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Meeting with Brett Estes Community Development Director, Astoria Oregon March 7, 2103 Teleconference

Attending: Brian Holst, Hal Hart, Margo Waring

We spoke with Brett Estes, Director of Community Development in Astoria, Oregon to fill out our knowledge of what Astoria has been doing and with what resources. Below is a summary of our conversation.

BE told us that Astoria has a population of about 10,000 and is in a "land locked" location on the Columbia River. 75% of their housing was built before 1950. Twenty years ago had an organized Downtown Business Association with staff, but then the economy became severely depressed with the loss of major businesses and downtown was considered "unsafe" in the evening by many in Astoria. A group of community people who were concerned about this became "guys with ties" who went into the downtown bars, making the toughs feel uncomfortable and gradually the area became cleaned up with the departure of the seedier element. A local vote deprived the Downtown Association of revenues and, subsequently, staff.

The current Downtown Association is also part of the Main Street program. Five years ago there was renewed effort for a better-organized Downtown association in response to new retail development in adjacent communities. (The Astoria downtown still had its department stores). Downtown merchants, property owners organized and got \$15,000 from the city, after an effort to show their viability by organizing and fund raising. Astoria's community development had not done a master plan of downtown since 1968, aside from portions of the waterfront.

The Downtown Association has an Economic Restructuring Committee and wanted a plan. The committee members are Mr. Estes, president of the Downtown Association, business journal editor, spouse of a council member and property owner. They went to the Downtown Association board about wanting a plan for downtown and over time the board also saw the need and discussed funding for a scope of work. They received \$7500 from Astoria, \$3,000 from the Oregon Main Street foundation and \$5,000 from Pacific Power. Everyone agreed that the Downtown Association should lead the effort because they wanted to show this was not a top down but citizen inspired effort. [Main Street is an economic development tool for reviving business districts. The Oregon Main Street program gives funds to local groups for technical assistance and facilitation. The receiving group, Astoria's Main Street is a 501C3 and the same as the Downtown Association.] The resulting plan recommendations will be available in a few months and will recommend some code changes, e.g., parking, to the city.

The Downtown Association has had strong leadership and developed common understanding and agreement, approaching the city council about what they wanted to tackle.

Mr. Estes served to help write the scope of work and negotiate it with their consultants and his department also served in facilitation roles. Funding for the effort was \$7,500 from city plus in kind, \$7,500 from Sunday Market, \$5,00 from Pacific Power, \$3,000 from the Downtown Association plus their staff (Americorps) and volunteers. The Americorps person came via the University of Oregon. They also got support from the RARE program (Resource Assistance for Rural Environments). The city and locals gave \$19,000 as a cash match for federal assistance for 11 months for the RARE person who served as a director of the Downtown Association. A local property owner donated a small office space. The Downtown Association did major fundraising (complete with a thermometer!) The Downtown Association will soon go for a full time non RARE director using city funds and funds raised by the local brewers' festival. Long term, they would like a more visible and accessible office space.

Did the Downtown Association have a sustained link with the city council? At first the council was not opposed to the Downtown Association and its efforts but saw it had no track record. The Downtown Association wanted automatic support, but the president realized the need to prove himself or herself first, which they did by downtown clean up, and organizing merchants to go to city council meetings. The Downtown Association and the local Chamber of Commerce were not competitors: the Association went to the Chamber and developed a joint membership with a discount for joining both. The first time the Association asked the council for money, the vote was not unanimous; one member felt it was preferential to one part of town. His position has now changed and he sees the effort as a benefit. The Downtown Association Board began having after-hours events and invited and engaged council members that way, too. (Astoria has a mayor and 4 council members.) The mayor also reached out to the Downtown Association for support and an alliance was formed in support of a downtown park for the community's bi-centennial by the Association giving political assistance and dealing with merchant concerns.

The Downtown Association has had some growing pains and recently requested and received an audit and capacity assessment by the Oregon Main Street program. The number one recommendation was for full time staff.

Regarding code changes, the direction for the property management code came from the city council which wanted the staff to address code enforcement issues. Staff asked council members about their concerns individually and researched on line and contacted cities about what worked and did not and then tweaked it for Astoria. All the public meetings were held by the planning commission as open forums for both commissioners and the public. When it came back to the council, no citizens objected. Some downtown property owners objected, especially one large property owner, but they have made sure that these properties were not solely targeted. There have been some successes.

Regarding second story vacancy, Astoria was helped by a Building Officer who is flexible. They used the existing building code for its alternatives and have additional flexibility for designated historic properties. Now people get designated for this flexibility, exchanging exterior controls for interior flexibility. They declare upper uses continuous and grandfather in properties.

The tool they use is tax increment financing, especially for "anchor buildings", with loans. For example, a large car dealership became a brewery that uses upper floors as a restaurant and brewery (Fort George). Also another brewery is in downtown in an historic building. These businesses distribute and so Astoria has become an exporter. Tax increment financing has also been helpful for rehabilitation of upper floors.

The fire department under code changes 2 years ago now has the building official the reviewer of new and rehab permits for fire purposes. Some coordination is required with the Fire Chief on these permits. Asked about their façade Improvement program, Mr. Estes said that this is a grant and loan program financed through tax increment financing and owner contribution. He will send us a copy of their program details. Regarding street furniture. They received a small transportation grant and \$240,000 with a match by the urban renewal fund and money from the Sunday Market, the hospital and the Downtown Association to fund a menu of items—bike racks and bike covered lockers, bus shelters, and trashcans. A local federal Job Corps center that has programs in landscape and facility maintenance installed planters. This free labor is typical of Astoria's often unorthodox, slower, but less expensive approach that also produces great PR.

The original downtown cleanup swept away all the ugly and worn out 1970s equipment. Volunteers power washed the sidewalks. The process identified what citizens wanted and staff looked for funding mechanisms. The city Community Development office put together applications and the mayor testified to the legislature in Salem about their needs.