

Trees:

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Hermiston lots see increased costs, prices

Mike Frink, the tree lot coordinator at the Hermiston Kiwanis Club tree lot, said Dec. 4, his lot had sold more than 100 of its 430 trees. The lot, in the parking lot of the Hermiston Community Center, has been selling trees since the late 1970s, Frink said.

In the early 1980s, when Frink was selling trees, they cost around \$20 or \$30. Now, they carry prices between \$40 for a traditional Douglas Fir to \$140 for a 10-foot tree. In this price range, there are a variety of types — Douglas fir, grand fir, noble fir and Nordmann fir.

Frink said the Nordmann trees are popular and new to the lot this year; there were only a dozen remaining Dec. 4.

The trees are from the Estacada area, and summer's severe temperatures burned trees from bottom to the top, decreasing the crop. The Kiwanis Club had to search extra hard for trees, he said. Instead of obtaining trees from a single seller, like usual, the club had to buy from four different sellers.

Frink said the club paid around \$10 more wholesale for each tree. Part of this increase was passed on to consumers, he said, which is why each tree is sold on the lot for \$5 more than last year.

While the heat has troubled business, he said, the bigger challenge has been from competition with fake trees. In the early days of the lot, his club would sell 1,000 trees per year, well more than double the current sales. This was before fake trees were popular, he said.

Still, even with the challenges, Frink said the tree sale is a reliable fundraiser for the club. It is, he said, the second largest fundraiser for Kiwanis, typically earning \$18,000.

"We appreciate that," he said. Money from the lot goes back into the community for causes such as Agape House, swimming safety lessons and Martha's House, he said.

Up the street from the Kiwanis lot, in front of Grocery Outlet, Hermiston, George Ikonomou also sells Christmas trees. Having started the day before Thanksgiving, he said he expects to stay open through Dec. 20. On a good day, he



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Ward Walker trims the end from a Christmas tree Tuesday, Dec. 7, 2021, at his Christmas tree lot along Southgate in Pendleton. Walker sources and cuts his trees himself allowing him to avoid increased costs due to supply chain issues.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A fire crackles Tuesday, Dec. 7, 2021, at Walker's Trees along Southgate in Pendleton.

said, he will sell 60 trees. His trees range from \$10 to \$99, and he carries Douglas fir, noble fir and Nordmann fir trees.

Like the Kiwanis sellers, Ikonomou also saw changes through the years. He first started selling trees around Hermiston 10 years ago. Since then, he also has noticed

competition from fake trees, he said, and shortages in trees that predates the past year's heat wave.

Because of the recent shortage, though, he had to buy in larger bulk than usual, he said. He stores about 600 trees now, bringing them out when needed. Ordinarily, he would be free to order trees when

he started running low.

He is charging \$10 more for each tree these days, he said, matching rising wholesale prices.

Still, he said, he likes this business, as it is work he can do with his brother, Demetri Ikonomou. In addition, he said he likes working around trees.

"I like real trees. They put me in the mood for Christmas," he said.

Pendleton tree lots hold prices steady

Brothers Tom and Jeff Hepler, owners of Hepler's Trees in Pendleton, said they held their prices the same this year and shifted around their stock to try to lessen the burden of increased wholesale costs.

"This year has been pretty good," Tom Hepler said. "It's a bit slow during the week but the weekends have been really busy."

The Heplers said the lot has 550 trees, up from roughly 500 last year. He said he has a few more forest trees this year as opposed to his usual supply of farm grown trees.

"This year we got more of them,"

he said. "But they're big and beautiful."

The lot plans to stay open as long as supply allows, and Tom Hepler said the brothers have a tradition of giving away the last tree of the year.

Ward Walker, owner of Walker's Christmas Trees, said he has been able to keep his prices steady for more than a decade by cutting the trees himself in the Blue Mountains. Walker, who sources his trees from private land as well as with a U.S. Forest Service permit, said he considers himself largely immune to supply chain issues.

"If it's 10 days from Christmas and I need more trees, I'll just go cut more trees," he said.

Walker said he would rather sell additional trees than raise his prices, something his unique business strategy allows him to do.

While Walker hasn't changed his business model, he said he has seen consumers change the way they shop in the last two years. Walker said he thinks the pandemic has made people want to get into the holiday spirit earlier in the year.

"Last year I thought I was on track to have an above average year," he said. "I had sold like 80% of my trees before the 10th of December."

Walker said he ended up still selling his usual 400 or so trees, despite the quick start, and added that he is seeing a similar trend this year.

Because he knows when and where his trees are cut, Walker said he guarantees his trees through Christmas and tries to stay open as late in the season as possible to ensure anyone who wants a tree is able to get one.

"A lot of folks think when the other lots run out that's it, but I'll still be here," he said.

To further his mission of getting a tree to anyone who wants one, Walker has been collecting donations to help lessen the cost of trees for those who can't afford them. As of Dec. 5, Walker had collected \$415 to help families afford a tree, including roughly \$120 he rolled over from last year. So far Walker has used about \$160 of that to help people afford a tree or purchase a larger tree.

"I don't want people to skip getting a tree," he said, "just because of the cost."

Marigold:

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But with his grandparents moving back to India after their health improved, Patel said he was ready to get hands-on with the business.

Patel said he ended The Marigold's practice of renting rooms to locals, changed out locks, upgraded the hotel's security system, hired a new general manager and intended to hire a security guard that would be stationed at the hotel during the late-night hours.

Patel apologized for the trouble his hotel has caused the community and asked for three months to turn around the property.

Lowe said shutting down The Marigold might not improve the situation on the ground.

"I think it's important to note that having a shutdown property in the center of town like that is not a good look for the hotel," he said. "People who are engaging in bad conduct will relocate to somewhere else."

'His business and my business are clashing'

While Patel and Lowe's arguments focused on The Marigold's future, Byram reminded the council of the hotel's recent past.

He said The Marigold went from an entity that

wasn't even on the police's radar in 2019 to a business that attracted more than 270 calls for service in 2021. Even if no one called to report a potential crime, Byram said police still patrolled the area regularly the past two years.

While the city declared The Marigold a nuisance property due to the volume of calls it garnered, Byram said it's not a city law he tries to enforce often.

"It only takes two nuisance nuisances at any location in which to initiate a chronic nuisance ordinance," he said. "So we're kind of conservative in using the chronic nuisance ordinance because quite honestly, I could use it on almost every business."

Byram said one of the main reasons The Marigold continued to attract law enforcement's attention was because Patel repeatedly hired employees who permitted or were even complicit with the criminal activity at the hotel.

Byram said Steven Enko, the man authorities suspect of shooting a gun from The Marigold and injuring a 17-year-old boy, was the "significant other" of an employee and was being allowed to stay at the hotel unbeknownst to Patel. This differs from an account Lowe submitted to the council, which identified Enko as



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Shivam Patel, owner of The Marigold Hotel in Pendleton, looks down Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2021, following the Pendleton City Council's unanimous vote to uphold the suspension and revocation of his hotel's business license.

a person who was visiting a hotel guest. Byram said even after police informed Patel of Enko's connection to the hotel, he hesitated to believe their account.

"It's not my job to run his business for him," Byram said. "I run a different business, and his business and my business are clashing."

Patel didn't receive much public support from the city council audience, either.

Although the hearing itself was not open to audience input, members used the public comment section to

share their frustrations with The Marigold.

Tim Guenther, the owner of Prodigal Son Brewery & Pub and the Packard Tavern, commended the city for revoking The Marigold business license. Both of his businesses are in close proximity to The Marigold and his staff's negative encounters with hotel patrons were numerous enough that sometimes his employees felt unsafe walking to their cars

after their shift was over.

Paula Hall, the CEO of the Community Action Program of East Central Oregon, said the nonprofit worked with several hotels to provide temporary shelter to unhoused Pendletonians in the early days of the pandemic.

"We never had any inci-

dents like what was experienced at The Marigold," she said.

Council sides with city staff

Councilor Carole Innes said she volunteered at The Marigold in conjunction with CAPECO and said it did "a pretty darn good job" while there. Now she feels unsafe going to the nearby Banner Bank ATM at night because of The Marigold's atmosphere.

"It's our job as a city council to make sure our citizens feel safe," she said. "That doesn't mean that we dismiss downtown business development and growth and having that building empty would be a nightmare. So this is a conundrum, at this point."

Ultimately, the council voted to uphold the staff's decision, but it's not necessarily a permanent end to The Marigold. While the council may have affirmed staff's decision, city attorney Nancy Kerns told the council that City Manager Robb Corbett could allow The Marigold to reopen once he determines that it no longer represents a threat to public safety.

BMCC:

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"Over the course of these first three months, it is apparent that some areas of our operation were not getting the emphasis/oversight that is now our standard." Browning wrote in his December board report. "As a result, EVP Fields and I have made some adjustments to the organizational alignment."

Wade Muller, the dean of student engagement, retention and strategic planning, is moving to become the chief human resources officer, which was vacant. Blue

Mountain is advertising the dean position Muller is vacating with the shortened title of dean of student success. The deans of regional education and strategic partnerships and student learning and success also are having their titles shortened to dean of workforce and dean of student learning, respectively. Both employees who fill those roles are retaining their jobs.

While admitting that dean and human resources officer are different positions, Browning said in an interview that Muller's skills in compliance made him a good candidate for a

position of need.

And the change in dean titles isn't meant to be superficial. Browning said responsibilities are being realigned so there's less overlap between them. Although the original reorganization was made to make services more student-centered, Browning said having supervisors with overlapping responsibilities meant some departments and services didn't have proper advocacy in the administration.

Browning said the expectation is the administrative revamp will lead to a better quality of service to students and the community.

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