

UMATILLA

# Former Tillicum Inn to reopen Friday

By JADE MCDOWELL  
East Oregonian

The former Tillicum Inn has risen from the ashes.

The Umatilla hotel has been franchised as an Econo Lodge and is reopening Friday after closing for more than a year to repair damage from a fire.

Jose Quinones, who has owned the 40-room hotel with his wife Parveen for three years, said they can't wait to finally open their doors again. On Wednesday, workers were putting the finishing touches on the building, which will have a grand opening celebration at 2 p.m. on Friday.

"It took a long time, but we're here," Quinones said.

The inn was lucky in a lot of ways, but even with the stars aligning, the fire meant more than a year of lost revenue and employees who took jobs elsewhere during the closure.

Hotel manager Josie Kepich, who stuck with the business through the past year, said the fire started around noon on Sept. 6, 2017. Luckily, she said, because it started in the middle of the day, there were only about seven people in the building and she was able to quickly get them out before anyone was injured.

The blaze heavily burned six rooms in the center of the building — three upstairs and three downstairs — but other rooms were also damaged by smoke, water and firefighters chopping holes in the roof to help them put the flames out more quickly. It got so hot in the upstairs hallway that the plastic case around the fire extinguisher melted.

"It was ugly," Kepich said. "After everyone left, I came in here and thought, 'Oh my gosh.'"

Kepich had been on the phone with Quinones when she had suddenly shouted that there was smoke and she had to go. After trying to call her back, Quinones, who was in Washington at another hotel his family



Jose Quinones, who co-owns the Econo Lodge in Umatilla, stands in a room renovated after a fire damaged the motel (then called Tillicum Inn) in September 2017.



Auteliano Juarez, of Belford Restorations, works Wednesday near the entrance of the Econo Lodge in Umatilla, damaged by fire in September 2017 when it was called the Tillicum Inn.

owns, rushed to Umatilla.

When asked how the fire started, Kepich and Quinones said it was an electrical cause, but they didn't know the exact problem or what room the fire started in. They said they preferred to leave that to the insurance company and fire department to discuss directly.

"That's in the past; we're looking forward," Kepich said.

After the fire, they started working through

the insurance claims process and getting all the needed permits to strip most of the building down to the studs and completely remodel. Smoke-damaged linens, carpet, drapes, beds and other items were tossed out and contractors from Belford Restorations were brought in. Luckily, Quinones said, Farmers Insurance was great to work with, and everyone from city staff to the Umatilla Chamber of Commerce told the business to

just let them know whatever they needed.

"It's been hard, but we have had everyone helping us," Kepich added.

While some employees have moved on to other jobs since the fire, Kepich said many are returning to work for what will be known as the Econo Lodge. Customers, too, have been using other hotels, but Kepich said judging by the number of calls she still gets asking when they will be open again, at least some are planning to return next time they're in town.

"We need to get opened up and start some revenues going again," she said.

Quinones said after all the community has done for them, he and his wife and the staff are anxious to find ways to give back to the community once they reopen.

The newly remodeled Econo Lodge features new "everything," from furniture to carpet to showers. Private kitchenettes have been added to some rooms, and the business has added a continental breakfast. Refreshments and tours of the remodeled hotel at 1481 Sixth St. will be available Friday at 2 p.m. during the open house.

**"It took a long time, but we're here"**

— Jose Quinones, co-owner

# Umatilla County upgrades refrigerators, pickups

By PHIL WRIGHT  
East Oregonian

Umatilla County Public Health is getting two new refrigerators to store vaccines.

Public Health gives about 2,600 vaccines a year, according to Alisha Southwick, the department's deputy director, and the refrigerators storing the vaccines are 10 years old. One refrigerator is in the clinic in Hermiston and the other is at the department's office in Pendleton. She said the Wildhorse Foundation provided a \$10,000 grant to cover the cost of the upgrade.

Public Health received bids from four vendors. Southwick said, and selected two K2 Scientific models. They cost a total of \$8,590, including delivery, and have the most amount of cubic feet storage. Two other vendors also offered bids below \$10,000, according to a memo from Southwick, but those refrigerators were too small.

The county board voted 3-0 to approve the purchase.

Commissioner Bill Elfering advised Southwick the Wildhorse Foundation requires her to give back any difference between the grant money and the actual cost. Southwick said she planned on asking the foundation if her department could spend the remaining \$1,410 on new thermometers to monitor the temperatures of the refrigerators.

Commissioner George Murdock said the Wildhorse Foundation can be amendable to such requests. Murdock chairs the foundation's board of directors.

The board also approved the vehicle purchases for the public works department.

The department is get-

ting two new 2019 Ford F-250 XL pickups from Northside Ford Truck Sales Inc., Portland, for \$28,753.64 each. Tom Fellows, public works director, told the board the pickups would replace aging vehicles for supervisors, who drive them 25,000 miles or more each year, so it makes sense to improve those from time to time.

He also explained the department has the funds in its budget and is using the statewide network of contractors to get the best deal. Without that contract, the pickups would cost more than \$41,000 each.

And public works will buy three used pickups

from the United States Forest Service for a total of \$20,100, including \$8,100 for a 2009 Ford F-250 crew cab four-wheel drive with a diesel engine and 81,797 miles. Fellows said the department also budgeted for these vehicles.

PENDLETON



Ward Walker has run Walker's Christmas Trees in Pendleton for more than 30 years.

# Walker makes Christmas tree wishes come true

By TAMMY MALGESINI  
East Oregonian

Ward Walker initially got into the Christmas tree business as a way to fill the gap between his seasonal lawn service business.

"This is a natural progression with my time," he said. "As I'm wrapping up my lawn business, I start cutting trees."

In his 30th year of selling Christmas trees in Pendleton, Walker still has a lot of fun with it. In addition to making a profit, the Pendleton man likes to help brighten the holiday season for people that might be less fortunate.

Reading a person's body language, Walker sometimes offers a discount. Other times, he merely plays Santa Claus and gives trees away.

"I like to give to people that don't expect it and would never ask," he said.

Also, he has held contests on the Walker's Christmas Trees Facebook page. Last season, he asked for nominations in order to give away a handful of trees.

Without knowing the identity of the proposed recipient, people voted by "liking" the nomination. Among a flurry of nominations, the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association was moved by the giving spirit, offering stocking stuffer gifts to those in need.

Others have responded with the pay it forward spirit by paying double when making a purchase. Last season, Walker presented a tree paid for by Gene and Mary Hallman to a family that recently lost a loved one.

In 2016, Cindy Moran was touched when her par-

ents, Frank and Phyllis Ritz, were the recipients of someone's pay it forward generosity. After putting up a small artificial tree for many years, Moran said her mother was hoping for a real tree.

In ill health, she didn't have many holiday seasons left. After hearing about the octogenarian's wish, Walker was touched and gave Phyllis' caregiver a tree.

"This brought tears to my mother's eyes," Moran said. "With all the negative things happening in our world, it is good to know that there are still good people who care about others."

Last season, as it got closer for Santa to make his rounds, Walker needed to take care of his own holiday plans. Posting a message on Facebook and at the tree lot, he let people know it was self-service and they could pay what they could afford. All he asked was that people message him to make payment arrangements.

Although there were a few grinchers who stole Christmas trees, Walker won't let the actions of a few deter his holiday spirit.

"It's a cool feeling to help others," Walker said.

Walker's Christmas Trees is open seven days a week from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. (except opening at 9 a.m. on Saturdays). It's located in the 800 block of Southgate between Abby's Legendary Pizza and Wendy's. For more information, call 541-969-8412 or search Facebook.

Contact Community Editor Tammy Malgesini at [tmalgesini@eastoregonian.com](mailto:tmalgesini@eastoregonian.com) or 541-564-4539

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