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Bank from A1

the biggest, ugliest building and you renovate it."

The Bank Building seemed to fit the bill.

Blackstone's project conceptually began when he realized there was economic energy in Cottage Grove's downtown and began thinking of ways he could tap into its potential. He had made his career as a consultant identifying marketing opportunities for large companies, validating new concepts for products and determining strategies for entering markets. It dawned on him that such skills could be applied toward revitalizing a city.

"So I hired myself to do a consulting gig for Cottage Grove but didn't tell anybody," said Blackstone. "I did a deep dive," he said, going as far as hiring a research firm to conduct surveys.

As his vision developed, Blackstone came to a simple realization that "jobs are related to business, business is related to building and building is related to land," he said.

Real estate seemed to be the key, prompting him to acquire both real estate and a general contractor's licenses along his journey to materialize his vision of an economically vibrant town.

Blackstone moved to Cottage Grove in 1985 and has witnessed the rise and fall of several businesses over the years, describing how he could just "feel" that some would make it and other would not.

Only a year was left on his mortgage when he floated the idea of investing in the roughly \$1.5 million Bank Building project to his wife. To his surprise, she agreed.

"What type of woman in the world would say that?" Black-

stone queried gratefully. "But she did."

Since work began, Blackstone has received the \$20,000 Diamonds in the Rough state grant to reconstruct the building's façade and is currently waiting to hear back on a potential \$200,000 grant as part of the Oregon Main Street Revitalization Grant Program.

Work on the building is to be extensive and estimated to last until next May. Restorative efforts will include returning the building's original rooftop awnings, reconstructing its western bay window, putting in large first-floor windows and installing a decorative balcony on the building's façade.

When construction is completed, it's hoped a symmetry and balance will be returned to the building's streetside appearance.

The ground floor will also be constructed to meet Americans with Disabilities Act requirements.

"So it's coupling the historic aspects with current code," said Blackstone.

The ground floor, though in the process of being completely gutted, will continue to house businesses in its reimagined state. Extending 60 feet down Sixth Street, the building will divide units into thirds, giving 20 feet each for the two existing businesses and potentially Blackstone's own coffee shop on the corner.

The remainder of the first floor is planned to serve as affordable, rentable office space that will feature individual offices, private desks and shared workspaces. This particular business model is meant to provide a stepping stone for small businesses, startups or even larger out-of-town companies which want to maintain a presence in Cottage Grove at a low cost.

Blackstone sees the workspace as a financially sustainable "incubator" for economic stimulus in the city. Given an affordable opportunity, he believes ambitious small businesses can find a lasting role in developing the town's heart and soul.

Creating business space is only part of the plan, though.

"The key is getting tenants downtown," Blackstone said on making his revitalization efforts successful.

Until construction began, the second floor had served as low-income housing and many of the units' facilities had not been updated in so long they appeared as relics of a bygone era. Final floor plans for upstairs will see six units refurbished for middle-income tenants, three of which will feature an original ballroom-style ceiling which was uncovered during the inspection process and is slated to be restored.

"I like to think of living upstairs here as small-town living in an urban environment," said Blackstone. "You see all the activity, the energy and the flow and you're able to live in this mini-urban environment but in a small town. I think that's kind of cool."

Blackstone theorizes that people with disposable income within walking distance of downtown shops are likely to become downtown consumers, stirring the pot for an energetic economy.

As ambitious as the project is, it cannot claim pioneer status on the frontier of downtown revitalization. The Bank Building joins a cast of Main Street players which have contributed to a process of breathing new life into the area.

"My fantasy is that this can be a stimulation and further what efforts have already been done," Blackstone said. "There are al-

ready some real heroes down here."

Structures and businesses such as Homestead Furniture, Axe and Fiddle, Jack Sprats and the Club Building are among often-cited examples of downtown moving in the right direction, though not every project has been executed without criticism. Blackstone's own building has received its share of skepticism on social media. Regardless, the building owner believes the need for progress is evident.

"Main Street will never be what it was 50 years ago or 25 years ago," said Blackstone. "So I think we as a community in a sense need to re-envision what our Main Street is."

Part of that process involves accepting the inevitability of change.

"I think the message I want to send is that our town needs to grow," Blackstone said. "Growth is not bad. We're always in a state of dying, so if we don't grow, we will die."

For a city facing disturbingly low rates of housing vacancy and a cost-burdened household rate at nearly 50 percent, downtown economic stimulus has potential to weave into the social fabric a thread of vitality.

"Buildings downtown can have a profound effect downtown and on the community," said City Manager Richard Meyers. "So it's exciting to see that classic old building get restored and put back to the condition it was in before."

For his part, Blackstone emphasized he accepts his role in the process with humility and an understanding there are wider implications for his actions.

"At the end of the day, it's not about me," he said. "It's about the community and how it can help. It doesn't mean you're going to make everybody happy, but you do your darndest."

Vets from A1

deaths among soldiers was a topic of conversation last week among Florence-area veterans, spurred primarily by the visit of the traveling replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, "The Wall That Heals."

Sadly, underscoring the memorial's visit was the unexpected death of local veteran Pete Maury, who took his life just days before the wall's arrival. The night before, Maury and his wife, Bev, had spent the evening with a group of friends enjoying dinner at Elks Lodge #1858. Later that evening after returning home, Maury ended his life with a single gunshot.

When "The Wall That Heals" arrived a few days later, fellow veterans of Maury's were still mourning his loss and agreed

to speak with *The Siuslaw News* in an honest discussion about the possible reasons for their friend's suicide. Most were in agreement that the physical pain he was enduring, coupled with the inevitable decline in his quality of life, led him to suicide.

Jerry Hernandez is the Commander of Disabled American Veterans Chapter 23, Florence, Oregon, and a strong advocate for the needs of the local veteran's community.

"With Pete Maury for example, you get to a certain age and all those injuries you got during the war or during your service time — they start to get more intense," said Hernandez. "The pain gets more intense and Pete was tired of the pain. It had been going on for so long, he was just tired of the pain."

Hernandez explained that Maury had operations on his knees and his legs, and it was just going on for too long. "About five years ago, a friend of his passed away, the same way, committing suicide. So, this was on Pete's mind, too. If you were in the military and you had friends that committed suicide, sometimes it's contagious."

Maury was a longtime member of the Elks and his work with the Florence Municipal Airport Volunteers was well known and appreciated, greeting visiting pilots and travelers as recently as three weeks ago.

Maury seemingly enjoyed his last night on earth, chatting with friends during his meal and even making an attempt at dancing which, with his limited mobility, was not an easy task. According to his wife

and friends, there was no indication from Maury's behavior or words that would have indicated he had plans of suicide later that evening. After Maury and his wife returned home, he simply went to the garage and killed himself.

"I think Pete just wanted it that way. He didn't want anybody to know what he was planning. He had been thinking about it for some time. He had mentioned it one time and we all said, 'He's not going to do that,'" Hernandez said.

The number of individuals that have served in the military and take their own lives averages more than 6,500 a year.

This means that, each day, approximately 20 veterans kill themselves. Most of these deaths are by gunshot. Rick Shore is the Treasurer for DAV and he feels the reason that guns are used in the vast majority of veteran suicides is a simple one.

"They are a tool we were trained to utilize, and we have them because of that," he said. "That makes them easily accessible and we are not afraid to use them. Unfortunately, we are using them on ourselves," Shore added with a noticeable tremor in his voice.

The fact is, there has always been concern that those who serve in combat are at greater risk of depression and alienation when returning to civilian life. Those concerns have been voiced by family members and the loved ones of veterans, going back to the Revolutionary War. There is also anecdotal evidence dating back to WWI that indicates suicide among veterans was an issue of public concern for a number of years after that war.

Reports of WWII and Korean War veterans killing themselves were often either not publicized or were misidentified as "accidental." As a result, accurate statistical information on suicide rates among this group of veterans has been limited.

See Vets 9A

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