

EOTEC: Planning commission votes for parking shuttle requirement

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manager Al Davis’ comment that EOTEC’s event center was booked “pretty much every weekend” through fair week.

“There are not very many options to replace this building,” Phil Hamm said.

Margaret Saylor agreed, noting the community center also had amenities EOTEC didn’t, such as a stage.

“I just can’t conceive of a city only having a facility like EOTEC,” she said.

Davis said average attendance for weekend events at EOTEC, which range from fundraisers to quinceañeras, was about 500. He said organizers of smaller events in the 200-300 range didn’t like using EOTEC as much because the size of the great hall made the event look empty, but private options, such as the Maxwell Event Center, couldn’t hold crowds that large. He also noted both EOTEC and the community center often hosted events on the same night.

He said his phone started “ringing off the hook” when the *East Oregonian* published an article announcing the possibility of a sale of the community center.

“So it’s your expert opinion not to get rid of this valuable building?” commission member Ben Sargent asked Davis.

“It’s my expert opinion to stay out of it,” Davis responded, drawing chuckles.

In response to a question



The sun sets over the carnival at the Umatilla County Fair in 2019.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan, File

from the commission, City Planner Clint Spencer confirmed the city would not be able to sell the community center in secret, but would be required by law to hold a vote of the city council in a public meeting, advertised ahead of time, where public testimony would be taken.

The topic came up as the planning commission discussed parking at EOTEC. It was conducting its annual review of the variance the

city obtained from the commission in 2016, promising to meet certain conditions in exchange for not providing as many paved parking spaces as would normally be required by city ordinance for events with more than 2,000 attendees.

In January 2018, the commission chastised EOTEC — then jointly owned by the city of Hermiston and Umatilla County — for flouting several of the variance’s

conditions in 2017, including the requirement to only use the Ott Road entrance in case of emergency and to submit various plans and permits before the fair.

In January 2019, the planning commission put a moratorium on new construction at EOTEC because the city had not yet submitted a written parking plan as required by the variance. The decision was a contributing factor to the decision

to not build an RV park at EOTEC that had originally been planned for construction in 2019.

On Wednesday, Spencer suggested to the commission that they extend the deadline for the parking plan out another year, to 2021, because the city had still not submitted one.

Davis said the city’s EOTEC advisory board was still working on an overall strategic plan for the

site, and based on the slow progress he thought it could be as long five years before anything else — such as RV park intended to raise revenue for EOTEC or the office and storage space that had been promised to the Umatilla County Fair — was built on the site.

The potential sale of the community center complicated things as well, he said. It had always been a long-term goal of EOTEC to expand the event center eventually, but that expansion might look different depending on whether the city still had a community center.

If it did not, he said, the advisory board might write the plan to include a separate community center facility on site rather than just adding more rooms onto the end of the event center building.

“It’s part of the conversation the advisory board’s having, but how do you strategically plan for something that you don’t know is going to happen?” he said.

In light of the unfinished strategic and parking plans for EOTEC, the planning commission voted to amend two conditions of the variance. They added a requirement that shuttles be used for the fair and rodeo week and that event organizers and the city work to determine whether any other events with more than 2,000 attendees needed a shuttle to keep up with parking demand. They also extended the deadline for the parking plan from 2020 to 2021.

Snow: The avalanche center hosts its annual backcountry festival Feb. 7-9

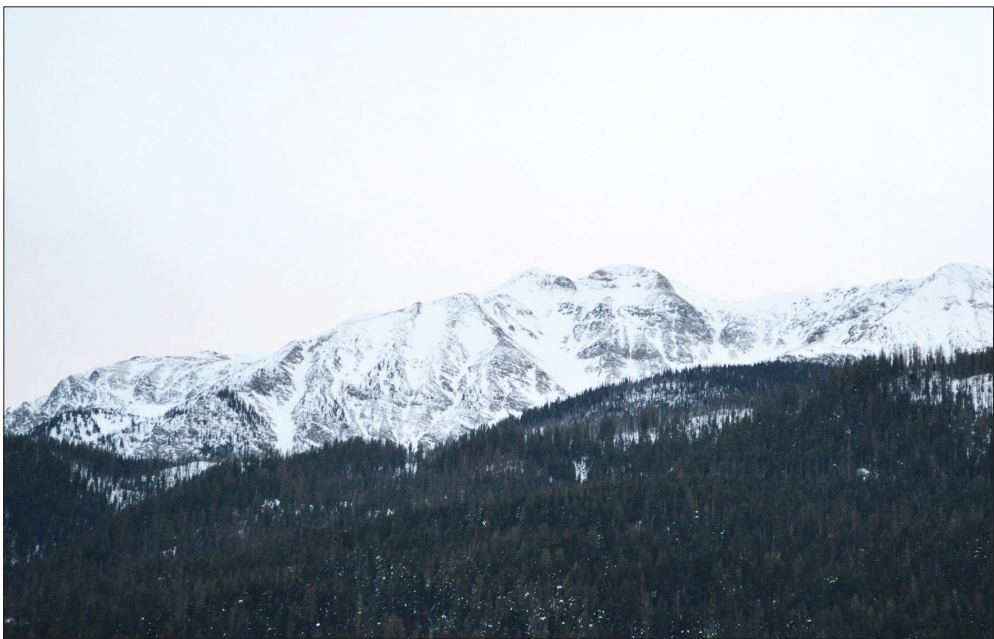
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for 10 years, Connelly Brown, owner of Wallowa Alpine Huts and progenitor of the center, said it is not supported by a U.S. Forest Service employee, a requirement for an avalanche center to issue danger ratings.

“The closest official center is the Northwest Avalanche Center in Seattle, which covers the whole coastline and the Cascades down into Oregon, but our snowpack is different over here,” Brown said.

Wallowa Alpine Huts serves the northern and southern Wallowa Mountains and hosts nearly 500 skiers a year. Brown said typically when a backcountry skier looks at the homepage of an avalanche center, most of the polygons that outline an avalanche center’s region are colored. The polygons outlining the terrain forecasted by the Wallowa Avalanche Center is gray and outlined in blue, indicating there is information for that area but no color-coded rating, such as green indicates low danger while red indicates a high danger.

Brown said most of the ski community that flocks



EO Media Group Photo/Steve Tool, File

Chief Joseph Mountain in the Wallowas is a popular place for backcountry skiing and a common place for avalanches. Through the center’s website, advisories are posted once or twice a week. Victor McNeil, the center’s director, is also one of three avalanche forecasters in the region.

to Northeast Oregon is from outside the area and is used to the color-coded rating — and need to read the advisories and observations carefully.

“Because we can’t post the color-coded system, skiers have to read the conversation on our website, which takes more participation and afterthought,” Brown said.

Skiers and snowmobilers

will also call outdoor recreation retailers that sell Oregon Sno Park permits, like Outlaw Motorsports in Enterprise, to get the local snow report.

Dustin and Lorien James run the family-owned business and are both experienced snowmachine riders.

“Our mission is to increase snowmobile users’ knowledge of avalanche

danger, which is prevalent in our area,” Lorien James said.

The Jameses said they are a sponsor and supporter of the center. For the past three years, Lorien James led a ladies snowmobile ride that culminates in a dinner with auction and raffle items bringing in more than \$2,000 — all donated to the center.

James said they also support the center’s training sessions.

“We participated in their first companion rescue course on this side of the mountain and we are looking to do some for Wallowa County Search and Rescue. It only does so much good to wear the beacon — if you don’t know how to use it you are screwed,” James said.

Besides its well-maintained and updated website, McNeil said the Wallowa Avalanche Center offers a 1½-hour avalanche awareness classes for both skiers and snowmobilers. The center also sponsors Level 1 and Level 2 three-day avalanche courses each year in Baker, Union and Wallowa counties.

“We go back and forth between targeting the snowmobile crowd and the ski community,” McNeil said.

Snowstorms dominate the forecast this week for Northeast Oregon and McNeil said January and February are the most active months for avalanches, though they can occur as soon as there is snow in the mountains. He said long periods of high pressure, like the region experienced in December,

is not good for snowpack.

“When there are long periods of high pressure the snowpack will stay fairly weak and the surface of the snow starts to deteriorate. Snow on top of a weak load or windblown snow are the perfect ingredients for an avalanche,” McNeil said.

The avalanche center hosts its annual backcountry festival Feb. 7-9, starting at Lefty’s in Baker City on Friday evening with a ski movie and auction. On Saturday, the Tip Rand Memorial Backcountry Ski Race is at Anthony Lakes Ski Area, followed by free companion rescue and snowpack assessment clinics. Saturday night there is another live auction and music by the band “Bag of Hammers.” Sunday the festival concludes with a day-tour backcountry ski.

With no financial support from the Forest Service, fundraisers in Portland, Seattle and elsewhere around Northeast Oregon are crucial to keeping the center open.

“We are running on a pretty small budget,” McNeil said. “Considering what we accomplish in a year, we do quite a lot with a relatively small amount of money.”

Storms: 9 to 13 inches of snow is expected at Snoqualmie Pass on Interstate 90

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Pendleton, said.

Heavy snow will first hit the Cascades before heading east, Wister said, blanketing the mountains as well as expected accumulation in the Grande Ronde and Wallowa valleys, followed by a cold front pushing down from the north early next week.

Wister said starting Monday, the cold air will filter through the region bringing a chance of snow in the Columbia Basin and the foothills of the Blue Mountains.

“The moisture is coming from the west, but there is some cold, Canadian air expected creating a complex pattern of different upper level patterns,” Wister said.

The Columbia Basin and foothills will have daytime highs in the 30s and overnight lows in the teens,



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

A snow gauge along Summit Road near Interstate 84 indicates roughly one foot of snow on the ground as of Thursday morning. Winter storms are expected to hit the region on Friday, bringing additional snow to the higher elevations of Northeastern Oregon.

while the mountain areas will likely have highs in the teens and 20s and single-digit overnight low temperatures.

The first storm should

settle across the Blue Mountains by mid-Friday morning and may put down as much as 8 to 12 inches of snow, while the following system from the Pacific could bring

MORE INFORMATION

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in as much as another 10 to 12 inches, Wister said.

Following a relatively dry December, the snow forecast is a welcome relief for high elevation snowpack on which irrigators and anadromous fish will depend next summer.

“The good news is the mountains will get some needed snow, but no one likes to drive through heavy snowstorms,” Wister said.

While Wallowa County saw temperatures as high as 53 degrees early this week, mid-week storms brought

about 4 inches to Mt. Howard, a 7,910-foot-elevation mountain towering over Wallowa Lake. The Wallowa high country could also receive as much as 2 feet in the coming 7 to 10 days.

The *Tri-City Herald* is reporting that heavy snow is still in the forecast for the Cascade Mountains, where a winter storm watch has been issued for Friday and Saturday.

Nine to 13 inches of snow is expected at Snoqualmie Pass on Interstate 90, with another 3 to 7 inches expected on Friday night, Saturday and again Saturday night. Sunday 4 to 8 inches is forecast, the paper reported.

I-90 was closed at 4 p.m. Wednesday for about 90 minutes because of spin-outs and collisions at Denny Creek, 5 miles west of the summit.

When it reopened, chains were required.

To prepare for the coming weather locally, Oregon Department of Transportation Spokesperson Tom Strandberg spent Thursday afternoon dropping off the department’s winter driving guides at truck stops around the region.

“It’s typical winter season here in Eastern Oregon,” Sandberg said. “People just need to get their heads into the winter weather mode and be prepared, especially if they’re driving over mountain passes or around curvy roads. You never know what’s around that corner.”

ODOT also has crews out and available 24 hours a day in the region right now, Sandberg said.

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East Oregonian reporter Alex Castle contributed to this report.