

Vacation rental measure goes to voters

Signatures gathered for the May ballot

By ERICK BENGEL

The Astorian

A referendum to repeal a Clatsop County ordinance that made vacation rentals a recognized use in zones throughout unincorporated areas is headed for the May ballot.

The county has confirmed that the group North Coast Neighbors United has gathered enough signatures to bring the issue to voters.

In June, the county Board of Commissioners passed Ordinance 22-05, which added vacation rentals of up to 30 days as an outright use in 16 unincorporated zones, both commercial and residential, in the development code. The ordinance came after the county had already permitted scores of rentals to operate in those zones.

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Vacation rentals: County is

crafting plan to limit vacation rentals in certain zones

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The county has a moratorium on issuing new licenses set to expire in December.

About 180 rentals operate in unincorporated areas. If the referendum succeeds, many existing vacation rentals — possibly more than 100 — outside of Arch Cape stand to gradually disappear as licenses expire.

The county has said it could lose about \$700,000 in lodging tax revenue if the ordinance is repealed.

Though all voters in the county could vote on the ballot measure, the referendum only applies to unincorporated areas.

Cities along the Oregon Coast, including in Clatsop County, have marketed themselves as attractive destinations, bringing tourists to the area and money to the local economy. Meanwhile, the short-term rental industry, a long-standing practice, has grown with the advent of online platforms like Airbnb and Vrbo. Some neighborhoods experience the impact of vacationers more than others, causing concerns about livability in residential areas and strains on the natural environment.

“Short-term rentals do have a place. That place could be a room in an owner-occupied home, or it could be a whole house in an

area properly zoned for tourism,” Charles Dice, the chief petitioner, who lives Cove Beach, said in a statement by the North Coast Neighbors United group. “But these businesses do not belong in residential neighborhoods, and they especially don’t belong in rural communities without the infrastructure to deal with the problems that come along with absentee owners.”

The Neighbors United group is working with Portland land use attorney Daniel Kearns. Before the ordinance passed, Kearns argued in memos that, if a development code does not mention a use in a particular zone, but allows it in other zones, the use is prohibited in that zone by default. The code has allowed vacation rentals in the Arch Cape zone since the early 2000s.

Chris Crean, a Portland land use attorney, told county commissioners at a work session in August that the vacation rental permits issued outside of Arch Cape before the June ordinance was passed had been issued in error.

Earlier that month, Crean had successfully defended Lincoln County against a voter-initiated ballot measure that would have phased out short-term rentals. The legal logic that allowed Lincoln County to prevail did not apply in Clatsop’s case, he told county commissioners.

Although people have rented out beach homes for decades, the county began regulating vacation rentals in 2018. Soon residents of Cove Beach began bringing complaints to the county about the rentals’ impact on their quality of life.

After almost three years and dozens of public meetings on the issue, county commissioners in April amended operating standards for vacation rentals outside of Arch Cape. The standards included new rules around permits and occupancy, and required a good-neighbor flyer to be posted that addresses common concerns such as noise, pets, parking and littering.

The county is crafting a plan to limit vacation rentals in certain zones. In Cove Beach, a South County neighborhood zoned Coastal Residential, vacation rentals compose about 30% of housing stock.

A group opposed to the referendum, Everyone For The North Oregon Coast, is working on an awareness-raising campaign around the potential harm of losing so many vacation rentals.

Marie Gwydir-Moore, co-creator of the group, has emphasized the economic hit that North Coast businesses, from retailers to contractors to housekeepers, could take if vacation rentals start disappearing.

“It’s huge,” she said. “It goes way beyond the \$700,000 that the county’s going to lose.”

Gwydir-Moore works in the vacation rental industry, owns a vacation rental in the unincorporated Surf Pines neighborhood and lives part time on the North Coast. She said that people like the Neighbors United group are trying to restrict access to their part of the coast.

“These are people that have come to this community, some of

them enjoy the area, and they just want to close the door behind them," she said.

Dice also owns a vacation rental.

Both Gwydir-Moore and Dice have challenged the county's original ballot title, prepared by District Attorney Ron Brown. An amended ballot title is forthcoming, the county said.

Residents in Cove Beach have led the fight against vacation rentals in the unincorporated parts of Clatsop County.

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