

Residents grumble about flood-control demands

County changes a result of federal insurance requirements

By Jack Heffernan
Cannon Beach Gazette

Clatsop County may make alterations to land use rules this year that would affect several hundred property owners in flood-prone areas, citing new federal insurance requirements.

The county has participated in the National Flood Insurance Program since the 1970s. For residents to remain eligible for the 50-year-old program that guards against flood losses, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has required that the county adopt updated flood-hazard maps and make revisions to its land use rules.

As a result, roughly 700 property owners in unincorporated areas of the county may be required to, among other things, pay for a permit when developing their land or seek approval before altering structures.

FEMA has required the county to make the revisions by June 20. The agency first released the updated maps and flood-insurance requirements in 2016.

The county Planning Com-



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Some residents are unhappy about potential county land use changes to comply with federal flood insurance demands.

mission voted 4-1 on March 20 — with Commissioner Thomas Merrell the sole opposing vote — to recommend the changes to county commissioners, who will have the final say. Prior to the vote, several people spoke in opposition to the changes during a packed public hearing at the Judge Guy Boyington Building. In addition, county staff have fielded more than 200 complaints from residents since notices of the changes were mailed out in February.

Throughout the hearing, Bruce Francis, the Planning Commission's chairman, reiterated that he sympathized with the residents but felt it was necessary to maintain access to the flood-insurance program.

"We're confronted with a problem that has been placed upon us to make a decision for the overall good of the majority, hopefully, to obtain flood insurance," Francis said while addressing the crowd's disapproval. "Maybe it is that

we need to be attacking the political angles of this, rather than making that request here at this hearing."

A few of the residents suggested the county break away from the national insurance program altogether.

"They've got you by the throat on the insurance aspect, but I would suggest that you think about altering an approach on insurance," said Henry Willener, who owns property south of Seaside. "Maybe get Washington and

Idaho — forget California — and form a consortium to have your own insurance group."

Along with the recommendation for county commissioners to approve the rule changes, the Planning Commission advised that county legal experts explain the changes and work with the federal agency to roll back some of the regulations.

The most unpopular change discussed at the meeting would be an expansion of the definition of developments that would require property owners to pay an \$85 permit fee. Previously exempt activities — including minor repairs to a structure that don't alter its size, new driveways that don't change the topography of the land or signs placed by local public agencies — would require the permit once the rules go into effect.

"They come up with these ideas. They force it on the little guy," said Edwin Owen, a farm owner. "I'm just afraid that you start changing the rules, not only do I have to go beg for a permit, but then you start talking about, 'Oh, you can and can't do this,' you know, on a farm. It just bothers me."

But it's unlikely FEMA will buckle on the expanded permit requirements, Community Development Director Gail Henrikson said. She called the permit requirements

"non-negotiable," along with mandates to seek permission for structure updates in certain areas.

"Frankly, staff isn't any more enthused about having to go through this process and working language changes into the code any more than you want to see them there," Henrikson said.

She said staff has worked with FEMA to determine how much latitude the county has in reworking the changes, citing an email the agency sent to the county earlier this month.

"FEMA's stand is that the exclusions that Clatsop County has offered in their definition of development makes their definition of development noncompliant with the National Flood Insurance Program," wrote Roxanne Pilkenton, a flood plain management specialist for the agency. "FEMA takes the definition of development seriously and, currently, push back from the state of Idaho has them facing suspension if they continue to allow exemptions that are expressly included in the definition of development."

County commissioners are tentatively scheduled to hold a public hearing on the subject in April. If that hearing is continued, commissioners would hold another hearing in May, when they would potentially adopt the changes.

Seeking safety for city's visitors

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preparedness, Althea Rizzo of the Oregon Office of Emergency Management took a hard look at the hotels she stayed at after her presentations.

Some hotels had evacuation information for a tsunami in the room. Others didn't. Some had signs showing an escape route. Many didn't. When she would chat with front desk clerks about what to do in a disaster, some thought there was nothing to do to prepare. "It's very hit and miss along the coast," Rizzo said. "And we have a long way to go."

Rizzo, a state geohazards program coordinator, urges hotels to train staff on the basics of tsunamis and to take specific steps to prepare, such as food storage and evacuation drills. She also suggests hotels share evacuation information with guests through emails that confirm room reservations.

But engaging with the hospitality industry has not always been easy. Out of 20 sessions she conducted, only one member of the industry showed.

Some of the reluctance stems from a lagging fear that talking about tsunamis could deter tourism, she said. But often what keeps hotels from being prepared is a lack of time and resources.

"We can tell hotels they should have resources, but then those supplies need to be maintained and purchased — another cost in an already difficult industry," she said.

Tiffany Brown, the emergency coordinator in Clatsop County, said she thinks attitudes are slowly changing locally.

"We're seeing a shift. As the community gets their head around this threat, the mindset is shifting. It's shifting from, 'We don't want to deter them from coming to the coast,' to, 'because awareness is growing, we have an obligation to educate them,'" she said. "This is important because they come in contact with our most vulnerable population, which in this instance means people not familiar with the area."

Local efforts

Greg Swedenborg, the general manager of The Waves Ocean Front Lodging in Cannon Beach, always



COLIN MURPHEY/EO MEDIA GROUP

An employee at The Waves hotel in Cannon Beach holds up an example of the tsunami evacuation information in guest rooms.

knew tsunami danger was present on the coast.

But his journey to start preparing got kicked into high gear after The New Yorker published a piece in 2015 about the threat of a Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake. Between community discussion and seeing increased tsunami safety signs around town, preparedness was brought to the forefront.

"There was definitely a spike in community interest after that article. I think that's when (hospitality) started really getting proactive," he said.

Swedenborg reworked the emergency protocol with his employees and started putting evacuation maps and information in guest books — a practice that has become standard in most hotels in the city.

Some, like Beck-Sweeney, have gone further by providing go-bags for her employees, as well as encouraging homeowners to purchase go-bags to put in vacation homes for guests.

Communication and more consistent employee training are areas Beck-Sweeney and Swedenborg cited for improvement.

"We're so spread out, there is no way to immediately reach everyone in an emergency," Beck-Sweeney said. "But we knock on doors. We know how to track people down."

Preparing has a cost, whether it be in the time it takes to evaluate procedures or in emergency supplies for guests.

"Being a small business, we just have to make the time to get this done. There's always a million things to do, and it has to be a priority," Swedenborg said. "We are doing better than we were, but we still have a long way to go."

How tiny homes could help beat crunch

Tiny from Page 1A

"It makes sense if it can pay for itself at a rate that makes sense for someone who works here," St. Denis said. "But if the rent is going to be \$1,700 to make it break even? That's not any help."

There could also be new costs on the horizon.

A state law that went into effect in January required the development of building codes for tiny homes. One of the changes reclassified tiny homes on wheels so they would no longer be considered RV's, creating additional challenges for how they could be transported into the city.

Keeping tiny homes mobile was never part of the city's original vision. But acquiring special permits and trailers could influence the overall cost of the project. Questions about whether tiny homes no longer classified as RVs can be placed in the RV Resort will also need to be answered.

"Tiny houses were able to be moved at one point easily. Now it's less easy to move," St. Denis said. "Is that viable? If so, what are the costs associated?"

Regulatory challenges have raised similar obstacles in communities across Oregon looking at tiny homes as a housing option.

Before moving forward, St. Denis is recommending that Cannon Beach have a formal financial analysis done by a housing specialist.

"I think folks are trying to make something happen," he said. "As we're getting closer to it, we're just asking, 'Did you think of this?'"

With interest in tiny homes growing, John Morgan, the executive director of the Chinook Institute for Civic Leadership, organized a symposium to address some of the issues.

"Over the course of this last year, I kept getting peppered with questions about tiny houses," Morgan said. "One of the things that became evident to me was there wasn't a lot of good knowledge about what tiny houses even are."

While the symposium's purpose was to help cities and other interested agencies understand land use and the affordable housing crisis, Morgan said confusion about building code changes quickly became the theme of the event.

Sarah Stebbins, state chapter leader of the American Tiny House Association, said no longer classifying tiny homes as RVs has had "huge" effects.

"Well over half of the tiny homes being constructed are



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Cannon Beach is looking at tiny homes at the RV Resort off of Elk Land Road.

'Let's say you are in the process of building a tiny house on wheels. Because your house is no longer considered an RV, you will not be able to get the same RV financing or insurance.'

Sarah Stebbins,
State chapter leader of the
American Tiny House Association

on wheels. Builders are threatening to leave the state. Some have done so," Stebbins said. "Let's say you are in the process of building a tiny house on wheels. Because your house is no longer considered an RV, you will not be able to get the same RV financing or insurance."

Dan Bryant, project director for SquareOne Villages in Eugene, is one tiny home activist and manager feeling the impact of other changes.

His project came out of a need to address a growing homelessness issue in Eugene



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The tiny home project is on hold.

in 2012. His organization, which now manages three tiny home communities, was largely supportive of the new state law because it helped create safety and building standards conducive for homes less than 400 square feet.

But recent changes from state building and fire officials don't allow sleeping lofts in tiny homes due to fire safety concerns. Bryant argues such changes are too restrictive and affect overall affordability. He and other tiny home advocates are pushing for the codes concerning lofts

to be amended next legislative session.

Eliminating lofts as an option reduces the number of people who can be housed, affecting the homes affordability, he said.

"When you look at it in those terms, there is a true human cost," Bryant said.

While several aspects about tiny homes remain in flux, city councilors in Cannon Beach still believe the small units could help with the housing crunch.

"It's not a solution," Mayor Sam Steidel said. "It's a tool in the toolbox."



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