

TOP STORY

## Columbia Senior Diners to end meal gatherings

Home delivery program to continue

By Abbey McDonald The Astorian  
Aug 5, 2022

Columbia Senior Diners, which serves low-cost lunches to seniors, will close at the end of the month.

For nearly 50 years, the nonprofit has provided seniors with a space to socialize over a meal on weekdays. Since the coronavirus pandemic, the service has had difficulty maintaining revenue.



The final plate will be served on Aug. 31, but the home delivery program will continue through a partnership with NorthWest Senior and Disability Services.

The program's in-person dining served nearly 6,000 meals at the Astoria Senior Center in 2019.

Many of their diners switched to home delivery during the pandemic, said Becky Johnson, the program's board director. She said they've gone from serving up to 25 diners a day to around five.

Columbia Senior Diners has provided meals at the Astoria Senior Center.

Erick Bengel/The Astorian

“It’s a combination of, No. 1, the program revenue, and just the inflation and the costs of food and the paper goods, supplies

just unfortunately has taken its toll,” Johnson said.

For \$6, patrons could get a full lunch with meat, potatoes or pasta, vegetables, a beverage and dessert. The portions were often large enough to take home leftovers.

Becky Bafford, who lives in Ocean Park, Washington, has been coming to the lunch service for around eight years. She likes the rotating menu, but going there is about more than getting a meal.

“Being able to socialize is everything. I don’t give a damn if it’s not even something I want to eat that day, I get it, I’ll take it, I’ll leave it in the free food box. But I want to see some people,” she said.

She called the in-person service closure “terrible.”

“There’s people that depend on this. Luckily, I’m not in that situation, but there certainly are people that do,” she said.

The program was largely funded through grants and donations, Johnson said.

In 2016, Columbia Senior Diners warned it may have to close within a year due to a severe budget shortfall.

“The program always fell forward. It was like things would get tight, but then the next month we would get the United Way check or we’d get the grant money from the city,” Johnson said. “So it was never where it was like a halt in the program, until recently. It was probably a matter of a few months.”

Johnson said she is excited to partner with NorthWest Senior and Disability Services, which operates a home delivery program in Seaside, Cannon Beach, Warrenton and Svensen.

“We are thrilled that we will transition our home delivery patrons to them, so our home delivery customers will not go without,” she said. “So that’s where we feel really comfortable and excited. We don’t see it as a negative or an end, but just a transition.”

The NorthWest Senior and Disability Services’ program delivers a week’s worth of meals — one warm and the rest frozen — for an optional donation of \$3 per meal. The delivery includes a visit and a safety check.

Debbie Dunaway is the meal site coordinator for the service in Svensen, which will be taking over the Astoria Senior Diners’ delivery clients in September.

She said they are reaching out to clients to make sure they want to continue with the program.

“It’s really sad because that’s a big program, it’s very needed. But with these economic times its become impossible for them to continue the program,” Dunaway said. “I know that having them close is not good, but having some place for these clients to go to is good.”

The service is seeking additional volunteer drivers, who will have to pass a background check.

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