

LIBERTY

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transformed into a space for retail businesses. Occupants of its space included Western Auto, which operated there for many years. The retail space had a false ceiling and floor that prevented customers from realizing the old Liberty was both above and below them, said Dale Mammen of La Grande, who initiated the effort to restore the Liberty.

Mammen began the work to save the Liberty Theatre after first taking a tour of it about a decade ago. He had a sense of urgency after seeing the theater.

“I knew that it would either be restored or be torn down and become a parking lot,” Mammen said.

Phase III, the final act of the restoration project, will involve restoring the balcony and the basement. Fundraising is beginning for phase III. For information on making donations, visit the Liberty Theatre Foundation’s website at www.libertyonadmas.org.

At Friday’s open house, people had an opportunity to see the walls in the theater, which have been painted or covered with materials of various colors throughout the building’s history. Small patches of these hues and its bricks will remain exposed when the restoration is finished. This will add to the historic flavor of the theater.

“It will be like stepping into a time capsule,” said Jeff Clark, a member of the Liberty Theatre Foundation Board.



Michael Frasier, left, a member of Liberty Theatre Foundation Board, talks Friday during the open house of the old theater in La Grande with Randy Tweten, center, and Ben Heckman. The trio are standing in front of the area for the theater’s lower level seating.

Staff photo by Dick Mason

TREES

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Club tree stand, in the parking lot of the Hermiston Community Center, has been selling Christmas trees as a fundraiser since the 1970s. Tree sales help pay for a variety of Kiwanis programs, including college scholarships, dental screenings and community improvement projects, such as the new lighting at Kiwanis Park in Umatilla this year.

Like other vendors, Christmas tree shortages were a concern, but the Hermiston Kiwanis Club several years ago locked onto a steady supplier that has helped them maintain their sales numbers.

“About four or five years ago we had to scramble to find enough trees,” Barak said. “Since then, we have been relatively consistent and our customer base seems used to the type of trees we’ve had.”

The club started with 400 Christmas trees and sold roughly 300 in the first week of operation.

Barak said he expected to sell off the remaining trees and close the stand Sunday evening.

“It’s just a great fundraiser for us, and a great family experience to go and find the perfect tree,” he said.

Barak also said community support always is a key in their efforts to sell trees.

“We work really hard to keep our costs down so that as much as possible can go back into the community,” he said.

Keeping down cost also was a factor for the Union County group, Browne said, which sold trees for \$65. She said that was a good sight better than vendors in California, where trees were selling for \$140 or more.

Brothers Tom and Jeff Hepler have been selling Christmas trees for the eight years at their stand on the corner of Southwest Frazer Avenue and 12th Street, Pendleton, Tom Hepler, however, began selling Christmas trees nearly 30 years ago as a way of raising money to

buy presents for his wife and five children.

Although he sells trees to make a profit, he said, he tries to keep his prices as low as possible, something that has become more difficult in recent years. The Heplers are one of many Christmas tree sellers that use farm-raised trees, making them reliant on farms that set wholesale prices. While the Heplers said they haven’t had any issues getting the number of trees they need by using family and friends’ farms, they have run into increased prices.

“The prices have gone up nearly double,” said Jeff Hepler. “They went from \$3 a foot to nearly \$8 a foot for wholesale.”

The Heplers said the Great Recession in the late 2000s led to a drop in demand for trees, causing many farmers to go out of business or tear out tree operations in favor of other crops, a change that led to fewer available trees. Despite this, the Heplers feel as though the tree glut is improving.

“As far as getting trees, it’s going to get better,” said Tom Hepler. “The larger trees have been an issue though, so if you want a big tree, you better come early.”

While access to trees appears to be improving, the brothers said the shortened holiday season and rise in artificial tree sales will keep their sales lower than last year. The brothers said they expect to sell roughly 500 trees this year, down from a record 540 sold last year.

“Financially, artificial trees are taking over,” said Jeff Hepler. “But it’s the smell, and the ambiance and the whole Christmas tree atmosphere that keeps our customers coming back.”

While most local Christmas tree vendors get their trees from commercial tree farms on the west side of the state, Ward Walker harvests all of his trees by hand from nearby forest land. Walker, who runs Walker’s Christmas Trees on Southgate in Pendleton, said the only thing that could hurt his tree sales would be a widespread tree disease.

“I’m not reliant on the tree farms,” he said.

Unlike farm-raised trees, the trees on Walker’s lot vary greatly in height and width and are less “full” than many are used to, he said. Walker said his trees are exactly what his clients want.

“My clientele is people that grew up and went to the forest to get their own tree,” he said. “My biggest competition is people who can make it to the mountains to get their own tree.”

Walker sells trees to fill the winter lull in his landscaping business and said he can sell anywhere from 300-450 trees depending on the year, although sales fluctuate more than he’d like. Walker said sales have been good in recent years, and he is prepared to keep selling trees right up to the end of the week before Christmas.

“If I get close to running out, I can just go harvest a few more,” he said. “I really love what I do.”

Phil Wright of The Observer contributed to this report.

BILL

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down each year gradually in order to get to where we need to be in the future,” Dembrow said. “And industries or sectors that can’t be below that amount will have to purchase allowances to continue to emit above that amount.”

The earlier proposal would have created a new state bureaucracy to manage the program.

The current concept, instead, puts the oversight role under the Department of Environmental Quality, Dembrow said.

It also takes a different approach to a major point of contention last year: its impact on prices at the gas pump. Republicans argued rural Oregonians would feel the effects of a carbon policy more acutely because of the longer distances they must drive to get to work, school and to other duties of everyday life. Fuel suppliers would have faced added costs under the original proposal that would have been passed on to consumers.

The new proposal would instead mean companies importing gas into the state would only adhere to the emissions system in the Portland area at first, starting in 2022, and then, three years later, metro areas with populations of 30,000 or more.

“That’s a big change,” Dembrow said.

While the details aren’t “quite there yet,” he added, it’s generally an idea he supports.

“I think it really does address a lot of the concerns that we heard that the bill would put inordinate costs on our rural residents,” Dembrow said, “So delaying the implementation for the most rural parts of the state is an acknowledgement that we’re trying to address those concerns.”

Dembrow said the current concept doesn’t include what he feels are important aspects of last year’s proposal, such as worker retraining for those who could be impacted by economic changes wrought by a new climate policy.

The Oregon AFL-CIO, a federation of unions representing about 300,000 Oregon workers, issued a rejoinder to the draft on Friday.

Graham Trainer, Oregon AFL-CIO president, said the current draft doesn’t help workers whose industries could be affected by a climate policy and doesn’t direct proceeds from the policy to creating “family wage, quality jobs.”

“We have always believed that workers must be at the center of policy when debating how their work could be impacted, and especially in a

cap and invest program that has the potential to produce major shifts in Oregon’s economy,” Trainor said in a written statement Friday.

“Any climate action that leaves behind workers and communities disproportionately impacted by the effects of climate change is a policy and a process that should be rejected,” Trainor said.

Sen. Fred Girod, R-Stayton, considered to be a point person for Senate Republicans as they negotiate a new climate policy, couldn’t be reached for comment Friday afternoon.

Sen. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, who is resigning to run for Congress in early January, has taken a step back from his previously front-and-center role in carbon policy for Republicans, and said Friday he hadn’t seen the latest proposal.

Senate Republican Leader Herman Baertschiger Jr. of Grants Pass said he hasn’t been involved in the discussions over the policy, and said he hadn’t gotten very far into reading the 60-page

proposal Friday.

But he said it was “madness” to consider sweeping climate legislation during the five-week legislative session. The session starts Feb. 3.

“We think that trying to run these huge policies that’ll affect every Oregonian in five weeks is craziness,” Baertschiger said.

Brad Reed, a spokesman for Renew Oregon, a coalition of businesses and nonprofits pushing for state policy to address climate change, emphasized the concept is an early “starting point.”

But Reed said the concept is missing “key components” the group pushed for last session, and doesn’t go far enough to make all major polluters pay or invest in moving the state to a clean energy economy.

“I want to stress that we consider this as where they will start negotiating,” Reed said. “This is not a piece of legislation that the Renew Oregon coalition would be able to support.”

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wage jobs on the eastern side of the state, something she said is keeping younger people away.

“We need young people in the area, but we can’t afford them,” Wright said. “I want to work on finding family wage jobs to bring young people back to Eastern Oregon, rather than being a

retirement community. And nobody should have to fight and scrap for a pay raise.”

Democrats haven’t fielded a candidate in the 58th District primary since 2014, when state Rep. Greg Barreto, R-Cove, won his first term. Barreto declined to seek a fourth term, opening up a seat that covers Union County, Wallowa County and a part of Umatilla County.