

Candidates talk rentals, rabbits in Cannon Beach

Issues debated at election forum

By Brenna Visser
Cannon Beach Gazette

Candidates for City Council generally share a common vision: preserve the character and charm of Cannon Beach.

But when asked at an election forum Thursday, Oct. 4, about how they would manage key issues which define that character — vacation rentals, parking and how to contain a growing bunny population — their views diverged.

City Councilor Mike Benefield, Greg Swedenborg, a hotelier and Cannon Beach Chamber of Commerce board president, and Robin Risley, a real estate agent and planning commissioner, are vying for two seats on the council in November. Mayor Sam



City Council candidates Mike Benefield, Robin Risley and Greg Swedenborg speak at an election forum in Cannon Beach.

Steidel is running for his seat unopposed.

They were joined by state House District 32 candidates Tiffany Mitchell, a Democrat, and Brian Halvorsen, an Independent. Republican Vineeta Lower was invited but did not

attend. The forum was sponsored by The Daily Astorian.

On some issues, like the bunny infestation frustrating neighbors in Tolovana, candidates were equally stumped.

“But I think the problem lies in the eye of the beholder,” Benefield said. “You either love them or hate them.”

But on others, like regulating vacation rentals, the candidates disagreed on approaches.

Benefield advocated for a proposal about to go before the Planning Commission that would eliminate the five-year rental permit that allows some homeowners nightly rentals.

“It’s putting a commercial business in a residential neighborhood,” he said.

Risley instead felt the city should do more to crack down on illegal rentals, which she believes will happen once the city hires a code enforcement officer.

Swedenborg, however, feels the number of rentals registered with the city is fair. Only about 30 homes have the five-year unlimited permit, and the revenue generated from those rentals benefits the city significantly, he said. In-

stead, he would propose raising the annual fee for the permit from \$350 to \$3,000 and suggest using the revenue to fund more affordable housing solutions.

“These houses we’re talking about are designed to be rentals. We can’t turn back the clock on that,” Swedenborg said.

Candidates also differed on how they would address parking during the city’s peak tourism season.

“A flashing sign that says we’re full?” Benefield joked. “Unfortunately we’re a beautiful place, and the rest of the world is finding out. I’m not sure what to do about that.”

Benefield supports creating a shuttle system between town and the U.S. Highway 26 junction, as well as parking at South Wind. Risley leaned more toward creating a committee to study the issue, as well as leveraging underuti-

lized parking lots at businesses like the Cannon Beach Community Church or banks while they are closed.

Swedenborg said he wasn’t sure of the solution, but advocated for paid parking in city-owned parking lots. By his estimates, the three lots could raise about \$500,000 a year to fund whatever option the council decides.

Mitchell and Halvorsen also chimed in about the impact of tourism in the region, saying each would work on the state level to rework the way lodging tax revenue gets distributed to cities.

“A lot of people already know we’re here,” Mitchell said. “So let’s cut back a little on promotion and reinvest in things like our roads, our schools ... which would not only be a benefit to the communities, but would ease the tax burden on those who live here.”

Officials may request a bond measure to make City Hall repairs

City Hall from Page 1A

Issues surrounding City Hall have been documented for more than a decade.

Multiple renovation plans to fix problems with air ventilation and structural defects have been drawn up, but shelved due to high costs and lack of feasibility.

Conversations about replacing City Hall resurfaced at the urging of City Manager Bruce St. Denis, who has concerns about the building in a tsunami or earthquake. The building would be vulnerable to a minor seismic event or a medium-to-large sized tsunami, St. Denis said.

Making the building resistant to a major earthquake would be a priority no matter which location is chosen. But some, like City Councilor George Vetter, see placing the new City Hall at South Wind as the gateway to finally developing the property that has sat vacant since 2013.

Higher costs associated with developing South Wind, such as buying highway access and installing new utilities from scratch, could be offset by selling the land on where City Hall sits on Gower, Vetter argues — land that could be priced at a premium given its proximity to Hemlock Street.

Installing utilities for a City Hall at South Wind could be the catalyst for other devel-



Damage can be seen to the foundation of the City Hall building in Cannon Beach.

opment, such as a new school building, he said.

“I think if we keep (City Hall) here, we are abandoning the South Wind site,” Vetter said. “The City Council needs to take the lead to go up there. I don’t see how we could get a bond measure here and then get another for development at South Wind. We’re turning our backs on South Wind if we don’t take this opportunity.”

St. Denis said he under-

stood Vetter’s argument, but cautioned that no matter the location, a City Hall serving a town the size of Cannon Beach will never be big enough to be considered a long-term shelter after a disaster.

“I don’t want to give the impression to people that they can go there and stay there for two weeks,” St. Denis said.

Others, like City Councilor Mike Benefield and Mayor Sam Steidel, believe there’s an

inherent value in keeping City Hall in the heart of town. Most

of the structural issues could be addressed at the existing location for the majority of seismic and tsunami events, they believe.

“What we do needs to be accessible to the public,” Steidel said. “It’s important to town character to have City Hall at the center.”

Benefield also fears moving City Hall to South Wind had the possibility of being “an uneconomic decision made just because we happen to own the land.”

Steidel is asking the architecture firm to study a third option — placing the police station at South Wind. Critical supplies and services could be stored and conducted while keeping City Hall accessible in town.

“Having police up there fits better for what we purchased the 55 acres for,” Steidel said.

No decisions will be made until after the City Council receives SRG’s price estimates for each scenario. A public comment period will be open

in January before city councilors make the final location decision mid-February to meet the May ballot deadline, St. Denis said.



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