

Landowners fume over fire fee

Hundreds face new assessments

By Jack Heffernan
EO Media Group

Landowners in Clatsop County are challenging a fee assessed by the state for fire protection, citing improper classification and a lack of advance notice.

In early January, roughly 2,300 landowners in the Astoria Forest Protection District were notified that their properties, designated as forestlands in July, would be assessed an annual fee for fire protection as part of their property taxes. But some argue either that their properties should not qualify as forestland or they had not received proper notice.

The Oregon Department of Forestry provides fire protection to forest and grazing lands through money from both the state general fund and fees it collects from forestland property owners.

Overall, roughly 4,750 lots were added as forestlands, while 1,200 lots — including 600 owners — were removed from the list.

The current annual tax rate in the Astoria district is \$1.21 per acre, and owners of forestlands are charged a minimum assessment of \$18.75 each year. A \$47.50 surcharge can be added if property owners build additional structures on their land.

Wildfire efforts

The money collected from these fees fund wildfire efforts in the state. Rates could vary each year based on the number of wildfires the Department of Forestry responds to in a given year and the number of people paying into the system, Astoria District Forester Dan Goody said. The department does not receive any additional revenue from the assessments.

While many of these property owners also pay taxes to local fire districts that respond to structural fires, the Department of Forestry's assessment is based on lands it would protect during a wildfire, Goody said. Therefore, many property owners who don't have many trees or vegetation on their land may also be subjected to these taxes.

But some property owners have been confused about the distinction. Tim Mancill, who has owned a 2.36 acre lot on North Wahanna Road in Seaside for almost 13 years that also includes his home, was



DANNY MILLER/EO MEDIA GROUP

Tim Mancill says he was notified in January that he will have to pay an extra fee to the state on his Seaside property for fire protection. Mancill has lived on his Seaside property for 13 years.

assessed \$66.25 for his property. Much of his property includes wetlands, which are submerged underwater for much of the year, along with some willow trees.

"I think they're out for a money grab," Mancill said. "Don't they have better things to do with their time?"

Goody said people would be surprised about the kinds of land that allow wildfires to spread quickly. In his experience, even lands such as cranberry bogs have caught fire, he said.

Astoria district

In October 2013, a fire assessment committee began its review of the Astoria district. The six-member committee included appointments made by the Department of Forestry, the Oregon State Fire Marshal, the Oregon State University Extension Service and three by the Clatsop County Board of Commissioners. Following a review, the committee made recommendations about what areas could be reclassified as forestlands.

"I don't mean any disrespect to any of the folks living on the lands, but there is over 100 years of experience studying fire risks on the committee," Goody said.

Two public meetings and one hearing in May in Astoria and Seaside produced no oral or written public comments, Goody said. The final classification was recorded by the county in July.

Surprise

The problem: some property owners whose lands were

reclassified were completely unaware that this process took place.

"I was surprised and was like, 'What the heck is this?'" Mancill said about the moment he received the notice in January.

Mancill was one of about 70 landowners who attended a town hall meeting in Seaside on Saturday, Feb. 4, to discuss the issue. The town hall, organized by state Sen. Betsy Johnson and state Rep. Deborah Boone, featured local officials and members of the Department of Forestry, as well as concerned landowners. At times, the town hall became disorganized with attendees shouting out of turn, multiple people who were there said.

"There were so many questions," said Coral Rose Shipley, a Seaside property owner. "It was very hard for the people presenting to make their presentations. They had one outlook and the audience had another outlook."

Goody said he was surprised to hear that many property owners were not aware of the classifications in 2016. The state had sent postcards 10 months prior to the letter sent in early January, so residents may have disregarded them as junk mail, he said.

"They get a lot of mail, a lot of junk mail, and a lot of that gets overlooked," Goody said. "It definitely was not the intent to blindside people."

Appeal process

The classification process is now final, but the Department of Forestry received 29

appeals of the assessment prior to Monday's deadline. The appeal process will likely last until sometime this spring, Goody said. Once the process is completed, the reclassified land will be added to the Forest Patrol Assessment Roll in July.

While the state sent out postcards, held public meetings and sent notices to newspapers, it typically sees little involvement from the public until late in the process, Goody said.

"We typically don't get much public involvement until it starts hitting the pocketbooks," he said. "Our honest intent is to make forestland assessment honest and equitable to all."

County Manager Cameron Moore said at the Feb. 8 Clatsop County Board of Commissioner's meeting that the county was not notified in advance about the letter sent out in January. He also said ODF officials apologized to the county for the confusion during a meeting Friday, Feb. 7.

Sen. Johnson said she had preliminary discussions with top officials at ODF earlier this week about making adjustments to the assessments in Clatsop County. Adjustments would be based on the apparent failure of communication, she said.

"The number of people who attended the town hall meeting gave rise to the fact that there was some kind of failure to communicate," Johnson said. "If we had this kind of disconnect in communication, something is wrong."

Hotel aims to draw golfers to Gearhart

McMenamins Gearhart Hotel to expand

By R.J. Marx
Seaside Signal

An eyesore "held together by paint" is coming down after the Planning Commission approved a new 16-room hotel with a golf teaching facility adjacent to the Gearhart Golf Course and McMenamins Gearhart Hotel.

Portland architect George Signori displayed plans for altering and expanding the existing cart barn structure to a new building with guest rooms, golf training room and cart storage.

Since the original cart barn was built partially over the front property line, commission approval for a nonconforming structure was necessary.

The barn "is held together by paint," General Manager and Director of Golf Jason Bangild said at the Feb. 9 meeting. "Its condition is deplorable. When you come down from Astoria, it's the first thing you see and the last thing you see."

The proposed three-story structure increases the size of the cart barn by 85 percent, for a total area of more than 13,000 square feet. Much of the cart barn, including the existing roof, beams and a portion of the west wall, will be demolished.

Design of the new building was based on the existing English manor house style of



R.J. MARX/SEASIDE SIGNAL

The golf cart building next to McMenamins Gearhart Hotel will see a modification and expansion after Planning Commission approval.

the neighboring McMenamins Gearhart Hotel, with a main house and a "dependency," Signori said. "What we've done here is really beautify the golf course."

The proposed structure includes a virtual golf training facility on the first floor, guest rooms on the first and second floors and golf cart storage in the basement, Signori said.

Forty-two new parking spaces are proposed on the building's east side.

One design alteration drawing comment was a plan to install Verizon relay equipment in two faux chimneys atop the mansard roof.

Relays were necessary to increase coverage and the chimneys provided an aesthetically pleasing way to accomplish that goal, Signori said.

David Smith asked fellow commissioners to determine if there was a demand for the new building, one of the criteria in Gearhart's master plan for a conditional use permit.

"I've talked to the constituents in my neighborhood, and I've yet to find anybody who lives here who can find a need for an increased presence on the Gearhart golf course," Smith said. "Who defines the demand and how

is that determined?"

"We can tell you there's a need from the owner's side," Signori said.

The proposed building is "architecturally appealing and compatible with the existing hotel," City Planner Carole Connell wrote in her staff report. "The request to expand the hotel supports the continued viability of the Gearhart Golf Course, an important recreational resource in Gearhart."

Six commissioners endorsed the proposal with landscape and construction conditions. Smith abstained from voting.

After the meeting Bangild said he is shooting for a 2018 completion. "We'll go back to the drawing board and go over the logistics," he said, a process that could take six to eight months.

Construction, Bangild said, is easier in the winter, when play is less.

Like the neighboring hotel and Sandtrap Restaurant, the property is owned by Columbia Sportswear Chief Executive Officer Tim Boyle, who leases the space to McMenamins, Bangild said after the meeting. A small portion of the main building is rented to Paul Tice, manager of Gearhart by the Sea.

"People shouldn't worry about the area getting overrun," Bangild said. "I think it will provide a better experience for the clientele we currently have."

Kiwanis honor Harry Miller at annual pancake feed

Seaside Kiwanis Club's annual Pancake Feed fundraiser, typically held in April, will be held this year from 5 to 7 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 21, at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center. Tickets are \$7 for adults; \$6 for seniors (62 and older); children under 12 are \$5; and tickets for a family are \$20.

This year the Kiwanis Club will remember its beloved member Harry Miller, who died last December. Many community members would purchase their pancake feed tickets from Miller, Kiwanis member Marilyn Dwyer noted. "He was our top ticket seller."

Miller was a member of the Kiwanis since 1955. He started and worked on various service projects such as Camp Kiwanilong and

the Seaside Service Club. He worked on all of Kiwanis fundraisers including Christmas tree sales, the golf tournament and the pancake feed. "His love for the youth of our community and his generosity was as huge as his smile," said Dwyer. "So, in memory of Harry, we are asking you again to donate by buying tickets to the Kiwanis Pancake Feed."

The Seaside Kiwanis club donates all money raised back to the community. Youth is the club's main focus. A few of the organizations and projects Seaside Kiwanis are involved in and donate to are Camp Kiwanilong, college scholarships, CASA, Seaside Kids, Safe Kids, Back Pack programs, Doernbecher Children's Hospital and the Safety Fair.

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