

TRAILS

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City officials at each end of the proposed trail are eager to see it accomplished, anticipating both economic and health benefits. Elgin, at 1,700 population, has no accessible trails from downtown, according to a press release announcing the grants. Joseph, with roughly 1,000 people, also will benefit from the trail.

Interest at each end

As it turns out, Brock Eckstein has an official interest at each end of the trail. He's Elgin's city administrator and also is interim city administrator for Joseph.

"Our city staff, collaborating closely with the Joseph Branch Trail Consortium and WURA, are prepared to lead and assist as needed to ensure the project is a success, because the potential economic and health impacts from this trail for our city, community, and region will be momentous," said Eckstein of the benefits to Elgin.

"In the future, it'll be really great for Joseph," he added, lamenting the delays in the project over acquiring funding.

A board member of the Wallowa Union Railroad Authority, which owns the right-of-way alongside the tracks, Eckstein sees the grants as a step forward in solving the financial woes of the project.

"I'm really excited getting two grants," he said.

One grant, from Oregon State Parks' Recreational Trails Program, will fund construction of the trail-

head, which will also serve as a pocket park for the city of Elgin. The trailhead/pocket park will be on city-owned land across from the train depot in downtown Elgin.

Eckstein said there is a "time cap" of December 2024 to complete the first 13-mile segment.

"We're just taking it piece by piece until we get the whole thing done," he said.

In addition to trail information, the trailhead/pocket park will include an electric vehicle and e-bike charging station — the only one between La Grande and Enterprise — an Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant parking place, ADA-compliant picnic tables, interpretive signage about the area's earliest inhabitants and more recent history, a bicycle maintenance stand and a water fountain.

The Oregon State Parks grant also will fund construction of the inaugural 0.6 mile of the trail that will be an ADA-compliant path running out of town along the railroad tracks.

A second grant, from the Oregon Department of Transportation's Transportation Growth Management program, will fund development of a detailed refinement plan for the 13-mile segment of the trail between Elgin and Lookingglass in rural Union County on the Grande Ronde River near Palmer Junction. This funding will also support local outreach and education about the trail.

Parts of the trail, near trailheads located in towns, will mostly be ADA-compliant and made of hard-packed gravel, said Gregg

Kleiner, project coordinator for the consortium.

"The ADA-compliant sections will accommodate electric wheelchairs, and E-bikes will be allowed on other parts of the trail," Kleiner said in an email. "Other parts of the trail will be a more basic gravel trail that can be used by hikers, bicyclists and equestrians. ... We hope it might be used by local school athletes, like cross-country teams."

Grants a perfect fit

Kleiner, who joined the consortium as its first project coordinator in March, finds the grants a perfect fit for the project.

"These two grants dovetail perfectly and will be a catalyst for the larger project, which has been in the planning stages for many years now," Kleiner said. "This funding will establish a wonderful, fully accessible community asset for residents of Elgin (and Joseph) to enjoy while also generating an economic boost for (each) city from visitors stopping in town to hike or bike out of town along the Grande Ronde River on the initial trail segment ... or to charge their electric vehicles."

He said students enrolled in Eastern Oregon University's Sustainable Rural Systems Program are helping research and develop content for the interpretive signage and other components of the project.

The project also will help draw people to the Eagle Cap Excursion Train, which runs from the train depot in Elgin up to Minam and back about twice a week from late spring through fall.

VETERANS

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A long-term home

Scudder was homeless prior to moving into Veteran's Village Union County, and he said there are many other veterans struggling. Scudder emphasized that the village gives a fresh start to veterans who need a safe and reliable place to live.

"No drugs or anything are allowed. This is the perfect environment," he said. "I'm not a people person. My issues are more of a personal matter. Being around other veterans will be nice. I couldn't ask for more. I'm so happy."

Tsiatsos noted that a vital part of the project is to create permanent housing instead of a temporary stay.

"We wanted it to be a place someone could call home for 20 years," he said. "We're hoping to create an environment where people will live long term."

Scudder found out about the veterans village through his VA social worker, Angel Smith.

Through a program called HUD-VASH, veterans go through a screening process similar to the Section 8 housing process. The program guides veterans in need of rental assistance who have experienced homelessness.

The housing authority does the financial screening and background checks, while Smith provides ongoing case management, drug and alcohol counseling and any other services the veterans may need for at least a year after finding a new residence. The aim is to make sure the veterans are able to stay successfully housed.

"It really is a great program for veterans," Smith said.

The HUD-VASH program bases rental rates on gross monthly income adjusted according to



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Francis Weatherwax stands in the doorway of his new home at Veteran's Village Union County on Tuesday, Nov. 9, 2021. He is among the U.S. military veterans who were selected to live in the community of cottage-style homes in La Grande.

the individual's needs, including obstacles such as mental health, drug and alcohol abuse or physical disabilities.

"It helps promote an environment where veterans can help each other out," Blais said.

Gold standard

Tsiatsos said he thinks Veteran's Village Union County is a model that other communities can mirror to alleviate veteran homelessness.

"We're hoping that maybe other communities will come see this and try to model a similar design. It doesn't have to be permanent, but I think permanent housing is more rare than transitional, so to me there's more value to a community there," Tsiatsos said. "I think once people see that and see that the livability is sustainable, then it might be something other communities will want to do."

Having been homeless himself and knowing many veterans who face similar issues, Scudder emphasized that communities like Veteran's Village Union County can be life changing.

"I feel like a whole person again," Scudder said. "I can't tell you how excited and thrilled I feel."

GCT Land Management is in the process of creating another veterans village

in Baker City, which will include nine one-bedroom homes and three two-bedroom homes.

The city of La Grande and the planning commission adopted a code change in 2018 that allowed for the construction of cottage-style homes and small dwelling units. Tsiatsos was the first to make major plans after the code change, bringing the veterans village to life.

"It's one of those things Gust became more and more passionate about and got a lot of folks behind it," La Grande Community Development Director Mike Boquist said. "The city is very supportive of his project."

A new beginning

For Scudder and the future veteran tenants of the village, the micro-neighborhood provides an essential piece in getting back on one's feet — a place to call home.

With the goal of creating a model to help veteran homelessness around the state, Tsiatsos has spoken with other communities about similar possibilities.

"Most of the communities now have the cottage home ordinance in place, so they can bring that density into their communities because housing is in such short supply across the nation right now," he said.

LETTER

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Heikkila wrote that he was attaching the draft of a letter "that could be sent to Sen. Wyden in advance of next week's town hall meeting on the legislation. I thought it might make sense to have it come from a group of commissioners."

Heikkila didn't respond to emails or voice messages seeking comment, and Anderes, the county commissioner, didn't respond to emails or voice messages about the matter.

The American Forest Resource Council is a trade organization that lobbies for the timber industry out of Portland and in Washington, D.C. The group has a political action committee that contributes to both Republican and Democratic candidates at the state and federal level, according to the non-profit Open Secrets. Anderes has not received any contributions from the group, according to Open Secrets.

The draft letter that Heikkila sent to Anderes on Aug. 24 was addressed to Wyden and posed questions ahead of a town hall he hosted later that month.

Within three days, Anderes and 13 other Eastern Oregon commissioners signed the letter and sent it via email, verbatim, to Wyden's office. The letter expressed concern that the River Democracy Act would create too many regulations for agencies to enforce and leave millions of fire-prone acres of forest untouchable.

"As you know, federal land management agencies must navigate an unending and often conflicting maze of federal laws, regulations, and litigation as they seek to implement land manage-

ment activities and treat millions of at-risk acres across Oregon," the letter said. "Unfortunately, the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management are falling far behind the pace needed to get ahead of the growing crisis and we are deeply concerned about any legislation that would compound the challenges they face."

Anderes had earlier adopted language on the issue produced by the American Forest Resource Council. On Aug. 4, he and Union County Commissioners Matthew Scarfo and Donna Beverage issued a resolution opposing the River Democracy Act. Emails obtained by Oregon Wild showed the resolution was drafted by Nick Smith, public affairs director for the American Forest Resource Council, and emailed to Anderes about a month before the commission passed its resolution.

Smith told the Capital Chronicle that the American Forest Resource Council urges public officials to take up their causes, just like Oregon Wild.

"We have serious concerns about this bill and its potential to worsen wildfires in Oregon," he said. "We encourage elected officials and organizations to take positions. If they're using that information, and it sounds like they did, then they have serious concerns about the bill and want to be heard."

Arran Roberts, communications manager at Oregon Wild, said, "We haven't had someone stick anything we've said on their letterhead and call it their own."

He agreed that advocacy groups press their positions with public officials.

"We have a role to say

you should do this, ask these questions. There's a difference between that and writing a whole resolution and having it copied and pasted," he said.

Erik Fernandez is wilderness program manager at Oregon Wild. He sought the public records from Union County after noticing similarities between press releases from the American Forest Resource Council and statements from several Eastern Oregon county commissioners.

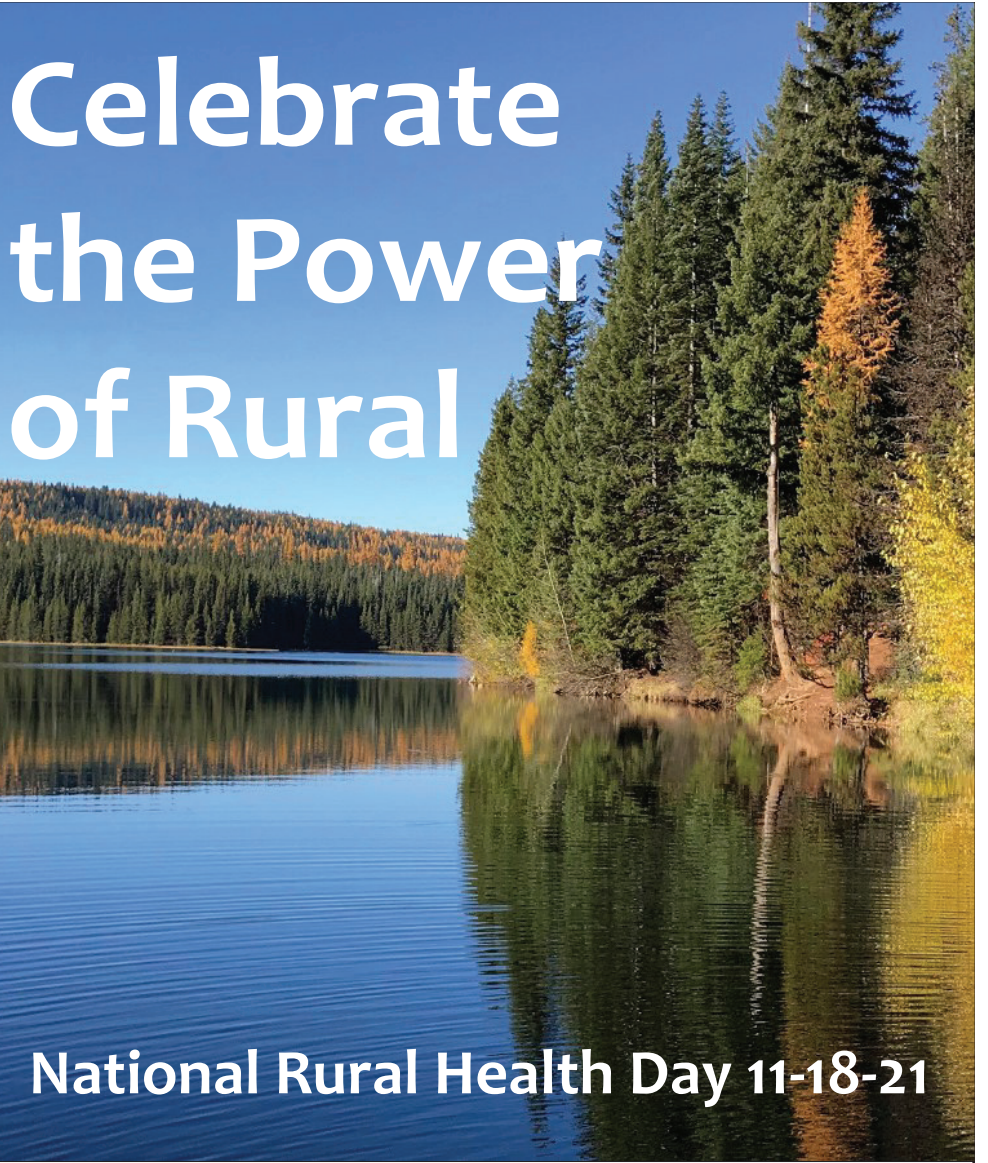
"The statements, the talking points, they were clearly all reading from the same script," he said.

"These Eastern Oregon county commissioners are criticizing this bill for being written by Portland environmentalists. But here you have timber industry lobbyists based out of D.C. and Portland talking for them," he said.

Smith said that there is a deep frustration in North-eastern Oregon and elsewhere over the bill.

"There are people in rural Oregon that have had their input and concerns ignored about the bill," he said. "We have members who operate in rural areas, who employ people in rural areas, and are in communities where members would be deeply affected by the implications of this bill."

Adding more river miles to the Wild and Scenic Rivers system would impose higher standards for water quality and more protection for cultural and recreational values. It could also mean more land off limits to logging and logging activities. The American Forest Resource Council said the proposal could restrict forest thinning and management needed to protect the state from wildfires.



Celebrate the Power of Rural

National Rural Health Day 11-18-21

National Rural Health Day is an opportunity to "Celebrate the Power of Rural" by honoring the selfless, community-minded spirit that prevails in rural America. Rural medicine has been called the purest form of health care. Our technology may be state of the art, but our people are as timeless as the landscape that surrounds us. Keep it real – keep it close to home – keep it rural. That's how we do health care.



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