

State plans to invest millions in Kam Wah Chung expansion

By JUSTIN DAVIS
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — One of Grant County's best known tourist destinations is set for a multimillion-dollar renovation and expansion that will better showcase the rich history of Chinese immigrants in the region and provide a boost to the local economy.

The Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site in John Day is centered around a 19th century stone structure that was originally a trading post. The building was later purchased by Lung On and Ing "Doc" Hay and operated as a general store and Chinese apothecary.

The site was a longtime center of the Chinese community in Grant County. Plans call for a new interpretive center, additional parking and other improvements on an expanded, multi-acre site.

State financing for the project includes funds for additional improvements designed to link the Kam Wah Chung site with downtown John Day.

Identifying the need for an expansion began with the first restoration of the site in 1974-76 under former curator Carolyn Meisenheimer. In the years that followed, Meisenheimer began to notice the deterioration of things like the epigrams on the walls, paper products and various artifacts within the apothecary and general store. A master plan created to address these deteriorations ultimately led to the conclusion that an expansion was necessary.

Park manager Dennis Bradley says that following the master plan's creation in 2004, various parcels of land adjacent to the Kam Wah Chung site on Northwest Canton Street were identified as being



Justin Davis/Blue Mountain Eagle

A display of goods lines the shelves at the general store at the Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site. The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department is planning a multimillion-dollar project to expand and upgrade the historical tourist attraction in John Day.

ideal fits for the expansion.

"We identified five properties within the master plan that were suited to the expansion of the interpretive center," he said. "Since that time, we have acquired three of those properties."

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department is in discussions to finalize the purchase of the last two parcels for the expansion, Gleason Park and Gleason Pool.

"The agreement is already in place," Bradley said.

The city of John Day has agreed to demolish the pool, which is no longer in use, before the state closes on the land sale.

The demolition of the pool and an adjoining building is under review by the State Historic Preservation Office. The 64-year-old pool is no longer in use, but Bradley said any structure over 50 years old falls into the category of

a historic building.

"We've heard the Gleason Pool is probably the second-oldest pool in Oregon," Bradley added.

There are things that can be done to mitigate the preservation office's concerns, including putting up an interpretive panel that explains the history of the pool and shows what it looked like.

Closing on the Gleason Park and Gleason Pool properties is critical to the expansion of the site. Current plans have the new interpretive center's location overlapping with where the pool currently sits. According to museum curator Don Merritt, the 3-acre Gleason Park site will remain largely unchanged for the time being.

More artifacts, virtual tours

The Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site's current facilities, park managers say,

are just too small.

Limited space in the interpretive center means it can only display roughly half of the artifacts in its collection. The size of the facility also restricts the number of virtual tours that can be conducted — an important way of reducing foot traffic in the original Kam Wah Chung building, which is showing signs of age and wear.

The expansion will add around 2,000 square feet to the 8,600 square feet the heritage site occupies now.

A new 500-square-foot theater will double the number of virtual reality tours the site can offer. Virtual tours are popular at the site, but there's only enough space for 10 tours at a time. The new theater room will be able to conduct 20 virtual tours at one time once completed.

In a feasibility study released in May, the state

unveiled two proposed designs for the new interpretive center. The first is a single, large structure inspired by Chinese architecture of the late 1800s and early 1900s. The key characteristic of the building would be a sweeping roof design and gable framing similar to traditional Chuan-Dou framing. The building would be located where the community pool currently sits and would have visitor access and parking off Northwest Canton Street.

The second design incorporates traditional Eastern Oregon architectural features. Instead of a single building, the interpretive center would consist of two buildings with roofs at different heights. The goal with this design is to break down the scale of the interpretive center to better match the existing scale of the historic Chinese buildings on-site. The design would feature a double-sloped roof in two different sections.

This design would allow for a separate entrance for staff into the area and break up the mass of the building.

With this design, the interpretive center would also sit where the community pool is currently located, but visitor access and parking would be behind the building as opposed to Canton Street. This design would also leave an existing archeological site free for research purposes.

A final decision regarding the design of the new heritage site hasn't been made yet, but Merritt says they are "heavily leaning" toward the second, two-building layout.

The money is already there

Funding for the expansion was provided by the 2021 Oregon Legislature through

Senate Bill 5506, which authorized \$50 million in general obligation bonds to fund park projects throughout the state.

"Kam Wah Chung was fortunate enough to receive some of that funding, so that's where the funds are coming from," said Bradley.

The cost of the project is estimated at \$4.5 million.

In conjunction with the Kam Wah Chung project, the city of John Day plans on sprucing up the downtown business district and strengthening the connection between downtown and the renovated heritage site. The city received a \$1 million state grant for infrastructure improvements.

At a John Day City Council meeting on Feb. 8, City Manager Nick Green outlined a detailed proposal regarding how the money will be spent. Half of the \$1 million grant will be spent on improving sidewalks, parking, signs and wayfinding markers along Canton and Main streets.

Another \$250,000 would be used for landscaping and site beautification, while \$200,000 would be spent on aesthetic improvements to Main Street businesses that could include fresh paint, new signs, facade improvements, upgraded streetlights and murals.

Another \$50,000 would go toward demolishing Gleason Pool and compacting the soil there. The city has set aside \$22,000 from the sale of the park and pool properties to cover the remainder of the estimated cost of demolition.

The city has also applied for an Oregon Main Street grant worth up to \$200,000. If approved, the grant would double the size of the city's investment into upgrades along Main Street.

Snowpack melting faster than expected

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon's snowpack is melting faster than expected, worsening an ongoing drought and pointing to a very dry year if conditions continue.

Scott Oviatt, a hydrologist and snow survey supervisor for the Natural Resources Conservation Service Oregon, a member of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said snow started melting almost two weeks earlier than usual, and many sites across the state hadn't even reached their peak available snowpack levels before melt off began in the lower elevations.

"Once the snowpack starts melting out, it's hard to stop," he said.

The information comes weeks after many Eastern Oregon snowpack levels were reported to be in good shape. The dramatic decline in snowpack levels coupled with the ongoing drought has caused concern among experts who are watching the snow water equivalent levels closely.

"The fact that we didn't reach a peak value and the fact that we're melting out early is a concern because we are losing the available water content in the snow pack (earlier) than we normally plan on," Oviatt said. "Depending on location and elevation, we're about two or three weeks early, and we didn't achieve our peak, and now we're at 70% for the Grande Ronde/Powder area and we're dropping rapidly."

Those who rely on water irrigation channels should be especially concerned about the rapidly melting snow. While snowmelt is generally expected to hit its zero point sometime in mid to late spring, having the water runoff begin and end earlier means that resources will become scarce as summer drags on — and a heat wave event can further impact water supplies and leave farmers and agricultural industries dry.

Last year's heat wave



Union County Search and Rescue/Contributed Photo, File

The Wallowa Mountains stand covered in snow in October 2021. A faster than normal snowmelt in early 2022 has dramatically lowered the snow equivalent levels in Eastern Oregon, signaling increased water scarcity for the late-spring and summer months.

depleted water supplies and caused some farms in Oregon to run out of water entirely by late June 2021, weeks ahead of schedule. In one instance, Plantworks, a nursery in Cove, had to purchase new water storage containers and fill them with city water in order to keep their crops alive.

"Essentially, folks that rely on irrigation water will have less available, and there will probably be some restrictions applied depending upon where they get their water and their water rights," Oviatt said. "There will be less available surface water for instream flows to support things. There will be less available groundwater storage because we're not recharging our system with our ground soil moisture and because we've been in a long-term drought and we didn't really recover from that over this winter."

Union County watermaster Shad Hattan agrees, stating that if the area doesn't get significant spring rain, "it will be hard on everything. Agriculture, stream flows. If we don't get moisture for April and May, that's (going to be) hard on everybody."

One silver lining to the early melt off and continuation of the drought? Fire season might be milder compared to last year.

"The biggest thing is how fast the snow we have right now comes off," said Trevor Lewis, assistant fire management officer with the Wallowa-Whitman National

Forest. "If we lose our snow real quick, and it dries out fairly quickly then our grass growth isn't as high, so we generally see lower rates of spread with our fires, even if we do have significant fuel moistures that are dryer. It really depends on how this snow comes off."

Lewis said that last year's slow runoff allowed for above average grass and brush growth — primary fuels for wildfires that were primed by the heat wave that pushed temperatures to record highs in most of Oregon. That grass growth meant that fires spread more rapidly, and in the case of the Bootleg Fire resulted in one of the nation's largest wildfires for 2021.

"It's kind of a catch-22 for us," Lewis said. "Does it come quickly and we have a drought? Or does it come off slow and we end up getting the grass growth?"

Despite being a La Nina year, the Eastern Oregon snowpack wasn't enough to start turning around the drought conditions in the area. As of March 31, most of Eastern Oregon remains in severe or moderate drought, and conditions are expected to worsen over the summer.

"In order to recover from that long-term drought we need successive years and we need excessive amounts of precipitation, and we're just not getting it," Oviatt said. "It's not going to happen this year, we're going to have to make some sacrifices in terms of surface water and available water."

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