

Committee to look at options for historic Central School in Baker

By Chris Collins
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A six-member committee has been formed to research and recommend options for the future of the historic former Central School building that sits at the corner of Fifth Street and Washington Avenue.

The Central Building Committee's first meeting is set for 4 p.m., Thursday, March 14.

The six community members will report to Superintendent Mark Witty, who will serve as a liaison between the committee and the District.

Committee members are

- Robin Nudd, who works in community development as well as serving as an executive assistant and information and technology liaison for the City of Baker City.

- Richard Langrell, a retired Baker City businessman and former Baker City councilor.

- Karla Macy, a member of the Baker City Parks & Recreation Board and the mother of a child who uses a wheelchair.

- Bryan Tweit, manager of Launchpad Baker, which provides resources for new

businesses just starting up, including free mentorship and access to affordable office space. Tweit also has been a Special Olympics coach and ski instructor for nearly 30 years.

- Todd Roseborough, a commercial/ag lender with Bank of Eastern Oregon. He lives in Baker and works throughout the region.

- Randy Daugherty, owner of Baker Garage, a former City Council member and a current member of the Baker City Budget Board.

The committee is expected to remain active until a "viable solution" is found for the Central Building, a fact sheet provided by the District Office states. Vacancies will be filled by standard procedures used by the District and approved by Superintendent Mark Witty. Periodic reports also will be made to the Baker City School Board.

"If this was an easy thing, it would have been done," Witty says of the work ahead of the committee.

"We're looking for a better outcome for the community," he said. "We'll see where this committee takes us."

The environmental science

brownfield cleanup class at Baker Technical Institute is expected to be involved in the program to leverage grant money to study the site and then to make plans for any cleanup work, such as asbestos removal, that needs to be done, Witty says.

The Central Building was closed in 2009 and classes that previously had met in the building were moved to the Helen M. Stack building at Fourth and Broadway streets.

The Central Building was designated as surplus property and the District has been trying to sell it over the past 10 years without success. District administrators believe it would be too expensive to remodel the building for use as a school.

In 2011, the Historic Preservation League of Oregon, now known as Restore Oregon, named the Central Building one of the state's Most Endangered Places. The hope was that the attention would help focus the efforts of the school district and the community on finding a new use for the building.

Renowned architect Ellis F. Lawrence was chosen to

design the city's new high school as part of a contest announced in 1915, according to the Restore Oregon website. Ellis was the first president of the Oregon chapter of the American Institute of Architects, campus planner and head of the architecture school at the University of Oregon. The Restore Oregon website's latest entry regarding the school is dated fall 2014, and has this to say about the Building: "Reuse efforts stalled due to lack of community support."

Here is Witty's charge for the Central Building Committee:

- Receive information on current Central Building issues, such as maintenance plans and the status of grants to identify all hazardous material and any structural problems.

- Research viable options for building use that would add value to the community.

- Coordinate with Brownfield program students who will assist in gathering input from the community.

- Investigate various options to determine feasibility.

- Prepare a report for the Baker School Board.

SEWER

Continued from Page 1A

The city doesn't have an actual cost because it has not put the project out for bid.

City officials have been planning for the project for several years.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality notified the city several years ago that it would not issue a long-term permit allowing the city to continue discharging treated wastewater into the Powder River.

The city's wastewater treatment plant and lagoons are just north of town, in Baker Valley.

The city's least expensive solution, Owen said in an earlier interview, is to use the treated wastewater — after it has been stored temporarily in the city's lagoon and been treated to remove the chlorine the city adds as a disinfectant to its drinking water — to irrigate crops that aren't used for human consumption.

To do that the city needs more space to store water, however, because the water would be used for irrigation only from spring through early fall.

The city also needs to find landowners willing to use the water.

The city's current plan includes building a pipeline from the current lagoons to a new storage pond that would be built on the east side of Interstate 84.

The city owns 40 acres adjacent to the current lagoons, but it needs 60 to 100 acres for the new storage pond.

The city will also increase sewer rates for commercial accounts.

They don't pay a flat

monthly rate, but instead are billed \$2.17 for each unit of water they use (one unit is 748 gallons).

The commercial rate could rise over the next three years to at most \$3 per unit, a 38-percent increase. As with residential rates, the increases would be incremental, with no more than 43 cents per unit per year.

According to a survey by the League of Oregon Cities, of 17 cities with a population between 5,000 and 10,000 (Baker City's population is about 9,900), Baker City's current residential sewer rate is lower than all except Sandy's. At \$32.50 Baker City's would be the third-lowest rate among those 17 cities.

There are state and federal programs that offer grants, which don't need to be repaid, to cover some of the cost of projects such as wastewater system upgrades, but Baker City doesn't qualify for those because its sewer rates are too low.

To qualify for grants the city would need to charge about \$38 per month for residential customers.

City officials are not proposing such large rate hikes to possibly qualify for grants.

The city hasn't had substantial upgrades to its wastewater system since 1965, Owen said.

The city has considered other options to pay for the pipeline and lagoon, including a property tax levy, which voters would have to approve.

The City Council will have to approve any rate increases associated with the project.

STREETS

Continued from Page 1A

To reverse the trend, the city would need to repave 2.4 miles of street each year. But the current budget only allows the city to repave about 2.4 blocks, every other year.

This is due in part to asphalt costs that have risen from \$103 per ton in 2009 to about \$135 per ton now.

Overall, including the cost of moving utilities, curb and gutter work and improved pedestrian access, the city esti-

mates it would cost \$14 million to \$24 million to upgrade all streets to the "good" or "very good" categories.

This year the city is scheduled repave about three and a half blocks of Washington Avenue from the Powder River east to Clark Street. The estimated cost is \$332,000.

In 2018 the city didn't do any repaving, to save money for this year's project.

On average an asphalt street lasts between 20 and 25 years. The city has about 1.28 miles of street built in 1959 that

haven't been repaved since.

According to the 2019 Pavement Management Plan, it's considerably more expensive to repair a severely dilapidated road — these require repaving or in some cases complete reconstruction — than it is to maintain a street that is already in good shape.

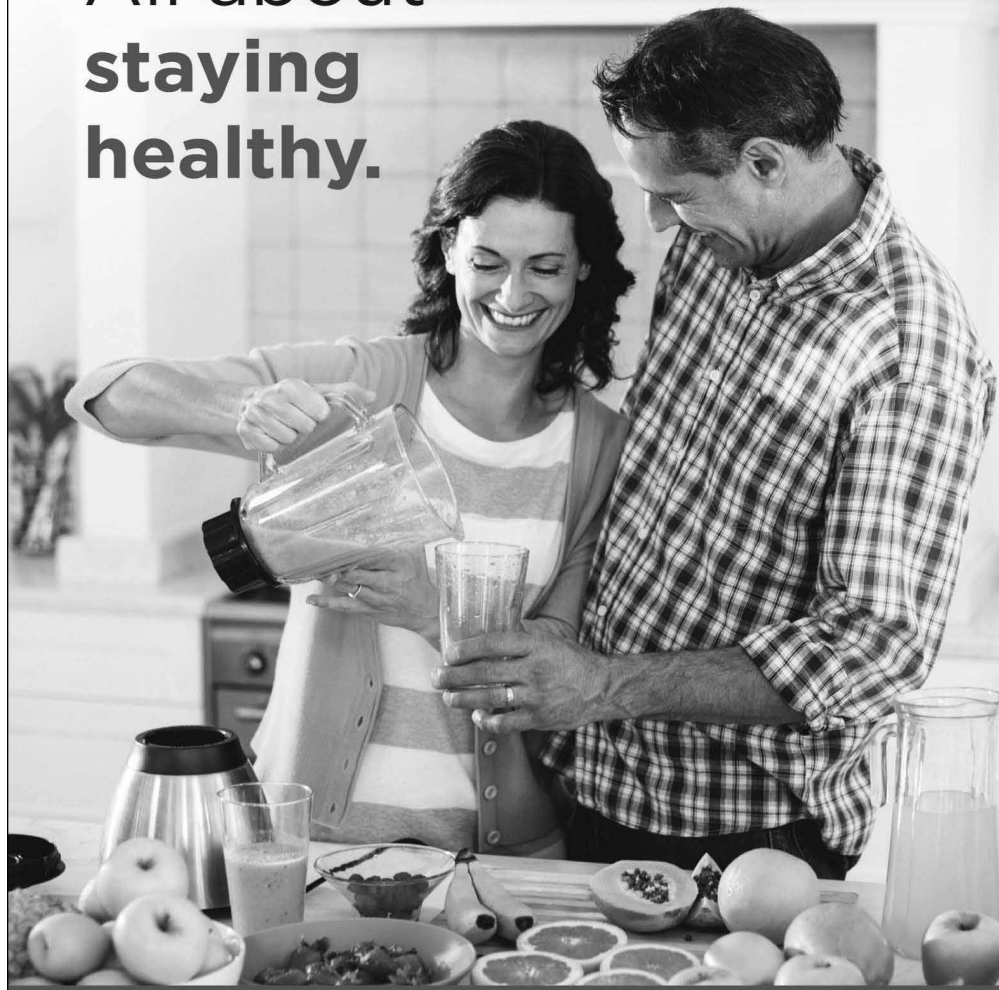
In those cases chip-sealing, which is much less expensive than repaving, can maintain a street in good condition.

The city's 2019 plan also calls for chip-sealing sections of streets, including 14 blocks

of Campbell Street from Main Street west, and the whole of Windmill Lane, east of Interstate 84.

The city's street fund has three main sources of funding — property taxes, the state gas tax and the Oregon Surface Transportation Program Fund. Due to the 2017 transportation bill, the city estimates that annual gas tax revenue will increase by \$180,000 over the next three years.

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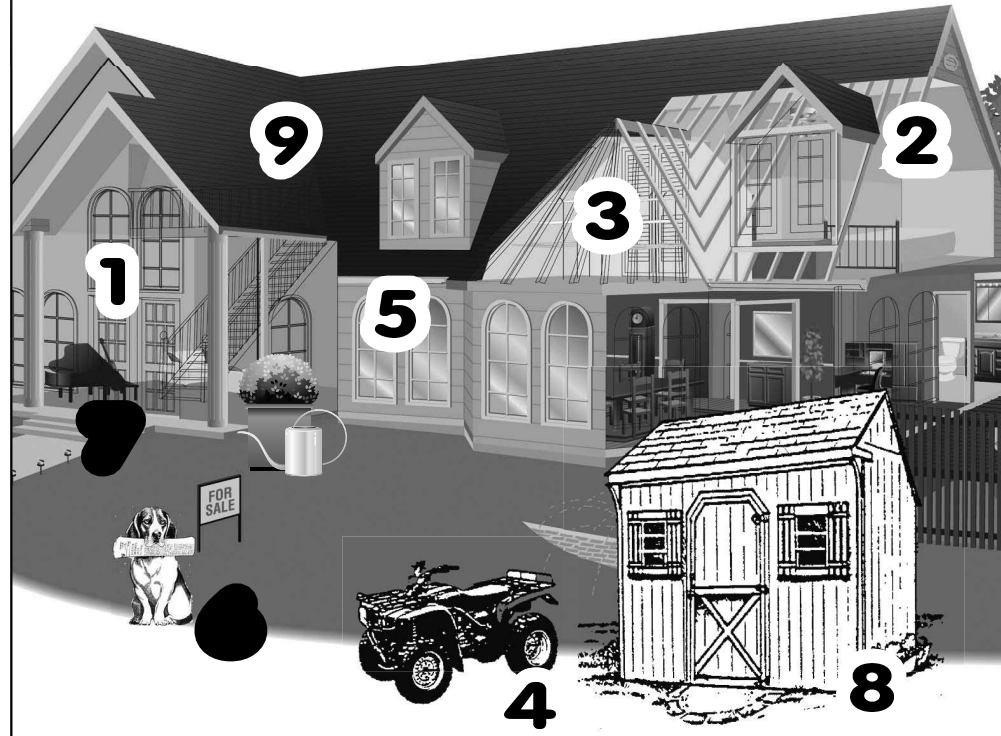
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