

# Tension emerges over county land use planning

By NICOLE BALES  
The Astorian

Clatsop County commissioners have taken steps over the past several months to tighten the reins over the Planning Commission and advisory committees, creating tension over the direction of land use planning.

In April, commissioners unanimously agreed to pause community involvement in the comprehensive plan update. The update for the document, which sets planning policies that guide land use, recreation, transportation, natural resources and housing, started in June 2019 with a countywide advisory committee and six citizen advisory committees representing land use planning areas.

When commissioners issued the pause, eight of 18 goals were covered. Commissioners said they wanted to simplify and expedite the process. Concerns were also raised about some of the policy ideas coming out of the committee meetings.

During a Planning Commission meeting in April, Robert Stricklin, a planning commissioner, was critical of the county commission. He said the Planning Commission, which makes recommendations to commissioners and some land use decisions, had become irrelevant since the county began hiring consultants to do more of the work. Following the meeting, county Commissioner John Toyooka said the mission of the Planning Commission needed to be restated, saying there had been a “drift.”

During work sessions in June, the county presented a draft of revised bylaws for the Planning Commission and commissioners supported a new plan for proceeding with the comprehensive plan update.

Commissioners have said the steps are necessary to clarify roles and responsibilities. But planning com-



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Clatsop County commissioners have sought to take greater control over land use planning.

missioners and some people involved with the advisory committees have argued that while the public process can be messy, it is fundamental to Oregon’s land use planning goals.

“In our capacity as members of the governing body, it’s our job to appoint various groups to fulfill our mission of caring for the people of the place,” Commissioner Lianne Thompson said during a work session in June. “Those appointed positions are necessarily more limited in scope and authority.”

“What I saw was that we as a governing body had not been clear enough in the role definitions with which we empowered you to work for us and the people of Clatsop County. So that’s why we did the pause. That’s why we said we have to clarify roles and responsibilities.”

## ‘Aspirational’

The concerns raised were mainly over policies proposed in the Northeast and Southwest Coastal advisory committees. The county referred to some of the proposals as “aspirational” and said the committees need to stay within the boundaries of the law.

Commissioner Courtney Bangs and some in the timber industry also questioned items in the draft of a planning goal that addresses forestlands. Public comments about the goal described the suggested policies as an overreach and called the proposed regulations of industrial timberlands illegal.

Commissioners agreed on a new framework with a target completion date of July 2022. Gail Henrikson, the county’s community development director, said parameters will be provided

to guide the process.

The citizen advisory committees will take six months to focus solely on updating their respective community plans. The Planning Commission and countywide advisory committee will complete the review of the goals together rather than separately.

In early May, Henrikson canceled Planning Commission meetings scheduled for May, June and July. In an email to planning commissioners, she said no applications had been submitted to the county that would require a hearing before August.

Henrikson said that, in the meantime, county staff would prepare new training material for planning commissioners and review the Planning Commission bylaws. A joint meeting between the Board of Com-

missioners and the Planning Commission is planned for July.

The significant changes to the bylaws would include removing variance review from the Planning Commission’s scope of authority, establishing term limits and allowing the removal of a planning commissioner for two or more unexcused absences. Other changes include outlining responsibilities for the chair, vice chair and staff and guidance for conduct and appearance of bias.

“I was pleased to see such common-sense rules and responsibilities basically outlined by staff at the request of the Board of Commissioners,” Bangs said during a work session in June. “You addressed attendance and decorum and respect and following Oregon state rules and laws in

conjunction with the goals of the county governing body.

“So basically you’ve outlined similar expectations of a traditional job, in my personal opinion. Work as a team for a common goal, and that goal is economic success, health and well-being of our county.”

Bangs said she was saddened by a few emails she saw in response to the draft, calling the feedback “open malice.”

Because discussions about Planning Commission bylaws and the comprehensive plan have taken place during work sessions — which typically do not provide time for public comment — feedback to commissioners has largely taken place outside of meetings.

## ‘Very concerned’

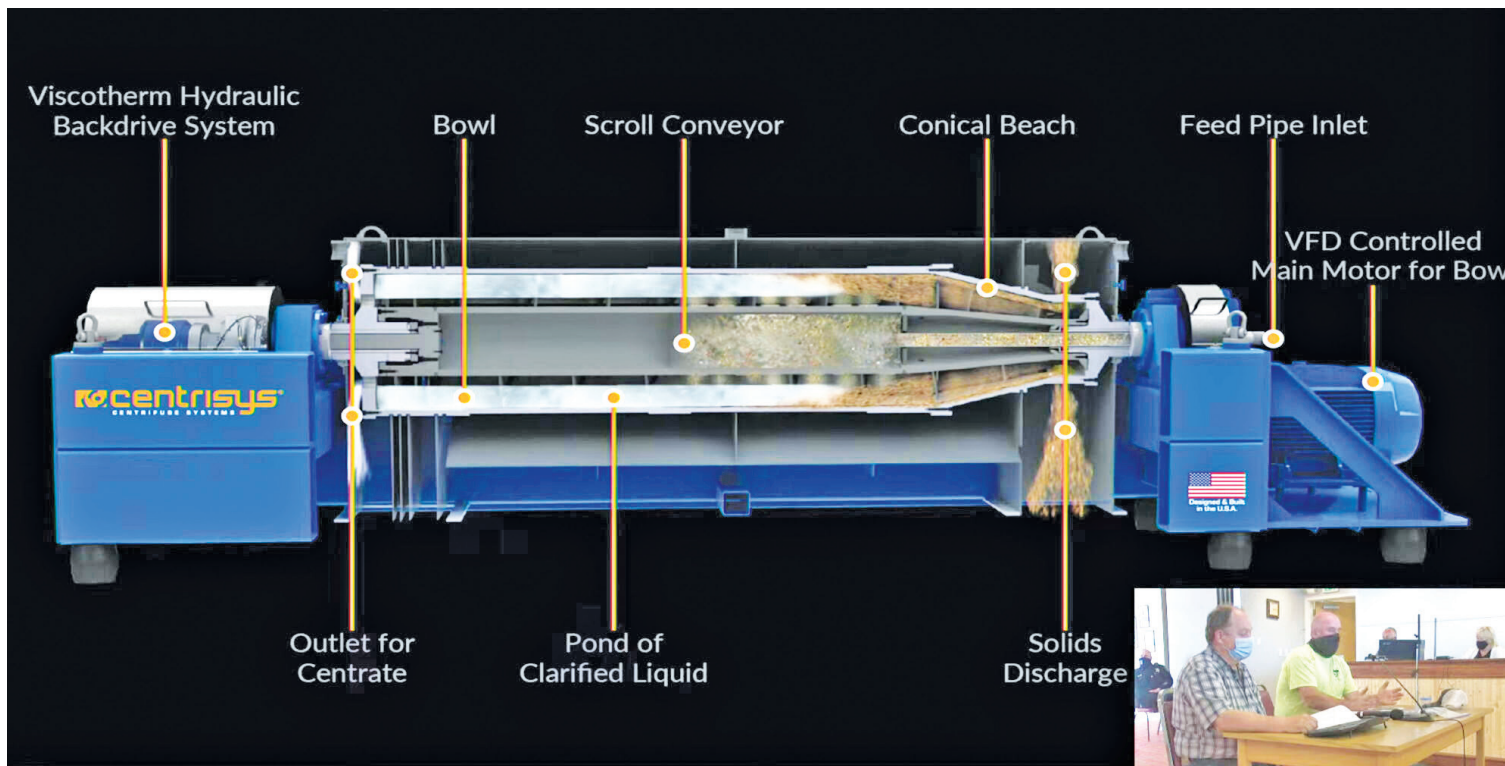
Some planning commissioners and citizen advisory committee members told The Astorian that while they are not necessarily at odds with all the changes made by the county, they take issue with the approach.

Nadia Gardner, the chairwoman of the Planning Commission, said in a statement to The Astorian that she is “very concerned about inclusivity, transparency and respect for volunteers and the diverse voices of the general public.”

“The county has canceled Planning Commission meetings for three months,” she said. “In the meantime, staff and the commission are working and deciding on key planning issues without our input or citizen involvement through open Planning Commission meetings, where we welcome public comments.”

“Some of this work is being done in ‘one-on-one meetings’ and work sessions that do not include public involvement and comment. Examples include amending our own Planning Commission bylaws, the comprehensive plan update process, affordable housing, and short-term rental discussions.”

# Wastewater: ‘Clearly, from my opinion, this is a no-brainer’



The City Council has discussed a sludge press and dryer unit designed by Centrisys.

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region bringing their own sewage to Seaside for processing at a price lower than alternatives for disposal.

The city has not evaluated how the equipment might be paid for, City Manager Mark Winstanley said. Last Monday’s presentation was a prelude to possible action later this year.

“One of the reasons why it’s a little bit fluid is because we’re in a period where our ability to access funds that we normally would not be able to get is a little bit greater than it has been in the past,” Winstanley said. “Certainly one of the things that we’re looking at is the federal government’s interest in an infrastructure bill and whether that is a source of funding we would be able to use. I hate to get in front of that bill, but I’d like to be able to see what that looks like.”

“Clearly, from my opinion, this is a no-brainer,” Mayor Jay Barber said. “It’s got to be done. And we want our workers to remain safe on the job and we want to furnish a good product for the agricultural community. ... I think it’s got to be done.”

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