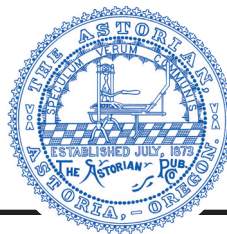


OPINION



the Astorian

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BEHIND THE NEWS

'There's no cookie-cutter approach to homelessness'

Kenny Hansen has a street-level view of the changes in Astoria over his 33 years as a police officer.

For the past several years, he has served as the police department's homeless liaison, building trust and relationships out on patrol.

While there are success stories, homelessness has become more visible downtown and the city is under increasing pressure to take action.

"I think it's important to let the community know that as a city, a police department, we are doing everything we can within our power," said Hansen, a detective. "I totally understand the frustration. I have experienced some of the frustration on a personal level myself.

"I can totally relate to where the community is coming from."

But Hansen knows it can be a slow, uneven process.

"We are very open to suggestions if the community has suggestions. We are very open to listening, because we're looking for answers ourselves," he said.

"And in a broader term, the state, the country, is looking for answers, because it's not unique to just Astoria, Clatsop County. If you look around, it's the entire country."

In an interview, Hansen discussed what he has learned about homelessness, the challenge of responding to bad behavior downtown and some of the tools the city is exploring to address quality of life concerns.

Q: As the homeless liaison officer, what have you learned about homelessness that you did not know before?

A: I learned that everyone has their own story.

Everyone has a reason behind where they're at today. Some are similar. Some are not so similar.

I look at each person as their own book. And in their book, they have different chapters in their lives.

I look at each situation on an individual basis. There's no cookie-cutter approach to homelessness.

Q: Over the past several years,



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Kenny Hansen is a detective with the Astoria Police Department.

we have increasingly seen homeless camps move from the woods and along the Astoria Riverwalk to downtown. What is your perception of how the city's homeless population has changed?

A: They were up in the woods for some time, and then, a couple years ago, we made an effort to move them from the woods because of issues and things like that that were happening up there.

So when that happened, it displaced them, to where then they're moving into the downtown area and other locations.

I think that was unforeseen at the time — not realizing what was going to happen, what it was going to be like.

Because it's something we've never experienced before in this community. It's something new. Today, even, we're still learning as we go along.

We learned what works, what doesn't work, and always, always open to trying new ideas.

Q: The count hasn't been exact, but do you sense it's larger than it was

a few years ago?

A: I think it is larger.

And that's based on seeing more people in RVs, more people in regular vehicles, and just more people camping in general.

Q: Police have struggled to respond to bad behavior downtown. Some of this behavior is linked to homelessness, mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse. What do you say to business owners and residents who are frustrated by what they see?

A: I try and explain to them that we're doing everything we can.

In some situations, we're only able to do certain things that the law allows us to do. We work with the person or people who are causing problems downtown to try and help them understand their behavior is not acceptable and offer them resources, offer them help to try and turn their behavior around.

Q: It seems the approach Astoria police have taken to this issue has diffused a lot of the challenges that

we have seen in other cities. Is this a deliberate approach?

A: I think what we're doing is a deliberate approach, because we've seen what works and doesn't work in other cities.

Like anything, we try and take the things that work and maybe tweak them around a little bit to fit our community and what would work there.

Q: The city is looking at several tools to address quality of life concerns. One option would be to temporarily exclude people who have repeatedly committed crimes or engaged in bad behavior from the Garden of Surging Waves, the Riverwalk and other places. From a police perspective, how do you think this would play out?

A: I think it would play out in a positive way.

A lot of the people we deal with in like the Garden of Surging Waves area, I've noticed that they have lacked structure maybe growing up — they never had it, or they have lost it, which has led to them having a feeling of maybe they can do whatever they want to do with no accountability.

I think with structure — like the exclusion zone — it's kind of like giving them a timeout. You behaved this way so many times, so at this point you cannot come back here for this amount of time.

So with their actions come consequences and, hopefully, they can correct their behavior. And during that exclusion time they can jump into getting some resources for what caused their behavior and things like that.

That's something that I always look at: What's going to correct this behavior on a permanent basis? Not what's going to fix it for this moment. I look at the long term.

I try to get people connected with treatment, mental health, things like that. I am probably one of the biggest advocates of the crisis response team from Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare. I probably use them more than most of our other officers. They're a great resource to get people into their system and things like that.

Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Location, location, location

Location, location, location. We can all agree that for the safety and resilience of our community, it is essential that our critical infrastructure be located safely outside the tsunami inundation zone.

Back in the 1950s, when the Gearhart fire station was built, less was known about the unique hazards and risks we face on the Oregon Coast from earthquakes and tsunamis. We now find ourselves with a big problem — the current fire station sits squarely in the inundation zone of even a small tsunami.

Dedicated citizens of Gearhart have come together and carefully considered numerous possible locations for a new, resilient fire and police station. We are fortunate to have a location available at the highest elevation of all the proposed sites.

A station located on this high ground will likely survive all but the largest tsunamis. As an added bonus, the land does not have to be purchased; it is being given to the city, helping to lessen the overall cost of the project.

We can make our families safer and more protected when we come together and vote "yes" on Measure 4-213 for a new fire and police station in Gearhart.

ERIC HALPERIN
Gearhart



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Very happy

Iwas very happy to read in the newspaper that our current Warrenton and Hammond area representative on the Clatsop County Board of Commissioners, Mark Kujala, is asking to be reelected in our May election ("Election lineup set for May," March 10).

Our Warrenton and Hammond area is grouped with a small slice of Astoria in the county representation districts, but the vast majority of the population of that voting district reside west of Youngs Bay.

Mark has always tried to do his absolute best for our people, and for him to be chosen as the county commission chairman acknowledges that the other commissioners believe he is doing a good job.

I ask for you to please vote for Mark in the May election so he may continue to represent our interests.

RICK NEWTON
Warrenton

Do the right thing

As a result of Jack Zimmerman and Harold Gable, the community of Gearhart was robbed of the opportunity to pass the bond to finance the fire and police station in November. When the judge reviewed their objections to the ballot language, not one argument was deemed legitimate.

Gearhart cannot continue to delay critical infrastructure in our community. Because of this delay, we are looking at increased construction costs and bond interest rates. Can you trust Gable and Zimmerman on this issue?

The state provides the Oregon Property Tax Deferral for Disabled and Senior Citizens program, which allows you to delay paying property taxes on your residence. I encourage anyone 62 years or older, disabled and receiving, or eligible to receive, Social Security Disability Insurance, to

explore this option if the increase cost is an impediment to voting "yes."

What Gearhart will be faced with if you do not vote in favor of Measure 4-213 is further increased costs. If we do not have a fire station equipped to meet the key standards of our various homeowner insurance companies — guess what? We can join the communities who are unable to insure their homes or pay excessive premiums.

The lives of our volunteer first responders save may be your own, or that of a loved one. Do the right thing — support the safety of our community. Vote "yes."

SHEILA NOLAN
Gearhart

Clearing the streets

The best way to clear our downtown streets of the disturbing sight of the homeless is ... to house the homeless.

When homeless, you can only focus on immediate needs: On finding food, tonight's shelter and hygiene. Housing provides, instead, the stability one needs to focus on and address the problems that led to your homelessness in the first place — unemployment and physical, mental and addictive health issues. It takes time. But studies show that it works.

Studies have also shown that housing the homeless reduces such public costs as emergency room visits, in-patient hospitalizations, emergency shelter costs and emergency mental health and police responses.

Why not let Astoria be known for the beauty of its riverfront, not the distraction of its homeless population. The downtown housing project under consideration is a good deal financially, and will address multiple issues. So let's do it!

JULIE SNYDER
Astoria