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Signs at the Astoria Bridge caution pedestrians and offer suicide counseling.

Photos by Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Grant to help food bank

USDA money for rural health care

By **ETHAN MYERS**
The Astorian

Margi Hoffmann, the state director of rural development for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, visited the North Coast this week to meet with stakeholders and announce a substantial grant to a regional food bank.

The grant, totaling \$237,900, will help pay for the expansion of refrigeration capacity at Clatsop Community Action's food distribution facility in Warrenton. The emergency rural health care grant coincides with additional funding from the Roundhouse Foundation and the Columbia Pacific Coordinated Care Organization.

The money will go toward replacing the walk-in cooler and freezer at the organization's warehouse, remodeling the existing dry storage area and the purchase of two new refrigerated trucks.

NEW REFRIGERATED TRUCKS WILL BE A SIGNIFICANT BOOST

"It's incredibly important because food bank infrastructure used to provide cans and canned goods to people, but this will provide them with the ability to grow," Hoffmann said. "It will expand their ability to provide fresh produce to people and culturally specific food to community members, which is really important."

Since nearly half of the food bank's distribution is done through mobile delivery to people in need throughout Clatsop County, the new refrigerated trucks will be a significant boost, Dusten Martin, the chief operations officer for the regional food bank, said.

"It's a big part of what we do," he said. "The majority of the pounds we distribute come out of our freezer and cooler, so it's important, it's a big support for our operation."

"It also makes a little rural county and a little rural food bank like us a little more self-sufficient."

Hoffmann, who has been in her role since January but served in a number of rural development positions over the past two decades, emphasized that the investment from the Biden administration in rural communities has been "once in a generation."

"(The rural development's) role at

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State to take steps to reduce the risk of suicides at Astoria Bridge

Signs, an enlarged gate, fencing among options

By **ERICK BENGEL**
The Astorian

After a series of tragedies and close calls, the Oregon Department of Transportation plans to take steps to reduce the risk of suicides at the Astoria Bridge.

The state does not keep an official count, but several people have leapt off the bridge in recent years.

In January, a 29-year-old Astoria man died after jumping off the bridge and landing on the grass east of Suomi Hall.

Another man with a history of mental health issues scaled the bridge twice this year.

One night in late July, a Kia was found abandoned on the bridge, blocking the northbound lane. The owner is listed as a missing person, the Oregon State Police said.

"The Megler Bridge is a draw for suicide or suicide attempts," Monica Steele, the assistant Clatsop County manager, said this month at a Public Safety Coordinating Council meeting.

County leaders recently met virtually with Department of Transportation staff to discuss a range of options.

In the near future, the department will post bridge signs with the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, the new national suicide-prevention number, according to Mark Buffington, the department's district manager on the North Coast.

The department may also enlarge a deck-level gate, currently topped with barbed wire, that allows access to the top of the span. People have managed



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to bypass it and ascend the steps to the bridge's highest point.

Other bridges, such as the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, have had netting installed to help catch people who jump. At the Astoria Bridge, the cormorant population could pose problems.

"I'm afraid that if we put netting down, we create a platform for nesting," Buffington said. "But it is in discussion."

Fencing may be another option, though a retrofit would be years away. "There's currently no funding for that type of change," Buffington said, adding, "It would be a major construction project."

The Astoria Bridge, completed in 1966, was designed to bear a certain weight and withstand winds of a certain speed. To add fencing to the superstructure would require the department to study the feasibility and engineering.

Steele told the Public Safety Coordinating Council that the county would work with its lobbying firm to find potential funding for a study.

Another idea from the county-Department of Transportation meeting is to post signage telling drivers to call 911 if they see someone walking on the bridge, an action considered trespassing. Current signs caution pedestrians not to walk on the span and offer suicide counseling.

The Department of Transportation can be reluctant to put up nonstandard signage. The department tries to adhere to the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, Buffington said.

The death of Carrie Barnhart, a 54-year-old woman who jumped off the Astoria Bridge in 2015, led to an examination of the gaps in the county's mental health safety net. Barnhart had a history of schizophrenia and depression and had been pulled from the bridge by police a week before her suicide. Her family settled a wrongful death claim against Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, the county's mental health and substance abuse treatment provider, over her treatment.

Sheriff Matt Phillips told the Public Safety Coordinating Council that what is needed is "more capable guardians," people who feel empowered to look after their fellow citizens and call emergency responders when they see someone on the bridge.

"We got citizens all over the place," the sheriff said. "Here's an opportunity to use them."

Boles crowned Astoria Regatta queen

Scholarships awarded to participants

By **ALEXIS WEISEND**
The Astorian

The bathroom of the Liberty Theatre was packed with curling irons, hairbrushes and excited girls in floor-length blue dresses.

Family and friends helped the girls do their makeup and hair while others practiced their speeches in the mirror. The girls offered advice and reassurance to each other.

They had been waiting for this moment for almost a year.

ASTORIA REGATTA

The Grand Land Parade takes place at noon on Saturday downtown.

For a full Regatta schedule, go to: astoriaregatta.com

The Astoria Regatta held the queen's coronation Wednesday night, crowning Leah Boles, who is entering her senior year at Seaside High School.

"I have no words to describe what an honor this is, especially being surrounded by such a group of amazing women," Boles said. "It's truly been an amazing experience."

One of Oregon's oldest traditions, the Astoria Regatta started in 1894 to celebrate the return of fish-

ermen from Alaska. The annual tradition has only been interrupted by World War I, the Astoria fire of 1922, World War II and the coronavirus pandemic.

Girls from local high schools interview with the Astoria Regatta Association to become princesses on the Regatta court. The princesses write speeches based on the Regatta theme and deliver them at community events.

On stage at the queen's coronation at the Liberty, the princesses give their speeches one last time. With this year's theme being "Just Wanna Have Fun," the princesses spoke about entertainment.

The judges choose a queen based on her public speaking skills and ability to answer questions.



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Leah Boles was crowned Astoria Regatta queen Wednesday night at the Liberty Theatre.

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