

Tribe remains committed to restoring public access to Willamette Falls on the Blue Heron property

**PROJECT continued
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on environmental remediation and brought millions of federal dollars to the project. And we have only just begun.”

Among the federal funds obtained by the Tribe is an \$800,000 Environmental Protection Agency grant to help clean up the Blue Heron property, which had been used as an industrial site since the mid-19th century. Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley also included \$2 million for infrastructure improvements at the Blue Heron site that was included in the fiscal year 2022 omnibus spending bill approved in March by Congress and signed into law by President Joe Biden.

However, Kennedy said, the Tribe has seen little progress at Willamette Falls from other entities while significant public resources have been spent. The Legacy Project has received approximately \$40 million in funding over the last 10 years and has yet to break ground on the riverwalk.

“Months of talks and adding even more governments to the table are prolonging project gridlock and not yielding any benefits to the public,” she said.

In August 2021, the Legacy Project restructured its partnership to not only include the Grand Ronde Tribe, but the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, Con-

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~ Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy

federated Tribes of Siletz Indians, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.

“The Willamette Falls site is part of our ancestral homelands and our ceded lands, and therefore it holds significant historical and cultural importance for our people,” Kennedy said. “As a result, and after careful consideration, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde will no longer participate in discussions around the Willamette Falls Legacy Project. This decision was not made lightly. It reflects our deep frustration with ineffective project management and poor communication, along with a lack of transparency and accountability of the Willamette Falls Trust. Collectively, all these actions have come to heavily burden the project and led us to this critical point.”

In May 2021, the Grand Ronde Tribe withdrew from the Willamette Falls Trust, a nonprofit organization raising funds and engaging the community regarding

the riverwalk project, because it undermined Grand Ronde Tribal sovereignty and subjected Tribal staff to “micro-aggressions.”

“We attempted to raise awareness about the problematic nature of these conflicts and create opportunities for deeper understanding, but there was never a sincere commitment to healing and building the foundational relationships needed to move this project forward,” Kennedy wrote.

During the Wednesday, March 23, Tribal Council meeting, Tribal Council member Kathleen George said the gridlock and lack of accountability in how public funds have been spent contributed to the Grand Ronde Tribe’s decision.

“In the end, that lack of credibility and transparency ... their unwillingness to tell where the money went ... we weren’t comfortable with that,” she said. “We’re going to move forward with a really good project and keep working with our local, county, city partners and make a wonderful thing here, but we have to do that in a way that is accountable.”

Vice Chair Chris Mercier said that although news stories regarding the Grand Ronde Tribe leaving the project gave a decent overview of the situation, they did not explain the “drama” Tribal representatives have had to deal with.

“There’s so much more that did not make it into those stories that I think needs to be told,” Mercier said.

Kennedy said access to Willamette Falls will remain a “top priority” for the Grand Ronde Tribe as the project continues.

“Renewing, restoring and revitalizing Willamette Falls is an opportunity not to be squandered,” Kennedy said. “And we have no intention of letting that happen. As the owner and caretaker of the site, we will continue moving forward, guided by our vision of restoration, revitalization and increased public access for everyone.”

Tribal Communications Director Sara Thompson said the withdrawal from the Legacy Project will not affect the Grand Ronde Tribe’s development of the Blue Heron site.

“Over the next few months, we will focus on completing the master plan for the site, continuing remediation and environmental restoration, and launching a fundraising campaign

for the project,” Thompson said. “As the owner and caretaker of the site, we will continue moving forward, guided by our vision of restoration, revitalization and increased public access for everyone.”

Thompson added that the Grand Ronde Tribe remains committed to restoring public access to Willamette Falls on the Blue Heron property and has left the door open for a future project should one come along.

Gerard Rodriguez, director of Tribal Affairs for the Willamette Falls Trust, said a public easement on the former Blue Heron Paper Mill property will allow the partnership’s public access project to proceed alongside the Grand Ronde Tribe’s restoration and development plans.

However, Metro Public Affairs Specialist Nick Christensen said that Metro needs to have a willing property owner to move forward on any work on the public easement.

“Since last summer, the capital portion of the project has been paused while the four public partners and the five Tribes with interests in the WFLP try to work through challenging questions about how to govern and manage the project,” he said. “It’s important that we take the time to get the approach right. The four public partners remain committed to supporting the project’s four core values: public access to the second largest waterfall in North America by volume, habitat restoration, cultural and historical interpretation, and economic development. We’re excited about the progress at the former Blue Heron Paper Mill site. We look forward to hearing more about the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde’s plans for the site.”

Willamette Falls Trust Board Chair Robert Kentta, who also serves on the Siletz Tribal Council, said, “While we are disappointed about the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde’s decision to abandon the process and withdraw from the partnership, we also must acknowledge that these negotiations among all of the stakeholders – both Indigenous people and others – is progress toward healing in and of itself.

“As a result of our ongoing process, Willamette Falls Trust is continuing to collaborate on plans for the falls that center on multi-Tribal leadership, history and culture – and that benefits all Oregonians. Our path forward is to remain consistent to the trust’s mission of creating an exceptional experience at Willamette Falls, including working closely with parties on both sides of the river.” ■

Includes information from Oregon Public Broadcasting.

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