

Heritage Square: Hundreds signed petitions against project

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City Councilor Roger Rocka recognized John Southgate, the city's consultant, and Edlen & Co. for their effort in trying to help the city fill the empty pit at Heritage Square, a site that has proven difficult and expensive to redevelop.

"I think you brought us exactly what we asked for, and more. To me, this project is one that solved a number of the city's problems at once," Rocka said. "There are people who have very legitimate concerns about this project at Heritage Square. But there's also a lot of opposition based on the kind of stuff that feeds on itself on social media.

"It's as if people are imagining some kind of zombie movie where there would be all these ... mentally deranged people wandering the streets of downtown, which is exactly the opposite of what this project would accomplish."

Rocka expressed particular concern over the potential for negative political campaigning and people running for City Council in the November election solely based on stopping the project. "And that's fine, except if that's the only thing they care about, I don't think we have a very good City Council going forward because there are lots of other things that council has to do besides this project," he said. "And it kind of tears the city apart."

Jones, Rocka and City Councilor Joan Herman, who had voted to negotiate with Edlen & Co. on the details of the project, are not running for reelection in November.

Aside from having "sticker shock," Herman said she could no longer support the project in light of community opposition. She said she also did not want the city to deplete urban renewal funds downtown for one project.

"It's too much for our small community to bear," Herman said. "Even if there were not a significant opposition to the site among a segment of the population.

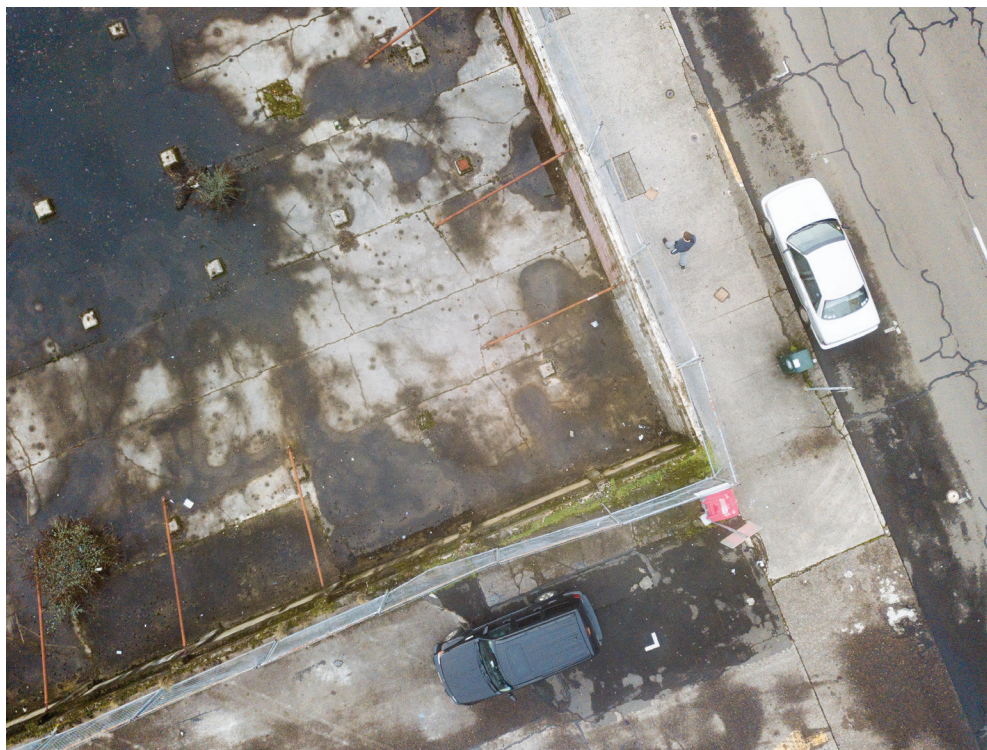
"The Heritage Square site, I still believe, is an appropriate site for that. But in light of the community opposition, I can no longer support putting our proposal there, and I'm saddened about that. I truly believe it would have been an attractive development. It would have been vibrant. It would not have been out of scale for our downtown community."

City Councilor Tom Brownson had voted against moving forward with the project in February after citing concerns about the mental health component involving Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare. He said he is looking forward to seeing how the county proceeds with affordable housing. "I think we need the time to really let the dust settle here," he said.

City Councilor Tom Hilton, who had voted against the proposal in January and February, urged the public to continue to rally together to create opportunity at Heritage Square.

"I said this at the beginning, is that it will bring our community out," Hilton said. "And it brought our community out in a way which showed the passion of the people that live here, and the passion of the people they elected to represent them.

"There is no question we experience and we are facing housing shortages and crises. And there's no question that our citizens that have mental health concerns need a place to feel safe and exist. I think, again, what this has done is brought our community together."



The empty pit at Heritage Square is shown from above.

Lydia Ely/The Astorian

'THE HERITAGE SQUARE SITE, I STILL BELIEVE, IS AN APPROPRIATE SITE FOR THAT. BUT IN LIGHT OF THE COMMUNITY OPPOSITION, I CAN NO LONGER SUPPORT PUTTING OUR PROPOSAL THERE, AND I'M SADDENED ABOUT THAT. I TRULY BELIEVE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN AN ATTRACTIVE DEVELOPMENT. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN VIBRANT. IT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN OUT OF SCALE FOR OUR DOWNTOWN COMMUNITY.'

Joan Herman | Astoria city councilor

Vocal opposition

While the ending was abrupt, the discussion played out at City Hall for nearly six months.

Last October, the City Council called for workforce housing at Heritage Square and invited developers to submit proposals.

Edlen & Co. was one of two developers to show interest. A panel of city leaders appointed by Jones privately reviewed the proposals and recommended Edlen & Co.

In January, the City Council — acting as the Astoria Development Commission — voted to 4 to 1 to recommend the city enter into an exclusive negotiating agreement with the developer.

But criticism of the project, fueled on social media, quickly grew.

Dozens of opponents waving #Save Our Astoria signs gathered outside of City Hall in late February to demand a pause. The City Council voted 3 to 2 to enter into an exclusive negotiating agreement with Edlen & Co. after both sides agreed they could back out at any time.

Critics sought to undermine every aspect of the proposal. Several prominent business leaders urged the city to tailor the housing to higher-income workers at places such as Fort George Brewery and Buoy Beer Co., which are part of the Clatsop Enterprise Zone. The

Astoria Senior Center, across the street from Heritage Square, raised the potential loss of parking and possible safety risks for seniors. Some of the people involved in supporting the Garden of Surging Waves a decade ago appealed to the city to hold out for a plaza or park.

The loudest criticism, however, was directed at Edlen & Co.'s collaboration with Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare on the mental health component.

Residents and several business owners claimed the project would draw more homeless people and increase the behavioral problems and criminal activity that many believe is deteriorating downtown.

Hundreds of people signed petitions against the project.

Two open houses at the Astoria Armory in March gave the public more opportunity to provide feedback to Edlen & Co., Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare and the city, but opposition had hardened.

In response to some of the feedback over the past few months, Edlen & Co.'s latest concept would have preserved a smaller city parking lot at 11th and Exchange streets across from the senior center and created a large plaza along Duane Street next to the Garden of Surging Waves. The changes would have removed retail space and office

space for Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare's Open Door program from the ground floor.

The four-story building would have had up to 97 apartments on the eastern edge of the block. Sixty-four of the units would have served people earning 60% to 80% of area median income. That means, to be eligible, most workers would have needed to earn around \$14.74 to \$19.65 an hour, or \$30,660 to \$40,880 annually, using 2021 figures.

The other 33 units would have been reserved for supportive housing in collaboration with Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, Clatsop County's mental health and substance abuse treatment provider. The units would have been priced for people at 30% of area median income.

Jill Sherman, who leads public-private partnerships at Edlen & Co., indicated at the work session on Friday that there was the potential for additional funding sources for the mental health component. She also said the developer could have removed the mental health component from the project and worked with Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare on another location for supportive housing.

"It's very disappointing for the time that the folks on our team, the effort that we've invested — obviously, so have you on the council as well as other citizens," Sherman said. "I guess I would just ask that as we move forward, perhaps we work together to find a different place for this project."

A string of false starts

The collapse of the workforce housing project will likely restart the conversation about what to do with Heritage Square.

The city acquired the property two decades ago when Safeway moved to Uppertown. The defining feature of the block is a pit that formed when the foundation of the market crumbled after heavy rains in 2010.

The Garden of Surging Waves, a park honoring the history of the Chinese in Astoria, opened in 2014 with the hopes of a plaza or amphitheater to follow.

In 2015, the City Council considered Heritage Square as a potential site for a new public library. One mixed-use option involved a library with a housing component and was priced at about \$24 million.

After an 18-month debate, the City Council voted 3 to 2 in 2016 against a library project at Heritage Square, citing the high cost and lack of public support.

In 2017, the City Council agreed to make housing at Heritage Square a policy goal, but no progress was made until last fall, when city councilors identified workforce housing as the priority.

"Personally, I worry that if we do nothing, if we don't have any affordable housing projects move forward in the very near future, if we don't implement the recommendations in the county housing study, that the character of our town is going to change through inaction," Jones said. "And the change will be that in five years, the working-class town that we love will be moving rapidly towards a gentrifying town.

"I think that especially amongst the very passionate debate we've had, it's good to remember that we all have the best interest of our community at heart," the mayor said. "We're coming from a place that we want what's best for Astoria, for our economy and for the people that live here into the future."

Outbreak: Care home continues to offer vaccines to unvaccinated residents

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At the facility, 49 of 54 staff — 91% — have received their initial doses; of those vaccinated, 36 — 73% — are boosted. Several staff members received medical or religious exemptions to vaccination, Barrick said.

The facility does not know the source of the outbreak, which occurred as the state lifted pandemic restrictions amid declining virus case counts and hospitalizations.

Gov. Kate Brown's emergency declaration over COVID-19 ended Friday after more than two years.

Early in the pandemic, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cautioned that care homes posed a special risk of virus outbreaks. The communal living situations, coupled with age-related health conditions, make the environments vulnerable to sudden case spikes that can lead to severe illness and death.

Over two years of the pandemic, residents at other care homes in the county have died after outbreaks. Until last month's outbreak, Clatsop Care had experienced little more than a dozen virus cases, overwhelmingly among staff.

Friday marked the first COVID-related death at the facility.

Barrick said the care home offered COVID-positive residents Paxlovid, a Pfizer-brand oral antiviral medication to treat their virus symptoms. "It looks like it's been very helpful in lessening symptoms," she said in an email.

The Clatsop County Public Health Department has asked the state to investigate whether the outbreak was caused by the omicron variant, the new omicron sub-variant, or both, Margo Lalich, the department's interim director, said.

Two years ago, during pandemic shut-downs, residents were isolated to their rooms.

"We can't do that anymore. That's just not appropriate," Barrick said. "So while we've got people on isolation, we also

have people that are going out into the community and having dinner with their families, which is great.

"I think everybody wants to move forward and move away from COVID, and what that looks like is very different for the people inside this building," she continued.

Attitudes toward treatment of the elderly through the pandemic have been fiercely polarizing. Some people worry that care home residents will suffer from loneliness and isolation, while others are more afraid for residents' safety as the virus circulates.

Earlier this year, the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services issued guidance to care homes saying, "the bottom line is visitation must be permitted at all times with very limited and rare exceptions, in accordance with residents' rights."

"So we've had lots of visitors in the building, which is wonderful," Barrick said, "but with it comes some give and take."

The care home continues to offer vaccines to unvaccinated residents.

Barrick said she hopes the community is understanding toward the care home's predicament. "We are doing everything within our power while trying to respect the rights of the residents to see their families, to engage in the community, to visit their primary care physicians, and with that comes a certain amount of trade-offs," she said.

She added: "We have to acknowledge that these residents have emotional and social needs, as well."

Lalich said the county is closely monitoring the outbreak. The care home is "doing absolutely everything they're supposed to," she said.

The question, she said, is whether more outbreaks can be expected in the community.

The Oregon Health Authority reported two new virus cases for the county on Thursday and seven new cases on

Wednesday.

Since the pandemic began, the county had recorded 4,592 virus cases as of Thursday. The county has recorded more than 45 deaths related to the virus.

Lalich emphasized, as she has before, "The health and well-being of the community is a shared responsibility, and that still remains the case."

She said, "The pandemic isn't over, and if people navigate day-to-day life as if it's over, the mitigation efforts that have been adopted over time" — vaccines, masks and quarantining — "that we know work, will become less important or even forgotten."



Residents of care homes are at particular risk from coronavirus outbreaks.

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