

Council rejects affordable housing code amendments

Councilors claim amendments did little to 'ensure affordability'

By Brenna Visser
Cannon Beach Gazette

In a 3-2 vote, the City Council on April 10 decided to reject proposed code amendments intended to encourage affordable housing.

Mike Clark of Coaster Properties and former City Planner Rainmar Bartl wanted the city to reduce parking and landscaping requirements, as well as increase height restrictions in the residential zone designated for multifamily housing. The amendment would have also allowed multifamily housing in a commercial zone as an outright use.



The changes would have only applied to developers willing to put a deed restriction on a project that would forbid the apartments from turning into vacation rentals or condominiums.

The idea came as Clark was looking into ways to rebuild the Sea Lark apartments that burned down last winter. Clark was granted a parking variance so he could expand the complex from four to eight units without increasing the number of parking spots. But he wanted the City Council to look at long-term solutions for developers, Bartl said.

While the council affirmed affordable housing as a priority, some councilors decided the proposed changes did little to provide any kind of guarantee units would be affordable.

"If the purpose is to have some affordable housing, then we need to have more in the ordinance than just relaxing building restrictions," said City Councilor George Vetter, who voted against the amendments.

The council followed the footsteps of the Planning Commission, which in February rejected the proposal due to concerns about how the changes would ensure affordability, as well as the impact to the town's aesthetic with higher roof heights. Commissioners were also concerned parking changes could make spaces harder to find in a town where parking is already at a premium.

"To me there's nothing in this that would assure this would be affordable housing,"

Commissioner Lisa Kerr said in February. "The proponents are all people involved in development and commercial endeavors. That's fine — but the way it's written here is a disaster waiting to happen. I don't think how any of this could lead to affordable housing."

Bartl argued reducing the city's parking requirements would be a way to entice more developers to build by allowing them to maximize the number of units on the property. A study by the Victoria Transport Policy Institute in British Columbia found that one parking space per affordable housing unit increases costs by 12.5 percent, which eventually translates into higher rent.

Councilors Nancy McCarthy and Mike Benefield also voted against the amendments Tuesday, fearing that without any form of rent restriction requirement the changes would lead to developers

tearing down and rebuilding single-family homes to rent at market prices. Benefield also had concerns about how the changes would affect the "character of Cannon Beach."

By raising the roof-line limit from 28 feet to 32 feet, properties would be following the same guidelines the city already approves for motels. Developers could build three stories to include more units, which ultimately drives down the rent charged at the end of the project, according to Bartl.

Bartl argued the deed restriction banning short-term rentals and condos acts as a control by taking away two major incentives that drive the high-end home market.

Mayor Sam Steidel and City Councilor Brandon Ogilvie, who both voted for the changes, argued having more multifamily housing would help address affordable housing issues by increasing density.

"We just need more housing. Housing in general is also a need, and regulatory changes are our best option to try to get more development," Steidel said. "Maybe it will help (affordable housing), maybe it won't, but it'll never happen unless we try."

While Bartl recognized there was no way to guarantee rents would be affordable, the point of the amendments was to find a way to increase the chances of a developer being interested in building housing in Cannon Beach at a time when land and construction costs are soaring.

"I'm rather disheartened by this conversation. You've spent five years telling the community you want to do something about affordable housing," Bartl said. "Nothing has happened. This is the easiest thing that anybody can do, and evidently most of you can't do it ... You have to take some risks."



BRENNA VISSER/CANNON BEACH GAZETTE

Georgia Gerber's "Tufted Puffins," a sculpture outside Cannon Beach City Hall. The sculpture is included in the Oregon Coast Art Trail.

Public art trail coming to Oregon

Oregon Coast Visitor Center launches project

By Brenna Visser
Cannon Beach Gazette

As a modern homage to the Oregon Trail, the Oregon Coast Visitors Association is developing a public art trail that will stretch from Astoria to the California border.

The idea of the program is to connect and promote existing public statues, murals and more in each of the Oregon Coast's 27 communities. The visitors association is working to catalogue these pieces to create a comprehensive map of all the art in the public sphere for a self-guided tour by next year.

Some of what would be featured in Clatsop County includes the Astoria Column, the Lewis and Clark statue at the Seaside Turnaround, and the tufted puffin sculpture by Cannon Beach City Hall.

"The goal of this project is to help residents and visitors connect with artists, gain a deeper sense of place, and improve artists' livelihoods," said Marcus Hinz, the visitors association's executive director.

Part of the inspiration came from a desire to connect and elevate the work artists have long been doing on the coast into one cohesive guide. Kevan Ridgway, the chairman of the market-

ing committee at the Cannon Beach Chamber of Commerce, is using this year to gather any documentation he can find about coastal artists and taking community suggestions about what should be featured on the trail.

There are only 10 cities along the coast without any form of public art. An objective for this project is to work on ways to find funding to introduce art into these communities. One of the ways Ridgway plans to do this is by partnering with the environmental cleanup group SOLVE, which would contribute materials for marine debris-related art to make the endeavor more cost-effective for the artists and the towns.

"Public art is a form of community expression," Ridgway said. "So for visitors, public art is a great way to learn about a place. Hopefully the Oregon Coast Art Trail will entice patrons of the arts to wander into local galleries, inquire about local theater performances, or plan a future visit to explore more of the art trail."

While the ultimate goal is to encourage visitors to visit the area in the fall, spring and winter months, Ridgway believes it will contribute just as much for the residents of the coast, he said.

"This will connect visitors and residents with artists," Ridgway said. "We don't want to do something that doesn't add value for the residents."

Internal disagreements stall remodel efforts

City Hall from Page 1A

Mayor Sam Steidel worried the bond would not pass with so many others expected on the ballot this year. A bond campaign, he said, could also influence the odds of passing bonds for larger capital projects that have long been promised to voters, like developing South Wind, affordable housing and purchasing the old Cannon Beach Elementary School.

"I'm worried we say we are going to promise all these other things on the citizen survey, and now all of a sudden we're saying, 'Let's get another City Hall,'" Steidel said.

St. Denis argued for acting this year because bond

pricing and construction costs will only go up, eventually making the bond more expensive. He also feared voters will have tax fatigue after weighing the other bonds in November.

Part of what has stalled remodels and reconstruction efforts has been an internal disagreement about where a new City Hall should be built.

Many, like City Councilor George Vetter, believe City Hall should be relocated to the city's 55-acre South Wind site above the tsunami inundation zone. Vetter wants to sell the land where City Hall now sits to help offset the costs of rebuilding at the other site.

"This is an opportunity to take a step (toward South Wind)," Vetter said. "It will

cost more money. But I don't think it will be much more of a challenge at South Wind than here."

But St. Denis said building at South Wind would make the price tag for the bond skyrocket once factors like installing utilities and state transportation requirements for an intersection are calculated. High costs are partially why it has taken so long to develop South Wind, he argued.

Steidel and City Councilor Mike Benefield took a different position, arguing it is culturally significant to have city services visible and in the center of town.

"You have to weigh public access versus preparing for a one-time wipeout," Benefield said.

St. Denis argues there are ways of designing and rebuilding City Hall east of where it sits now that would "buy down risk" by making it cost-effective. At 60 feet above sea level, with two stories and a reinforced foundation, a new City Hall to the east could be seismically up to code and survive most tsunamis.

But educating the public about the realities of either option will take some work, St. Denis said.

"We need to stop thinking about the worst-case scenario. For three years, we have been saying we have to go to South Wind," he said. "And we did a good job. But it's only one option. It's time to challenge that paradigm."

Councilors divided on options for South Wind

South Wind from Page 1A

Steidel, who four years ago built his mayoral campaign on working to relocate essential city services like police, schools and City Hall to South Wind, hopes a recently reinstalled steering committee will help decide what steps need to be taken to move forward.

"South Wind's a problem of our own building, but it's a valuable piece of property and we should be doing something to get it going," the mayor said.

Origins

During the fall of 2013, the city purchased the site from The Campbell Group as Cannon Beach Elementary School was closed due to funding and tsunami safety concerns. The seller, who has an interest in education, saw selling the property as a way of keeping a school in Cannon Beach, said Mark Morgans, the Lewis & Clark Timberlands area manager, who facilitated the \$359,000 sale.

Modeling after communities affected by the 2011 tsunami in Japan, the City Council started to explore ways the property could serve a dual purpose as a school and emergency shelter. But momentum came to a halt after the cost estimate of creating a required intersection at U.S. Highway 101 added more than \$2 million to a project already saddled

with around \$3 million in other utility costs.

Part of the reason city councilors were blindsided by the price was due to the fact little traffic research had been conducted before they decided to buy it, Steidel said. The goal was to acquire the land while it was at its discounted price, leading the city to buy the property more quickly than is standard.

"There was not good research on our part about the road and access issues," Steidel said.

Another roadblock appeared after the Seaside School District denied the Cannon Beach Academy its charter twice in 2014, setting back the timeline. Initially, there was agreement that the school district would staff the school if the city built the structure, Steidel said, but those plans were eventually taken off the table, leaving questions about where the school will get funding to build.

"Had the school district accepted the charter, I think the timing would have shifted," Steidel said. "In the last four years they could have focused on fundraising for a new building instead of getting started up."

Different perspectives

With the school in flux, discussions about South Wind began to focus more on emergency management, such as putting a mass care site at the property. As afford-

able housing concerns gained a higher profile, talk of housing entered the dialogue.

Some, like City Councilors Mike Benefield and George Vetter, see putting housing at the site as a way to generate revenue for funding other projects. Others, like Steidel, believe the land should be reserved strictly for essential services. The council was split earlier this month about whether or not City Hall should be on the site.

City Councilor Nancy McCarthy has raised concerns over how much the city should be involved with any construction related to a site that could turn into a school, and recommends that the City Council wait until an possible emergency manager is hired before making large decisions.

Morgans, who helped design the master plan four years ago and volunteered to come back to the steering committee, said whatever is decided needs to be centered around why the property was sold: to build a school.

"I get that staff changes, and visions change. But I think it's going to take going back to ground zero, asking ourselves who needs to be here versus who wants to be," Morgans said. "Put the footprint down for those other

uses and make sure the kids aren't out of luck."

Moving forward

For now, City Manager Bruce St. Denis said \$400,000 has been budgeted to put into a reserve for South Wind. There is also money budgeted to do a site analysis for a possible new City Hall in response to discussions councilors had earlier this month about replacing the aging building. Plans for any work related to a school are still on hold.

"The original intent was for a school, and the school district has gone in a different direction at this time, trying to consolidate everything in Seaside," St. Denis said.

While some of the problems seem insurmountable, City Planner Mark Barnes, who was on staff when South Wind was purchased, said developing land of this size is always going to be a slow and complicated process.

"Honestly I wouldn't characterize these as roadblocks. Developing land like this is expensive. Nothing peculiar about it — it's just hard and expensive," Barnes said. "It's not without solution. There are just decisions that have to be made, and that takes a slow, deliberative process — the way it should be."

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