

MCNARY

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well enough through spring and summer, but was installed in an inconvenient location. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers bought the second laser in September, which will be mounted onto the outfall pipe this spring.

The cost of both lasers, along with solar panels and mounting hardware, came to a total of about \$22,200, according to USACE biologist Tim Wik.

“The exact predation rate for juvenile salmon at McNary Dam can vary, but it is obvious that birds are actively feeding in the river

near the dam at various times of the year,” Peery said.

He said millions of juvenile salmon are eaten along the lower Columbia River each year.

Director of Blue Mountain Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Lynn Thompkins said the birds eating juvenile salmon near McNary Dam likely include gulls, cormorants and waterfowl.

“The dam slows all the fish down, and they use the fish ladder. It’s like having a bird feeder in our backyard,” she said. “They ought to hire a falconer.”

And while the Walla Walla District doesn’t appear to be hiring a bird of prey to scare the salmon-eating birds

away anytime soon, it might purchase a Long Range Acoustic Device that would emit distress calls from predatory birds and accompany the lasers. This too, would be installed in the spring or summer.

The Walla Walla District and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have an agreement which dictates that each spring, the USDA’s Wildlife Services group comes and hazes the hungry birds.

The hazing includes setting off fireworks and shotgun blanks, as well as using boats to scare away lingering birds, and will continue this spring.

Studies suggest that bird abatement lasers might harm a bird’s

eyes. In 2016, the University of Washington conducted a study on the effectiveness of lasers as bird abatement against seagulls at fisheries which stated that not much was known about how lasers might affect the retinas of gulls.

In 2018, a researcher from Purdue University told NPR he was conducting a study about whether lasers could harm an animal’s retinas, which could affect their ability to mate, hunt and seek shelter.

“The manufacturer indicates that it is possible that a laser can injure a bird’s eye if it directly strikes the retina, this is why the lasers will not directly target birds, instead they will move through

the area we would like to keep the birds from,” Peery said.

He added the laser targets move slowly to allow birds time to avoid being in close contact with the light.

In April, according to the district, the lasers will be evaluated.

“Project biologists will count the number of birds that are in the area near the juvenile fish outfall, and the number of those birds that appear to be actively feeding,” Peery said.

If the lasers are effective at warding off birds this spring, the Walla Walla District will consider adding them to other area dams, according to a press release from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

HOMELESS

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Dwight Johnson, the executive director of Neighbor 2 Neighbor.

Johnson spoke with pride about a man who landed a job interview while staying at the shelter in 2012. The man was disheveled and had nothing appropriate to wear. The warming shelter’s leaders stepped forward.

“We paid for a pair of slacks, a haircut and new shoes,” Johnson said.

The improved look helped at the interview.

“He still has the job today,” Johnson said.

The Pendleton shelter is in its second home after initially opening near a grade school. Johnson, a part-time sergeant with the Umatilla County Sheriff’s Office, said neighbors and parents of schoolchildren expressed concerns that homeless people might pose a threat and create messes in the area.

The warming station personnel met with neighbors and addressed concerns, such as prohibiting loitering around the shelter until 15 minutes before opening and banning registered sex offenders. The warming station repeated the outreach when it moved to its second home in 2015.

Johnson is one of two law enforcement officers serving on the station’s board. He said having two people with police backgrounds is a plus because they are better able to detect and address potential problems.

The shelter operates with volunteers and opens only when the combination of temperatures, wind, rain and snow puts people outside at risk of freezing. Guests check in from 6:30-9 p.m., lights out is at 10 at night, and the wake-up call comes at 5 a.m. Everyone must be out an hour later.

The shelter has about six minor incidents a year, Johnson said, ranging from arguments to guests who refuse to leave. The worst incident occurred outside the building when one guest knocked another to the ground. No one was hurt, but the skirmish resulted in police arresting one man for harassment.

Johnson said guests are generally well behaved and obey the shelter’s rules. He said breaking the rules is grounds for expulsion, and “there is peer pressure” to toe the line.

The Pendleton shelter bans alcohol and drugs, but volunteers don’t check to see if guests are under the influence. Johnson said he does not want the staff to have to learn how to do this. And rejecting those with drugs and alcohol in their systems



Top: Someone left behind these belongings Sunday morning in Max Square in downtown La Grande, a popular spot for the homeless.
Bottom: Sunday morning reveals more signs of homelessness in Max Square in downtown La Grande.

would be contradictory to the shelter’s mission of protecting people from the cold.

The shelter’s staff also does not check to see if guests have warrants. Johnson said this would be a time-consuming and impractical process. He said law enforcement officers are welcome to come to the shelter, especially if they suspect someone of having a warrant. He said there have been several such arrests at the shelter.

The Pendleton shelter can host 28 guests and last winter often was filled to capacity and sometimes beyond. Johnson said the shelter had as many as 34 people on some nights, a far from ideal situation.

“We had people sleeping on the floor,” he said.

That crowding carries a greater potential for incidents. This season, the shelter has a strict limit of 28 per night unless there are extreme weather situations.

All of those using the Pendleton warming station must be at least 18 years old. Families with children receive motel vouchers.

“We do not feel it is a healthy place for children,” Johnson said of the shelter. “We do not want to put them in that environment.”

SAFETY AND FAMILIES ARE TOP PRIORITIES

Vela said the same peer pressure dynamic for following the rules occurred at the

La Grande shelter. And he and other board members met with La Grande Police Chief Brian Harvey to go over concerns.

Harvey described those conversations as productive. He said he generally made suggestions on how the Union County Warming Station could improve policies and procedures. For example, he said, the shelter was tight-lipped about revealing anything about guests. Even if volunteers overheard guests talk about a robbery or sex crime, the chief said, police prevented them from bringing that forward.

“Basically, I made it real clear not to run the shelter in a way that it becomes a sanctuary for a criminal element,” he said. “They need policies to have leeway to keep the shelter and community safe. If there’s some reason that brought us to

come there, we want them to be free to talk about that.”

Harvey emphasized the La Grande Police Department is not weighing in on how the council should vote on the appeal. He also said he would like to see the community organizations dealing with homelessness come together for a more comprehensive solution.

While the Pendleton facility does not allow children, the La Grande shelter admits families with children. Audrey Smith, a member of the Union County Warming Station Board, explained the Third Street building has rooms individual families can stay in.

“We like to keep families together,” she said.

Smith noted all of the school-age children who stayed at the station in 2018-19 were able to attend classes after spending a

night at the shelter. If not for the shelter, she said, the children probably would have missed school because they would not have eaten a nutritious meal, had a good

night’s sleep and been able to clean up.

Smith said the Union County program provides adults with help to get them back on their feet, and the station recently won a grant for two counselors to work with guests to that end.

Volunteers at the Pendleton Warming Station also strive to help their guests get their lives on the right track. They not only prepare them for job interviews but help them obtain birth certificates and other documentation to apply for jobs. But Johnson said this is not the most critical objective.

“Our mission is to keep them from freezing to death,” he said.

The Union County station was open each night during its first two seasons and would continue that plan if it is able to open at the Third Street location. Smith said being open every night provides a sense of stability to guests, which allows them to seek services and search for jobs.

“It is hard to plan for the future when you are always in survival mode,” she said.

HOMELESS ARE LOCALS

Vela said the majority of the people who have been guests at the Union County Warming Station have ties to the area. The same is true of the Pendleton warming station. Johnson said most guests indicate they used to live in Pendleton or have relatives there.

“Nobody has admitted that they came (to town) because of the shelter,” he said.

The people with no Pendleton connections often are transients on their way to another city and rarely stay long.

“They usually move on after about two weeks,” Johnson said.

Whatever the La Grande

City Council decides on the permit at the Wednesday night hearing, warming station supporters or detractors have 21 days to appeal to the Oregon Land Use Board of Appeals.

Adelsberger said he has not decided if he would take that route. Since filing the appeal, he said, there has been a “lot of talk and things happening” regarding the warming station. He said the key is to figure out the right solution and operate the shelter in the best way possible.

Vela said the Union County Warming Station Board is ready to do whatever it takes to open the shelter, but the appeals process makes pinning down that date difficult. If the 21-day window closes without opposition, Vela said the work begins on getting the place ready, but that would be after Christmas, and contractors have not been willing to even give cost estimates because of the uncertainty caused by the appeal.

“As soon as we can, our doors will be open,” he said.

ANOTHER NIGHT IN THE COLD

That Wednesday night at the recycling center, the homeless man hauled a large canvas backpack containing a warm sleeping bag and a laptop computer. He also owns a tarp, he said, but tends to stash that where no one would look. He said he carries the mass of belongings everywhere he goes to protect them from theft.

He said he uses public internet connections to communicate with friends and family via social media, and he watches YouTube before settling in at night among the bushes at downtown’s Max Square.

When he wakes, he said, he will go looking for more cans and bottles to turn into money so he can buy a little food. He said he will repeat the hunt in the afternoon, eat again, and get ready for another cold night under his tarp, just a couple blocks away from the empty building awaiting the warming shelter.

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