AVV Article on March Government Corner: includes land use discussion; written by Sara Cash

On March 12th, Benton County Commissioner Xan Augerot brought together another meeting for Alsea residents to talk with our elected and county officials. About forty locals gathered in person and virtually along with Commissioner Augerot, Lincoln County Commissioner Casey Miller, Benton County Sheriff Jef Van Arsdall, Christine Mosbaugh of the Benton County Community Health Center, Oregon State Representative David Gomberg, and Oregon State Senator Dick Anderson. There was a lively conversation with much input from the Alsea attendees.

Many thanks to all of these public officials for taking time from their busy schedules to visit Alsea and to all of the townspeople who came to listen, ask questions, and work together on the hard topics facing our community. Sadly, Commissioner Augerot, who has been so supportive of Alsea, will end her tenure at the end of this year. She has endorsed Liz Irish, who was also at the meeting, for the coming election to fill her seat.

Commissioner Augerot brought great news that US Senators Wyden and Merkley were able to secure **$1 million of funding specifically earmarked to work on the Alsea and Alpine sewers**! She reported that bids will be taken some time in the next few weeks, with the possibility that work could be done this year. Sheriff Van Arsdall reported that US Representative Val Hoyle secured funding for the new antennae that offers better tri band radio coverage for Benton County Rural Fire during emergencies. Both of these public servants stated repeatedly that they welcome input from the public and reserve Fridays for personal meetings and calls with Benton County residents. Christine Mosbaugh gave a report of the status of the Alsea Clinic closure and reopening. A flyer with more detailed information about the clinic has been mailed to all the mailboxes in the Alsea zip code. Other news from the county is that there will be an election for a new district attorney. Sheriff Arsdall encouraged people to make public comments in that election process about concerns expressed at the meeting concerning prosecution and incarceration in Benton County.

Senator Dick Anderson stated his support for the Alsea Community Action Collaborative as a vehicle for positive change for the community. When Jamie Olsen made a plea for assistance with the many challenges facing our community, Rep. Gomberg replied that he and Senator Anderson would welcome an “organized, concerted, community wide emergency based ask” for intervention. I am going to follow up on this statement to find out more specifically how we as a community could make that “ask.”

Concerns were shared from the attendees about fire related issues like fireworks, the need to prosecute firebugs, fire insurance rates, and renters’ insurance rates due to distance from fire protection. Alsea Fire Department Captain George Foster stated that he thinks the State Fire Risk map, which affects things like insurance rates and taxation, is too restrictive. He also stated that part of the clinic reopening needs to include walk-in services so that the fire department does not have to respond to minor emergencies, which further taxes their underfunded and understaffed resources.

Land use and housing issues, of course, took center stage during the discussion portion of the evening. Points were made that Alsea lacks Rural Residential zoning, which allows for housing

exemptions, and that returning Multi Use Ag zoning to use would address this problem. Soren Rounds pointed out that, if zoning requirements were changed, there are empty lots in downtown that could developed with housing units for professionals who could then move to town to teach at the school or serve at the clinic. The question then arose of how to ensure that such units would go to the intended public professionals. Janet Hendrix stated that Oregon needs regional zoning rather than statewide zoning, so that codes could better fit the local needs and land usage. George Foster stated that land use regulations must be eased so that Alsea can grow as needed, suggesting that large scale landowners be able to divide off parcels staggered over time to build housing units for family members. Janet Hendrix raised the question of how to direct housing to those who need it without restricting the rights of property owners to do as they want or need to with their own property. Linda Carter and others expressed concerns about land use changes leading to our own tiny version of urban sprawl.

As part of the housing conversation, Senator Dick Anderson announced the creation of a low interest revolving loan system for municipalities and counties that is intended to fuel the building of affordable housing units across the state. The concept is that the local community determines what would work best in their community and then seeks funding through their municipality or their county if the town is unincorporated. The loan is repaid over time using the property taxes from the newly created housing units, which in turn replenishes the funds available to loan.

Commissioner Augerot pointed out that the current rewriting of the countywide comprehensive plan provides a unique opportunity to address land use problems in Alsea through the vehicle of the Alsea Citizen's Advisory Committee (read more about this in another article in this issue). She also stated that taking away tax deductions for 2nd and 3rd homes might make units that are currently empty available for purchase or rent.

Liz Irish, Benton County Planning Commissioner and candidate for Benton County commissioner, suggested leveraging my position on the planning commission to address land use in our community. She asked that comments and input from Alsea residents on how to redistrict our local areas be addressed to the committees and subcommittees of the Planning Commission that are currently working on land use issues and rewriting the comprehensive plan.

Representative Gomberg has been creating initiatives to finance infrastructure development to support additional housing units across the state. He says there is discussion at the capital to allow acreage to be swapped like for like to encourage the production of housing units near urban growth barriers. Senator Dick Anderson suggested the creation of a model for zoning that addresses the needs of small communities by loosening land use restrictions to accommodate the desires of those communities.

As a community, let's bring the energy, engagement, and creative solutions concerning housing and zoning shown in this meeting to the reinvigoration of the Alsea Citizens' Advisory Committee and to the process to gain Alsea input to the countywide comprehensive plan. These are opportunities to think about and create the Alsea where our grandkids can survive and survive.