

# Wallowa schools examine charter options

By Kathleen Ellyn  
Wallowa County Chieftain

Wallowa School District is investigating the value of converting from a public school to a charter school. A public meeting with Steve Kelly, an Oregon School Board Association moderator, and the Wallowa School Board was held last week to kick off the discussion. Approximately 24 attended.

“This really is the beginning of a conversation,” Kelley said. “The community and the school district get together and talk about what they would like to become. It’s almost a revitalization or a rebirth.”

The board examined the idea because the school is facing myriad challenges, said school board member Polly Devore.

“Small rural schools the size of ours are going to charter,” she said. “It’s an opportunity to have a restart for our school. It’s a way for the community, staff and students to get excited about their school. We wanted to bring this to the community to find out what their thoughts are.”

Members of the school board began researching the idea by calling superintendents of eastern Oregon schools that have transitioned from public schools to charter schools to interview them about the experience.

Only superintendents with experience in both public and charter schools were interviewed.

So far, all of the reports gathered have been entirely positive and even when pressed to come up with a negative, school administrators of other area charter schools could not do so, said Wallowa School Board member Carrie Hermens.

“When you get your charter, you have to have a focus and direction that your community and school has decided on,” she said. “I interviewed the superintendent of Pine Eagle and she said it was really wonderful how the process brought the community and the school together. It got everyone on the same page and got everyone thinking and everyone really excited. She said that was the most beneficial, thing

and it is still helping their school today.”

There are 124 charter schools in the state. As of 2011, charter schools were required to define their focus as general, contemporary public education curriculum; progressive, child-centered, democratic, normative; specialized, trade specific, content specific; or traditional, perennial or essentialist. Charter schools often have multiple orientations.

Imbler Charter School is traditional, Joseph Charter School is general, Pine Eagle is also general.

While emphasizing that no decisions had been or could be taken without more conversations with the community, Dave Flynn, Wallowa School Board chairman, said that the board had no plans to hire uncertified teachers, which is allowed for charter schools.

Several WSD students have gone on to top colleges and making sure credits transfer to those schools is important to the board and the community.

Another public meeting will be scheduled.

## Key features of a charter school

- The school remains accredited provided key courses are offered and licensed teachers teach them. The list of state goals for charter schools includes providing new professional opportunities for teachers. Wallowa leaders have said they value their accreditation; they have had students accepted in Ivy League colleges and will not hamper any student’s chances.
- Some courses at charter schools may be taught by members of the public — artists, musicians or qualified mechanics teaching art, music or shop. These citizen teachers must be registered with the state but need not have teaching certificates.
- State colleges have historically accepted credits earned in citizen-taught classes, but some larger colleges have not. Wallowa has indicated it would have teacher and parent support before hiring non-licensed teachers, even for electives.
- The school is run according to the guidelines of a charter drawn up by parents, educators and administrators.

Building strong working relationships between educators, parents and community is a key in the Charter Schools Act.

• The charter school has a board that is overseen by the regular elected school board: citizens still have elected officials on their school board to hold accountable.

• Schools may choose a “focus” or even more than one focus such as business technology or arts and sciences. But they need not choose a focus and, unless parents and community say otherwise, Wallowa will likely remain a general education school. Responding to student, teacher and parent interests will remain a focus even if the public rejects the charter school idea. Administrators have already added business courses and are examining more ways to improve their offerings.

• Charter schools get from 80 to nearly 100 percent of state money per student public school students receive. When a district school changes to charter, the amount is often

near 100 percent. The lower amount is usually paid to experimental schools with some nonlicensed teachers.

• Charter schools may compete for students, and students may move to charter schools without permission from their home district. Students may also transfer out of a charter school to another school without permission. Wallowa hopes to lure back some students who transferred to Enterprise or Joseph for arts or other courses by offering those courses.

• A federal start up grant can be substantial — \$250,000 to \$450,000 — and a school that spends wisely can capitalize on this, usually by improving technology. Schools approved to be chartered by a sponsor may receive planning subgrants up to \$100,000. Other grants from state or nonprofits are available to charter schools. Wallowa may be well positioned because it is a small rural school with an excellent graduation rate and a high percentage of students go on to college or trade school with scholarships.

## HOUSING

Continued from Page A1

There were already three rented apartments in the building, and now all four are filled. Downstairs he built two retail spaces replete with high efficiency heating and electric, combined with historic preservation of Bowlby Stone walls and wood floors. It’s a style that reflects the marriage of values Wallowa County is struggling to embrace — modernity with a nod to history and an open and enthusiastic love of character.

Now, he’s tackling another historic Bowlby Stone building at the corner of Main and River streets with plans to put a dozen apartments upstairs and several retail spaces downstairs.

Although McKee has a passion for restoring the downtown blocks of Enterprise, he’s steely-eyed about making the restoration pencil out.

“There are a lot of different factors I look at,” he said. “Number one is inventory. There’s a lot of low-income housing here. But there is no middle-income or higher-income housing here. When you want to increase your economic trajectory, you need to entice middle- and high-income people here because they are the real



Kathleen Ellyn/Chieftain

Andy McKee’s latest project in downtown Enterprise is on one of the city’s busiest corners.

stimulus to economies.”

McKee Brothers are staying out of the low-income housing market for three reasons: low-income housing is already available in the county; there are problems associated with low-income housing with regard to some renters taking personal ownership of their space — problems they want to avoid; and a business model relying on

federal money is a recipe for disaster.

“I don’t like building a business model around government money and government policy because, as we know, they change their mind. It’s not like where businesses change direction, and it’s well anticipated. All of a sudden, with no advance warning, the government can say ‘we’re ending funding for next year.’”

His business model, which relies on the apartments for the base income, allows him to be patient with regard to filling the commercial spaces he’s creating.

“I think we’re about two years ahead of the curve in Enterprise with regard to commercial space,” McKee said. But he sees the curve.

“Everything I’m seeing in the county, I think property values are going to skyrocket.”

He doesn’t foresee Enterprise being Joseph or even competing with Joseph — it will retain its own character. He’s got dreams about that, and he can’t explain why he’s so committed to the city other than it is home.

“We live here,” he said. “The reason we moved here is for a good environment to



Courtesy photo

Let the magic begin. The interior of a building before Andy McKee sets out to modernize while simultaneously restoring the historical look.

raise our children. We want the community to know that we’re committed to spending money in the community and improving our community because we live here and we’re members of the community.”

As a Wallowa Countian, he looks at Enterprise and feels depressed.

“It’s sad,” he said. “Right now people get here, and they don’t even give Enterprise a second look because it looks like a ghost town.”

But where others see Enterprise as a glass half empty, McKee sees it as half full and believes there’s a pitcher approaching that glass.

“To me, downtown Enterprise has so much untapped potential and downtown Joseph kind of at it’s maximum capacity as far as growth,” he said. “Everything that I’m seeing, given

the growth in tourism, (makes me ask) where is that going to spill over? To me, that’s going to be Enterprise — and that’s our investment model.”

So far, the McKee brothers are mostly renting to people who have moved in from larger cities. Many are younger individuals with professional careers. They once needed the amenities of a big city for their careers, but now they have the technology to work remotely.

McKee sees success ahead for his own business model, but for the folks looking to buy a single-family home “it’s going to get a lot worse before it gets better,” he said. “People are coming in and overpaying because compared to other places, the prices in Wallowa County are cheap. Property values are now out of reach for 90 percent of the people.”



**Are You Turning 65?**  
Need Help Navigating and Understanding Your Medicare Options...  
**Call Kathleen TODAY**  
616 W. North Street, Enterprise  
541-426-4208



Total Solar Eclipse: August 21, 2017

# Solar Eclipse

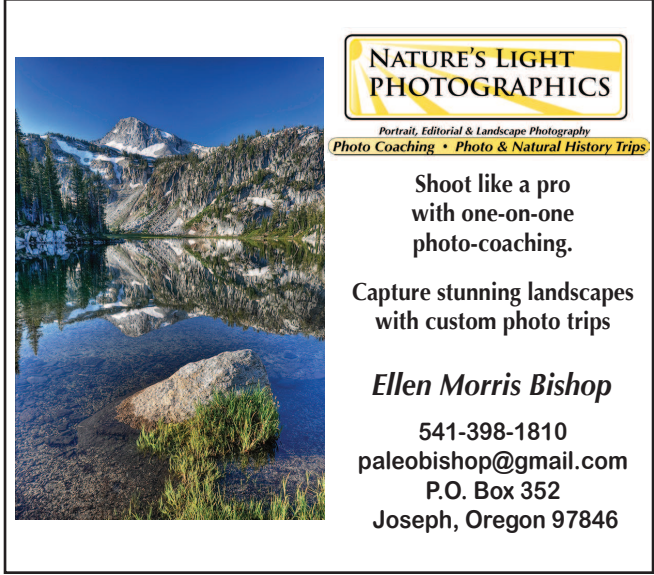
**FREE Presentation!**  
**FREE Eclipse Glasses!**  
**Thurs, August 17th • 7 pm**

**Daniel James Lincoln**  
Physicist & Astronomer

Is this the end of the world?  
Learn about the upcoming event — history, geometry, human & animal behavior, and the relationship to the photometry of transiting exoplanets!

# Wallowology!

Natural History Discovery Center



**NATURE'S LIGHT PHOTOGRAPHICS**  
Portrait, Editorial & Landscape Photography  
Photo Coaching • Photo & Natural History Trips

Shoot like a pro with one-on-one photo-coaching.

Capture stunning landscapes with custom photo trips

**Ellen Morris Bishop**  
541-398-1810  
paleobishop@gmail.com  
P.O. Box 352  
Joseph, Oregon 97846



THE GEOGRAPHY OF MUSIC

**SUMMER ARTS CLASSIC**  
AUGUST 24-26, 2017  
MUSIC, ART, AND WORDS INSPIRED BY THE BEAUTY OF NORTHEAST OREGON

**SUMMERARTSCLASSIC.COM**





**JB BANE ELECTRICAL & PLUMBING SUPPLIES**  
& COMPANY  
ELECTRICAL & WATER SYSTEM CONTRACTOR

**PUMPS • IRRIGATION**  
**HARDWARE • APPLIANCE PARTS**

**208 S. RIVER ST. • ENTERPRISE, OR**  
**www.jbbane.com • 541-426-3344**



Enjoy Summer  
Indoor Outdoor  
Any Season  
**We've Got You Covered!**

**Eds**  
**Ed Staub & Sons**  
Energy. Community. Service.

**Your One-Stop Appliance Shop**

Convenient Delivery • Residential • Commercial • Industrial

**Speed Queen**  
**Amana**  
**Rinnai**  
**Crosley**

201 E. Hwy 82 • Enterprise  
541-426-0320  
Sales & Service  
Hours: Mon-Fri 8 a.m. - 5 p.m.