

In South County, county commission candidates differ over pace of progress

By **ERICK BENGEL**
The Astorian

As Clatsop County Commissioner Lianne Thompson seeks a third term, she said the county is on the verge of realizing goals long discussed.

She believes the skills, knowledge and relationships she has built up over nearly eight years representing South County's District 5 will come into play as county projects, such as expanding child care and setting up broadband in underserved areas, get underway over the next four.

"It takes a while, but now I see things coming to fruition," she said, "so that's really exciting."

In the May election, Thompson faces Steve Dillard, an innkeeper from Seaside who sits on the Port of Astoria's Airport Advisory Committee.

At a candidates' forum at Clatsop Community College last month, Dillard noted that some issues before the county — such as homelessness and a lack of affordable housing — have worsened over Thompson's two terms. "I'm here because I represent change," he told the audience.

Elected in 2014, Thompson is vice chairwoman of the Columbia-Pacific Economic Development District and works with the Association of Oregon Counties. Earlier this month, Clatsop County collaborated with the association to create a list of more than a dozen parcels of surplus county land that could be used for housing, child care and other social services.

"A lot of people don't have necessarily a big-picture or a long-term view," she said, "and I do."

In an interview with *The Astorian*, Dillard said he wants to support local businesses recovering from pandemic shutdowns. He also wants the county to move beyond an emergency mindset — for example, by resuming in-person meetings of the Board of Commissioners at the Judge Guy Boyington Building in Astoria.

"The county building is hosting some homeless people at each of the doors, but they're not having meetings there," he said. "Now why is that, in April of 2022?"

Dillard said he and his wife had been looking to get more involved in the community. About six months ago, he began attending city meetings in Seaside. When he learned the county's District 5 seat was open, he chose to run.

"I'm at a place in my life where I can serve, and I'm willing to devote time to the county," he said.

As in the District 3 race in Astoria between Commissioner Pamela Wev and Nathan Pinkstaff, a deck mechanic, the District 5 election features an incumbent facing off against an opponent with sharply different political views. In the District 1 election in Warrenton, Commissioner Mark Kujala, the board chairman, is running unopposed.

Since Thompson first took office, the ideological makeup of the nonpartisan board has become more conservative.

Given the political divides in her district and countywide, Thompson, who at the forum did not return fire at Dillard, said she is "committed to building and maintaining connection and cooperation."

"If I align with one side and want to demonize the other side, I don't think I'm a good commissioner," she told *The Astorian*. "So I went for the middle — the high road, the ridge line — not the swamp at the bottom of the hill."

A divisive issue in her district is the burgeoning vacation rental industry. Although the county has permitted scores of short-term rentals in unincorporated areas, the development code does not recognize rentals as an explicit use except in Arch Cape.

The Board of Commissioners is weighing options on where to allow vacation rentals and how to regulate them.

County staff, based on board direction, has recommended making short-term rentals a recognized use in both commercial and residential zones. A Planning Commission recommendation, however, would limit them to commercial and multifamily residential zones — and only as a conditional use — while eliminating them from other residential zones.

Before she decides on the issue, Thompson said she needs more information — for example, the extent to which rentals eat into housing stock that could be used by long-term renters. People looking to ban short-term rentals in residential zones have tied the lack of available housing, in part, to the region's rental market.

"There may be an impact, but I want us to have data before we take actions that have unanticipated consequences," she said earlier this month.

Dillard said in an interview that he would have approved the Planning Commission's recommendation, aligning himself with the belief, expressed most volubly by residents in South County's Cove Beach neighborhood, that short-term rentals are prohibited by default.

In April, the Board of Commissioners extended the moratorium on new vacation rental permits for the second time.

The board's decision to extend the freeze by another 120 days — ending on Aug. 26 — came as the last extension was scheduled to end.

On affordable housing, Dillard said the county should try to create incentives for developers. "Is there a way where we can step in and say, 'OK, this is something that the county sees as a priority? How can we help this along?'" he said.

As a commissioner, Dillard said he would use his position to push back against what he believes are excessive regulations from Salem.

Asked why he should be elected, Dillard cited his diverse background, including his experience owning an IT firm and founding a nonprofit that serves the homeless. "I can work at the community service level. I can work at the business level. I get things done," he said.

Thompson pointed to her "wide and deep administrative background in government."

"Somebody can come into it and have an idea about how it works, but I know the inside way that things operate," she said.

Thompson believes that, when progress on major issues is incremental, the best course of action is not necessarily to remove the person working on them. She said she has been "building capacity" at the county, in particular through the networking she has done to begin bringing resources to the region.

"It's like a gardener who plants a seed, and just because it hasn't poked through the earth and borne fruit yet, you don't say, 'Oh that's worthless,' and rip it out. You continue to nurture it so that it grows and produces the results that it promises," she said. "Because I think I can promise results. I think we're working effectively toward those. It's just a longer-term gain."

At the end of April, Thompson had more than \$11,000 in contributions. Dillard had raised more than \$4,000.



Photos by Lydia Ely/The Astorian
TOP: Commissioner Lianne Thompson is running for a third term. ABOVE: Steve Dillard is an innkeeper in Seaside.



ABOVE: System in use at Suzanne Elise Assisted Living. LEFT: John Baldrige shows kitchen area protected by the far-UVC lighting system.

Photos by R.J. Marx

Elise: Tech brings healthier environment

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"We are on the leading edge of it," Baldrige said. "It's our future. I look at it and I say, 'Why isn't the whole world like getting involved in this?'"

The assisted living center, like other care homes in the region, had numerous outbreaks during the pandemic. In mid-March, the number of cases tied to an outbreak first reported by the Oregon Health Authority on Jan. 11 stood at 16 cases.

Baldrige believes the far-UVC system will make a difference in the future. Far-UVC, which filters rays in a similar manner as ultraviolet waves, kills bacteria over time and protects against airborne diseases.

Through a \$100,000 Oregon Department of Human Services Long-Term Care Capital Infrastructure Improvement Grant, with 29 lights installed from \$2,000 to \$3,000 each.

UVC Cleaning Systems, Inc. installed the lights at Suzanne Elise in early March. Lights were placed in ceiling tiles on the first floor and within the sheetrock on the second floor.

Baldrige's interest in healthier environ-

ments didn't start with COVID, with experience in water purification, disinfection and UV-related products.

UVC is fairly common in airports and health care facilities, rolling big black lights that "zap everything," he said.

While UVC is dangerous for extended human contact, the reduced far-UVC wavelength won't penetrate the body.

The environment covered by far-UVC is "getting sanitized all the time," Baldrige said.

He would like to see the technology used in local buildings, including the new Seaside High School and Middle School campus.

Baldrige said he foresees a product that would combine far-UVC technology inside of a regular LED light bulb, so it's cleaning as it lights up the room. "It could change the world," he said. "Can you imagine the difference?"

For now Baldrige is happy to make the atmosphere at Suzanne Elise a little healthier. "I've been in the hotel industry mostly all my life," he said. "This is the same thing. I'm really good at hospitality. I love it. I like to treat these people like they're in a hotel."

Director: Lambert steps up at downtown association

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downtown businesses. Tickets are available at the Carousel Mall or Holiday Inn Express from 1 to 6 p.m. the day of the event. The flower basket campaign continues to beautify downtown with colorful arrangements lining downtown streets.

The Seaside Golf Classic is sched-

uled for Aug. 24, to benefit the association and Seaside Kids Inc., which provides athletic opportunities for local children.

"Kerri has a feeling for downtown, which really helps," business owner Jeff TerHar said. "She has an interest in downtown because she's worked downtown for so long."

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