

More room at the inn



Site preparation work has started at the location where a four-story Holiday Inn Express will be build at the corner of West Hermiston Avenue and Highway 395. Heavy equipment operators were working on the site Tuesday, Dec. 15. According to Mark Morgan, assistant city manager for Hermiston, building permits were purchased for the location last week.

As more travelers find Hermiston, hotels catching up to meet demand

By JADE MCDOWELL

It isn't uncommon for travelers to Hermiston to find there is no room at the inn, but 2016 could be the year that changes.

A 2013 study by the city of Hermiston found a city-wide occupancy rate of 65.8 percent, and by 2014 that number had inched up to nearly 69.6 percent. The final numbers for all of 2015 aren't in yet, but the third quarter of the year saw a 4 percent jump over the third quarter of 2014.

"Hermiston's occupancy rate is extremely high, even compared with Portland," assistant city manager Mark Morgan said.

Hotel capacity in the Hermiston area is getting a boost, however, by the expansion of two local hotels and a construction of new Holiday Inn Express downtown.

TOURISM

Hermiston has seven hotels (not counting Comfort Inn and Suites by Space Age, which is outside the city limits) comprised of 434 rooms. The 93-room Holiday Inn Express under construction at the corner of Hermiston Avenue and Highway 395 will boost the city's hotel capacity by 21 percent.

Insight Hotel Management president Richard Boyles said in a statement that his company was excited about the new hotel, and the improvements to downtown Hermiston that the property tax revenue from the \$5 million investment will bring.

"We're thrilled about building our new hotel in the middle of downtown Hermiston, and we're really excited about the planned developments in the Urban Renewal District," he said.

Nakul Butta, manager of the Rodeway Inn, said the big new franchise hotel coming to a city the size of Hermiston is a testament to the way the hotel industry is thriving there.

"They find our economy strong and that we're doing well," he said.

According to Butta, the Rodeway Inn's revenues have seen "steady growth."

"The last few years, especially after 2012, has picked up quite a bit," he said.

The growth seems to have been driven by Hermiston's overall growth, the expansion of various private-sector businesses and an increasing number of events hosted by Hermiston School District. Local hoteliers said they're filled to capacity on weekends the city hosts state football championships, regional basketball tournaments and other sporting events, sending some teams and parents to Pendleton for a room.

Butta said the Holiday Inn Express will likely put a bit of a dent into some of the hotels in a similar price range but it "won't put anyone out of business."

He said local hoteliers are excited at the prospect of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center, which will open its event center building to conferences and other events in April and will be completed in 2017.

Butta said travelers to Hermiston tend to be there for corporate reasons instead of tourism, taking advantage of its position as a geographic hub close to local businesses as well as industries a half-hour drive away in the Tri-Cities, Boardman and Pendleton.

"Each of those towns has a specific industry they hold," he said. "If we can have an epicenter like EOTEC, that's a key point."

Holiday Inn Express isn't the only player in the hotel industry to see the need for more hotel rooms in Hermiston.

The Oak Tree Inn behind Safeway is currently expanding its offerings. When construction is done in May the hotel will go from 62 rooms to 86. Twelve of the new rooms will include kitchenettes.

Manager Kellie Solinger said the hotel

gets all types, but there are more corporate visitors than tourists coming through. The Oak Tree Inn has a contract with Union Pacific, but is also open to the general public.

"We're just so busy," she said. "We stay busy year-round."

Comfort Inn and Suites, located outside the city limits near Space Age Fuel, finished an expansion in late 2015. The hotel,

which formerly had 65 rooms, added an additional 35, including six suites.

At the time co-owner Jim Pliska said the rooms shouldn't be hard to fill because the hotel was "often running up against capacity."

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A 35-room expansion was completed in 2015 at the Hermiston Comfort Inn & Suites.

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