

Stairs:

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teachers at the time, opened its doors in 1929 after the construction of a campus in La Grande. The large staircase structure was created to provide pedestrian access from downtown to the campus, as well as a place for gatherings and events.

Architect John V. Benes, who also headed the Hot Lake Hotel and Geiser Grand Hotel projects, designed the staircase in an Italian Renaissance Revival style, constructing the structure with 178 steps, 418 stone balusters and 17,470 square feet of concrete over five tiers. In 1980, the site was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Many around the community share fond memories of the staircase, from growing up down the street to taking wedding photos on the scenic lookout. Among them are Anne Olson and Marcia Loney.

The sisters grew up down the street from the stairs and were enchanted with its grandeur, as both attended kindergarten at the Ackerman Lab School on campus and Olson later enrolled at Eastern for college. Decades later as the structure began to crumble, vandalism on the crumbling stairs in 2013 was the final straw as the duo decided to fight for the staircase's future.

"I just remember being really struck by that," Olson said. "I think that's been a big issue all along. Here's this incredible architectural treasure, but it's in Eastern Oregon and at the end of a street that's not used as much any more. It's a hidden treasure."

The sisters voiced a shared concern among alumni and community members, aligning with officials at Eastern to seek funding to restore the staircase.

"Anne's and my memories are shared by generations and generations of kids and adults," Loney said.

The Grand Staircase represented a symbolic connection between the town and the local university, creating a bridge for students and community members to be a part of the campus. The staircase also physically links the university to the community, allowing pedestrians easy access to and from the campus.

"It was a very symbolic, meaningful thing for many years," Seydel said. "That changed with deterioration of the staircase to the point where we couldn't use it."

Pushing for funding

Local advocates worked with the city of La Grande, Main Street Downtown, Union County Chamber of Commerce, Eastern Oregon Visitor's Association, Oregon Historic Preservation Office, Union County Commissioners, La Grande Landmarks Commission and



Bob Bull Photo Collection/Contributed Photo

Eastern Oregon Normal School students congregate on the Grand Staircase for the 1936 rendition of Evensong, a commencement ceremony for graduating students. The Oregon Legislature in 2022 granted the La Grande school, now Eastern Oregon University, \$4 million to restore the historic staircase, after the university and local advocates worked for years to secure the funding.



The Observer, File

Eastern Oregon University's Grand Staircase, which was built in 1929 — the same year the university was founded — doesn't look very grand in this 2016 photo. After years of being on Restore Oregon's list of endangered places in Oregon, the university received funding to rebuild the historic feature, with work slated to begin in 2023.

other interested parties in the city.

"Having all those players lined up made it possible to show that this wasn't just the university trying to get money for something that needed to be fixed or a bunch of sentimentalists — it was a community effort," Olson said.

When Olson and Loney created a connection with Restore Oregon in 2014, pushing to find funding for a restoration project, the sisters were shocked to learn that few around the state knew of the staircase and its history.

"One of the things we've found is that outside of La Grande and Union County, nobody knows about the staircase," Loney said.

Seydel and advocates for the Grand Staircase managed to drum up enough donations and funds to begin the planning and organizing stages of the restoration — Seydel noted that the funding efforts have extended close to 20 years. The project inched closer and closer to financial backing over the last decade, with the funding being close to consideration in state legislative sessions in the last several years.

"We were painfully close to getting it funded and

trying to fix this incredible piece of architecture," Seydel said. "Finally, we were able to push it over the finish line so to speak."

In a groundbreaking decision, House Bill 5202 designated tens of millions of dollars for statewide projects, \$4 million of which is allotted to restoring EOU's Grand Staircase.

"I seriously think it took us a few days to actually believe it," Loney said. "We were overjoyed. This is a gift to future generations, to La Grande and to Oregon. We're beyond excited and we're so grateful to EOU for all the work they've put into it."

Lasting connection

With the new financial backing, the university is in the planning stages of starting the staircase's restoration in 2023.

The project will involve working around the staircase, preparing the site, reconstruction and landscaping. The staircase has suffered from the effects of time, including running hillside water, concrete over 90 years old, broken balusters, vandalism and the freeze and thaw winter cycle.

According to Seydel, the restored staircase will

provide an opportunity to bring back events and traditions that were an important part of the early years of the university. The stairs were most notably used for graduation and Evensong, a ceremony in which graduating seniors traversed the steps and symbolically left the campus and embraced the community as their post-college lives began.

"That was very symbolic of the connection between the university and the wider world," Olson said.

Seydel noted that the Grand Staircase also will encourage tourism to the university and Union County, with visitors stopping in La Grande to admire the architectural feature. Seydel envisions the stairs again becoming a focal point for university and community gatherings and a place for wedding and graduation photos among other things.

In Olson and Loney's years of advocating for the restoration of the staircase, positive community feedback from alumni and community members helped the cause gain substantial momentum. With the staircase set to return to its original glory, the sisters hope the nostalgic structure will create new memories.

"We really do hope that it is a seed for some really good things to happen for the university and for the city of La Grande and in the region," Olson said.

The restoration project is set to bring back one of the city's most historical gems. Originally built to link Eastern Oregon University with the La Grande community, the Grand Staircase will strengthen that bond in years to come.

"It supports not only the university, but it is the embodiment of the physical connection to the community," Seydel said. "It drives tourism, it drives enrollment and it makes the entrance very symbolic from the university to the community."



Phil Wright/East Oregonian

Tum-A-Lum Lumber is open for business Wednesday morning, March 30, 2022, at its new location at 2470 S.E. Court Ave., Pendleton. The business is celebrating the opening April 2, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., with a family-friendly event.

Lumber:

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Since the property had been bought by others as an investment, the acquisition was somewhat complicated, with Hillsboro real estate brokers and banks involved. But Cornelius Holdings of Seattle got the deal done.

In December 2019, the Pendleton Planning Commission approved Tum-A-Lum's shift.

A building permit application estimated renovation and new warehouse construction cost at \$2 million with Seattle architectural firm Graham Baba as designer. The project's general contractor was Bouten Construction Company of Richland, Washington.

Reinhart said the subcontractors were local. He rattled off a long list of familiar Pendleton businesses in plumbing, heating, electric, fencing and such, plus a few new or not so well-known. The city of Pendleton was granted a utility easement.

"Our remodeling will be the mother ship for future expansions at our other locations" Reinhart said. "Ours was based on Hood River's. We learned a lot from that project."

In a call from Reinhart, his boss Cornelius said, "We've made a substantial investment in Pendleton, as in all the communities we serve." Public records reflect this boon to local businesses.

Established in Walla Walla in 1906, Tum-A-Lum Lumber came to Pendleton in 1924.

"It's a fourth-generation family business, and the concept extends to employees and customers," Reinhart said. "I can call the owner and he picks up."

Tum-A-Lum's presence grows

Tum-A-Lum and its parent holding company managed to add stores during the pandemic.

"Our customer base changed," Reinhart said.

"We had fewer contractors and more DIY clients."

Since 2017, Tum-A-Lum's parent, TAL Holdings of Vancouver, has acquired nine similar local home improvement businesses with 20 stores in the Pacific Northwest. Tum-A-Lum itself also has locations in The Dalles and Hood River, for a present total of 10 TAL companies with 23 outlets in four states.

"We've added seven stores in two companies in just the last two months," Reinhart said.

The latest acquisition was Orofino Builders Supply on March 14, with four Idaho locations.

"The businesses we've bought are like us. Family-oriented," he said. "In most cases, the previous owners have opted to keep working under the new management. They say it's a family legacy, it's who we are. Former owners say how much like themselves they found Bill Cornelius, Sr. and Susan."

Some of the bought businesses operate in cities with big box chain home improvement stores.

"We can compete because of local customer loyalty and better service," Reinhart explained. "None of our associates will tell a customer she has to go to lunch. Contractors can carry accounts with us, but have to pay as they go at Home Depot or Lowe's. Growing our locations means we can keep our prices competitive."

Tum-A-Lum has proceeded as it set out years ago. Its plans have worked so far, with continued growth.

"We haven't grown faster than we can handle," Reinhart said. "It's the most exciting place I've ever worked."

Grand opening of the new location is Saturday, April 2, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The family-friendly celebration includes a free tri-tip steak lunch, product demonstrations, children activities and raffle prizes. The first 100 customers will receive a limited edition 5-gallon bucket.

Gas:

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Public Works Department is preparing for a busy summer of repairing roads. But it takes oil to make asphalt, and at the moment, Public Works Director Bob Patterson said he doesn't know how that will affect street construction prices.

Patterson said he'll need to wait to see whether the street construction bids the city is soliciting come in over estimates so he can determine the effects of the rise in oil price, especially because the price has been volatile.

Rising oil prices are manifesting themselves in other ways at the public works department. For the first time in his decades-long career, Patterson said iron ductile pipes are less expensive to buy than PVC pipes, oil being one of the primary materials used to manufacture the latter.

And although the city still is determining the long-term impact of high gas prices on



Phil Wright/East Oregonian

The price for a gallon of regular hovers around \$4.40 the night of March 19, 2022, at the Chevron station at 309 S.E. Nye Ave., Pendleton. The price was on par with other local stations. AAA reports as of Tuesday, March 29, the average price of a gallon of regular is \$4.42 in Umatilla County.

the municipal fleet, Patterson said the effects of a strained supply chain means many car dealerships are no longer willing to hold vehicles because of the high demand for used and new cars.

"It's different times right now," he said.

Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston said the higher fuel costs also affect his department. As one of the larger expense to the

city's general fund, the police department works to ensure it is under budget each year.

"As of today, we are 6.4% over budget in fuel, which equates to roughly one month of usage," he said. "This year will be the first in a long time where I will be requesting a supplemental increase to offset that deficit."

To help curb fuel costs, he said he is encouraging officers to be more cognizant about vehicles left running

for extended periods.

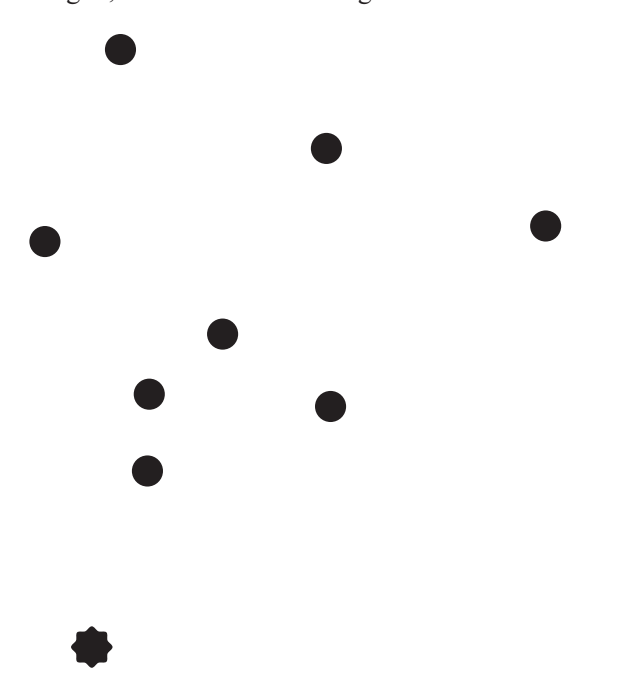
Umatilla's police chief also is paying attention to gas prices.

"All I have done with my staff is to make them aware of the rising costs and asked them to minimize usage when they can but right now our operations have not been affected," Police Chief Darla Huxel said.

Unlike the private sector, city governments can't necessarily pass the price onto consumers when their costs go up for all of their services.

Pendleton Fire Chief Jim Critchley said the fire department never will hold back a fire engine or ambulance due to high gas prices. He said the fire department's current budget is still in line with expectations and it's still too soon to see how gas prices will affect the next fiscal year's budget, which starts in July.

If gas prices remain high, Critchley said the department likely would curtail off-site trainings and other travel to stay within the department's budget.



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