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many significant — that were ultimately approved by commissioners and, later, Florence City Council.

The result was a significantly less difficult procedure for developers to navigate, which should cost less and require fewer steps to complete than the previous system.

2019 also saw a renewed focus on the numerous committees which advise and consult with the city. These committees are made up of residents that volunteer their time to learn about the issues related to the committees they serve on and then to share their observations with the Florence City Council.

The selection of individuals chosen to serve on advisory bodies starts with an application process and ends with the mayor making final determinations as to who will serve, after nominal consultations with other councilors. This process is codified in City Code, Title 2, Chapter 1, and led to the concern expressed by some councilors that the process was unfair, and the individuals serving on committees should be voted on by all council members.

The impact these committees can have on the end result of the process related to their deliberations was clear in a number of situations this year, but was perhaps most evident in the controversy surrounding the installation of the “Stitching Time, Weaving Cultures” mural.

The Florence Public Art Committee (PAC) spent more than a year creating a call to artists, reviewing submissions and finally selecting an artist to create and install a mural on the Central Lincoln PUD building at the corner of Quince Street and Highway 126.

This process was extensive and, while the public was encouraged to be part of every step of the selection process, initial participation was limited. The mural became a point of contention as certain people felt the subject matter and style used by artists from Marino-Heidel Studios in Portland was not well-suited for Florence.

This dislike for the mural led to a clash between Mayor Joe Henry and Councilor Joshua Greene on the content and funding for the overall subject of public art in Florence. The two have different perspectives on the importance of public art and their opinions often drove the debate to verbal attacks — at times of a personal nature — during public meetings.

Originally, the funding for the purchase of the mural was part of the budget for the Florence Urban Renewal Agency (FURA), which received significant negative feedback for funding the project.

This funding process changed after the tumult surrounding the “Stitching Time” mural, as Henry spearheaded a successful effort to clearly separate PAC from FURA — effectively eliminating any future funding for PAC from that source. During this time, Greene resigned from his ex-officio position on FURA.

In June, Florence City Council approved the City of Florence’s Biennial Budget proposal of nearly \$60 million in public expenditures over the next two years.

One of the most unifying news stories of 2019 was the arrival in April of “The Wall that Heals.” The 350-foot replica of the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington brought together many in the community, some who have served and others who have lost loved ones during service. Having the opportunity to see the thousands of names carved into the obsidian surface of the memorial drew thousands to the athletic field behind Siuslaw Middle School.

The outpouring of support that was the result of the visit led to an increased awareness of the issues faced by local veterans, many of whom still deal with the pain and loss they encountered during not only the conflict in Vietnam, but also the many battles fought in other places and other times.

There were also some local issues that had a national, or even

international component to them, which brought them to the attention of Florence residents.

The ongoing debate over the severity of climate change led to protests outside Florence City Hall and along Highway 101, advocating for a formal position by the city acknowledging the dangers of climate change and formulating a policy to concretely address

“It feels like such an honor to have the community vote me in. I’m looking forward to working with the city as a whole and hopefully we can make good decisions as a council.”

— Geraldine Lucio, Jan. 7, 2019
Florence City Councilor

the issue. To date, while certainly promoting awareness, the protests have not been successful in achieving any specific or official action by the city.

There were many opportunities for visitors and officials to come to Florence to participate in conferences and meetings during 2019. One of these was the Oregon Coastal Caucus Economic Conference, which took place in August and featured forums led by Oregon senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley and DeFazio. This year’s conference was entitled “Infrastructure Investment — A Collaborative Approach” and featured a wide array of panels and speakers. There were panels that targeted a specific sector of the economy, such as winemaking, fishing and farming, to discussions centered on emergency preparedness and the issue of improving broadband infrastructure needs for rural coastal communities.

The presentations made at the conference explored the many avenues that are available for coastal communities, business owners and municipalities to take advantage of the growing interest in Oregon as a place to start a business or to raise a family. There were also workshops addressing the changing educational needs of students and the ways in which state assistance can be garnered in support of many types of projects designed to increase tourism and investment in the state.

As the area officially begins 2020 and the next decade, here is a breakdown of some the other stories that helped define the Siuslaw Region in 2019 ...

NEW CITY COUNCIL SWORN IN

The first Florence City Council meeting of 2019 was held Jan. 7 at the Florence Events Center. Mayor Joe Henry welcomed members of the community, many of whom had gathered to greet the new city council.

The retiring council agenda was short and more of a formality, with the primary purpose to provide outgoing Councilor Susy Lacer the opportunity to share her thoughts on her tenure on the council with the crowd and to accept very positive comments from fellow board members.

Councilor Joshua Greene spoke of his appreciation for her work over the past four years and Councilor Ron Preisler, along with Henry, spoke of Lacer’s willingness to accept committee duties and her commitment to the community.

“I want to thank her for her years of dedicated service to our community and to the city council,” Henry said. “She has been instrumental in helping us to get through some interesting decisions along the way.

The second part of the meeting began with the administration of the oath of office to Henry, who was re-elected as mayor, Councilor Woody Woodbury, who was elected after he was appointed to the role in January 2018, and Councilor Geraldine Lucio, a first-time candidate.

Woodbury and Lucio won the open seats on the council in a race that had created a controversy in late 2018 among the electorate due to perceived partisan overtones.

The mayor welcomed both councilors warmly and the first work of the 2019 Florence City Council began.

“A SMALL PICTURE OF HOMELESSNESS”

In the beginning of 2019, the

Florence Emergency Cold Weather shelter had been seeing dips in the numbers of guests who arrived, while Siuslaw Outreach Services (SOS) saw a small decline in those requesting services. However, the Florence Police Department had seen numbers remain flat, and the Lane County Point in Time homeless count had seen steady increases over the years — but the data was incomplete, showing only one sheltered homeless person and 22 unsheltered, far beyond the lower rates that other organizations had been seeing.

“Sometimes the people don’t trust government,” said Lane County Human Services Supervisor Alexandria Dreher. “If they’re homeless, and they’re in a crisis and not interested in completing a survey, or they don’t trust the system, it’s not worth it to give information.”

The problems with finding an accurate count of a homeless population in the Siuslaw region was just one component in the myriad of issues that governments, nonprofits and residents face when addressing the issue.

In a three-part series examining the issue in Florence, the Siuslaw News spoke with a wide variety of voices in an attempt to come to an understanding of the issue, including spending an evening at the Emergency Cold Weather Shelter and speaking to homeless guests who expressed the problems of living on the streets in the region. Siuslaw News also spoke with various institutions, such as the SOS, the Cold Weather Shelter, Lane County and the Florence Police Department.

There were many organizations looking to solve the issue, with some headway being made. A small but dedicated group, called First Step, was creating a handful of transitional housing units, and those have since been deemed successful. The city has been working on creating more housing opportunities, and well-established programs like Florence Food Share were working to bring sustenance to those in need — home or no home.

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