



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

The historic Helix City Hall is under renovation.

PRESERVING THE PAST

Small group of Helix residents making progress on preserving city hall

By JESSICA POLLARD
East Oregonian

HELIX — Blood is pumping once again in the heart of Helix, as a small group works diligently to preserve one of the last historic buildings in town — the Helix City Hall.

“At one time, Helix was a bustling metropolis,” said former Helix mayor Jack Bascomb. “There were six saloons, three hotels, three churches. It was the center of the grain industry.”

Bascomb is the president of the Helix Advancement Partnership Network, a non-profit organization, which commenced restoration efforts on the building last month after 15 years of trial and error.

In the heart of Helix, there was once an opera house. Trains whistled along the railroad tracks which rolled through Helix. There was a newspaper, a flour mill and a general store.

And little by little, it started to fade away as highways in Eastern Oregon improved and big box stores became more prominent. Today, the population is a little under 200, according to the last census.

The Helix City Hall building got its start as a schoolhouse back in the 1900s. Sometime before 1955, Bascomb said, the school sold the building to the city for just \$1. It eventually became home to the library, city hall and a single-room historical museum jam-packed with relics of centuries past.

The building is a historical relic itself. Before any renovations began, the place had knob and tube electrical wiring and no air conditioning. In 2012, the basement flooded and the city discovered the whole building was being held up by basement

level door frames.

Bascomb said they nearly lost the building then.

“We want to preserve the character of Helix,” Bascomb said. “And we need a meeting place for people to do things.”

In the past, Helix City Hall was home for a local robotics team and for kids’ dance classes.

Right now, library shelves are crammed into adjacent rooms as the first leg of the renovation journey becomes finalized — new insulation, wiring, heating and cooling in the Helix Library. The room next door will soon become a community classroom.

The Helix Advancement Partnership Network was founded in 2004, and started gaining more community support in the mid-2000s, as residents donated \$7,000 to get the ball rolling on renovations for the Helix City Hall building.

The efforts were spearheaded by a former principal at Athena-Weston Middle School, Mary Pilgreen and former mayor, Harry Scheuning, who is lovingly dubbed “Mr. Helix.”

Pilgreen passed away unexpectedly from heart failure in 2008.

“Her death took the wind out of our sails,” Bascomb said.

The project was derailed again when Scheuning passed away in 2014.

“When we first started, we wanted to do the whole building at once,” said Cindy Wood, HAPN treasurer. “We



Students at Helix School, now the historic Helix City Hall, pose in a vintage photo.

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quickly learned, you don’t do that.”

They quickly learned that grant funding doesn’t necessarily work that way.

“When we started applying for grants, we were mostly unsuccessful,” Bascomb said. “Since we couldn’t do big, we tried really small.”

They started with community donations. They were shooting for \$6,000 but residents got \$7,000 together.

Terry Case, who is the HAPN secretary, said his family gathered \$1,000. His grandmother taught at the building when it was a schoolhouse in the early 20th century.

Soon enough, small grants started rolling in. But then a larger grant from the Wildhorse Foundation, totaling \$20,000 and another from the Oregon Commu-

nity Foundation totaling \$28,000 helped the group finally begin construction. The city put \$110,000 into restoration before the partnership started.

But there’s still a long road ahead. Wood estimates it’s going to take at least \$350,000 to complete the whole building, which still has its original single-paned windows. She said the project could get completed in two or three years.

“I don’t want to lose our momentum,” Wood said.

On Halloween night, the group is planning on throwing an open house for the library.

“In the 2000s, people were excited about this,” Bascomb said. “But now they’re ready for us to show them something.”



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The historic Helix City Hall got its start as a school in the 1900s.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Jack Bascomb, former Helix mayor and president of the Helix Advancement Partnership Network, inspects a new barn door inside the Helix City Hall, a historic building under renovation.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

The historic Helix City Hall houses the community library which has been in existence since 1914.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

The historic Helix City Hall building features many wide doorways with thick wooden frames.



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Helix librarian Annette Kubishta and cabinet maker Dan Evedland, of Walla Walla’s Cabinets Will Travel, talk about cabinets he will make for the Helix City Hall.