

## PARKS

Continued from Page A1

a lot of interest in our parks and recreation system, which is gratifying.”

According to Spence, the public input lays the foundation for the department’s future plans and allows funders to see that proposed projects are a need in the community.

“Funders often ask things like ‘what does the community need?’ and ‘where is this identified in your plan?’ when a project is going through,” Spence said. “With a plan and all that community outreach, we’re able to show that it’s been proven through our series and engagement with the public that we need x, y and z. In this one it was connectivity, accessibility, more trails, more open space, youth and teen programs and the recreation center.”

In addition to public recommendations, the parks staff recommended projects include improvements at Max Square, Reynolds Park, Candy Cane Park, Sunnyhill Park, Birnie Park, Benton Park, Morgan Lake, Riverside Park, Pioneer Park, Gangloff Park and Community Forest.

### Planning ahead

After gaining public input and creating a master plan, the La Grande City Council and Planning Commission are now set to host public hearings, gain approval and move the plan forward.

“Essentially, there’s a series of public hearings that will happen to get the plan adopted into the city’s comprehensive plan,” Spence said.

According to Strope, some projects are eligible for funding through the city’s general dollars, while others may be more likely afforded through accessible grants on a project-to-project basis. Strope noted the Pioneer Park turf project as a good example of the city partnering with Eastern Oregon University, La Grande School District and community business



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

**Children take an imaginary ride on a wooden motorcycle at Riverside Park on Tuesday, March 29, 2022. The city of La Grande now has a five-year master plan for improving and upgrading parks and public areas around the city. At the top of the list is creating an indoor recreation space.**

donations to accomplish a parks project. Additionally, more specific grant opportunities that come along in the coming years could shuffle the timeline of the projects.

One of the most noted needs in the plan is an indoor recreational facility, which would provide a multipurpose community space open for sports such as basketball and volleyball, programs for children and teens, classrooms and more.

Spence said an indoor recreation center has been a goal of the city for some time now, with plans nearly coming together prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“There’s such a lack of gym space and indoor activity space in La Grande. We really struggle with that,” Spence said. “We had a conceptual project pre-COVID. The pandemic kind of killed those conversations, but now with this plan it’s clearly coming to the forefront that people want and need that dedicated indoor recreation space.”

The current timeline of the parks master plan allots the hiring of an architect/engineer to provide site analysis for a recreation center during the 2022-23 fiscal year — the analysis is projected to cost \$25,000.

The Riverside Park playground improvement project highlights the plan’s 2023-24 fiscal year actions, in addition to uti-

lizing the walkability analysis to plan out connections to parks, exploring partnerships to improve youth programs and seeking out opportunities to purchase land near Gangloff Park.

“That is the next big thing that we will be looking toward funding and working with the community, because a lot of people have volunteered time into the original project,” Spence said of the Riverside Park playground. “When we go to replace that, it’s going to be important to do community engagement and outreach and make sure all the community partners feel good about the plans.”

The five-year plan expands through the 2026-27 fiscal year, adding restrooms to Candy Cane Park and planting trees along Island Avenue past the entrance to Interstate 84. The full timeline of the parks master plan is available on the city’s website.

Following a joint work session with the La Grande City Council and Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission on Monday, March 28, public hearings are set to take place at the La Grande Planning Commission on May 10 and at the City Council on June 1 and June 6.

“It’s evolving and fluid,” Spence said. “The purpose of the plan is to have a direction for staff every year with goals and objectives.”

## RESCUE

Continued from Page A1

mom and his brothers and sister. He talked about how much he loved his friends, and Kaybob and me.”

“Kaybob” was their nickname for Carter.

At one point, Watson half-joked that it was so cold from waterfall mist that he wished he could come over and snuggle. Both men cracked up.

After the sun rose high enough to shine into the canyon and warm the air, they decided to close their eyes.

“Let’s just get some sleep while we can,” Postma remembered Watson saying. “I think that was the last thing he said.”

### Help arrives

Midmorning July 2, Postma heard voices above him. His voice was hoarse from yelling back and forth to Watson, but he grabbed a stick and banged it loudly on the ground to attract attention. About half an hour later, Postma’s father, Adam Otteson, appeared along with Carter, who had decided to return despite his injuries because of worry about his friends. Otteson had rushed to the site after learning about the fall. Postma couldn’t see Watson from where he lay, but he and Carter soon learned their friend was gone.

“It was pretty terrible,” Postma said. Paramedics reached the spot and attended to Carter’s and Postma’s injuries. A U.S. Forest Service fire crew from Ukiah dug trail to the bottom and created a helicopter landing zone. Another team devised a system of ropes in case a helicopter rescue wasn’t possible. A National Guard Black Hawk hoisted the two men from the canyon bottom and flew them to St. Charles Medical Center, Bend.

### Saying goodbye

Postma spent almost two weeks in the hospital while Carter was released



Sharon Gaines/Contributed Photo  
**Cody Watson sports a sharpshooter medal he won in March 2020, while deployed in Qatar.**

to heal at home. Holli Hill postponed her son’s memorial service several weeks until both friends could attend.

On that day, three busloads of soldiers from Watson’s National Guard unit in the Willamette Valley arrived in their dress blues, bringing with them a Howitzer with the name Cody imprinted on the barrel. Postma, a helicopter mechanic with the aviation unit in Pendleton, said members of his unit also attended. Many had gotten to know Watson, who was planning on joining the unit after flight school.

Those who knew Watson can’t quite believe he is gone.

“Cody was an exceptional young man,” said Sharon Gaines, his grandmother. “Truly. He was our cornerstone.”

It’s been a rough year for the family. Holli’s husband, Kyle Hill, died in September 2020. The day of Cody’s accident was Holli and Kyle’s first wedding anniversary since Kyle’s death.

“It was a beautiful hot summer day,” she said. “We were supposed to be camping in the mountains. All three of those boys were supposed to be going to my camp for the weekend.”

Sharon Gaines’ husband, Gene, died this fall. As a boy, Cody and his grandfather spent a lot of

time tromping around in the woods together, she said. “I’m sure they’re in a duck blind somewhere in heaven telling stories.”

### Gratitude to responders

Gaines, an insurance agent and member of the Blue Mountain Insurance Professionals, which recently donated \$5,000 to Umatilla County Search and Rescue, thanked the people who responded to the fall.

“What most people don’t understand is that these people are volunteering their time to put themselves in harm’s way to help our fellow citizens when they’re in a bad situation,” she said. “It’s a huge county that goes from the desert to the mountains and everywhere in between.”

Carter and Postma also expressed gratitude to first responders.

“Search and rescue did a really great job,” Carter said. “They worked as a team. It took a while for them to get down there, but that’s because of how hairy it was. They assisted us all the way through.”

“It was very challenging,” said SAR Supervisor Dwight Johnson, who organized much of the rescue operation. “It was a narrow area, very hazardous.”

Not being able to rescue Watson bothers Johnson even though he knows responders did all they could.

“It wasn’t the outcome I wanted,” he said.

Carter still grapples with guilt about not getting to the pickup faster despite his injuries and lost glasses. Gaines rejected that notion.

“The first time he saw me (after the fall), he said, ‘I’m sorry I failed,’” Gaines said. “He didn’t fail in any way. He was heroic.”

Postma has returned to work and recently started running again. But even as his body heals, his mind often strays to Watson.

“Nothing will ever replace him,” he said. “Part of Kyler and I died up there with him. That’s just how it’ll always be.”

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