Tycoon builds fortune, gives it away

The Associated Press

PORTLAND — Over the past 40 years, Joe Weston was quietly building an empire on the city's east side, steadily acquiring land and putting up apartments.

Now, just as quietly, he's planning to give most of it away.

To him, its a simple matter of principle: "I made up my mind awhile ago that you don't pass excess wealth on from one generation to another."

"Joe is Oregon's best-kept secret," said developer Homer Williams, a partner in the Hoyt Street Yards project in northwest Portland.

"Here's a guy with thousands of apartments and millions of square feet of commercial property. And eventually, it will all go to charity. That's the way Joe is."

Growing up, Weston didn't really know what he wanted to do, but he knew what he wanted to be: better off.

He earned his way to Oregon State University selling newspapers, working as a soda jerk and sweeping up at a local bakery.

But he didn't stay there long.

"I was sitting in one of those big lecture halls at Oregon State," remembers Weston. "And I thought, 'There's more money in running a school than there is sitting in a school.' So I started the Portland Real Estate School."

The school served as the launching pad for his businesses.

"I came up with a plan, and I stayed with it," he said. "If you do that, success is attainable."

Just as Weston foresaw his own success early on, he likewise knew he'd eventually turn over his assets to help others.

Toward that end, he formed the Joseph E. Weston Foundation, run by the Oregon Community Foundation.

"People don't know the name Weston," said Greg Chaille, president of the Oregon Community Foundation. "He's not doing the kind of giving that attracts publicity."

Weston crafted a mission statement for the foundation five years ago, and at the top of the list are education, children and the working poor.

"My heart is with the working poor," he said. "I can relate to them."

Weston bought his first duplex in 1957 with $2,500 in savings, forming the Weston Investment Co. A decade later, Weston Investment began swooping into neighborhoods on Portland's inner east side. The company would purchase older homes, tear them down and replace them with apartments.

As the economy changed in the '80s, Weston began buying warehouses and office buildings in northeast Portland, then commercial properties in Washington County.

In 1993, Weston made his move into downtown Portland, picking up the Commonwealth Building at auction for $1.9 million.

By the end of 1997, Weston had acquired eight downtown properties — now worth $27.7 million — on or near the city's light-rail lines.

In each of the past seven years, Weston donated property valued at more than $1 million to OCF, then leased the land back from the foundation.

There are tax advantages, but proceeds go into the Weston Fund, which funds a wide range of organizations — from Cascade AIDS Project to the House of Umoja to Loaves and Fishes to most Portland-area high schools.

Record snowpacks raise Oregon avalanche danger

The Associated Press

PORTLAND — The danger from avalanches in Oregon and Washington is the highest it's been since the 1930s.

"We've issued more warnings this year than any other year," said Mark Moore, director of the Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center in Seattle.

"It's safe to say that while we may not have had the most snow of any year, the danger is the highest it has ever been because of the way the snow has accumulated."

Twenty-nine sites in Oregon have set records for snow accumulation.

In the Olympic Mountains, where the snowpack is nearly 260 percent of average, a two-man crew was unable to conduct a snow survey on Mount Craig because the avalanche danger was too high.

"These were experienced folks, and when they got up there and had avalanches starting below and above them, they said, 'No way,' and turned around," said Jon Lea of the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

In the town of Diablo, Wash., a snowslide closed a road to a nearby power plant, and crews had to be flown in by helicopter.

"The avalanches have never closed this road before," Lea said. "We're seeing it all over — avalanches are larger and running farther than we've ever seen."

A combination of steep bowls and sizeable snowpack qualifies Mount Hood Meadows as a Class A avalanche zone, among the most hazardous in the country.

Every morning, a dozen ski patrol members start their day on the slopes above the ski runs, setting explosive charges into slabs of snow that have the potential to start avalanches.

The mountain air resounds with the thwipp of the air-compressed "avalauncher" — a large, tubed gun that fires an explosive charge into inaccessible areas of the mountain.

"Safety is always our number one concern, and we've been especially vigilant this year — we have pressure to open on time, but sometimes people just have to wait until it's safe," said Stuart Hill, ski patrol member. "We don't want to make it any more dangerous than it already is."

Ten years ago, Mount Hood Meadows ski patrol director Jefferson Wong was swept away by an avalanche on a ski run called The Gulch shortly after the patrol set off charges to knock down a slab of unstable snow.

Rescuers dug him out in 12 minutes, but it was too late. Like most avalanche victims, Wong suffocated.

So far this season, Oregon has had one avalanche fatality. A snowboarder from Spokane, Wash., died in January when he triggered a slide near Spout Springs Ski Area in the Blue Mountains.

Nationwide, 17 people have died this season from avalanches. Another 18 died in Canada. Those numbers pale by comparison with the 60 who have died this year in Europe, including 38 killed last month in Austria.

"There are more people and more houses, and the mountains are steeper," Lea said of the European death toll.

Experts say land-use practices in Europe have made the danger worse. Many steep mountains have been denuded of trees, the best defense against devastating avalanches.

Pam Hayes, a forecaster with the Northwest Avalanche Forecast Center, said most of the danger in the United States occurs on federal lands, where few houses are built.

But Moore said unsafe logging practices and people building vacation homes in high-avalanche danger zones could boost the number of deaths here.

He said the arrival of spring brings the most danger, especially in back-country areas without avalanche control.