

Difference:

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A group of younger residents also joined in the effort, and Saager said that was encouraging to see.

Thirteen-year-old Olivia Carrillo of Milton-Freewater said she was there to help the community and do her part.

"It makes me feel good and proud to help my community," she said.

Evan Lewis, 15, joked that he was there because his "mother made him come," but he said it was a good day for him to be there.

"I figure this is a good way to use my time to help the community," Lewis said.

The Milton-Freewater Downtown Alliance has been around for 12 years.

"We want to get people re-involved with their community, especially younger people who can make a big difference," Saager said.

Volunteer Mike Beeson said he has noticed that a growing number of people want to see Milton-Freewater improve. Beeson is part of a rural development group training program.

Members of the program work to identify community improvement projects, and the Make a Difference event was part of that. Identifying graffiti as a problem for the community was one particular outcome.

"We interface with other local community groups, and we found our primary goals also matched those of the MFDA," Beeson said.

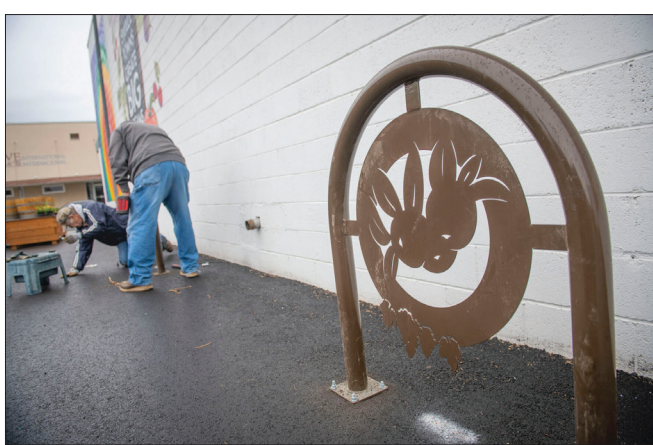
Most of Saturday's efforts were focused on Main Street, with other projects lined up to complete on Sunday, May 1, in the second day of Make a Difference.

A mural that inspires working together

The biggest effort for the beautification project was a large mural painted by Milton-Freewater artist Sheila Lane on the side of the Elks Lodge on Main Street.



Jean Ann Mitchell, top, and Kay West plant petunias in new barrel planters Saturday morning, April 30, 2022, during the first day of the Make A Difference Weekend in Milton-Freewater.



Two of 10 decorative bike racks are installed Saturday morning, April 30, 2022, during the first day of the Make A Difference Weekend in Milton-Freewater.

Elks members volunteered the wall for the project after being contacted by the Downtown Alliance design committee.

Lodge member Coyote Joe said organization members came to the Elks asking if they were going to do anything with the space on the side of

the building.

"They got in contact with our secretary, and the plan moved forward from there," said Coyote Joe. "Now we are in talks for possible future murals on the remaining walls of the building."

The mural is an interwoven black and white tree, and

community members took turns leaving hand prints on the branches as leaves.

Lane, the mural artist, is part of the Milton-Freewater Downtown Alliance design committee. She said the inspiration for the mural was rooted in bringing the diversity of the community together.

"I was thinking about how to bring that message into the mural," Lane said. "Using black and white and hand prints symbolizes that."

On the wall at the bottom of the mural are the Spanish words "Podemos Juntos," which means "We can, together."

Lane, who says she was once a Spanish teacher, hopes that by working together as a community they can make a difference.

"I think we are more connected as people than we might think," Lane said. "We want to bring our diverse

community together."

Lane is known for her mural art and has painted other murals in Milton-Freewater. She also has murals in Yakima, Spokane, and in the children's department at Life Church in Walla Walla.

Beautification and business

Saager, a former member of the Walla Walla Valley Chamber of Commerce and the Milton-Freewater Chamber of Commerce, said one thing he repeatedly heard from people in Walla Walla was that nobody would travel to Milton-Freewater because they thought there was nothing over there to see.

He believes this perspective was connected to a lack of promoting Milton-Freewater and what its 170 different businesses have to offer.

"We had no marketing," he said. "It isn't that we don't have anything, it's just that

nobody knows about it. That was part of the inspiration to develop this group to bring awareness to the business of Milton-Freewater."

Downtown Alliance member Sarah Shu, who is also part of the design committee, said making the downtown area appealing to visitors and attractive to new business is one of the main goals.

"I feel Main Street needs some restoration," Shu said. "You have to make downtown attractive to help businesses, and to bring people in."

Saager said one of the biggest challenges they face is financing.

"It takes money to do these kind of beatification projects. For the paint, for the soil, for the materials. We are hoping the community will help with those donations through our 'Give \$10 to Your City' project fund."

Many local businesses contributed that financing for Make a Difference including many merchants, larger regional businesses and some wineries.

Before the pandemic, Saager and the Milton-Freewater Downtown Alliance was making great strides in community development.

Part of that development included Freewater Square, constructed in the 500 block of Main Street.

In what was once a vacant lot, new asphalt was laid over gravel and plumbing, and electrical wiring was installed to accommodate food trucks and outdoor music events that require electricity.

Saager hopes that the Downtown Alliance and the community can get its volunteer base back up to levels like they were before the pandemic — between 500-600 people.

And he would love to see a collaborative effort between the Milton-Freewater Downtown Alliance, the city and the county to bring together the community.

"We want people to know that we are still alive — that we are still doing something," Saager said.

Bang:

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Despite the struggles, competitors were happy to be there. Jeremy Clark and his crew at Beer Belly BBQ explained they spend roughly \$2,000 to get to the competition every year but would never miss it for the world.

"It's a tradition," Clark said. "We have been coming out for 12 years and look forward to it every year."

Members of 3rd Generation BBQ use the event as a family reunion. Although the competitors are welcoming, the event offers a \$5,000 prize for the grand champion.

Lake House BBQ, of Everett, Washington, swept the field this year, claiming the grand champion title and \$1,025 of the \$5,000 total purse. The one-person operation was a David-and-Goliath triumph over the other four-person teams.

And Meatsweats won People's Champion, earning



Competitors of the Buckaroo Barbecue Challenge wrangle tents Saturday, April 30, 2022, in the parking lot at the Pendleton Convention Center as a thunderstorm blows over during the final day of the annual Pendleton Cattle Barons Weekend.

it the coveted wrestling belt trophy.

Drawing in visitors

People come from all over the West to Cattle Barons. The event attracts everyone from veteran horse buyers to world-class rodeo cowboys and families looking for something to do over the weekend.

Every summer, Ron Smith said he travels the West Coast looking for new additions to his stable, and Cattle Barons is a must on his travel list.

"Even if I leave empty handed, I still have a great deal of fun just being here," he said. "It's the only auction that doesn't feel like an all-out fistfight."

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