

To make Seaside safer, we need to fix all the bridges

What makes a guy year-in, year-out keep fighting the tide — pun intended — and take a look at our city’s most sensitive topic: a tsunami that could kill thousands and leave thousands more homeless? Bringing up the subject of the Cascadia Subduction Zone megaquake and subsequent tsunami in Seaside is about as popular as a long bathroom line.

Yet geologist Tom Horning manages to sound the alarm while proposing sensible solutions that could save thousands of lives. He almost makes it sound easy: “Your first goal is to review the information, choose a scenario, set your goals and get going.”

I had read about the Seaside native first in Bonnie Henderson’s important book, “The Next Tsunami.”

Among emergency preparedness officials and seismic sleuths, this geologist is the first stop.

If you want to know exactly when the big one will hit, Horning’s answer is an unsatisfying, “No one knows.”

Maybe his own guess is as good as anyone’s. After all, it’s Horning who in 1995 held a seance at the Pacific Way in Gearhart and came up with a date the tsunami would strike. “I said it was going to hit in the summer of 2025,” Horning said. “July 23, 2025. I’ve done this method to try to get the lottery numbers, but it doesn’t work.”

It’s the very randomness of the earth beneath our feet that makes exact predictions impossible, Horning said. Add to that new geologic evidence that there is not necessarily a correlation between the size of the quake and the size of the tsunami.

“Short durations can result in large tsunamis,” he said, “We have to assume a large tsunami, at least a 55-foot wave, could strike at any time, and that’s what we should prepare for. We don’t have any patterns to tell us when. It might be a long time in the future, it might be a short time.”

The very complexity of the problem can be paralyzing.

SEEN FROM SEASIDE

By
R.J.
MARX



‘You have to figure out a way to break them out of the denial phase and into action.’

— Tom Horning, geologist

“When people are confronted with disaster scenarios, they stick their heads in the sand and deny,” he said. “They just can’t handle it. You have to figure out a way to break them out of the denial phase and into action.”

Seaside is functioning well as a “normal” city, Horning said. But there’s nothing normal about the quake and tsunami threat.

“This is an extraordinary thing,” he said. “Judging by the fact nothing’s happened tells me it’s too complicated an issue for the way the city’s structured. We need to change the way the city does business. Probably the most important thing is to create a disaster preparedness committee that prepares goals for the city that become permanent goals. And it needs to be done soon.”

Committee must address risk

Previous Seaside city administrations failed to address the tsunami risk, Horning said.

“Most of the lower part of the city will be demolished or extensively flooded and damaged,” Horning said. “Death rates for people caught within the flooded area will range from 15 to 99 percent.”

If there are 25,000 visitors in Seaside for the Fourth of July, the numbers could be harrowing.

The city could be expected to care for survivors for at least 20 days.

“For a while the city had a committee, but they were conventional,” Horning said. “They said the things we need to worry about were forest fires, windstorms or Hell’s Angels coming through town. No one was really geared to handling earthquakes and tsunamis.”

After abandoning that committee, the city has seen “short period of progress surrounded by long periods of nothing,” Horning said.

The first step, he said, is to assume the worst-case scenario and so plan for it. “The thing Seaside hasn’t done is undertaken this with the gravity of the disaster that’s going to hit,” he said. “They’ve been ignoring this.”

Horning looks to Japan and their “culture of preparedness” as a model.

“I’ve got numbers from Japanese studies that suggest for this kind of water depth — about 35 feet in Seaside — you can expect 50 to 99 percent fatality rates,” he said.

If Japan hadn’t prepared, he said, their fatality rates in 2011 after the Tohoku quake would have been 10 to 20 times worse. “They could have lost half a million people,” he said. “They lost 23,000. Two-hundred thousand to 400,000 people could have died, but they got a lot of them out of there.”

Bridge repair vital for survival

Once a group — Horning calls for a “blue-ribbon panel” — is formed to address the serious issues posed by the tsunami threat, attention should be drawn to the city’s water crossings.

“The thing that I think is most important by far is that the city should immediately begin replacing old bridges,” Horning said. “Much of the other stuff is relatively inconsequential compared to it. It’s that important. Bridges are 95 percent of the story.”



R.J. MARX PHOTO/SEASIDE SIGNAL

Seaside High School students practice walking the tsunami evacuation route this fall.

The quake, which will strike without warning, will lead to wave heights of 30 to 45 feet and higher. Seven out of 11 bridges will fall down in a tsunami, Horning said.

After the shaking people have 15 minutes to get to safety before the tsunami. “They’ve got to be to the hills before the water gets them,” Horning said.

How they get there is another story. All the warning signs put together won’t make up for one failed bridge.

A few years back, getting money to repair bridges was relatively easy, Horning said. Seaside petitioned the Federal Emergency Management Agency and received federal money to fix four bridges. But when other Oregon communities saw dollars repeatedly going to Seaside, politicians vied for the funds and despite the need, FEMA money dried up. It was up to Seaside to get in line for Department of Transportation funds, or worse, to foot the bill themselves.

“ODOT has a backlog of 6,400 bridges,” Horning said. “And everybody wants money to fix the bridge outside their town. Now we have to raise the money through ODOT, so we have to raise the money ourselves. Or maybe the state will turn over some money through their resiliency plan, which should be funded to the tune of \$200 or \$300 million every year.”

Horning said the city isn’t doing enough to reach out for those funds, and the money the city does have is being spent on costly non-disaster fixes.

“What bothers me is they don’t have bridge replacement as part of the city’s hazard mitigation strategies,” he said. “That’s a stupid philosophy. Bridges are the one thing that will save thousands of lives. If you’re not talking about replacing bridges, you can’t get that money.”

Horning is speaking to everybody who lives here, visits or passes through.

“It’s about saving lives,” he said. “If the big one hits, we can’t do much about our real estate. It will be lost. You’ll still own a parcel of land but no one will be able to build on it. We’ll all be broke. We won’t have a tax base. You can’t just instantly go in and replace broken sewer and water lines. How do you rebuild a town that took a century to build in a year? You can’t. The primary thing is to save lives. The things that are going to cause people to die are impediments to their safe evacuation.”

“You ask me why am I still working at this?” he continued. “Because I’m the guy with more information than anybody, therefore the responsibility lies more on my shoulders than anyone else. So I’m trying to convey that information. That’s been my role for the longest time: to bridge science and society.”

Scene and HeardCLAIRE LOVELL

In an age of technology, will our gadgets do us in?

My houseguests for their 50th high school reunion were fortunate enough to be in the yard when my visiting deer came to call. She left, but not in fear. I was glad someone could verify what I’ve written about since last summer. Also on the “wildlife” scene was the neighbor’s cat, having a lie-down in my bird feeder. My son and his friend drove her off, feeling sure she was waiting for an easy meal. I don’t know. Had I been her size, it looked like a comfortable spot to me, too!

It was fun to see the pictures from Ashland deer mingling with the populace there. I guess we’re all going back to nature.

Whenever I try to find a number in My Little Phone

Book, I end up trying to throw it across the room. Even looking for numbers which are there is frustrating. The categories often don’t make sense. A lot of people have cell phones now that are not listed. Maybe there should be a special section for them. We know there’s already too much info about everyone out there, but if it’s not a privacy issue, give us a break. Nothing is sacred anymore. It’s all hangin’ out for any technocrat to figure. It seems that our gadgets are going to do us in.

Recently, I read an ad in a magazine about the idea of adult immunization of whooping cough to protect the children — because the adult might be the carrier.



CLAIRE LOVELL

What’s happening anyway that all of yesterday seems to be thrown out? When I was in the nursing business so long ago, every newborn where I worked was scheduled for shots, beginning at the age of about three to six

months. I’ve forgotten the exact age. DPT or diphtheria, pertussis, (whooping cough) and tetanus shots were given in a series to the baby and there was not much discussion that I knew of. Later on, they were vaccinated for smallpox as well. When it was discovered, we gave them Salk vaccine for polio and later on, live Sabin vaccine. It was kind of taken for granted. Having graduated to geriatrics, I lost track of protocol, but what we did in the “old days” worked for us. I just wish we’d had measles vaccine then because one of my daughters was so sick with it as a teenager.

Before this column, I used to write many letters to the editor, during Max

Shafer’s long tenure. We had many views in common. I wrote them because I like to read about the tenor of interests around town or in the county, and give my own unsolicited — and often unwelcome — opinions. Today, I don’t care so much. I think the number of words in these present day views should be much less. There used to be a limit. In my old age, though I like to keep informed, it’s daunting to see line by line of ideas from one person. I do read the short letters but most of the others are way too discouraging. They’re like homework! I will give in if the subject matter indicated is timely but how many ways can you say,

“vote for kids?” Brevity is a useful tactic anytime. A good maxim might be “say it in 200 words or less.” (“Look who’s talking?”)

Will some smart person let me know what “threaded the needle” means — reporter speak for Hurricane Patricia going between two cities in Mexico? I wish those guys would learn English rather than their cute compositions of the moment. Some are self-evident. Others need defining as the outset. And why isn’t Anheuser pronounced “Ahn-hoyser?”

Laugh line:

The world only beats a path to your door when you’re in the bathroom.

Letters

Be fair

We are writing this letter because we disagree with the way the short term rentals in Gearhart has been reported. While I would suspect that The Daily Astorian is trying to be unbiased, the reporter has not interviewed anyone who rents out their home. “Why?” we ask.

Chad Sweet mentions that he has received letters of support on both sides of this issue. How many of the letters are in favor of restrictions, and how many are opposed? We don’t know. Isn’t it the reporter’s duty to make sure it is reported?

Also, we do agree that the number of short term rentals has increased in the last year or so. Readers should ask, as the reporter did not, how many have been rented for, say, five years or more. I suspect that the reporter will find that many homes have been rented for quite some time.

All we ask is that the reporter do his or her job. Be fair and honest with the reading public.

**Greg and Nancy Marshall
Gearhart**

Action needed

Open letter to the mayor and council members of the city of Gearhart: My husband and I have owned a home in Gearhart for nearly 20 years. When we purchased our

home, Gearhart was relatively unknown. Many home owners rented their homes to friends and relatives, or they used local real estate firms to handle their rentals.

This system has worked well until recently, when national and international real estate agencies discovered that many Gearhart homeowners were eager to rent their homes non-stop for high rental fees. Because of the abrupt entrance of nationwide rental agencies like Vacasa, the quiet and charm that once graced Gearhart has been interrupted. This situation is not reserved for holidays or weekends, it exists every day during the summer and into autumn.

We have a short term rental next door to our home, where we have been observing one bunch of renters packing up and leaving in the morning and another group showing up in the late afternoon after the cleaners have come and gone. Traffic has increased dramatically on our street, South Marion — a narrow, dead end street with little or no shoulder, where traffic flow is often impeded, as has been the case with garbage pickup.

Realistically, most rental agencies don’t know how many people are staying in any one rental, let alone how many cars, boats, trailers, or campers they have brought with them.

There has been talk of polling Gearhart homeowners. I believe there have been enough committees, emails, letters, and words of complaint by those of us who have been impacted by this sorry state of affairs, which often pits neighbor against neighbor, and has changed the very essence of our community. Now it is time for action, before next summer, when this situation will surely escalate as more and more homeowners are tempted to take the money these competitive rental agencies offer for renting their homes.

The mayor and city council members need to enact rules and regulations that are enforceable and have teeth, not \$10 parking tickets, but ones with consequences. Like other communities in our area, they should consider capping the number of short term rental units allowed in Gearhart, limit the number of occupants allowed in a rental unit, and set a minimum number of days a property may be rented. We urge the mayor and city councilors to act quickly so we won’t have another “lost summer.”

**Terry and Cathy Graff
Gearhart**

Good job, Gearhart

Real estate promoters can now set higher prices and win bigger

commissions for selling homes in Gearhart and Seaside that can be rented out on a short-term (weekend, more or less) basis. As the new absentee homeowner makes his investment “pay for itself,” he could care less about the peace and safety of the neighborhood now enduring incessant noise and traffic congestion.

This has been something new for Gearhart, where family groups and their friends have usually taken turns occupying vacation houses owned communally by their own relatives. Those groups, identified with a particular family, normally act responsibly and with consideration for the permanent residents in their midst.

Mutual respect between Gearhart’s permanent and seasonal residents is part of the character of the community, and has long been associated with the quality of life we enjoy in Gearhart. The growing number of new absentee rentals has shattered that venerable tradition.

The Gearhart Comprehensive Plan foresaw the problem a generation ago: it clearly states, under “Residential Development Policies,” that “The city will recognize the importance of the city’s residential neighborhoods and the need to protect them from the negative impacts of the transient rental of property, and to discourage increased levels of traffic and similar disruptions.”

Immediately following that policy is a statement of “Commercial Development Policies” to “limit commercial activity,” “prevent the city from becoming a tourist destination,” and limit commercial development to what “supports the needs of the residents of Gearhart,” ending with a declaration that “The city shall not designate additional property for commercial development.”

Can anyone deny that short-term rental is commercial activity? Doesn’t the property owner derive income from that activity? And, if a businessperson can now suddenly make the specious claim that providing a historic setting for weddings is a form of short-term rental, then surely the real short-term rentals must be seen as business activity, and subject to city regulation and limitation.

Unfortunately, the ordinances implementing those Comprehensive Plan policies have not yet been enacted. Better late than never, the city council is now busy with such an ordinance, drafting it with careful comparison to ordinances successfully enacted by other cities.

Three cheers for the Gearhart City Council, and three cheers for Mayor Dianne Widdop for appointing Paulina Cockrum, a seasoned