

Meals: 'It's always been underutilized'

Continued from Page A1

run by the school district give out about a hundred meals a day.

"It's always been underutilized," he said. "I've been doing this since summer of 2016. We've never really had a huge turnout."

School lunches were free for every student, regardless of income, during most of the pandemic thanks to a federal waiver.

Just days before the waiver's expiration at the end of June, Congress passed the Keep Kids Fed Act to extend some pandemic flexibilities for school meal programs.

The act did not include an extension of the waiver making school meals free for all students.

The Department of Education said the USDA, which administers the summer meal program, has not issued information for next school year, but is expected to return to pre-pandemic meal services.

That could mean parents cannot pick up meals on



Alexis Weisend/The Astorian

Grant Roe hands out meals at Fred Lindstrom Memorial Park.

behalf of their children, meals cannot be delivered to homes, students must be present to receive meals, multiple meals cannot be served at once and most schools will establish meal prices again.

Kelly said the hope is that the Astoria School District will continue to provide all students with free meals, but the policy will have to be approved by the school board.

The Department of Education will implement incentives included in the Student Success Act after they were delayed by COVID-19 waivers.

Funding from the 2019 act expanded income eligibility for free meals to households that earn up to 300% of the federal poverty level. Students that qualify will receive free meals in the upcoming school year.

Tongue Point: No timeline for construction

Continued from Page A1

response cutters that will be stationed in Astoria will ensure that future generations of Coast Guard men and women continue to provide expert service to the people of the Pacific Northwest for many years to come."

While no timeline for construction was given, Coast Guard personnel will begin arriving at the site next summer.

Fast response cutters, the newest class of ships being produced for the Coast Guard, are designed for several uses, including drug interdiction, port, waterway and coastal security, fisheries law enforcement, search and rescue and national defense.

The 154-foot ships typically have 24 crewmem-

bers assisted by shoreside personnel.

"The city of Astoria is very excited to have this increased Coast Guard presence in Astoria," Mayor Bruce Jones, a former commander of Sector Columbia River, said. "... We're very proud of the Coast Guard presence here. It contributes to the local economy significantly, so having new cutters, plus the crews, plus the maintenance assist team, a new dock and all the supporting infrastructure — it's going to be a tremendous boost to our community economically, as well as just a great asset for our overall maritime economy."

Referring to Tongue Point as a "maritime super campus," Jones said, "It's kind of returning us to our maritime roots,

so it's a win-win. Good jobs — jobs that are aligned with our historic maritime heritage."

Astoria was chosen over Newport for two fast response cutters.

In 2020, U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley and U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici wrote a letter to the Coast Guard recommending that four fast response cutters be stationed in Astoria.

Members of the congressional delegation also sent a letter to the Coast Guard in 2019 requesting that two new 360-foot offshore patrol cutters be sited in Astoria. Larger offshore cutters are intended to replace the 1960s-era medium endurance cutters, such as the Alert and Steadfast, which are homeported at the 17th Street Dock.

Wright: Housing is at top of his city to-do list

Continued from Page A1

Wright, who moved to the city in 2014 with his wife, Patty, after retiring from a career that included work as a chief financial officer of an international grain company. "I wish I could have lived here my whole life. I'm at heart, I think, a small-town guy."

Wright served on the city's budget committee and Planning Commission before appointment to Barber's council seat after the death of former mayor Don Larson in 2016. Wright was unopposed reelection in 2018.

"I've been a councilor now for five years and council president for the last year and a half and working closely with Jay," he said. "And when he said he wasn't running again, it seemed like a natural step. Want to keep some kind of consistency

and leadership? You know, we'll have at least two new city councilors, my district and Dana's (Phillips), and we need to have some kind of continuity through the process, especially with all the new department heads and city manager."

At the top of his city to-do list is creating more housing.

"Our housing task force has come up with a lot of good ideas," Wright said. "The county came out with a list of areas in Seaside the county owns. We're well in the process of getting them to transfer that land to the city. My plan right now is to make it some kind of either low-income or affordable housing."

To address homelessness, he seeks to partner with "somebody that's good at it," he said, like Clatsop Community Action or Helping Hands Reentry Outreach

Centers.

"We need to be just the partners to facilitate that," he said. "I'll tell you that kind of thing is underway now. It's not necessarily public yet. We're working on it. Something will come out pretty soon."

Wright said he hopes to preserve and maintain the land across from the high school along the estuary.

Transportation projects remain a high priority, he said, with improvements from Broadway south. "That is going to happen," he said. "The money's been identified and the contracts are supposed to be open for bid later this month."

Wright gives Barber high marks as mayor. "I think he's done a great job," he said. "He's remained level-headed and reasonable. And those are all things that I want to emulate."

Levy: Would generate \$1.5M over five years

Continued from Page A1

ballot, which would raise the tax rate from 33 cents to 38 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

The levy, if approved, would generate nearly \$1.5 million over five years, funding operations and community programs, supporting library staff and extending hours.

"I don't think any of our board members would say this levy decision was easy," Kelsey Balensifer, the chairwoman of the library board, said at a June meeting. "We reflected, discussed, studied, argued and deliberated, but we ultimately came to a unanimous decision — one that we hope reflects a reasoned conclusion when faced with the library's undeniable need for additional funding and the public's valid economic concerns."

While staying open for 30 hours a week, the library functions with significantly

less staff than neighboring libraries in Astoria and Seaside.

The 5-cent increase to the tax rate will allow one of the part-time positions to become full time, City Manager Linda Engbretson said.

"Throughout our nearly 30 years of history, it is clear that the heart and soul of the community library has always been its people — passionate staff members, committed volunteers, enthusiastic patrons and generous donors," Balensifer said. "In light of this reality, our board would like to increase the library staffing levels to continue the same excellent service our community has come to expect while simultaneously reducing the risk of employee exhaustion and burnout."

"Enhancing the quality of life for our patrons should not diminish quality of life for our personnel."

The library board eyed three options — keeping the

rate at 33 cents, or raising it to 38 cents or 43 cents — before eventually settling on the 38-cent option.

"I think in an ideal world, we would love to give the library as many options as possible, as many resources as possible, but the board also felt like we needed to be realistic about the pressures facing our world right now," said Balensifer, who is married to Mayor Henry Balensifer.

Commissioner Rick Newton cited the success of the library's community programs in supporting the move to put a 5-cent increase on the ballot.

The library, first established in 1993, operated out of a small building in Hammond for a number of years before the structure began to deteriorate. In 2017, the library moved to a larger location on Main Avenue.

Later that year, voters approved a large jump in the levy rate, from 9 cents to 33 cents.

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