

HERMISTON

City council approves push to raise money for new Funland

Reconstruction committee aims to build a larger, more accessible and more durable playground

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — A citizen committee will try to fundraise as much as \$810,000 from the community in order to rebuild the Funland playground “bigger, better and stronger” after it burned down in May.

The goal is ambitious, but Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann praised the group for dreaming big.

“This community has a rich history of doing things better than average, better than they’ve been done before,” he said.

The city currently has \$752,000 in hand from an insurance settlement and some initial donations that trickled in unsolicited after the fire. It’s enough to build a playground over bark chips, but the Funland Park Reconstruction Committee hopes to build a larger, more accessible and more durable playground with new features, such as a restroom facility right next to the playground and a second picnic shelter to accommodate more birthday parties.

The largest cost of their vision — at \$336,000 — would be replacing the previous wood chips under the structure with a spongy, wheelchair-friendly, fire-resistant material made from recycled tires.

“The wood chips at the bottom of the swings and slides were displaced constantly,” Parks and Recreation Director Larry Fetter said, noting new wood chips would only cost about \$20,000 upfront but need to be replaced frequently.

The structure itself will be built from materials less flammable than wood, such as a compressed plastic made from recycled milk jugs that has become popular for new playgrounds. It will be designed to reduce the number of hiding spots for people up to no good, and will have an upgraded security camera system.

The tentative design the committee presented Monday would be broken up into three main thematic sections, plus a 16-foot-tall structure in the center and a separate area for swings.

The centerpiece of the adventure section is a large pirate ship where children can pretend to battle a mythological kraken coming out of the “water.”



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

Funland committee member Charlie Clupny, left, and Parks and Recreation Director Larry Fetter present plans for a new Funland playground to the Hermiston City Council on Monday.

In the agricultural section, slides lead down from a tall grain silo, while children can climb on a tractor or giant fruits and vegetables.

In the western section, a large locomotive gives a nod to the railroad that helped bring Hermiston into existence, while Western storefronts can be customized to reflect what Hermiston’s early downtown looked like. The section will also include a Native American campsite with teepees, a “fire pit” and drums.

Fetter said he consulted with cultural specialists for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation on the American Indian section, and they made suggestions to make the section more authentic to area tribes.

“We introduced a climbing rock with petroglyphs that might actually be found in the Columbia Gorge,” he said.

Multiple city councilors said they wanted to do more than just ask the tribes for suggestions to improve the design. If the tribes aren’t 100% on board with something, Councilor John Kirwan said, the city shouldn’t include it.

“Any time you have a cultural element, you need to get their permission,” he said.

Drotzmann agreed, saying he hoped the playground stands for generations to come, and therefore he wouldn’t want anything the tribes weren’t “completely comfortable” with.

“They gave us a tour (Tamástslikt Cultural Institute) and there’s so much detail and so much quality and so much thought in that, it’s so easy to get wrong, so I hear you loud and clear,” Fetter responded.

Councilor Roy Barron said he appreciated the effort to include the tribes, but he was disappointed there wasn’t more to represent Latino cultures. Fetter told Barron he would love

to take suggestions on colors or other design elements that would help the playground feel more inclusive for Latino children, which will likely make up the majority of children using the playground.

The final tally of how much the rebuild committee’s full vision would cost came to \$1,562,000 (an estimate last week placed it at \$1.2 million). Fetter said the city could downgrade or hold off on some elements if they weren’t able to fundraise as much as hoped.

While Fetter asked for the council to sign off on the design as presented, in order to complete construction by the city’s July 4 celebration at Butte Park, councilors said they would feel more comfortable fundraising first, and then approving a design after they see how much came in. Fetter said that would likely push the completion date back to Labor Day, but councilors said they felt it would be worth the wait to do such an important project right.

Two committee members, Charlie Clupny and Patricia Alder, told the council a lot of thought was put into the design and they hoped that enough money would be able to be raised to bring that vision to life. Clupny said when he talked to the Lions Club, they were excited to talk about how the club could help.

“I just shared three pictures and by the end of the hour they were like, ‘When are we going to start building?’” he said.

A new committee will be put together to begin fundraising in earnest and publicizing the vision for the playground. Efforts will include the sale of fence pickets that community members can engrave, and corporate sponsorships of pieces, such as the giant watermelon slice.

“You and your committee have the council’s blessing, now go forth and make it happen,” Drotzmann said.

Spreading some holiday cheer



Contributed photo

Students from the Pendleton High School Art Club visited Horizon Project Inc. on Court Street in Pendleton over the weekend and brought a little holiday cheer with them. The art club volunteered their time to paint the front windows with a festive Christmas theme. The student volunteers included Taylor Dougherty, Roxi Taylor, Jaelynn Rodriguez, Elijah Tabellija, Lainey Neistadt, Jack Hess and Lupita Garcia.



BRIEFLY

District nets \$3.3 million in bond refinance

PENDLETON — Six years after it passed, local voters will be getting a bargain on the 2013 Pendleton School District bond.

At a Pendleton School Board meeting Monday, Director of Business Services Michelle Jones told the board that the district refinanced the bond on Dec. 4, netting the school system \$3.3 million in savings.

According to district officials, the refinance could result in a lower property tax rate for the public or keep the tax rate stable should the district pursue another bond.

After school district residents approved the bond in 2013, the district used the \$55 million to pay for new Washington and Sherwood Heights elemen-

tary schools, among other improvements and renovations. The bond is set to expire in 2038.

Two injured in Milton-Freewater crash Saturday

MILTON-FREEWATER — Two people were injured Saturday night in Milton-Freewater when the pickup they were traveling in struck two parked vehicles at Main Street and 13th Avenue.

Carol Legenberg, 64, of Coos Bay, was driving a 1987 Isuzu pickup with passenger Danny Sager, 42, of Walla Walla, Washington, when she failed to negotiate a turn northbound on Main Street and struck the vehicles, according to Milton-Freewater Police Chief Doug Boedigheimer.

Police and medics from several agencies responded

at 9:26 p.m., he wrote in an email.

Witnesses said Sager was ejected through the windshield and was found sitting on a home’s porch, he wrote. Legenberg was extracted by Milton-Freewater Fire Department firefighters.

Both were taken to Providence St. Mary Medical Center. They were conscious, he wrote, but their injuries were unknown. Hospital spokeswoman Kathleen Obenland wrote in an email she did “not have any information to release on patients by these names.”

Legenberg told police she couldn’t see well in the dense fog, and it was unclear how fast she was traveling. The posted speed limit was 25 mph. Boedigheimer said Monday morning he was unsure whether charges would be filed against her.

— EO Media Group

Discount on water for low-income residents approved by city council

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — The Hermiston City Council made it easier for low-income residents to get a break on their water and sewer bills Monday.

The council approved a proposal by city staff after a significant increase in utility rates in March increased the number of hardship applications the city was receiving.

City Manager Byron Smith said the city’s previous process involved submitting an application detailing the customer’s income sources and expenses, which a committee would then use to decide whether the person should be given a discount.

“There were a lot of ‘ifs’ in the process before,” Smith said.

The new system adopted Monday requires people to apply annually, using their federal tax return for the year. If the applicant doesn’t file their taxes until partway through the year, they can get credit for payments they

already made. If the applicant falls below the federal poverty line, they will be given a 50% discount on their base fee for water and sewer, which under current rates would be a total discount of \$32.50 per month.

Using tax returns and the federal poverty line was recommended by the public infrastructure committee.

“The reason it came up was that there was so much subjectivity, it was nearly impossible to get on it,” said councilor John Kirwan, who represents the council on that committee.

Mayor David Drotzmann expressed his approval for the plan, noting that reapplication yearly should provide a more accurate picture of who needs a discount, such as in cases where someone loses their job but then later finds another one that pays well.

During time for public comment, Jackie Lin-ton of Hermiston said when she was knocking on doors during a past campaign for city council, she heard from residents who said they didn’t

have money left over for food after they paid for bills, such as water and sewer.

“Thank you to the city, and city councilors, for having compassion on those who are low income,” she said.

The program is opt-in — people who might qualify must submit an application. Smith said since 2012 the city only had 10 applicants, but he expects more people to apply in light of the complaints the city received this year about rate increases. If everyone who qualified for the discount applied, city staff estimate the city could lose 3.5% of its expected water and sewer revenue, at which point Smith said they would need to consider adjustments to the program or rates.

The city’s current utility rates are \$35 base rate for water plus 50 cents per 1,000 gallons up to 15,000 gallons and \$3.50 per 1,000 gallons beyond that. Sewer is \$35 per month plus \$3 per 1,000 gallons used, calculated based on average monthly use in December, January and February.

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