforce housing and invited proposals from developers.

"I believe as we move forward with the negotiations with Edlen, we will be able to deal with some of the issues that people are most afraid of," said City Councilor Roger Rocka, who made the motion to enter into the agreement with the developer. "I don't believe that we should make our decisions based on social media. I believe we should make our decision based on what we believe is the right thing to do. We need this housing. The people who work here need this housing."

"I think five years from now, we will all be looking back at this project and saying, 'I don't know why we were ever afraid of it. We are proud of it. This is just what our city needed.'"

City Councilor Joan Herman, who represents the downtown ward that covers Heritage Square, spoke out against the way some opponents have portrayed the project and the City Council's actions, particularly on social media.

"I appreciate the strong feelings this issue has caused in our community," Herman said. "I'm very distressed, though, by the dissension, some of which I



Lydia Ely/The Astorian
People gathered in front of City Hall on Tuesday night in a demonstration against a workforce housing project at Heritage Square.

'THIS MONSTROSITY OF A PROJECT WILL NOT SOLVE THE COUNTY'S HOUSING CRISIS.'

Cindy Price | Planning Commission member

believe has been done deliberately, both on social media and at large. And there has been a great amount of misinformation and fear-mongering — some of it deliberate, in my opinion — by members of our community who should know better.

"It's not befitting the town that we all love."

City Councilor Tom Brownson, who in January had voted to move forward with Edlen & Co.'s outline, voted "no" on entering into the negotiating agreement. He wanted to pause the process to give the city time to try to get buy-in and understanding from neighbors who oppose the project.

Brownson also raised concerns about the mental health component involving Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, Clatsop County's mental health and substance abuse treatment provider. He questioned whether the agency, which is partnering with Edlen, could properly manage the supportive housing units.

"I'm not convinced that placing it as proposed wouldn't lead to more problems than it solves," he said.

City Councilor Tom Hilton, who voted against entering into the agreement with the developer, said the mental health component and the public input on the project left him torn.

"Torn for the compassion I have for my community, and torn for the desire for our community to thrive," he said.

Hilton, who grew up in Uniontown, reflected on the changes he has seen in Astoria. While change is inevitable, he said, it is important that the community evaluates how to move forward.

'Save Our Astoria'

Before the City Council met, people opposed to the housing project filled the sidewalk outside of City Hall, many waving "#Save Our Astoria" signs.

Save Our Astoria, the group that organized the demonstration, created a Facebook page this month to rally the community about "unhealthy development."

Over the past few weeks, critics of the Edlen & Co. outline have taken to social media and have described the project in increasingly disparaging terms.

One memo being circulated — called "The Heart of Downtown Astoria," drafted by Cindy Price, who serves on the Planning Commission — includes a section on the potential impact to the downtown core.

The memo claims that concentrating lower-income and mental-health housing would do nothing but degrade the surrounding business district. It questions the effect of the Merwyn Apartments, the Astoria Warming Center, a LiFE-Boat Services drop-in center and a Helping Hands facility in Uniontown on police and nearby businesses.

"If you build it," the memo said, "they will come."

Price, who used to represent downtown on the City Council, is one of the most active critics of the Edlen & Co. outline on social media.

Back in 2016, Price was part of a 3-2 vote by the City

Council against advancing a mixed-use project with a new library and housing at Heritage Square.

In 2017, Price was part of the City Council when the council made housing at Heritage Square a policy goal.

In December, before the Edlen & Co. outline was publicly released, Price urged the Planning Commission to delay the code changes for housing at Heritage Square, citing concerns about parking. She was the dissenter in a 4-1 vote for an amendment to the development code that would move multifamily housing downtown from conditional use to permitted use.

On her Facebook page, Price has said she favors a small number of market-rate townhomes, row houses or condos at Heritage Square, with open space leading to the Garden of Surging Waves and some public parking. On Facebook and Nextdoor, she has raised a series of objections about the Edlen & Co. outline and suggested other locations in Astoria and Warrenton for housing projects.

"This monstrosity of a project will not solve the county's housing crisis," Price said in a Facebook post over the weekend. "There will be as many or more people on Astoria's streets, in dilapidated vans, and on the Riverwalk as there are now, and we'll have a monstrosity in the center of downtown."

In response to a comment from a reader who hoped another stalemate would not leave the empty pit at Heritage Square for another decade, Price stated, "Agreed. And yet 10 more years of the hole would be better than this project. As is, at least there is parking for businesses."

Day care: County has lost over half of its licensed child care capacity since 2017

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She said navigating changing regulations and staffing challenges have taken its toll. She increased pay in an effort to attract and retain workers.

Williams said she went from making a living from the day care to draining her savings and using her husband's income to keep the facility afloat.

As virus restrictions lessened, Williams said she was able to bring back more staff and children. However, uncertainties around staffing prevented her from being able to maintain and expand the number of children served.

While hiring and retaining quality employees has always been challenging, Williams said, it became worse during the pandemic.

Williams, who has been working in child care for 20 years, recalled when she purchased the Seaside property with her husband nearly a decade ago. She had been running her business out of her home, but decided to expand to meet the need.

The building was dilapidated and she and her husband used reclaimed items to build out the facility on a tight budget.

"We worked for nine months and created this amazing space," she said. "It is such a successful business if you can get the qualified teachers and keep them. That's what the problem is, and it's even worse now."

The closure of Mrs. Tami's Daycare & Pre-

school and Sprouts Learning Center are considerable blows to child care in Clatsop County. Since 2017, the county has lost over half of its licensed child care capacity — more than 1,000 slots at licensed care centers, care homes and family homes. Both facilities offer care for infants, which is particularly difficult to find.

Melissa Westley, who owns Coast Kids Academy in Warrenton, had recently informed parents that she would close its infant room after determining it was not profitable.

But Westley shifted gears after hearing the news about the other two day cares.

"When we became aware that the second day care was closing, we just thought it would be a good idea for the community to just keep it open," she said.

Westley bought Coast Kids Academy, formerly Soar With Us, a year ago. The center serves nearly 40 children, which includes eight slots for infants, but Westley said she had trouble filling the infant slots. When a teacher announced his plans to leave, she determined ending the service was her best option. He has since decided to stay.

After posting her decision to keep the infant room open on Facebook, Westley said nearly all the infant slots were filled within a day.

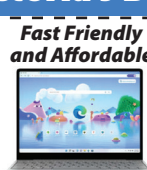
Most families are coming from Mrs. Tami's Daycare & Preschool and Sprouts Learning Center, she said.

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Hotel: 'The city is working with Hollander'

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The city appealed the decision to the Oregon Court of Appeals in an effort to uphold the city's prerogative to interpret its own code reasonably.

The court affirmed the state's decision.

In the meantime, the city worked on amending the code to guide future projects.

City staff told the City Council earlier this month that the code amendments still leave room for interpretation, allowing the city to reasonably interpret the code.

"It is not necessarily very black-and-white," Megan Leatherman, the city's community development director, said. "But overall, we think with all the changes that it does address their concerns."

Mark Hollander's proposed Fairfield Inn and Suites — a four-story, 66-room Marriott-brand hotel at the base of Second Street — was approved in 2018.

Hollander requested a

one-year extension on his permits in April 2020, citing economic hardship during the coronavirus pandemic.

The City Council denied the request, arguing Hollander had done nothing to advance the project. The city also questioned his claim that the pandemic was the reason for the delay.

The city said the code asked applicants to show why economic conditions prevented them from making an effort to proceed with a project.

However, the appeals board argued that, as written, the city could only consider economic conditions that existed at the time of the request for a permit extension.

"The city is working with Hollander on the possibility of approving a modified design for the building that I hope will please a few folks, but probably not everybody," City Attorney Blair Henningsgaard said in an email.

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