

Cannon Beach food tax money could aid firefighter housing

By **KATIE FRANKOWICZ**
The Astorian

CANNON BEACH — If voters pass a controversial tax on prepared food in November, Fire Chief Marc Reckmann hopes to use some of the money on housing for volunteer firefighters.

Even as the fire district responds to an increasing number of calls, it is losing or in danger of losing volunteers as home prices soar on the coast and rental options are often expensive and scarce, Reckmann told The Astorian.

The proposed 5% food tax was pitched as a way to spread the costs of running the Cannon Beach Rural Fire Protection District and funding city infrastructure projects between visitors and residents.

Proponents argue the tax would have little impact on businesses and be a boon to the city overall. The service industry has pushed back, saying the tax could hurt businesses as they continue to weather restrictions and challenges tied to the coronavirus pandemic.

The City Council considered passing the measure themselves, but decided to put the matter to voters. If the measure passes, Reckmann expects the fire district will see around \$800,000 annually from the tax.

Housing for volunteer firefighters is not the first priority if the tax passes. The fire district would look to hire a fire marshal and finalize a contract with Medix for local ambulance services. But it's up near the top.

Volunteers are the backbone of the fire district, which only has three paid employees. A number of them are in precarious living situations. Only three own homes in Cannon Beach.

"Everyone else rents and those rentals are being sold," Reckmann said.

He has one volunteer who is between housing and is temporarily living at the station. Another volunteer was living in an attic until recently.

Housing has been a dominant policy issue on the North Coast for the past several years.

The housing market picked up last year despite the pandemic. It has yet to slow, both in urban places like Portland and on the North Coast, where the market value for some homes has more than doubled. In Astoria, a house that sold last year for \$145,000 was listed for

more than half a million dollars this year. In Cannon Beach, where housing has often been especially expensive, buying a home is out of reach for many who work in the town.

Across Clatsop County, workforce-priced and affordable housing remains limited.

Reckmann himself bought a house in Seaside because he couldn't afford to buy in Cannon Beach. He's on the south side of Seaside, within 15 minutes from Cannon Beach, but it's a situation that hampers response time and, in his opinion, sends a bad message.

The fact that some of the food tax revenue could go to housing for volunteer firefighters has not been widely known. City Councilor Robin Risley asked for more information at a city work session Wednesday.

Reckmann said that while it is a priority, it is not something that would happen immediately.

In the first year, much of the fire district's share of the tax revenue would likely go to paying for the fire marshal and the contract with Medix. A portion would also go back to businesses to help cover the initial costs of implementing the tax.

But, by the second or third year, Reckmann would hope to have a conversation about the fire district buying or renting housing in Cannon Beach for volunteers.

He hopes to continue to rent a small home the district had reserved for the fire chief and offer it to volunteers instead. The house proved too small for Reckmann, his wife and their three children, but the money for the house has already been budgeted.

The fire district needs to retain volunteers, Reckmann told the City Council — a challenge as call levels remain high and volunteers face burnout.

Since September 2020, the fire district has broken call records every month with the exception of December and March, when the call load hit average levels. At the same time, a labor shortage seen across multiple industries nationwide is also affecting Cannon Beach's volunteer firefighters.

All of Reckmann's volunteers have other jobs or own their own businesses. With the labor shortage, many are working longer hours or more frequent hours and have less time to give. On recent calls, some volunteers were stuck at work.

On the North Coast, child care remains a barrier for many families

By **KATIE FRANKOWICZ**
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Despite a national conversation about the importance of child care, an infusion of federal dollars, checks to families and a resurgence of local discussions about how to better support and enhance care options, Clatsop County's child care desert is as desolate as ever.

Eva Manderson, the director of Northwest Regional Child Care Resource and Referral, can point to a few positives that emerged from the chaos of the coronavirus pandemic: Some facilities that closed last summer or operated at limited capacity have reopened or expanded. New providers have entered the market, with many beginning operations with key foundational business practices already in place. The number of child care slots is near pre-pandemic levels.

But the county still has more children in need of care than there are slots available. Child care providers struggle to keep prices affordable for families, attract quality staff and turn a profit.

There are still few choices for lower-income families. There are few places that offer evening or weekend care for parents who work nontraditional hours — for example, people in tourism-related jobs that increasingly power the region's economy.

Most facilities have a waitlist — very long waitlists in some cases.

"The problem hasn't gone away and child care hasn't become sustainable all of a sudden," Manderson said.

In 2020, the county had more than 5,000 children under 13 but only 780 slots in child care centers and home care situations, an imbalance that has varied little in recent years, according to data gathered by Oregon State University researchers.

The researchers also found that the median annual price of child care was around \$9,840 — slightly higher than the price of tuition at Oregon public universities.

Lil' Sprouts

In mid-August, Astoria leaders started to discuss what to do about the city-run day care program at Lil' Sprouts Academy. The center, opened nearly a decade ago because of the need for child care in the community, serves around 30 children. It is one of the few centers of its size on the North Coast to also provide care for infants.

The next day the city announced Lil' Sprouts would close until September after an employee tested positive for the coronavirus.

The center relies heavily on lower-paid, part-time labor and operates at an



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

A child's at Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District puts on his mask at summer camp.

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unsustainable loss — to the tune of around \$25,000 a month.

Lil' Sprouts maintains a waitlist of around 150 children. City staff field new inquiries about child care — and the waitlist — every week. The center could accommodate up to 70 children, possibly more if the city were to build out more classrooms.

Jonah Dart-McLean, the city's parks director, would need to hire 10 to 15 more part-time staffers for such an expansion, a particularly challenging lift in a labor market where demand for workers is high and supply is at an all-time low.

Switching to a full-time labor model with the additional cost of providing benefits would require major city investment.

In the coming months, Astoria leaders plan to consider several options to reconfigure how Lil' Sprouts functions. One possibility is to seek out a public-private partnership to free up Parks and Recreation Department resources for the Astoria Aquatic Center, another costly city program reliant on part-time workers.

The city may also examine grant packages to expand care offerings for lower-income families. City Councilor Roger Rocka has advocated for a co-op model, where parents volunteer for a set amount of hours in exchange for reduced rates.

City councilors are closely following child care discussions at the county level. The county, in turn, is paying close attention to the city.

two young children, though finding child care was not an issue for his family. His wife took time off from work to be home with their daughters.

"A lot of folks don't have the luxury to do that," he said. "They have to work — both parents have to work."

Kujala and other commissioners say they want to collaborate with Astoria and Seaside, where the Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District is in the process of expanding child care offerings after purchasing the former Broadway Middle School.

At the local government level, however, there has been little urgency to take action since the county — like all counties in Oregon — was declared a child care desert in 2019. The problem came into even sharper focus in early 2020, when Shooting Stars Child Development Center in Astoria, one of the region's larger providers, scaled back services.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Salt Makers return to the Cove

The Seaside Museum, assisted by a grant from the city of Seaside Tourism Advisory Committee, sponsors Lewis and Clark Salt Makers on Sept. 11 and Sept. 12.

Members of the Pacific Northwest Living Historians will create and share the experience of that exploration group, bringing to life the salt camp which those explorers established more than 200 years ago. The program will be held from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturday and 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Sunday on the Seaside beach west of the Avenue U and Prom intersection.

Visitors to the program will enter the camp and find members of the living historians busy making salt, as they boil sea water over a fire just as the men of the Lewis and Clark expedition did in 1806. The interpreters will also share the history and stories of the legendary expedition with everyone who comes to the beach.

Lewis and Clark Salt Makers is a free interactive learning opportunity for the whole family. This event is sponsored by the Seaside Museum and presented by the the living historians.

A portion of this project was made possible through a grant from the City of Seaside Tourism Advisory Commit-



"Salt Makers," by Mark Kenny.

tee, funded by room tax dollars. The program is also supported by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, Seaside Public Works Department and Sandy Cove Inn.

Current guidelines regarding face coverings and open fires will be followed.

For more information, call the Seaside Museum at 503-738-7065.

Preserving Seaside's History since 1974, the Seaside Museum and Historical Society is a non-profit educational

institution located at 570 Necanicum Drive, Seaside and is open Friday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Elks' grant helps support needy families

Thanks to a grant from Elks National Foundation Seaside Elks Officers presented a \$2,000 check to the South County Food Bank on Aug. 24. The grant will help purchase needed food items to feed our local needy families. Seaside Elks Lodge 1748 supports the community.

SOLVE beach cleanup comes to Gearhart

SOLVE will hold a beach cleanup in Gearhart on Sept. 25 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Participants are to meet at the Gearhart Beach access off of 10th Street. The beach cleanup is family-friendly. Be prepared with dressing for any weather and wear sturdy shoes.

Bring a reusable bucket or bag, gloves and water bottle. SOLVE will also provide bags and gloves.

Keep dogs on a leash and steer clear of roped off snowy plover nesting areas.