

Vacation rentals: ‘This is real money that is affecting my life’

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In Clatsop County, as elsewhere on the Oregon Coast, rentals of 30 or fewer days have proven to be lucrative ventures, drawing tourists and their money to the region. But residents have alleged that some visitors do not respect the neighborhoods or the surrounding environment.

A 2018 ordinance addressed health and safety concerns and marked the first time the county had sought to regulate the rentals. Although rental permits were issued, the development code still omitted rentals as an explicitly allowed use except in Arch Cape.

County staff has recommended that the board make short-term rentals a recognized use in 16 additional zones: four commercial and 12 residential.

In March, the Planning Commission, in a split vote, offered a different recommendation: allow vacation rentals only in the four commercial zones and two multi-family residential zones, plus Arch Cape — a move that would effectively ban rentals in the other 10 residential zones.

Planning commissioners who voted in favor argued that most residential zones are inappropriate settings for commercial enterprises.

In addition, the Planning Commission recommended that vacation rentals be permitted only as a conditional use, which requires a public notice and a public hearing.

The Planning Commission’s approach would eliminate more than half of the short-term rentals operating in unincorporated areas as existing permits can’t get renewed. County staff estimates that the loss would cost the county about half a million dollars in lodging taxes.



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Vacation rentals have posed problems for some neighborhoods.

The board originally planned to decide the issue this month. At the April 13 meeting, Thompson and Commissioner Pamela Wev said they would support a moratorium extension while the county gathers data on a key question: How does the vacation rental industry affect the local housing market in terms of prices and the availability of homes?

This data will be presented at a work session on May 18,

Gail Henrikson, the county’s community development director, said.

Commissioner Courtney Bangs voted in favor of a moratorium extension, but did so, she said, to honor her colleagues’ request for more information. She wants to finish the vacation rental conversation — which has played out in more than 20

public meetings since late 2019 — by the end of the fiscal year in June.

Chris Delong, who lives in the Astoria area, said on Wednesday that he started paying his mortgage on a vacation rental in July. He applied for a permit in October, not realizing a moratorium was in effect.

“I’ve been paying on that

mortgage since, with all of my investment sitting there, and I think it’s really on you guys to put this to bed ...” he told the board. “This is real money to me. This isn’t throwaway money. This is not disposable income. This is not me owning a big yacht or anything. This is real money that is affecting my life.”

Wastewater: ‘It’s been a very difficult pivot’

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Craft beer boom

The problem Astoria is facing is not unique.

Craft beer has boomed across the country, forcing cities and breweries to figure out how to address the impact on municipal treatment systems. Down the coast from Astoria, for example, Newport created an industrial pretreatment program and levied fines against Rogue Ales for not meeting limits.

Between the industrial pretreatment program and another \$5 million project to expand capacity, Astoria expects the treatment lagoons to last until 2045.

The project will turn a lagoon into a sludge storage pond with baffles and a new headworks to filter out grit and other solids. The city recently received nearly \$5 million in coronavirus relief funds to complete the project.

If nothing were done to address the industrial waste from breweries, the city said it is possible a mechanically driven plant would be necessary within five years, which is estimated to cost between \$50 million and \$70 million.

City engineers say Astoria is well suited for treatment lagoons, and that a mechanical plant is not a viable option. Even with a mechanical plant, the city said it would still need an industrial pretreatment program, which is common in other municipalities.

Astoria has never had significant industrial users on the treatment system before Fort George and Buoy Beer. Requests from seafood processors to discharge into the system have been denied, which has forced the businesses to work with the state Department of Environmental Quality to treat their own waste and discharge it directly into the river.

The city issued Fort George and Buoy Beer industrial discharge permits ahead of establishing the program so they could keep up with expansions while working toward a solution. The permits allowed the breweries to discharge a higher level of solids than previously agreed upon.

Fort George and Buoy Beer jointly hired John

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Chris Nemlowill | owner of Fort George Brewery

Mercer, a brewery wastewater consultant, which led to developing a side-streaming system, which removes the heaviest effluent before the wastewater is discharged into the city’s system.

Fort George puts the heavy effluent into tanks that are taken to local farms for supplemental cattle feed most of the year. The farms cannot take the effluent during the winter, which leaves the brewery needing to find another option for a few months a year.

“It’s been a very difficult pivot,” Chris Nemlowill, the owner of Fort George Brewery, told The Astorian, adding that the process and logistics have been costly and time-consuming.

He said the lagoons are outdated infrastructure, and that he would like to see capacity upgrades that can accommodate growth in the city.

“I do think it’s really important that we take this opportunity to look at any additional capacity we could gain with our current wastewater treatment plant,” he said. “I am concerned because without capacity upgrades, you’re just in a spot where the fermentation sector cannot grow in Astoria.”

“It will be impossible. I don’t think people are going to want to start businesses in Astoria if they can’t grow them.”

Nemlowill said he would like to come back to the table before the city moves forward with the ordinance.

Nemlowill and David Kroening, the president and general manager of Buoy Beer, said they are not advocating for a new mechani-

cal plant, but do want to see more creative solutions to increase capacity.

“I don’t know if we’ve solved or if we have enough information yet, if everything we’re doing now is going to solve the issue,” Kroening said during a City Council meeting in April. “What other changes might be coming? Are we investing money in now and then we get into another issue in three years where we’re not low enough, and it comes down that we need to spend multimillion dollars at that point? That’s going to be a challenge that I’m not sure how we will solve it if we get to that.”

City engineers have acknowledged the amount of infrastructure Fort George and Buoy Beer have contributed to improve treatment capacity.

“We have seen it hands-down affect the wastewater treatment plant in a positive way,” Cindy Moore, the assistant city engineer, said. “There’s this fine-tuning of the difficulty associated with the wintertime discharge.”

Harrington said there is nothing that could have been done or can be done to the treatment plant that will allow the breweries to continue discharging as they have been in recent years.

“Industry usually deals with their waste before it gets discharged,” Harrington said, adding that treating at the source is most economical and that on-site treatment is common for larger breweries.

New breweries

Obelisk Beer Co., a brewery planning to open in Astoria this year, is one of the first new brewer-

ies to navigate the new regulations.

When Dave Coyne and Nathan Lampson, owners of Obelisk Beer, approached the city for a building permit, they were told they would first need to have a plan in place to pretreat wastewater on-site to a level consistent with a residence before it goes into the city’s treatment lagoons.

For Coyne and Lampson, who are planning on opening a taproom on Bond Street, that meant implementing a biological treatment system to treat wastewater.

Lampson has advocated for some capacity being allocated for new businesses, saying it could keep other businesses from coming to Astoria.

“A part of it is comforting because we know that with the path where we have our own biological treatment, we’re not as beholden to changes in effluent capacity,” Lampson told The Astorian. “But the flip is that we’re starting a pretty small project and the costs associated with the improvement is pretty high.”

“I’m just hoping that for other small projects, that doesn’t prevent them from existing.”

Book: ‘It’s so important that kids experience nature and get outside and have fun’

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“The positive response and feedback has just been really nice. A lot of my friends have little kids who are just in the perfect age range for the book. So they have just loved it. Every little kid loves dogs and parks and nature,” she said.

Taylor’s love of national parks began during family road trips from her home state of Missouri, which she said are some of her best childhood memories.

“It totally made sense just to get into working with the National Park Service and helping to facilitate that experience for other families, and other kids. It’s so much fun, like one of the best jobs ever,” she said.

After college, Taylor took a seasonal job at Grand Teton National Park and spent the next 12 years working at Yellowstone, Glacier and Yosemite.

She rescued K-So as a puppy from a Catahoula leopard dog shelter while working at Yosemite in 2013. They have been hiking partners ever since.

K-So’s name is a shortening of ‘OK, so,’ a phrase Taylor and her husband

repeated so much when choosing a name that the puppy began to respond to it. The dog is covered in calico spots, and has one brown and one blue eye.

“She’s very unique looking. People always commented on her and kids always wanted to pet her,” Taylor said. “So it kind of became just a fun weekend event to take K-So up to the park and just walk around with her and to answer people’s questions about the park.”

Taylor worked at Yosemite until 2019, then moved to Astoria where she works remotely as a program manager for the National Park Service.

K-So is now 9 years old, but still an avid hiker. Taylor has been writing more poems about her adventures and hopes to publish a sequel.

“I think it’s so important that kids experience nature and get outside and have fun, and enjoy it at an early age. I think that bringing that into kids homes through K-So is something that has always been really important to me, and developing the next generation of stewards of our public land,” she said.



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