

Gift

Continued from Page 1A

205 prior to the wildfires, but it grew to well over 500 on some summer days.

When the Lionshead Fire swept through the city in the early morning hours of Sept. 9, 2020, it wiped out most of the city indiscriminately. Entire streets of homes were burned to the ground, including Detroit Avenue, where the former city hall was.

"I was just utterly speechless. Just utterly speechless," city councilor Eric Page said. "It just takes your breath away. The smoke was still so dense two weeks later when we went to get the boat, that we could not get a full visual of the devastation."

A community center like Detroit has never had

Workers have been tireless in their goal of finishing the new community center in time for the June 4 grand opening.

The project combines the community center — made up of the old high school gym and adjacent rehabilitated buildings on the south side of it — and the civic center.

On the civic center is side is where offices for the city and Marion County Sheriff's Office will be. Idanha-Detroit Rural Fire District has two bays on that side for fire engines.

The 16,300-square foot structure is estimated to have cost \$2.5 million. But it's not costing anyone a penny. The building is being donated to the Detroit Lake Foundation, which is selling it to the city for the \$250,000 the foundation paid the landowner. The foundation, a non-profit, will lease the community center side of the building for \$1 a year.

The structure is modern in every way, but still carries the story of Detroit with it.

The historic signs that will be hung in the hallways serve as a tribute to the city's history, as do the wood signs of athletic success of the high school that hang from the walls of the former gym.

In Detroit style, the doors are made of wood, as are things like the tables and much of the decorations.

Companies such as Freres Lumber donated wood for the building, and it was wood processed from wildfire salvaged logs.

The furniture is being made by Oregon Corrections Enterprises, including a table in the conference room.

"This has a story," Detroit Mayor Jim Trett said. "Corrections Enterprises got some timber after the fire, took it out back, had it milled and they built tables like this for each of the cities."

So many companies and individuals made donations that it's hard to remember which ones did what.

Fred Eichler framed the building. Newman Paving & Curbing paved the parking lot. Detroit Lake Foundation president Davis Evenson and his company, Davidson's Masonry, donated the masonry on the entry wall. Someone else paid for the fireplace.

Most of the builders had some connection to the city, similar to the connections

of Duncan and Siegmund.

Figuring out how to use everything that was donated was difficult at times.

"So we kind of have to figure out how to work with the county or work with the jurisdiction and say, 'This is a gift. How can we get this to work?' Because we don't have another option," Duncan said.

"There isn't somebody to pay the bill. So it's been great, again, everybody leaning in and having that understanding that this is about the spirit of building a building for the community. It's not about building a city hall."

All of the gifts added up to something remarkable.

"This is a launching pad for that community to recover," said Kyle Freres, VP of Freres Lumber. "I think the other good story here is the base of that building is an abandoned school and they turned it into something."

Former Detroit school buildings

When the city was moved prior to the completion of Detroit Dam in the 1950s, new elementary and middle/high school buildings were constructed on Patton Road and Santiam Avenue.

As the city and neighboring Idanha grew and thrived in conjunction with the logging industry, the schools thrived along with them.

Detroit's football team reached the state championship game in 1971. Its boys basketball teams won Casco League championships in 1978 and 1979 and its volleyball teams won league championships in 1984, 1985 and 1986. Those league championships were memorialized with intricate wood signs on the walls of the gym befitting a logging town.

The gym was occasionally used as a community gathering space for things like meetings and bazaars.

But with the decline of the logging industry in the area in the 1990s, the school's population shrunk. The district was combined with the Santiam Canyon School District. In the late 1990s, the schools closed and the students bussed to its Mill City campus.

Detroit Lake Charter School operated from 2000 until 2003 on the campus until it had so few students it couldn't continue.

The city purchased the former elementary school in 2004 from the Santiam Canyon School District, according to records from the Marion County Tax Assessor's office.

The former high school was sold to a property developer.

"That's a touchy point up here," Trett said.

About 25 years ago, a committee looked at converting the school into a city hall.

Between problems like asbestos-lined pipes and an old boiler heater, it wasn't practical.

"Yeah, we tried real hard to make that project work," Eric Page said. "It was just too expensive to fix that building."

Eventually the school building was torn down. But the gym remained.

The elementary school also was torn down and became the city park. The former football field became a street and over a dozen homes.

Meanwhile, the gym stood unused for

a decade.

"That building was built for the test of time," Duncan said. "And there was a reason it was never torn down.

"I could just see rehabbing that building and getting it back to its original intent was.

... that was kind of the anchor for the project."

Coalition of builders come together on job

Though the group had been doing projects before that, the world discovered the coalition of builders in 2010 when a group assembled by Rich Duncan undertook its largest and most notable project.

Over 1,000 people came together to redo the Nightmare Factory at Oregon School for the Deaf — including musician and filmmaker Rob Zombie — and constructed a new boys dormitory.

People worked around the clock for 43 days on the project on the Salem campus for the television show Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.

Since then, the alliance has continued to work on projects.

It has come together to build the Mt. Angel Community Festhalle, the Discovery Pavilion at The Oregon Garden in Silverton, homes for Habitat for Humanity and projects with Liberty House and the Boys & Girls Club.

"Those are some bigger projects that are lasting for the communities," Duncan said.

After the wildfires in Detroit, the need was apparent.

The closest there had been to a gathering place in Detroit was The Cedars Restaurant or Mountain High Grocery.

Building a house or two in the city would only do so much — a community space would mean much more.

"And so we just decided that we needed to go up there and get some kind of building put together for whatever use, but just to give an anchor of a building because everything was pretty much burned and gone," Duncan said.

The builders from the SEDCOR Coalition of Builders formed the Santiam Rebuild Coalition and got to work.

Old city hall leveled in the wildfire

The former city hall, located on Detroit Avenue, was about what you'd expect in a small, former logging town.

It was small, made mostly of wood and was combined with a couple bays for the fire department. Walking down hallways required navigating your way around boxes of papers. It was out of space.

"I kept saying if the state fire marshal comes in, we'll be closed immediately," Trett said.

City council meetings were held in the bays that normally contained fire engines. A big city council meeting would require the street in front to be shut down and it be held outside.

A new city hall had only been discussed in vague terms.

"That hadn't crossed the radar," Trett said. "I think the reality was we knew we couldn't afford it."

The building was leveled in the wildfires.

With no city offices, Sweet Home offered to give the city a trailer to use as temporary office. With much of the infrastructure damaged in the wildfires and it being unsure when it would be repaired, the city offices were moved to a temporary location in Stayton. The owner of that location has a new tenant for that space coming on June 1. So the city needs to move fast.

An old building given a new purpose

Kim Fowler owned the school property. After the alliance was formed, he donated the two acres where the school formerly sat and the gym to the Detroit Lake Foundation.

The Detroit Lake Foundation came into being in the early 2000s when the water level of Detroit Lake was too low in one year for boating. It came back to life after the wildfires with the goal of helping to rebuild the city.

"Our goal is you can't build a town without a city hall," said Candy Page, who is on the foundations' fundraising committee.

The Santiam Rebuild Coalition broke ground on the project in March 2021. The goal was to have the building completed in six months.

It wasn't always straightforward.

Things like water, power, phone service and internet were impacted by the wildfires.

"So that all kind of happened concurrently because a lot of their infrastructure burned up," Siegmund said. "A lot of the services that we all take for granted every day were non-existent for a time for this project."

Other things didn't go smoothly, either.

The gym had some moisture problems impacting the wood floor and roof issues, which required addressing. And there are the supply chain shortages the rest of the world is experiencing.

It slowed the progress.

"I didn't have any movie stars. I couldn't pull something with getting an autograph for somebody to get them to do anything," Duncan said. "At the end it was a little tricky."

To get the building done in time, people have been volunteering on weekends and any free time. Some are working nearly around the clock to have it finished for the grand opening.

The hope is that the community center becomes more than just a building for Detroit. The dozens of people and companies hope that it becomes a focal point in the rebirth of a city.

"I think as more people see that community center functioning, it will breathe life and people that have hesitated to rebuild up there, maybe not sure the town was going to come back, they will see that and realize that this canyon community is coming back," Eric Page said.

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Detroit Community Center grand opening

When: 2 p.m. June 4
Where: 345 Santiam Avenue, Detroit

Wildfires

Continued from Page 1A

when we go weeks without an incident and then all of a sudden there's five or six in one day. That's when the adrenaline gets pumping."

The camera-based ForestWatch system, which began in 2006, has become an increasingly common tool for the Oregon Department of Forestry. With additional funding from the passage of Senate Bill 762 in 2021, the camera program will be expanded from 74 cameras at 58 sites now, to 110 cameras at 94 sites by the end of 2023 — mainly in rural areas of central, eastern and southern Oregon.

Ten new sites will be added for the upcoming fire season.

Those cameras are watched by digital fire lookouts, like Beavers, at four detection centers in Central Point, Roseburg, Redmond and Lakeview. A fifth center will be built in La Grande.

Last year, the cameras and digital lookouts spotted 167 fires statewide and confirmed the location of another 384 fires that came from a different source, such as a 911 call. And they confirmed that 95 possible fires were false alarms.

"The efficiency and number of fires spotted in this system has increased each year — but it's more than just identifying the fire," said Jamie Paul, who helps oversee the camera program for ODF.

The digital lookouts can watch how a fire evolves in real time and help determine how many firefighters, helicopters or engines are required — along with any possible danger to fire crews.

"Last year we had firefighters on scene and the camera picked up two new starts that jumped the line," Beavers said. "We were able to get that communicated so two aircraft could dump water on it before they could merge or spread into the original fire.

"We can also tell them where the new starts were — downslope or upslope of fire crews — in case it was a safety hazard," Beavers added. "It helps the inci-

dent commander know what's happening around them — all the stuff they might not be able to see."

From classic fire lookouts to digital lookouts

The job of watching the forest for wildfire has been a classic job in the American West dating back to the late 1800s. Oregon, at its height, had around 800 to 900 staffed fire lookouts across the state during the golden age of lookouts from roughly 1930 to 1950.

Classic lookouts started to decline by the 1950s with the rise of aerial detection — which was considered more efficient — and that trend has continued. There remain around 100 active fire lookout towers across the state, although that number changes every year, said Cheryl Hill, author of "Fire Lookouts of Oregon." Overall, she said, there are roughly 155 standing lookouts remaining, including some that campers can rent overnight.

Increasingly, remote cameras are doing the work of spotting the fires.

"It is harder to recruit people to work in classic fire lookouts, although that's not the only reason we're expanding the camera system," Paul said. "The cameras provide 24-7 eyes in the sky and they can pinpoint fires faster. People from the detection centers can spot it, make a call and have resources going out to suppress that fire really quickly. That's what we're all about — keeping the fires as small as possible."

(ODF protects state, county and private land from wildfire — which often means areas closer to towns and homes, unlike fire on federal land which is sometimes allowed more latitude to burn for forest health.)

At first, the cameras were mostly placed on decommissioned fire lookouts or communications towers, which typically cost around \$60,000 to set up. But they've started creating new and more complex sites that can require using a helicopter to bring in equipment and generally cost \$150,000.

"We put them where the viewshed is as wide as possible and where fire dan-

ger is high," Paul said.

In addition to digital fire lookouts watching the screen, Paul said, the programs have some level of artificial intelligence.

"The cameras are programmed to recognize every point on the horizon — so it knows what it's looking at from frame to frame — and if the frame shows up different, it knows something is wrong and will flag it," Paul said. "A human will take a close look and confirm everything — and often they see it first — but it's another tool that's part of this program."

Where are new cameras going?

The majority of new cameras are being placed in Central Oregon and north-eastern Oregon, in areas that get the most lightning strikes and have the highest wildfire danger, but also are on the more remote side, where people are less likely to call them in.

"When it comes to camera placement, we have a lot more in rural places where we don't expect people to be," said Natalie Weber, public information officer for ODF in Southern Oregon, where the most cameras are placed. "If there's a fire in more populated areas like Medford or Ashland, a lot of people will report that to 911. So these cameras focus on the areas a fire would be more difficult to find."

Northwest Oregon, near the state's most populated areas, doesn't have a ton of cameras because it's already fairly well covered, Paul said.

"We're looking at the places where they'll do the most good," she said. "But that doesn't mean we won't build out in those areas in the future."

Some of the new sites for cameras do include places in Western Oregon, including southeast of Eugene at Fairview Peak and Werner Mountain, along with Scott Mountain, near Cougar Reservoir. But most will be placed right down the center of the state.

Who can spot the most fires?

Inside the Central Point detection

center, there are four stations where digital fire lookouts sit. Each station has seven screens — six computer monitors and one larger TV screen.

"We're looking for anything that catches our eye — that might be a small amount of smoke rising up," Beavers said. "If we see something, we can go live, zoom in on that point and confirm what it is."

Beavers said the digital lookouts have contests to see who can spot the most fire starts. The winner gets free lunch at the end of the season and just as importantly, bragging rights.

Beavers said he held the title for three years, but last year, lookout Gene Vine took the title by spotting some 30 to 40 ignitions. They only count if it's a confirmed fire that fire crews jump on.

Sometimes, those smoke sightings come rapidly, during a major lightning burst — like the one that took place in July 2018.

"Those lightning busts are hectic times," Beavers said. "We'd be looking at just one screen and wouldn't see just one incident popping up — we'd see five or even 10. Then we'd cycle to the next camera and see the same thing. It's not stressful, but it does get the adrenaline pumping as you try to get all the information out to dispatch so they can go and get it."

Beavers, who was a wildland firefighter before transitioning into fire detection, said it feels good to be part of the modern incarnation of the classic American lookout.

"I would have loved to have this back when I was a firefighter, just because you know what's happening around you," he said. "It's a really important job."

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