

Life in the Valley



Winter retreat to heat up

Salem couple Dwight and Susan Sheets have plans to restore the Santiam Pass Ski Lodge, starting with the main floor seen here in its current state. PHOTOS COURTESY OF DWIGHT AND SUSAN SHEETS

Duo to restore once-popular Santiam Pass Ski Lodge

Kyle Spurr The (bend) Bulletin

A deteriorating ski lodge west of Sisters that's been boarded up and vacant for more than three decades is in the process of being restored so it can once again be a respite for skiers, hikers and travelers through the Santiam Pass.

Salem couple Dwight and Susan Sheets recently received a permit from the U.S. Forest Service to begin work on the historic Santiam Pass Ski Lodge, located across from the Hoodoo Ski Area on U.S. Highway 20 in the Willamette National Forest.

Dwight, a former college professor, and Susan, a former music teacher, launched the nonprofit Friends of Santiam Pass Ski Lodge to enlist support and donations from interested individuals and organizations. Among their supporters: Restore Oregon, a historic preservation group that put the old ski lodge on its list of most endangered places in the state.

The couple is also seeking other grants and fundraising to cover the potential \$2 million to \$3 million needed to fully restore the ski lodge, which sits on 26 acres near the top of Santiam Pass.

"The interest and the response of people learning of the fact that we want to bring it back, it's been overwhelming to us," Dwight Sheets said. "Overwhelmingly positive. We are excited about what is going to happen here."

For now, the focus is to ensure the dilapidated two-story structure has enough structural integrity to allow guests and then to clear the ground floor for public use — and all within five years, which is the length of the restoration permit. The Sheetses will use another operational permit to continue reworking the lodge on the Forest Service property.

"We aren't planning on adding to it," Susan Sheets said. "We are taking it back to its 1940s design and style."

Their initial plan is to create an open area on the ground floor with a cafe, gift shop and restrooms. The upper level will become a community center open for various events and gatherings.

Their plan includes repairing the lodge's 75 wood sash windows that are mostly boarded up. The couple remembers when the lodge was last open in the 1980s and all the windows made them feel like they were sitting outside with a clear view of the mountains.

"It will be a place people can sit



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Dwight Sheets, on the planned restoration work of the Santiam Pass Ski Lodge

in front of a fire with hot cocoa and have a great view of Mount Washington," Susan Sheets said.

There are currently no plans for overnight guests at the lodge, the couple said, although that could change as the project develops.

The ski lodge has been empty since 1986, when it was last used by a church group. The Forest Service didn't grant any permits until this year.

The lodge originally was built between 1939 and 1940 by members of the Civilian Conservation Corps in response to a growing public demand for recreational facilities in the region. The total cost to build the lodge was about \$22,000, according to the Forest Service.

It housed up to 60 guests in dormitories. In its 46 years of operation, it attracted thousands of guests year-round who visited during ski trips, summer activities and hiking over Santiam Pass.

An account in The Bulletin from Feb. 5, 1940, described a dedication ceremony for the opening of the ski lodge that drew 2,000 people. A brief ceremony was held in the lodge, and a ski competition was held at Hoodoo Ski Area, according to the article. Hoodoo had opened two years prior in 1938.

"A snowmobile was operated between the new lodge, adjacent to the Santiam highway, and the ski bowl, about half a mile south, and

in the bowl, a ski tow, 600 feet in length, carried skiers to a lofty ridge overlooking the treeless depression," the article read.

The ski lodge closed in 1986, but Forest Service employees have kept an eye on the boarded up property. For example, the Forest Service had the roof repaired in 2002.

But in 2003, a pump house next to the lodge was lost in a wildfire. And multiple acts of vandalism also have been noted at the lodge over the years.

A Forest Service memo describes the lodge as suffering from openings in its roof, siding, windows and doors. It's easily accessible to the elements, animals and, with some effort, people, the memo states.

"The physical condition of the historic structure is dire," the memo reads.

Despite its current condition, the Forest Service recognizes the lodge's historic value and is nominating it to the National Register of Historic Places.

"It has the potential to be reopened and to function as a facility for the original intention — to promote the use of the natural environment by the general public," a draft of the Forest Service nomination concludes.

The historic nomination, which will be sent to the National Park Service for consideration, high-

lights the lodge, next-door garage and a short ski trail that connects to a larger network of trails, including what is now the Pacific Crest Trail.

"The Santiam Pass Ski Lodge was instrumental in creating a place for citizens to sleep and get meals in the mountains at a reasonable cost while they participated in winter sports activities around the area," the Forest Service nomination reads.

The nomination also points to the lodge's rustic architectural style of the era. The lodge was made with locally harvested and milled lumber and stone quarried from nearby Hogg Rock.

Joy Sears, restoration specialist at the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, which oversees historic nominations, said the state's committee visited the site in October 2016 and gave a positive recommendation.

Sears also visited the site and left hoping it would one day be restored.

"I'm just glad people are still interested and there is still love for the building," Sears said.

For the Sheetses, it seems like the right time to take on the massive restoration project. The couple has three sons, with the youngest just about to graduate from high school. When they become empty-nesters, the Sheetses plan to relocate to the Sisters area to be closer to the lodge.

The Sheetses grew up in Salem and met in high school. They left Oregon to pursue their teaching careers on the East Coast and in the Midwest.

Dwight Sheets earned a Ph.D. in theology and taught religious studies at various colleges, while Susan Sheets taught music at the elementary, middle school and high school levels.

They moved back to Salem in 2015 and became interested in why the lodge remained closed for so long. Some of their fondest memories growing up in the region involved visits to the lodge.

"We went to the Santiam Pass a lot to ski," Susan Sheets said. "We enjoyed the lodge, and it closed down shortly after we moved away. We noticed every time we were back, the lodge was still closed and not being used."

Dwight Sheets recalls taking a hiking trip through Oregon in 1976. He became sick on the hike but was able to reach the lodge and rest there until he felt better.

He and his wife are motivated to reopen the old lodge, especially for the younger generation of outdoor-enthusiasts who have stumbled upon the lodge but have never been inside.

"There is a generation of hikers and backpackers that have discovered the lodge," Susan Sheets said. "They want to see it come back."