

Transfer of former Umatilla depot lands nears completion

By JOHN TILLMAN and DAKOTA CASTETS-DIDIER
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — The lands of the former Umatilla Chemical Depot are nearing transfer from Army ownership to the Columbia Development Authority. After years of waiting for local control, the deal could close in December.

CDA Director Greg Smith said the memorandum of agreement to complete the transfer from the Army to local hands “is 100% done.”

“The deeds of trust are drafted,” he said. “As soon as the ports of Morrow and Umatilla, the counties and (CTUIR) authorize the transfer, the deeds will be attached to the MoA. Once approved, I can sign. It has been awaiting my signature for 90 days.”

Smith said that is because the Army requires the delay for a \$1 million payment.

“It’s a pretty good deal — thousands of acres for a million bucks,” Smith said.

The area west of Hermiston and north of Interstate 84 straddles the border of Umatilla and Morrow counties, covering 17,165 acres, which will support wildlife habitat as well as military and industrial uses.

Some 7,500 acres is to remain in military use, housing the Oregon Army National Guard’s Camp Umatilla infantry training school, emergency management facilities and youth activities.

Nearly 5,800 acres is for wildlife habitat. The Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation is to receive most of this land, which it aims to rehabilitate.



East Oregonian, File

Igloos that once housed chemical weapons dot the former Umatilla Chemical Depot near Hermiston in 2014. Control of the site is slated to transfer in December 2022 from the U.S. Army to the local Columbia Development Authority.

“Rehabilitation will not occur until transfer occurs,” said Bill Tovey, the tribes’ economic development director. “The Army will transfer the land to CDA, who will then transfer the 4,000 acres to the tribes. The land is mostly zoned wildlife habitat. The big thing is protecting the shrub steppe habitat.”

Industrial parcels in Umatilla and Morrow counties on the former depot total close to 3,200 acres. The Port of Morrow is to develop Morrow County’s nearly 1,900 industrial acres in the southwest of the depot area. Three parcels in Umatilla County with around 1,300 acres are zoned industrial.

The ports wanted to raise the million dollars by selling 640 acres north of the depot, Smith explained. The counties

and tribes each offered to pay a third. The five-member CDA board split.

“The property transfer and payment was supposed to have been authorized at the board meeting (Tuesday, Aug. 30),” Smith said, “but I was down with COVID-19.”

The board postponed the authorization vote until September, after which the Army is to be notified and the transaction to take place in 60 days.

The Army created the depot in 1940 and declared the property as surplus on Nov. 14, 2008. The Local Redevelopment Authority, composed of Morrow County, Umatilla County, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and the ports of Morrow and Umatilla, adopted a redevelopment plan in 2010.

JOHN DAY

Suspected chemical attack on dog puts official on alert

By JUSTIN DAVIS
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — John Day City Council member Heather Rookstool is watching her back these days following a suspected chemical attack last month on her family dog.

Rookstool said the family’s pet bulldog, Zeta, was burned on her belly between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. on Wednesday, Aug. 10, at their residence on Northeast Seventh Avenue across the street from the skate park.

The incident has left Rookstool shaken and wondering why somebody would attack her dog instead of coming to her personally and attempting to solve any issues they might have. The incident has also hit her in the pocketbook to the tune of a \$425 vet bill she hadn’t budgeted for.

Rookstool said she can’t say for sure what the motivation behind the attack was but the timing is “convenient” considering it happened a day after she cast the only vote against putting the pool bond back on the ballot in November.

Even if politics wasn’t behind the incident, Rookstool said she wants the public to know someone in the community is hurting animals.

“Who’s to say it isn’t a random act that happened at my house? It could have been. There have been times in the past where we’ve had dogs poisoned in Mount Vernon. There have been things that happen in Grant County in the past that were just random,” she said.

The veterinarian who treated Zeta was unable to determine exactly what caused the dog’s burns because of a decision not to perform a skin biopsy on the animal following the attack. Rookstool said that decision was made due to the amount of stress the animal had already endured.

Efforts to identify other possible reasons for the burn marks on Zeta’s stomach began immediately after her condition was discovered, with all but a deliberate attack being essentially ruled out.

“We checked to make sure there were no noxious weeds because bulldogs have sensitive skin,” Rookstool said. “We checked off every box we could think of. A weed, a sunburn, even a car accident. People keep coming at me with all these different ideas and I’m like, ‘You’re not helping, we’ve already done that.’ Unfortunately, nobody wants to think about it, but it’s looking like something was put on her skin.”

The incident has left Rookstool wondering if she needs to look over her shoulder now and possibly carry Mace everywhere she goes. If it was a deliberate attack, Rookstool said, it won’t deter her from continuing to be the lone “no” vote in city council meetings if her convictions tell her she needs to be. If anything, she said, the incident has inspired her to continue doing what she is doing and has given her an added drive.

Despite that added drive, Rookstool said she never thought her position and votes at city council would lead to her family being put in danger.

“I never thought being on city council would make me fear for my safety in my own community,” she said. “You’re not going to make any changes hiding behind this, so confront it face to face but don’t be a coward. It’s hard to put into words that are respectful because there are so many things I would love to say to this person and I hope I get to say this to them.”

There is a \$550 reward for information that leads to the arrest of the individual or individuals responsible for the suspected chemical attack on Rookstool’s dog.

Renovations continue at historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center

By LISA BRITTON
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BAKER CITY — Work is “on track” at the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, which is closed for an energy-efficient upgrade.

The renovation of the interpretive center, 5 miles east of Baker City, began in March 2022 and hasn’t been affected much by supply issues, said Sarah Sherman, project manager.

“Hopefully that will continue,” she said.

The center, which is 30 years old and 30,000 square feet, is getting new siding, insulation, roofing, windows and doors. The \$6.5 million remodel, funded in part by the Great Americans Outdoor Act, is expected to reduce energy consumption by 73%.

The center is managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

“We want to be good stewards of our natural resources,” said Vale District manager Wayne Monger, whose office oversees the center. “This design utilizes high thermal insulation value materials and high-efficiency heating and cooling technology to counter energy demands during summer and winter.”

Sherman describes it as “facelift” because much of the work won’t be obvious to visitors. “Structurally, it will be the same, but shiny and new,” she said.

Work is about one-third finished. So far, construction has included new insulation and a new roof. The next projects focus on new siding, windows, doors and lights. The HVAC system is expected to take the most time.



Casey Taylor/Contributed Photo

New siding is being installed in August 2022 at the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, outside Baker City. Additional work includes new windows, doors and an HVAC system. The renovations are expected to reduce energy consumption by 73%.

Construction is expected to be complete in 2023, but Sherman said it will take about four months to put the center back together because many exhibits were packed away in storage, and boxes were built around displays that stayed, such as the oxen and wagons.

Sherman estimates the center could reopen in late 2023.

In the meantime, those interested in Oregon Trail history can visit NHOTIC’s exhibit inside Baker Heritage Museum, 2480 Grove St., Baker City.

This partnership will continue through 2023 — and hopefully beyond, Sherman said.

“Being part of the community is what we want to do more of,” she said. “We want to continue that even after we reopen.”

The Baker Heritage Museum is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Sunday from noon to 4 p.m.

Admission is \$9 adults, \$8 seniors, \$5 for ages 6-12, and free for ages 5 and younger.

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