

Bridge repair key to excursion train's return to Wallowa County

Previous state funding source has been lost

By Paul Wahl
Wallowa County Chieftain

The Eagle Cap Excursion Train runs out of the depot in Elgin and reverses course prior to arriving in Minam.

The reason? A substandard bridge.

A formal move to begin the process of replacing the bridge has been taken, which means one day the train could again ply tracks located in Wallowa County.

The board of the Wallowa Union Rail Authority, or WURA, voted Feb. 13 to form a committee with Friends of the Joseph Branch to determine costs and begin seeking sources of funding. The matter is expected to appear on the board's agenda when it meets again in March.

The authority is a cooperative agreement between the two counties to operate the 62.58-mile ex-Union Pacific Railroad line between Elgin and Joseph.

In addition to the Water Canyon Bridge, three additional bridges would need to be repaired to bring the train to the track's terminus in Joseph.

"I don't know anyone on this board who wouldn't like to see those bridges up and running," said Steve McClure of Union County, who co-chairs the authority with Susan Roberts of Wallowa.

Funding for bridge projects has become a challenge. Previous grants have come from a state program established to fund air, rail, marine and bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure on a competitive grant basis.

WURA recently completed a \$350,000 project to repair tracks, for which it expects to receive reimbursement shortly.



Eagle Cap Excursion Train 2018 Proposed Schedule

- Sunday, May 5** — Cinco de Mayo
- Sunday, May 13** — Mother's Day Brunch
- Saturday, May 26** — Two Rivers
- Saturday, June 2** — Wine and Chocolates
- Saturday, June 16** — Spring Train Robbery
- Sunday, June 17** — Father's Day Train Robbery
- Saturday, June 30** — I Love America! Veterans' Train
- Saturday, July 7** — I Love America! Veterans' Train
- Wednesday, July 18** — Two Rivers
- Saturday, July 28** — Sasquatch Watch
- Saturday, Aug. 11** — Two Rivers
- Saturday, Aug. 25** — Two Rivers
- Saturday, Sept. 1** — Two Rivers History Train
- Saturday, Sept. 8** — All About Fishing - Hatchery Train and Salmon Bake
- Saturday, Sept. 15** — Fall Foliage Photo Run
- Saturday, Sept. 29** — Wine and Cheese Train
- Saturday, Oct. 6** — Autumn Train Robbery
- Saturday, Oct. 13** — Autumn Train Robbery
- Saturday, Oct. 20** — Two Rivers — End of Season Bounty

When the Oregon Legislature approved its transportation bill in 2017, the grants were pulled in favor of pooling funds to complete four large transit projects, according to Scott Turnoy, who had been spearheading ODOT's freight and planning program.

Once the \$60 million cost threshold is reached, grants will most likely return. That could be as far out as 2022.

Turnoy said there are a couple factors that could bring the grants back sooner, but he was not optimistic.

He said the state does not have a like alternative for rail projects and suggested federal funds might be available.

The Water Canyon Bridge could cost as much as \$100,000 to repair. Representatives of the Friends told the WURA board it could

also pursue an inverted culvert bridge, which would cost less and be more environmentally friendly than the creosote-covered foundation of the existing bridge.

For the Friends group, which operates the excursion train on tracks owned by the authority since 2002, the repairs are crucial.

"With the train not able to operate in Wallowa County, it's out of site, out of mind," said David Arnold, vice president of the organization.

Membership has dropped by around half over the past few years, most of those not keeping current are Wallowa County residents, according to Peggy Weishaar, membership chair for the group.

Weishaar presented a proposal earlier in the month to hold a membership event on the train — parked in Wallowa to coax Wallowa County residents to join.

Even empty, the train could not be brought to Wallowa because of the condition of the bridge.

A "fun bus" would have originated in Joseph, taking interested individuals to meet the train in Wallowa and return.

"It's just very frustrating," said Weishaar.

Members primarily provide volunteer staffing for the excursion train runs. The more members, the more trains that can run, the more revenue the group can generate to improve the experience and help WURA fund its part of the bargain.

Despite a static number of volunteers, the Friends has boosted the number of trips the excursion train will make this coming summer.

Wallowa County residents who would like to join the Friends and receive the recently implemented newsletter for the group can call Weishaar at 541-786-0094 or stop by the depot in Elgin for details. Visit eaglecaptrainrides.com.



Chieftain File Photo

The Wallowa County "Dragons in the Willowas" dragon boat team heads out for a practice run on the Willamette before the Portland Dragon Boat Races on June 10, 2017. The Hawthorne Bridge over the Willamette is behind them and they race from the Marquam Bridge back to the Hawthorne.

Dragons get \$10K from Wildhorse Foundation

Seven Wonders Cup highlights the 2018 season

By Kathleen Ellyn
Wallowa County Chieftain

Wallowa Lake Tourism Association has won a \$10,000 grant from Wildhorse Foundation to help pay for the racing boats purchased for the Seven Wonders Cup Dragon Boat Races held on Wallowa Lake last August.

Association president Michael Lockhart, initially conceived of dragon boating on the lake as a tourism development exercise, but he had to divide his focus for the first years.

"Once I announced we were doing a dragon boat team, my phone was ringing off the hook," he said.

The "Dragons in the Willowas" dragon boat paddling club was developed as a separate but related entity. The association is helping build the assets of the club but expects to hand off that responsibility to the club in coming years.

The association will continue to manage the race itself.

The first race in 2016 was very successful, and the brand new Wallowa team astonished more experienced teams with their competitive abilities. News of the beauty and quality of the event spread, and the second year the Wallowa team proved to be even more competitive against more experienced visiting teams.

The popularity of the Seven Wonders Cup is expected to grow yearly.

"We're getting interest from top-rated teams, and I think we're going to just keep growing," Lockhart said. "Our race is popular because it is well-run and it's fast-moving, which most competitors

want. They like a lot of time on the water and they like to compete."

The challenge for the paddling team is that, although interest in joining the team continues to be high, the local team needs to bring in a coach for regular workshops until local coaches are more experienced.

They also want to continue competing in the Portland Dragon Boat Races held during Rose Festival in June and expand their season (and spread the word about the Seven Wonders Cup) by competing in other northwest races. That costs money.

For now, Lockhart and the association are doing most of the work of fundraising, not only writing grants to help the paddling club purchase boats and other equipment, but opening talks with Wallowa Lake State Park and marina operators about offering dragon boat rides in the team's big Kaohsiung boat "Wally" for tourists — an idea presented by the paddling team.

Lockhart is also trying to tackle a problem faced by the tourism industry as a whole.

"The biggest challenge to growth that we have is lodging for the teams," Lockhart said.

Each team consists of at least 20 individuals, not counting husbands, wives, children and volunteer support people. For the first two races, Lockhart reserved blocks of campsites at Wallowa Lake State Park.

Because dragon boat racers use boats owned by the hosts and only have to bring themselves and their paddles, racers compete across the U.S. and even in foreign countries. When the Wallowa County race begins to attract teams from other states, there will also be the problem of getting participants to Wallowa County.

IN BRIEF

Training class in dementia care set

A dementia care training, sponsored by Wallowa Valley Senior Living, will be 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, March 6, at Enterprise VFW Hall, 800 N. River St., Enterprise.

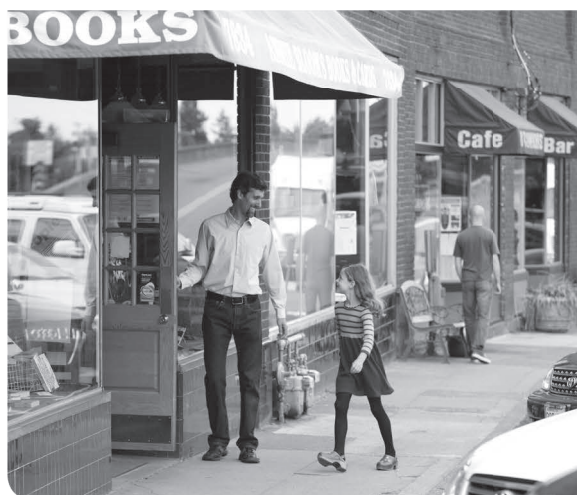
The session will feature discussion of what's normal versus

not normal in the aging process. Continuing education units are available. Dress comfortably.

The program will be presented by Rod Hardwood, an Older Adult Behavioral Specialist with Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc., serving much of eastern Oregon.

It is designed for those who find themselves in the role of caregiver to those with dementia.

Info and RSVP: 541-426-5311.



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ATHLETE OF THE WEEK

Cole Farwell & Steven Beckman

This week the Chieftain is featuring two athletes of the week, state wrestling champions Cole Farwell and Steven Beckman. Both wrestlers returned from last week's championships in Portland with their second consecutive titles.

Farwell, 17, a senior at Enterprise High School, won his title at 126 lbs., winning all his matches by fall. He also plays football and is an honor roll student.

Beckman, 16, is a junior at Joseph Carter School who won the title at 106 lbs. He also won all his matches by fall. He also plays football and is an honor roll student.

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