

# ‘We need to have a grocery store here’

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for dinner.

“We need to have a grocery store here or at least expand (Grand Ronde Station),” Tribal Council member Denise Harvey says. “I’m not worried about it being profitable because it provides a service to our Tribal members.”

The Grand Ronde Tribe’s Strategic Plan states as a goal that it wants to “attract new Tribal members, diversify and grow the population, and promote a healthier, sustainable community.”

In order for the Tribe to be successful in accomplishing that goal, Harvey and others say that the “food desert” barrier needs to be removed.

“In order to get people to eat healthy, you need to change the environment of the community first,” Harvey says. “You can’t just tell people the health risks and ask them to eat healthy.”

Food deserts are defined as areas that lack whole food providers who supply fresh protein sources, as well as fruits and vegetables. Instead, people living in food deserts typically rely on convenience stores that provide processed, high-sugar foods, which are known contributors to a variety of health ailments, such as obesity and Type 2 diabetes.

The opinion that Grand Ronde needs a grocery store to improve community health outcomes and attract more Tribal members to move home is nothing new.

In 2015, a survey of Tribal members found that almost 75 percent felt a community grocery store was a necessity, and those who have attended subsequent input meetings over the years echo the sentiment.

Following the survey results, Tribal Council voted in 2016 to have ECONorthwest conduct a feasibility study to determine if there is enough demand to justify a stand-alone grocery store in Grand Ronde. The study found that demand could not sustain a full-sized store because it would require \$10 million in annual sales to survive. At the time, the total community grocery spending was estimated at \$2.7 million. However, the study concluded that expanding Grand Ronde Station near Spirit Mountain Casino might be a viable option.

These findings resulted in a 2017 study by Pepper Foster Consulting to identify options within the Grand Ronde Station site. Ultimately, the study found it unlikely that Grand Ronde Station would be able to compete on either price or selection with “big box” grocery stores in



Map created by Samuel Briggs III



Photos by Timothy J. Gonzalez

**Bananas available at Grand Ronde Station on Wednesday, Nov. 13. The market tries to help local shoppers by offering bread, dairy products and healthy snacks.**

Dallas or McMinnville. However, the study did recommend reconfiguring the store to make one side a community store that sold basic items such as produce, cheese, milk, eggs, meat and other necessities.

As of 2019, the study’s suggestion has not yet been implemented.

“The main objection I am hearing is that it would not be profitable,” Harvey says. “I think a grocery store would be a bonus, and that

we could attract a lot of the traffic heading to and from the coast.”

She notes that although the Grand Ronde Food Bank – iskam məkʰmək haws – does a good job providing fresh fruits and vegetables to the community, there are limits on the availability and choice of products.

Food Bank Program Manager Francene Ambrose has said that many local families prefer to buy produce rather than take what is available at the food pantry because of quality and selection.

Tribal Economic Development Director Bruce Thomas says that a full-sized brick-and-mortar grocery store operates on only a 3- to 5-percent profit margin, and that includes a large number of steady customers.

“I’ve never seen a town of this size able to support a grocery store,” Thomas says. “Most people here have access to a car to drive to stores (in other areas) and the cost of grocery delivery services would be far lower than the cost of building a regular store, and the waste that would result if you can’t sell

the product.”

Tribal Council Vice Chair Chris Mercier lives in Grand Ronde and feels a grocery store could be supported by the community.

“There is a Grocery Outlet in La Pine and that’s a fairly remote community,” he says of the central Oregon town south of Bend with a population of approximately 1,900 residents. “We shouldn’t be so worried about profitability. If we build something like a WinCo or a Grocery Outlet, it will attract customers. Right now, people who come to the food bank are from all over the area.”

The 2010 U.S. Census estimated there were 1,661 people living in the Grand Ronde Census Designated Place. George says the most recent population count is approximately 1,800 people in 700 households.

Mercier adds that an emphasis on healthy eating and lifestyles won’t work as well without a local place to purchase fresh, affordable groceries.

“I live in Tribal housing and I know a lot of people who go to the convenience store every day to get a soda and bag of chips (for a meal),” he says. “I think if those people could go to a grocery store, they might make better health choices, but they need to learn how much better fresh things taste.”

Tribal Planning Director Rick George says a plan is currently in the works to establish a “tipping point” for population numbers needed to support a full-sized grocery store.

“Until we hit the tipping point, we can’t sustain a store,” George says. “We need to be careful and just like



**A selection of healthy snacks available at Grand Ronde Station.**

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