

# Ordinance: ‘I think we made a good step forward’

Continued from Page A1

As a makeshift RV camp on 10th Avenue and Necanicum Drive continues to cause concern for residents and visitors alike, Sandra Sheets, a resident who lives nearby, said the ordinance would make the city safer. “We’ve been concerned about the increase in activity at the park and I do think 2022-04 is a good start,” she said.

City Councilor Randy Frank said the ordinance would give Police Chief Dave Ham a “starting spot” to enable police to regulate illegal camping. “It will be nice to have something to give your staff the ability to go out and deal with people,” he said.

The city’s Houseless Task Force, an outgrowth of a year of public forums on housing and homelessness, aimed to produce guidelines that will clear overnight camping on city property by creating permitted alternatives.

The measure puts in place a program for temporary overnight camping on both residential and nonresidential properties. Vehicles, including vans or motor homes, would need to be registered in compliance with vehicle insurance responsibilities.



R.J. Marx/The Astorian

City officials hope a new ordinance will help clear an RV encampment at 10th Avenue and Necanicum Drive.

Permits would be valid for three weeks, at which time they could be renewed.

While individual parking or camping locations were not designated, proposed locations for limited numbers of permitted vehicles include parts of Shore Terrace, Necanicum Drive, Cartwright Park, Avenue G and Mill Ponds Park.

Camping would be prohibited at all public park areas, public parking lots, restrooms or publicly owned properties within residential zoning districts, along with U.S. Highway 101, Avenue U, Wahanna Drive, First Avenue to Avenue A, Necanicum Drive and other locations.

Some residents asked the City Council for more details on the proposed camping sites before moving forward with the ordinance.

“As a parent, I find some of the proposed locations that were discussed very concerning,” Susie James, a resident, said. “I would like to see some specific verbiage saying it cannot be at public parks. As a parent and as a person who works in the hospitality industry, I understand that tourists are what drive this town. But if you’re making it impossible for people to raise their family safely, we’re not going to have people to work in the hotels and restaurants because everyone’s going to move away.”

Tenth Avenue resident Russ Mead objected that the city would be endorsing a place without electricity, water or sewer.

“This seems absolutely unacceptable to me in a town like Seaside or a city like Seaside,” Mead said. “It’s

disrespectful to the property owners. It’s disrespectful to the people who are living in these campers.”

Mead suggested the city abandon the proposal altogether and focus efforts on an emergency homeless shelter with electricity, showers and bathroom facilities. “All of us deserve better than this,” he said.

Sunset Boulevard resident Stephanie Millman echoed the need to provide alternative services to the homeless population.

“It is better to spend that money enabling community-based connected services to help the homeless get off the streets and work on their situation — whether financial or mental health,” she wrote in a letter to the City Council.

Mayor Jay Barber, City Councilor Steve Wright,

City Councilor Randy Frank and City Councilor Dana Phillips voted in favor of the ordinance on Monday in first and second readings. City Councilor Tita Montero voted “no” to both readings.

City Councilor Tom Horning approved the ordinance in the first reading, but not in the second. City Councilor David Posalski was absent.

“I wanted the process to take its time, rather than accelerating the approval process, mostly so everyone in the city could have a say, if needed,” Horning said

after the meeting. “I don’t have any problems with the ordinance in particular. The rest of the process will be in the policy of where we will allow campers to spend the night. I am not keen on Cartwright Park or the Mill Ponds being allowed.

“Given the tendency for the campers to create messes, that could be a major blow to the parks program.”

The ordinance will return to the City Council for a third and final reading on April 25. If passed, it would become law within 30 days.

“We really worked hard to try to recognize all of the concerns about defending the rights of people who live in Seaside, the housed people, but also at the same time defending the rights of people who are houseless and also to do it legally so that we will not be in court over our decisions,” Barber said. “There’s still more work to be done. And we’ll continue to work on that. But I think we made a good step forward.”

## Commissioner: ‘A little bit of campaigning’

Continued from Page A1

else is kind of embarrassing — incredibly embarrassing actually,” Baldwin said. “... Again, I’m going to ask for you to step down from your position Commissioner Newton.”

Prior to Newton’s comments on Tuesday, commissioners were speaking with James Fowler, a fishing guide who acquired the lease of city-owned land known as Sturgeon Paul’s and was looking to bring in food carts as a sublease.

Fowler clashed with the commission throughout the lease transfer, but has since apologized for his behavior.

Despite a civil dialogue on Tuesday, Newton

accused Balensifer of being unfair to Fowler at the time of lease negotiations, which the mayor contested, telling Newton he was out of order.

When commissioners were given the opportunity to offer comments at the end of the meeting, Newton again denounced the mayor.

“Mr. Mayor, I am sorry I lashed out at you, but people who are deceptive infuriate me and I told Mr. Fowler that I would not allow you to deceive him again,” Newton said. “So that’s why I lashed out at you because you are deceptive, which I consider lying to Mr. Fowler. And I told him I would protect him.”

Newton’s bitterness carried on as he brought up

the food cart pod project near City Hall, an ongoing topic which sparked debate at previous meetings. Last year, Newton walked out of an Urban Renewal Agency session which was tackling the matter, claiming that his expertise in retail was being ignored by other commissioners. The issue led to several more disputes and conflicts.

As Newton wrapped up his comments on Tuesday, Balensifer warned Newton that he was violating City Commission rules.

After Baldwin addressed Newton’s actions, Poe noted similar apprehensions.

“Mr. Newton’s outbursts are out of order and they’re disruptive and they’re

embarrassing,” he said. “I also would remind him that I’ve asked him to step down before and I’ll ask him again now.”

Balensifer said Newton had undermined the City Commission in the community.

“Like I said before, and I’ll say again, there are some things you are dealing with personally that I wish you would take care of personally instead of publicly,” Balensifer said, reminding Newton of his request for him to resign.

The mayor also called the comments from Newton, who has confirmed he is considering a run for mayor in November, “a little bit of campaigning.”

## Tensions: ‘It does not matter where we go’

Continued from Page A1

“And when their family members don’t feel safe coming into our business, because of what’s happening in front of our business, it worries me because we’re not able to step in and provide the care that they need.”

Several business owners asked about ways to force LiFEBoat to leave. Some argued that offering social services attracts more homeless people to the city.

“If they stop feeding them downtown, we would have a lot less litter downtown,” Miriam Graham Rose, a downtown building owner, said about the homeless who access LiFEBoat’s services. “And that started in the park.”

Rose has also been vocal on social media against providing social services for homeless people downtown.

When someone on Nextdoor suggested she speak directly to LiFEBoat and learn more about what they do, Rose said, “Clearly you think the ‘clients’ have more rights than the business owners or the tax paying citizens of Astoria. I have less than no interest in confronting these ‘folks’ as I do not want to be hauled away by the police in response to my actions.”

During an Astoria homelessness solutions task force meeting in late March, Osarch Orak, the director of Filling Empty Bellies, who runs LiFEBoat Services with his fiancée, Erin Carlsen, the director of Beacon Clubhouse, referred to some of the critics as a “lynch mob.”

Orak apologized for making the comment during the

*‘ASTORIA IS A VERY SMALL CITY. THERE’S NO PLACE THAT ISN’T SOMEONE’S BACKYARD.’*

**Osarch Orak** | director of Filling Empty Bellies, who runs LiFEBoat Services with his fiancée, Erin Carlsen, the director of Beacon Clubhouse

meeting, but it still sparked outrage on social media.

When The Astorian asked Orak if he regretted the comment, he said that he only regretted apologizing.

“Because it’s the way I feel,” he said. “It’s not something I made up. It’s not something I can’t back up with proof of people’s actions toward us. It’s the true definition of that mob mentality is coming after us.”

**‘You have to start by humanizing them’**

This is not the first time in recent years that tension around the city’s homeless population has bubbled up to the surface. The city started a homelessness solutions task force in 2017, in part to respond to perceived safety concerns and complaints from downtown business owners about property damage and disturbances.

Orak and Carlsen have been involved for years. They began fundraising and saving money for a daytime drop-in center in 2018. Filling Empty Bellies started serving meals at Astoria parks in 2014.

The ground floor of the drop-in center on Commercial Street serves members of the Beacon Clubhouse, who are stable, employed or working toward employment. The basement is where anyone can come eat through

Filling Empty Bellies, access resources and connect to services.

LiFEBoat provides clothing and shoes for anyone in need, offers a washer and dryer and has plans for showers. The nonprofit is also moving forward with improvements to the building in preparation for providing a year-round overnight shelter.

Orak, who was formerly homeless in Astoria, said the goal is to help people who come for a meal or other basic needs connect with services. He said he wishes he had access to a low-barrier service provider like LiFEBoat when he was living outside.

“If you heard some of our participants stories ... I don’t know who wouldn’t be moved by some of our people’s stories,” Orak said. “And some of them just never had a chance.

“You have to understand what some of these people have been through. Their life is constant trauma — and yes, a lot of it is self-inflicted currently — but a lot of them don’t know any better. And it’s hard to get them to a place to where they can make the decision for themselves to do something different unless there are low-barrier (services),” he said. “You have to start by humanizing them.”

Orak agrees the loca-

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