

WINE: 'It's my belief this district will reinvent Milton-Freewater'

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wine bottle that uses grapes grown in the district and is finished in Oregon.

It was Robertson who first started gathering support to petition the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau for the AVA designation more than three years ago. Kevin Pogue, a geology professor at Whitman College in Walla Walla, joined in the research and submitted their petition in 2012.

Robertson was elated to hear the AVA was approved, which he said will draw in people from around the world and holds the promise of future economic development in Milton-Freewater — population 7,050.

"It's my belief this district will reinvent Milton-Freewater," Robertson said.

The Rocks District is defined geologically by an alluvial fan where the Walla Walla River exits the Blue Mountains and enters into the Walla Walla valley. Dark basalt stones are pocketed throughout the soil, which compared to the sandy soils befitting most of Eastern Oregon's signature crops, is actually quite beneficial for wine grapes.

Water drains easier through the rocky ground, encouraging vines to root deeper. A little stress is good for the plants, forcing them to focus resources on the fruit.

Rocks exposed at the surface also act as miniature radiators, Robertson said, capturing heat and ripening grapes later in the season.

At roughly 3,770 acres, The Rocks District is Oregon's second-smallest of 18 total AVAs. However, only 250 acres of those are currently planted in commercial production leaving plenty of opportunity to grow.

"You gotta believe more people are going to show up here," said Robertson, who lives in nearby College Place, Washington. "And they will. Big guys, little guys, they're all knocking at the door."

Milton-Freewater is already anticipating the AVA will be a boon to development.

Randy Grant, executive director of



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

The vines of a Syrah grape plant are kept within 30 inches of the ground to make use of the radiant energy from large basalt rocks in the soil that capture heat during the day.

the city's downtown alliance, said residents are ready to embrace the district and are looking for ways to capture new business and tourism.

About 74 people attended a meeting Tuesday night at the Community Building as part of an overall project to improve Milton-Freewater's economic development. Grant said they expect The Rocks District will play a big role moving forward.

"We are very proud of what Walla Walla has accomplished in the wine industry," Grant said. "That said, we think The Rocks has the potential to be the crown jewel for wine in the valley."

City Manager Linda Hall said the sky is the limit for new investment. She envisions custom grape crushing and bottling facilities could move in to take advantage of the product grown locally, along with tasting rooms and restaurants.

"We're extremely excited," Hall said. "It's nice to see our quiet little area of the world recognized for its distinctness."

Meanwhile, the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau is looking at changing its rules for naming AVAs on

wine labels following its approval of The Rocks District. As it stands, winemakers can only label a particular AVA if the wine is finished in that state. That means Washington wineries that buy their grapes from The Rocks District cannot use the AVA name on their bottles, since The Rocks is located entirely within Oregon.

Now, the TTB is looking at broadening the rule for adjacent states. There is a 60-day comment period before a final ruling is made. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, recently applauded the proposal as a benefit to Oregon's \$3.3 billion wine industry.

When consumers learn to equate The Rocks District wines with their unique taste and quality, that's when the region will really start to gain a reputation, Robertson said.

"It does so many good things, just by way of enlivening discussion about what is so special about the Walla Walla Valley," he said.

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PORT: Hanjin represented roughly two-thirds of container cargo volume

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Oregon, has negatively impacted productivity at Portland's container terminal.

The port and operator blame work slowdowns by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, while longshoremen claim inadequate equipment and safety problems are causing the problem.

Hanjin was caught in the middle of the fight and decided to discontinue service rather than endure further costly delays, said Wyatt.

"They finally just decided to pull the plug. They just couldn't take it any longer," he said. "It was obvious something had to give, and something did."

Hanjin's looming departure will affect agricultural exporters beyond the immediate vicinity of Portland and Oregon's Willamette Valley, said Josh Thomas, marine media relations manager for the port.

Container barges deliver farm goods to Portland from Lewiston, Idaho, providing a more cost-efficient alternative to trucks for shippers in northeast Oregon, southeast Washington and western Idaho, he said.

"Those connections have always been a selling point," Thomas said.

Exports from these areas had grown strongly in recent years, which would have kept Portland's container terminal competitive for Hanjin if not for the slowed productivity, he said.

"We know what the decision was not about, and that was the availability of cargo," he said.

For Bossco Trading, a hay exporter from Tangent, Ore., the departure of Hanjin will complicate logistics in addition to driving up transportation expenses, said Shelly Boshart Davis, its vice president of international sales.

Whereas a driver could deliver three containers a day between Tangent and Portland, it will require a full day to get a single container to the Seattle area, she said.

Truckers may also run out of legally allowable driving hours during that trip, potentially forcing them to stay overnight, Boshart said.

"It's costly all around," she said.

Other ocean carriers that ship to Japan and Northern Europe will continue to use Portland's container terminal, but Hanjin represented

roughly two-thirds of container cargo volume, Wyatt said.

The Port of Portland plans to seek other trans-Pacific ocean carriers to service the port, but that process may take two years, he said.

Any prospective partner would need assurances of full productivity from ILWU, said Thomas.

"That's going to be a heavy lift in the coming years here," he said.

If a replacement is not timely found, the absence will affect river pilots, tugboat operators and other service providers that other ports on the Columbia River — such as Astoria — depend on, Thomas said.

Meanwhile, the Port of Portland and ICTSI are seeking financial damages from the longshoremen's union in federal court, Wyatt said.

That litigation will likely become "more significant" now that Hanjin has pulled out, he said.

"We intend to pursue those very aggressively."

Capital Press was unable to reach a representative of ILWU as of press time.

Hanjin announced it's leaving Portland at a time of broader tensions between the

longshoremen's union and container terminal operators along the West Coast.

A previous labor contract between ILWU and terminals represented by the Pacific Maritime Association ran out in July 2014 and ports have become congested in recent months as the parties have strived to work out a new deal.

"It's a very intense period right now on the waterfront on the West Coast," Wyatt said.

A breakthrough about the maintenance and repair of truck chassis — used to move containers — was recently reached, but the overall agreement has remained elusive.

Most recently, the PMA accused the longshoremen's union of insisting on an unreasonable provision in the new labor contract: the ability to unilaterally fire arbitrators who rule against ILWU.

Work stoppages related to alleged safety violations are referred to such arbitrators, who are meant to quickly resolve such disputes and keep cargo moving.

If the union is able to fire arbitrators who stop slowdowns, that will jeopardize the reliability of West Coast ports, PMA said.

KITZHABER: Secretary of State is next in line of succession for governor

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plained return to Oregon sparked speculation that Kitzhaber planned to quit. Hours later, Kitzhaber issued a statement saying he would stay put.

"Let me be as clear as I was last week, that I have no intention of resigning as governor of the state of Oregon," he said in a statement Wednesday. "I was elected to do a job for the people of this great state and I intend to continue to do so."

Kitzhaber has come under increasing criticism for the scandal involving him and first lady Cylvia Hayes. Under the Oregon Constitution, the secretary of state is next in line of succession to the governorship. Oregon is one of seven states without a lieutenant governor.

The rumors were fueled when Brown's office would not reveal why she cut her trip short.

Her spokesman, Tony Green, said only that she returned from the National Association of Secretaries of State — whose winter conference ends Friday.

"I do not have any information about why she is cutting her trip short," Green said.

Resignation — even though Kitzhaber just began his fourth term on Jan. 12 — is not the only option.

Under the Oregon Constitution and a 2009 law, a governor can take a voluntary leave based on disability, define that period, and estimate when he might resume his duties. The law also provides for a medical disability with a more complex procedure.

Representatives of Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, and House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, say they were unaware of any pending announcements by the governor or the secretary of state.

Rumors circulated in the capitol Tuesday that directors of state agencies were called to a meeting in the governor's office. But Matt Shelby, a spokesman for Oregon chief operating officer Michael Jordan,



AP Photo/Don Ryan, File

In this 2012 file photo, Oregon Democratic Secretary of State Kate Brown celebrates at the podium after winning her race at Democratic headquarters in Portland. On Wednesday, Brown left a conference in Washington, D.C., to make an unscheduled return to Oregon.

said Tuesday afternoon that if there was a meeting of top-level government officials, Jordan was not invited.

"I know that Michael has no knowledge and has not been called into a special meeting in the governor's office," Shelby said. "I imagine if there was such a meeting he would be at the top of the list."

Meanwhile, lawyer Jim McDermott, who represents Kitzhaber, told The Oregonian, "I have every reason to believe the governor will stay in office."

Spokespeople for Kitzhaber did not respond to requests for comment Tuesday afternoon.

Earlier this week, in an exchange of letters, Kitzhaber requested Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum — an independently elected official — to conduct a review of the allegations against him and Hayes. Rosenblum responded that the Department of Justice had already begun an investigation.

They disagreed on the nature of the proceeding, although typically, the attorney general looks at criminal violations.

Additional reporting from The Associated Press. The Capital Bureau is a collaboration between EO Media Group and Pamplin Media Group.

ROAD: A 2013 report said city would need to spend \$35.7 million over the next decade to bring Pendleton roads to 'good' condition

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your child, 'Do you want Mommy and Daddy to have a car to go to work or do you want to eat every night?'" she said.

Public Works Director Bob Patterson said all options to fund street repair were on the table, including a gas tax and a utility fee.

The council and staff seemed to prefer the gas tax, 40 percent of which would be paid for by people from out of town.

Lisa Large, another Perkins petitioner, offered the counterpoint that gas stations in Pendleton often charge more than other gas markets in the surrounding area.

As the meeting continued, the discussion expanded to include how the city would gain voters' trust needed to pass a ballot initiative to fund streets.

Resident Terry Fife said it was hard to support the city when other projects like the Rudy Rada Skate Park, the raised crossings on Main Street, a new police station and the series of downtown bronze statues were funded before more pressing needs were discussed.

Mayor Phillip Houk said many of those projects were paid for with private donations or a dedicated enterprise funds, but many council members agreed that the city needed to do a better job of explaining the budget.

Councilman Chuck Wood said he was working on a draft of an informational booklet that would condense the city's more than 150-page budget into an easy-to-read document.

Still, some audience members were unimpressed with the council's public relations skills.

Petitioner Jenni Galloway, the daughter of a former city councilman, accused the council of rhetorical grandstanding without finding concrete solutions.

"Everybody talks but no one lands the plane," she said.

Galloway added that the council created an unfriendly environment and greeted some public comments with eye rolls.

One concrete idea was offered by councilman Neil Brown, who said he held a personal meeting with Pioneer Asphalt owner Terry Clark about the matter.

Brown suggested a local improvement district, which would spread the cost of fixing the street among the Perkins property owners based on the size of their property with the possibility of financial support from the city.

While the petitioners seemed open to the concept, the audience said such a district would set a dangerous precedent for other street repairs and would be harder to do in less affluent parts of the community.

Under many scenarios, the city would need voter

support to fund what Houk called a "significant crisis."

A 2013 report commissioned by the city would need to spend \$35.7 million over the next decade to bring Pendleton's roads to "good" condition. At the Pendleton current rate of funding, the city will only spend \$3 million.

"We're in trouble and we need your help," councilman Al Plute said.

Contact Antonio Sierra at asierra@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0836.

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Watch for spring Parks & Recreation activities in our flyer coming out through the schools in early March.

Look for the summer brochure around town and on our website late-April.

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