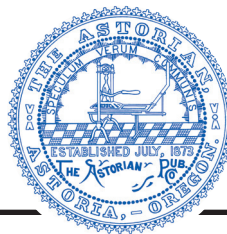


OPINION



the Astorian

editor@dailyastorian.com

Founded in 1873

KARI BORGEN
Publisher

DERRICK DePLEGGE
Editor

SHANNON ARLINT
Circulation Manager

JOHN D. BRUIJN
Production Manager

GUEST COLUMN

HERITAGE SQUARE

Astoria needs affordable housing

Our housing crisis is a perfect storm. The pandemic exacerbated an already growing challenge. Other small cities have gone before us: their workers have to live elsewhere, homeless populations have increased, young families can't afford a home in their hometown.

Astoria is at a tipping point: we can become a city whose residents are mostly wealthy retirees and remote workers working in close-by large cities; or, we can choose to remain a city where people of all incomes and backgrounds can afford to live. Our roots are as a working-class town, let's work to keep what makes Astoria a wonderful place to live.



STUART
EMMONS

Our challenge is across the housing spectrum. A concurrence of factors that impact housing affordability is taking place right now. From lower-cost rental apartments to higher-cost for-sale houses, we are seeing alarming trends.

Some of the factors: We have lost many existing low-cost housing rental apartments due to lack of upkeep, conversions and much higher rents due to a lack of supply. Short-term rentals are taking many housing units off the market. People are buying second homes in Astoria. Quality of life decisions by out-of-town retired people, or people who can work remotely, who can afford higher house prices, are attracting people to live in Astoria. Salaries from local jobs are not keeping pace with housing prices.

We can do something about this trend before it's too late. But we need to act quickly. We need to build several hundred units of housing, affordable — 30% of income — to working-class Astorians in the next several years. We need to look at ways to curb short-term rentals. We need to encourage more higher-paying working-class jobs. The good news: we are a small city. Unlike the larger cities near us, our challenges are within reach of visible positive solutions if we work together now.

One good thing about the Heritage Square project is that it helped get a much-needed community conversation going about housing. I was the architect on Heritage Square, and have



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

The empty pit at Heritage Square.

been a longtime advocate for affordable housing.

Some participated more than others in the Heritage Square process. Social media became one of the primary places for discourse, with much being constructive dialogue. Unfortunately, some comments devolved into unconstructive and even hurtful words.

Like every affordable housing project I've been involved with, there was opposition. That's normal. Some people had valid well-thought-out points, and I really appreciated the feedback. The public plaza. Parking. Astoria Sunday Market. Sadly, for our community, a small group of people, primarily over 65 years old, housing secure, financially secure, took to social media and tore into the project, spreading misinformation and exposing a lack of compassion, with the intent to kill the project.

Now, we see the end to a rare opportunity to build dozens of affordable apart-

ments that would have been available for Astoria residents who are housing challenged. We can continue to point fingers at our fellow community members, and continue to get little done, or, we can learn from this project and point our collective fingers at our housing challenge. And make real progress.

Working on affordable housing is hard. On almost every housing project I've worked on, there are a handful of people who insult anyone associated with the project, and come up with many reasons why an affordable housing project will be disastrous in a particular location. Almost any location.

And then there's the other side, the human side, that keeps me positive and focused. I visit projects I have worked on sometimes, and talk with some of the residents. One woman gave me a tearful hug. Another mother and daughter who had been housing challenged had turned around their lives due to a project I was

the architect for. Housing changed everything for the better.

During the Heritage Square design process, many 20, 30 and 40-year-olds in Astoria came up to me to tell me about their housing challenges and thanked me for working on affordable housing. They are our future. I encourage them to get louder next time.

We are at a fork in the road. We can become a city where most housing is out of reach for people who grew up here. A city of wealthy retirees and wealthy people who work remotely. Or, we can become a city where almost everyone can afford to live here.

Let's work together. Let's bring our community together with purpose, clarity and a positive mission to help keep Astoria a town we can all be proud to call home.

Stuart Emmons is an architect in Astoria. He worked on Edlen & Co.'s proposal at Heritage Square.

GUEST COLUMN

A place for us to gather

There has been renewed public focus on the Heritage Square block downtown since the Astoria City Council undertook a deep look into developing the site for affordable housing and a facility for Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare.

However, it ultimately proved to be too costly, controversial and even divisive to pursue those goals at that location.

I agree with Mayor Bruce Jones that there is an upside to considering the Heritage Square site for addressing affordable housing, homelessness and mental health care. The spirited debate that arose over proposals at Heritage Square has significantly raised public understanding about our critical need for affordable housing and our area's need for adequate mental health care facilities.

Local housing costs continue to soar due to high demand and a minimal inventory of available, affordable housing. The problem will only worsen until we take a comprehensive and aggressive approach to find durable and equitable solutions. We need to put our collective heads together and hammer out some solutions here in Astoria and throughout Clatsop County, for these are undoubtedly countywide issues.

But there is another significant outcome of the recent public discussion over Heritage Square. That is just how enthusiastic public support for an open square at that site endures.

When Safeway relocated, the city acquired the block, correctly understanding how strategic and impactful different rede-



A rendering of the Garden of Surging Waves with a plaza at Heritage Square.

velopment outcomes could be at that critical location. The city engaged a qualified consulting firm to conduct extensive public outreach as to the optimal use of the block. The precise outcome of that process was to focus on it becoming an open public space, something glaringly missing in our downtown landscape.

The Garden of Surging Waves was located where it is specifically to dovetail with that concept, that the public square would sit right alongside it, in the center of our city for all to enjoy. That arrangement makes perfect sense for our downtown layout.

This is something our downtown has long been missing. An open, accommodating public square. I think it is high time we finally do something about it.

The idea of a public square at that site is right in line with the renewal efforts the downtown has been undergoing for the past 25 years and is in perfect agreement with Main Street strategies for revitalizing a downtown. These strategies have been proven over

and again to be highly beneficial and strongly endorsed by urban planning professionals.

We are a town of rich history, great heritage, culture, food, arts, sports, local industry, fine crafts and incredible natural beauty, sitting handsomely here on this mighty river. Yet, we still do not have a downtown public square. An open public space made just for people. Not meant for cars, not trucks, but for people. A place for us to gather, visit and experience public events of all stripes.

Our Astoria Sunday Market will thrive in such an environment. Town gatherings, music, festivals, public dedications, a place for shoppers to meet up, or just a place to go and have a sandwich or a cup of coffee. A central people place, open to all, where locals, visitors and the entire downtown scene benefit.

When I think of all the appealing cities and towns I have visited, stateside and abroad, I am hard-pressed to recall a city I long to return to that does not have a public square in its downtown core. Cultures world-

wide have long understood the great value in centralized, open, public spaces.

The Heritage Square location is the only place where just such a plaza can happen. There is no other site remotely suitable for such use. A square at that location is the healthiest, most equitable and best use of that location. An urban plaza there will raise all boats.

I see this square as the natural outcome of our community coming together for the greater common good and finally creating an open, shared public square of our own, right in the heart of our beautiful downtown, a space destined to become a landmark and point of pride.

We are a gritty, resourceful, can-do little river town full of creative people. Let's roll up our sleeves and finally make this happen. Let's get this done. Then, our children, grandchildren and their grandchildren will be proud of us.

Ed Overbay, a woodworker, is the owner of Overbay Houseworks.



ED
OVERBAY