

Gearhart mayor resigns

Exit comes after firehouse bond failure

By R.J. MARX
The Astorian

GEARHART — Paulina Cockrum has resigned as mayor of Gearhart, citing personal reasons.

In a letter to the City Council, staff, the Planning Commission, volunteer fire department and residents, she said the resignation was effective Thursday.

"It has been my pleasure to serve on the Planning Commission 2008-2015, City Council 2015-2020, and truly an honor to serve as mayor for the past year and a half," she said in an email statement. "Together we have accomplished great things."

The resignation comes after the failure of a con-

tentious \$14.5 million bond measure in May to fund a new firehouse and police station on land north of the city.

"Some Gearhart residents have argued that this isn't a good time to ask the voters for a bond to build a new fire-police station," she said in presenting plans to voters. "I say, 'If not now, when?'"

Originally from Seattle, Cockrum was a nurse at Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria and selected by the governor to serve on a work group for criteria for coordinated care organizations.

The former planning commissioner was appointed by Mayor Dianne Widdop to fill the unexpired term of City Councilor John Duncan in District 3 after Duncan's

death in 2015.

She serves on the city's Community Emergency Response Team.

Cockrum ran unopposed for mayor in 2020 after Matt Brown announced he would not seek reelection. She received 96% of votes cast, winning nearly 950 votes out of the city's 1,500 registered voters.

After the election, she said her goals included "getting past the COVID-19 pandemic and the turmoil of the national election and look forward to the future."

At the time, said she hoped to prioritize the needs of firefighters and implement the city's hazard mitigation plan.

"There is no shortage of great things we can work on for all of our residents to pre-



Paulina Cockrum

serve the Gearhart we love," Cockrum said.

During her time as mayor, Gearhart finished its parks master plan, began development of a children's play area at Centennial Park, limited contractor working hours, endorsed a Gearhart ZIP code and passed zoning amendments designed to assist downtown businesses.

As City Council president, Kerry Smith will serve as interim mayor.

Vacant seats are filled by appointment by a majority vote of the remaining members of the council. The appointee's term of office begins immediately on appointment and continues through the unexpired term of their predecessor.

Director: 'We're definitely poised to move up'

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The housing authority provides critical housing assistance to low-income residents in Clatsop, Columbia and Tillamook counties.

"I for one am very excited Elissa is here," Evans told the board. "And I feel really good about all the work that we've done over the last year and a half plus to get to this point, and really feel Elissa will be able to move NOHA to the next level and beyond the next level."

"I think we've set the foundation, and in some cases we found the floor. But we're definitely poised to move up."

Quadel was hired in 2020 to manage the agency's housing choice voucher program after the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development flagged the housing authority as "troubled" following an audit report. The program, which is the agency's primary housing assistance program, helps low-income families find rental housing.

When the agency's former executive director, Todd Johnston, resigned in the fall of 2020, Evans was appointed as interim director.

Evans has since worked with the board and the Department of Housing and Urban Development on a corrective action plan to move the agency from troubled to what HUD calls a "standard performer."

Evans told the board on Thursday that he expects to have a letter from HUD by the end of the month notifying the housing authority that it has moved to a standard performer.

In 2020, Evans and Nina Reed, the board's chairwoman, attributed the disparity of the voucher program



New affordable apartments are planned in Warrenton.

to staff turnover and inconsistent management, which resulted in a lack of capacity of the staff to do the job in a way that met HUD's expectations.

The program was also experiencing a financial shortfall, and the agency was advised by HUD to stop issuing new vouchers until funding stabilized.

The program is no longer in a shortfall, and Evans said the housing authority has been slowly issuing vouchers for just over a year.

He said that everyone that had been previously selected off the waiting list, but had to wait for a voucher, has been served. The housing authority began to issue vouchers to new people on the waiting list in May.

During the meeting Thursday, Reed thanked Evans for his leadership during the transition. Other commissioners echoed her comments.

"A big 'thank you' to Quadel for all their energy and help and assistance and cleanup — lots of cleanup,"

Reed said.

Despite the setbacks, the housing authority managed to move forward on two affordable housing projects in Clatsop County.

A groundbreaking for Trilium House at Chelsea Gardens, an affordable housing project next to Home Depot in Warrenton, will be held on Tuesday.

The four-story building will have 42 one, two and three bedroom units for households earning up to 60% of area median income.

The housing authority is partnering with Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare and Clatsop Community Action to provide services to residents.

Five units will be dedicated for households with serious mental illness, with Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare providing referrals and supportive services. Eight units will be reserved for households with project-based vouchers and six will be reserved for households under the agriculture workforce tax credit

program, which could be used for workers at seafood processors.

The housing authority also unveiled a plan in April to double the size of the Owens-Adair, an affordable housing complex on 15th and Exchange streets in Astoria.

A new four-story, 50-unit apartment would mirror the building and be built over the parking lot. The project would likely serve low-income seniors and people with disabilities earning 30% to 50% of the area median income.

The building would include 40 one-bedroom apartments and 10 studio apartments, along with basement parking with 55 parking spots.

The housing authority applied to the state for government financial help in late April, and expects to learn whether the application has been approved by August.

If approved, construction could begin by the summer of 2023 and the project could be completed by 2024.

Capsizing: The crew got about two hours of sleep over a 40-hour period

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for prosecution. The report also recommends that the Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit Portland issue a civil penalty against Anderson for negligence.

Investigators spoke to survivors and witnesses and examined footage of the event.

On Feb. 20, 2021, after 4 p.m., the 38-foot vessel attempted to cross the bar with four men and about two tons of Dungeness crab aboard. Coastal Reign's crew had spent the previous week crab fishing on multiple trips and wanted to sell their catch at Garibaldi, where it would fetch more money per pound than it would in Warrenton.

Over a 40-hour period, the report found, the crew got about two hours of sleep.

In addition, three of the four crew members, including Anderson, had smoked marijuana during the trip, including about half an hour before they tried to cross the bar amid turbulent waters, the report found.

The Tillamook Bay bar is among the most hazardous in the country, "challenging even for the most experienced of operators," Capt. Christopher Coutu, the investigating officer from Coast Guard 17th District, said.

That day, the bar had been closed to recreational and uninspected passenger vessels under 40 feet long, but not to commercial fishing vessels.

Todd Chase, 51, the secondary operator from Warrenton, tried to enter the bar through the preferred route in the north, which is buoy-marked, but backed out.

Anderson took control, tried to cut through the south route and ran over the submerged end of the bar's south jetty. Several hundred feet of the jetty lies underwater; white waves break on the water's surface above the boulders.

Anderson brought the

Coastal Reign "about 600 feet east of where he should have been," Coutu said.

Three waves struck the vessel's port side; the third capsized it. All four crew members were in the pilothouse when the vessel overturned.

Chase drowned before he was found. Zachary Zappone, 41, a deckhand, also from Warrenton, was pronounced dead at Oregon Health & Science University Hospital.

The presence of marijuana on board was confirmed through drug tests and physical evidence that washed ashore. Zappone's backpack, containing marijuana in a glass jar and a plastic bag, turned up with other debris.

Chase did not partake and had expressed misgivings about drug use on the trip, the report found. His crew mates hid their drug use from him, according to the report.

Chase helped Zappone and the other deckhand put on their lifejackets. He was not wearing one himself; neither was Anderson. There is not enough information to know whether lifejackets were a factor in the deaths, Coutu said.

A few years ago, the preferred channel switched from the south to the north; the buoy system was changed accordingly.

"Did the movement of the buoy cause the casualty? No. Would it have been helpful? Yes. Yes. It would have been helpful for (Anderson) to have," Coutu said.

There are other signs that mariners can see and use in making their way over the bar, he added.

The report recommends that Coast Guard 13th District conduct a water access management study of the area to figure out where to place buoys, and work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to determine how much of the Tillamook Bay jetties are underwater.

Utility rates: Use of general fund to keep rates down floated

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As far as wastewater, the City Council approved several transfers to deal with emergency situations such as replacement generators and check valves that had a significantly negative impact on the contingency and subsequently the wastewater fund balance.

St. Denis said the city is starting to repay loans on wastewater improvements and does not recommend using the general fund in lieu of rate increases.

Mayor Sam Steidel advocated for using the general fund to keep rates down for people who are on fixed incomes and are already experiencing cost increases in other areas.

"That's where this becomes a challenging issue right at this moment," Steidel said. "It's possible we could look at it in September (and it) be totally different — we don't know where the economy is going to be. But my guess is that at least within the next year, two months, it's

going to be tight. So, can we save somebody a few bucks, maybe we can."

Others, including City Councilor Mike Benefield, argued that without rate increases the city would move backward.

"We haven't really had a gradual increase in rates. We didn't increase the rates," Benefield said. "And now we really need to increase rates and it's a cause for concern. And if we continue to put that off, the cause for concern will grow and grow until pretty soon we're back to the old way, and that is using the general fund to pay for the services that we provide in our utilities."

Based on discussion with the City Council, St. Denis told The Astorian that city staff plans to propose that water rates increase by 3% and wastewater rates increase by 6%. The difference between 6% and the original 9% increase proposed for wastewater rates could come from the general fund on a one-time basis.

Graduation: 'It's a time dedicated to really applaud their accomplishments'

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will hold its graduation at 7 p.m. on June 11 in the Knappa High School. An awards program for seniors will be held on Tuesday.

The Seaside School District will host graduation at 7 p.m. on Thursday at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center. Earlier that day, graduates will make their traditional walk around Pacific Ridge Elementary so younger students can show their support.

Ceremonies for sports, seniors and scholarships happen in the days before graduation.

Jewell School District's graduation will take place at the school, in a covered area outdoors, at 2 p.m. on June 18. The ceremony will be followed by refreshments and a senior slideshow.

Commencement festivities for graduates from Clatsop Community College will happen in Patriot Hall at 4 p.m. on June 17. Sheila Roley, a former superintendent in Seaside, will speak at graduation.

There are no capacity limits due to the coronavirus, however a livestreaming option will be available through the college's YouTube channel.

"Commencement is the culmination of all the hard work and dedication our students have put in throughout their college career, especially acknowledging their perseverance in these past years through COVID," Chris Breitmeyer, the college's president, said in a statement. "It's a time dedicated to really applaud their accomplishments. We are excited to celebrate this milestone with our graduates."

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