

# Trails:

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“We certainly appreciate the work your group has done,” Nash said.

He also pointed out that Sage DeLong, a new field representative for U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ore., was visiting at the meeting and urged Bombaci to make Bentz aware of any of the group’s needs through DeLong for “largest wilderness in the state of Oregon.” Nash also urged Bombaci to continue to make the commissioners aware of any way the county can assist the group.

“We’re making a difference,” Bombaci said. “The Forest Service hasn’t been able to field more than about three people per trail crew for the past decade or so. There’s no way they can keep up with more than 1,200 miles of trails. We’ve probably doubled or tripled the amount of work that’s getting done. ... But that still isn’t enough to keep up.”

In his presentation, Bombaci updated the commissioners on the trails group’s status.

“Currently we have two part-time staff, that’s me and Asch,” he said, introducing co-worker Asch Humphrey. “I work out of an office at Wallowa Resources. The organization initially was active just in Wallowa County, but we have been expanding and now we have just about as much activity in Union County as we do in Wallowa County.”

He said the group also is beginning to make contacts in Baker County.

“But right now, we’re taking things slow and trying to make sure we have a good volunteer base in Union and Wallowa counties first,” he said. “Right now, we have about 125 paying members. More or less half of them are in Wallowa County, a quarter of them are in Union County and the rest are scattered all over the place around the state and the Northwest. It’s mostly people over 50. ... I’d say the average age of our volunteers is someplace in the 60-year-old range. We have a pretty even split, almost exactly 50-50 male-female so there’s a lot of participa-



From left, Wallowa County Commissioners Todd Nash and Susan Roberts listen to Rick Bombaci and Asch Humphrey of the Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association give an overview of the group’s work on trails in the county during the commissioners’ meeting Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. Commissioner John Hillock is not shown.

Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

## FOR THE FUTURE

The trails group aims to:

- Continue current trail maintenance and expand as capacity allows.
- Continue sign manufacturing and installation.
- Develop greater skills and capacity to address trail erosion.
- Possibly expand into Baker County.
- Resume partnerships with

- universities put on hold because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Employ a trail ambassador concept by having volunteers stay at trailheads to educate hikers.
- See a transition in staff. Bombaci plans to step down as part-time director for five years. The group currently is advertising for a replacement.

## WALLOWA MOUNTAINS HELLS CANYON TRAILS ASSOCIATION

**What:** Trails maintenance group

**Website:** www.wmhcta.org/

**Email:** info@wmhcta.org

**Facebook or Instagram:** @WMHCTA

But Bombaci said even an electric-powered tool is banned from federal wilderness areas.

Nash talked about the difficulty working just with hand tools can bring.

“I’ve cut my share of trees and I can only imagine how discouraging it would be to get in there with a crosscut saw and see it wedge into place and not be able to move it,” he said. “I’ve had to cut those four or five times with chain saws in order to get the first piece to move.”

The main job the trails group does is clearing trails for recreationists.

“No. 1 is we clear trails using crosscut saws,” Bombaci said. “Much of the trail clearing is just about cutting out logs, but also there’s a huge brush problem, especially in areas that have burned, as you can imagine, the timber’s burned up and there’s a lot more sunlight hitting the ground so we have these terrible brush problems. It’s very labor intensive to do brush with hand tools. I’m not quite sure what the long-term game plan is for that. We had a group of people ... and in four solid days of work they covered less than 2 miles. The brushing is going to be a challenge.”

## Heritage sites

Another part of the group’s mission is to work on heritage sites, such as cultural resources, historic structures and Nez Perce crossing of the Snake River.

“Our biggest project to date has been the Lick Creek Guard Station ... it has a lot of rot; it still has a lot of rot,” Bombaci said of the building that was erected in 1930 and is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. “It was in danger of falling apart. We managed to clean up the grounds

around the building, moved some outbuildings that were causing snow to build up against it and exacerbate the moisture problem, we repainted the whole thing, we cut a hole in and I was down there in the dirt to dig out the crawlspace to make it bigger and put a vapor barrier and pulled out some rotten timbers and replaced them.”

But the project is still not done.

“We were unable to finish the job and I think if the Forest Service really wants to save that building, they’re going to need to come up with probably a few hundred thousand dollars to get some professionals in there to do the rest of the work,” he said. “But we did save a lot of the building so that it’s not going to continue to deteriorate at least.”

This year, the group also replaced a footbridge on BC Creek, Bombaci said, showing slides of the work there.

“This was a thorn in our side for several years, Todd can testify to that,” Bombaci said. “That Forest Service bridge blew out in 2002. Almost 20 years had gone by without the Forest Service replacing it and we nagged them and tried to get them to move a suspension bridge up there, but that didn’t pan out. As a result of our efforts, they did get in gear and now we have this great footbridge there. That tree (used as the basis of the bridge) was growing right there. They didn’t have to move it; they just had to winch in into place. ... That’s vastly improved the usability of that trail. It’s a very popular trail. ... That was a great win for us this year.”

The trails group also goes high-tech when possible. Bombaci said that since money from Travel Oregon granted for the BC Creek bridge wasn’t used on the suspension bridge, the group asked if it could use those funds to buy computer-controlled router to make signs. They’re now manufacturing signs that their volunteers and the Forest Service both are putting up. Bombaci said they will continue making signs this winter so they’ll have some to erect in the spring.

“It’s a very visible sign that something’s happening out there and we’re getting a lot of positive public feedback,” he said.

Bombaci emphasized that the trails group is in no way political.

“The organization was formed with the explicit intent that we’re not a political lobbying group,” he said. “We’re just a bunch of folks who want to get out there and do some good.”

tion out there.”

The group has supporters far beyond the active volunteers.

“We have an email list of about 450 folks,” Bombaci said. “A portion of them are active. Many of them are just ‘window-shoppers’ who are following along and cheering us on.”

Social media also provides support, he said, introducing Humphrey as the group’s social media outreach specialist.

“I’ve been working on social media over the past year and one reason is that we’ve been trying to bring some folks into our organization so we can continue to grow,” Humphrey said. “It’s been neat to see how having a regular presence on Facebook and Instagram and also our website so we can do updates ourselves. We’ve also been able to create online forms for projects.”

She gave some statistics

on the online popularity of the trails group.

“With Instagram and Facebook, we’ve grown our membership by about 50% in the past year,” she said. “We have 1,200 Instagram followers and almost 800 Facebook followers. We’ve been able to open up conversations through that. So we’re reaching younger folks who are working full time who want to do day trips and projects and we’re incorporating that into our next season of planning.”

Bombaci spoke highly of Humphrey’s ability — as a younger person — to connect via social media.

“Asch has done a great job of getting the word out there because I sure am not a Facebook or Instagram person, I don’t know about you guys,” he laughed. “She’s been very successful at that.”

## Showing their work

Bombaci gave a slide show to the commissioners showing photographs of their work, maps of the trails systems and charts detailing the work.

“We primarily work in the Eagle Cap and Hells Canyon wilderness areas,” he said. “We have done some work outside the wilderness, but most of our work’s been inside the wilderness boundaries. We’ve done a little bit

of work in the Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness in the north part of the county and that has been in coordination with the Umatilla National Forest. We’ve done a little bit of work on the trail at the Nez Perce Wallowa Homeland and a couple other places that have nothing to do with the Forest Service, but it’s mostly the Forest Service land that we’re working on.”

Emphasizing the scope of the group’s work, he noted that most of their efforts are in official wilderness areas and come with restrictions.

“I think there’s about 1,200 miles of trails,” he said. “Because most of our work is in the wilderness, almost all of our work is with hand tools. We use loppers, crosscut saws, Pulaskis. There’s a lot of teamwork involved.”

He then showed a photo of men lifting a log off a trail.

“These guys were just using brute strength,” he said.

“We do, occasionally, do work outside the wilderness boundary where motorized equipment is allowed,” he said.

Commissioner John Hillock sought further details on this.

“Would a battery-powered chain saw be legal?” Hillock asked.

## Icon:

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individual story or event.

She definitely ran a journalistic marathon. It’s not an easy game,” he said. “I’d put it right up there with milking cows and running

a dairy. It is a grind and a half. She did it for a long time. That alone is a monumental feat in my book because of the difficulty of the work.”

The former editor also said she was the picture of a community newspaper reporter.

“She understood that there was nothing too insignificant to consider in a hometown newspaper,” he said. “What’s going on up the Imnaha River at the grange hall may not seem

like a big deal to someone in the city, but it’s a big deal to the reader of the Chieftain, and Elane understood that. I hired lots of journalists over the years and they didn’t all get that. She did.”

Her daughter added that, with more than 3½ decades of her work on hand, she had a “tangible legacy” of her mother that lives on, even with her gone.

“I have bins of articles she has written. For 35 years all the (people) of Wallowa County have

things that are tacked on their bulletin board, in their keepsakes, just things she wrote from them and documented,” she said.

And Wandschneider perhaps put into words what most who met feel about the longtime reporter.

“I have great admiration for Elane,” he said. “She did a good job.”

The family will have a memorial for Dickenson in Wallowa County sometime in the spring or summer of 2022.



## Pet of the Week



**MEET TRUFFLES!**

Truffles is a spayed female, black long-haired mini panther, born approximately September 10, 2021. She is up-to-date on vaccines, dewormed and is litter box trained. Truffles loves to lounge around after a morning of playtime. She dreams of spending the Holidays with her new Fur-ever family.

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<http://www.wallowacountyhumaneociety.org/>

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