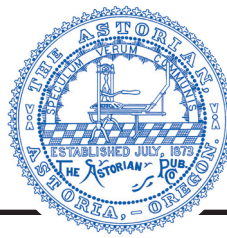


# OPINION



# the Astorian

editor@dailyastorian.com

Founded in 1873

**KARI BORGEN**  
Publisher

**DERRICK DePLEDGE**  
Editor

**SHANNON ARLINT**  
Circulation Manager

**JOHN D. BRUIJN**  
Production Manager

**CARL EARL**  
Systems Manager

## BEHIND THE NEWS

# ‘Everybody wants somewhere to live’

When Astoria revealed a potential workforce housing project at Heritage Square in January, one component stood out.

Edlen & Co., a Portland-based developer, pitched workforce housing for lower-wage workers and a partnership with Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare on supportive housing for people struggling with mental health and drug and alcohol abuse and facing homelessness.

Mental health was not part of the conversation last fall when the City Council called for workforce housing at Heritage Square and invited developers to submit ideas.

The micro units envisioned at Heritage Square could help provide a more stable path from treatment to recovery for people at 30% of area median income — \$15,330 a year using 2021 figures. The partnership would also reduce the income average for all the housing units, allowing Edlen & Co.

to offer a broader income range for the workforce units while remaining eligible for the government financial help necessary for the project.

Any housing at Heritage Square was bound to draw some opposition, but the mental health component of the Edlen & Co. outline has animated the campaign against the project.

City Councilor Tom Brownson and City Councilor Tom Hilton, who on Tuesday night voted against an exclusive negotiating agreement with Edlen & Co., cited concerns about Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare’s role as among their reasons.

The mental health component will likely be among the most scrutinized elements of the project at open houses to gather public input in the coming weeks.

“It’s just so normal for people to be fearful of something that’s change in general,” Neal Rotman, the housing services manager at Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, said.

The agency has been looking for housing opportunities in Clatsop County. A small footprint has started to take shape: A sober living duplex in Warrenton; a few supportive housing units and a handful of transitional housing beds in Seaside; a house in Astoria for women and children.

Heritage Square — at 33 micro units with support services — would be an ambitious expansion.

In an interview, Rotman talked about the importance of housing to the agency’s mission and his thoughts about some of the criticism that has surfaced about the project.

**Q: How does housing fit within Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare’s mission to provide mental health and drug and alcohol abuse treatment?**

**A:** There’s been studies over 20 years now related to the Housing First model. The studies show us that people who are homeless don’t do well in taking care of their physical, the physiology or their behavioral health needs.

For us at CBH, our mission is to reach as many people as possible, to help them with their behavioral health concerns, whether it be substance use disorder type stuff or the mental health issues that they may be facing. And as long as we have a population of individuals who are homeless, trying to engage them — with serious engagement — is extremely difficult.

When you’re worrying about, where am I going to eat? Where am I going to spend the night? Where am I going to go to the bathroom, actually, in many cases?

To focus on getting to an appointment, following up with a case manager or a therapist or some type of substance use program in general, is extremely difficult for people.



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

**Neal Rotman is the housing services manager at Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare.**

So really, it’s partially wanting to do what our mission is, which is to serve the Clatsop community with behavioral health services, and not being able to be able to do that with a moderate amount of the population.

**Q: The housing crunch in Clatsop County hits across income ranges. How does the lack of rental housing options, in particular, create barriers for people looking to emerge from treatment into recovery?**

**A:** Everybody wants their own place, I mean that’s just a given. Everybody wants somewhere to live, they want something to call home.

If you’re currently on any form of disability, you’re earning between \$780 to maybe \$1,300, \$1,400 a month. We know with the current housing stock to rent a studio or a one-bedroom in Astoria or even, move down the coast a little bit, you’re looking at anywhere from \$800 to \$1,400 for just a mildly priced unit.

If your income is in that \$1,000 range, you cannot afford to rent a unit. So you’re left to homelessness or you’re forced to rent a unit and then have nothing else for anything else in your life, including food.

Even on SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits and things like that, you’re still only going to get about \$120 a month ...

The reality is you just can’t afford to compete with the housing market when your income is low.

Now, for folks who have had some kind of mental health, behavioral health — they may have lost a position during their behavioral health crisis, they may have engaged in some behaviors with their family or other support systems — and so even staying with family may become problematic.

But to get into that job that you want to get, trying to get there without showering, without taking care of yourself, doing laundry on a regular basis, can be very difficult.

So that’s why our folks really struggle.

**Q: The supportive housing units at Heritage Square are still in the concept stage, but can you give us some idea of the people who would benefit most from these types of micro units?**

**A:** If we are successful — which we’re really trying to get funding from multiple streams, one of those is permanent supportive housing.

In order to get the housing vouchers through that program with the state, you have to be part of coordinated access (for entry into the local homeless services system). Clatsop Community Action oversees coordinated

access for this county.

So our folks would be like any other individual, they’re going to have to get into that queue of coordinated access, which means — who this could help — is pretty much anyone who is in that 30% AMI (area median income) category.

**Q: Over the past few years, Astoria has struggled with how to respond to some of the increasingly visible bad behavior downtown and near the Astoria Riverwalk. Some of this behavior is related to homelessness, mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse. What do you say to people who are concerned that the supportive housing units at Heritage Square would attract more bad behavior downtown?**

**A:** I think there’s this misnomer that any type of affordable housing project is going to attract a bad element, just because you’re talking about a lower economic situation for people.

The reality is — I’ve been part of a number of supportive housing programs, and I’ve never seen people congregating, because it’s someone’s home.

So the difference between a shelter or something of that nature, or a navigation center ... that’s quite different from permanent supportive housing, in the sense that these are people’s homes.

People aren’t going to get any type of resource coming to this supportive housing, because unless they’re a tenant — unless they’ve gone through the housing authority, Clatsop Community Action — it’s not an entry point.

So hanging out in front of a supportive housing program is not going to get you access, it’s not going to get you services. Like anywhere else in town where someone’s congregating or whatever and having some kind of behavioral health issue, it may get a crisis program to come out and talk to them, but it’s not going to get you a bed for the night. It’s not going to get you the things you want long term.

I don’t really see the two connecting that way, as compared to a shelter or some other type of program.

**Q: We’ve been struck by some of the language used by critics of the outline at Heritage Square: “Monstrosity,” “Unhealthy development,” “If you build it, they will come,” “The hole isn’t that bad.” What are your thoughts on some of the criticism?**

**A:** Everybody wants the best for their community. Any idea that something’s going to take away from what you currently have — and some of the criticism I see is we’ll lose some parking, this was originally planned out to be a public space.

I think the design that Edlen and (architect) Stuart Emmons have put together is trying to incorporate all of that together, with a community space honoring the Garden of Surging Waves.

We’re trying to make it designed so there is still some parking available, so that we’re not going to eat up any more of a limited resource downtown as far as parking.

So when I hear “monstrosity,” I can’t really relate to that. Because, to me, it’s really well designed. And if people really wanted to look at the design and understand, which I’m hoping we’ll get opportunities to do, they’ll see that this actually will beautify downtown in many ways.

In our discussions, we’ve talked about how do we make Surging Waves even more of a prominent point and a place where people want to go and look? And I think by incorporating the community space in there, as well, is a big effort to do that.

We’re also trying to figure out, can we put child care on something like this, because that’s needed downtown as well. So that, again, adding another service to the community that will make people gravitate there and use it.

*Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**Nix**

**R**e: “A reflection of Astoria’s policy values” (The Astorian, Feb. 19): Nix on developing Heritage Square into workforce housing by Edlen & Co.

The city of Astoria and the taxpayers should not be in the business of subsidizing housing for local enterprises to accommodate their employees. Instead of a downtown location, encourage the apartment projects in the works near Tongue Point, Uppertown and Uniontown.

Astoria needs open space downtown for all kinds of gatherings. At least two presidents have made remarks outdoors in our city. The space can be a starting point for events or outside concerts. The Astoria Sunday Market is a huge activity for locals and visitors, who also visit the shops in town.

Parking is needed downtown. Even with Heritage Square available now, try to find a place to park when the Liberty Theatre or Fort George Brewery has an event, or even on a holiday weekend. And like it or not, many of the potential residents of this new housing will have cars.

This project will have long-term negative effects on our enjoyment of open space in the city. How about taking a vote? The city belongs to all of us.

MIKE GREEN  
Astoria

As a vendor at the Astoria Sunday Market for eight years, here is what I have observed. The Oregon Coast is world famous. People fly into Portland, rent a car and come visit our coast. They start their journey in Astoria!

On Sunday mornings, I have met people from all over the world! They spend money here, so let’s continue to capitalize on this by enhancing their experience while they are here. Let’s develop a city with open space and a green lawn, where visitors and residents can walk around and breathe!

During the week, the adjacent parking lot is essential for visitors and shoppers and workers. Then on Sunday, it turns into this wonderful marketplace — where several hundred-small business people can sell their handmade goods, local farmers can sell their healthy produce and thousands of people can eat delicious food and listen to music. All while they enjoy our beautiful city and marketplace and spend money.

Fill in the hole and landscape it to enhance the Chinese garden. It is called Heritage Square, not apartment building square. Let’s celebrate our unique heritages with respect and beauty and they will come!

TED MESSING  
Astoria

## Intolerant reaction

**O**verlooked

In all this talk about what to do with Heritage Square, I am very concerned that one of this city’s best and greatest economic draws is being overlooked.

**T**he point of view represented in the lead article “Astoria looks at menu of options to address quality of life concerns” (Feb. 19) is incredibly offensive. Whose quality of life are we concerned about?

STAR TRIBUNE  
S&K  
Cagle.com

## OUR KIDS HAVE A READING PROBLEM:



## THEY WANT TO.



Obviously not those who are marginalized, vulnerable and already suffering from a lack of stable housing.

We have the highest rate of homelessness per capita in the state. This is not an issue we can reactively criminalize our way out of. Suggesting that citizens who have to witness others’ struggle degrades their quality of life is a point of view of privilege and intolerance.

Homelessness is directly related to a shortage of affordable housing and social services. Rather than implementing an “out of sight, out of mind” approach, how about not arbitrarily limiting the Astoria Warming Center’s days of operation and number of beds?

Why don’t we allow shelters as an out-

right use, instead of a provisional use, in this city? Why do we think that our quality of life matters more than theirs?

This article, coupled with the outright fear-mongering and campaign of misinformation led by a city planning commissioner against the proposed supportive and affordable housing development at Heritage Square, casts this city as incredibly intolerant and heartless.

I, for one, stand with Billie Delaney of the Astoria Warming Center on this issue. I am concerned about the quality of life of all citizens, housed or unhoused, struggling or comfortable. We are better than this short-sighted, intolerant reaction.

LAURA JACKSON  
Astoria