

Oregon News

ONCE UBIQUITOUS, THE FRANCHISE'S LAST OPERATING STORE IS IN BEND

World's last Blockbuster Video store is in Oregon

By Gillian Flaccus
Associated Press

BEND — There are challenges that come with running the last Blockbuster Video on the planet.

The computer system must be rebooted using floppy disks that only the general manager — a solid member of Gen X — knows how to use. The dot-matrix printer broke, so employees write out membership cards by hand. And the store's business transactions are backed up on a reel-to-reel tape that can't be replaced because Radio Shack went out of business.

Yet none of that has kept this humble franchise in an Oregon strip mall from thriving as the advent of on-demand movie streaming laid waste all around it. When a Blockbuster in Australia shuts its doors for the last time on March 31, the Bend store will be the only one left on Earth.

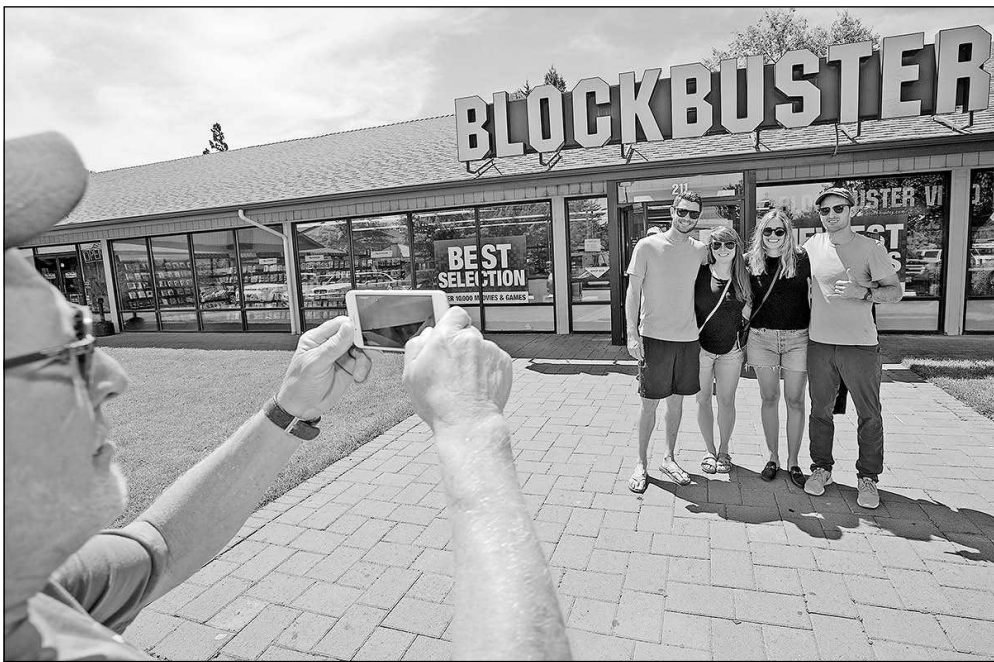
"It's pure stubbornness, for one. We didn't want to give in," said general manager Sandi Harding, who has worked at the franchise for 15 years and receives a lot of the credit for keeping it alive well past its expiration date. "We did everything we could to cut costs and keep ourselves relevant."

The store was once one of five Blockbusters owned by the same couple, Ken and Debbie Tisher, in three central Oregon towns. But by last year, the Bend franchise was the last local Blockbuster standing.

A tight budget meant no money to update the surviving store. That's paying off now with a nostalgia factor that stops first-time visitors of a certain age in their tracks: the popcorn ceilings, low fluorescent lighting, wire metal video racks and the ubiquitous yellow-and-blue ticket stub logo that was a cultural touchstone for a generation.

"Most people, I think, when they think about renting videos — if they're the right age — they don't remember the movie that they went to pick, but they remember who they went with and that freedom of walking the aisles," said Zeke Kamm, a local resident who is making a documentary about the store called "The Last Blockbuster" with a friend.

"In a lot of towns, the Block-



Ryan Brennecke / WesCom News Service file photo

Uber driver Angelo Bifano takes a photo of his passengers at Bend's Blockbuster in July 2018. A Blockbuster is closing in Australia, leaving the one in Bend — and no others, anywhere.

"It's pure stubbornness, for one. We didn't want to give in."

— Sandi Harding, general manager at the last Blockbuster Video store

buster was the only place that was open past nine o'clock, and a lot of them stayed open until midnight, so kids who weren't hoodlums would come here and look at movies and fall in love with movies."

The Bend store had eight years under its belt as a local video store before it converted to a Blockbuster in 2000, a time when this high desert city was still a sleepy community with a small-town feel to match.

Customers kept coming back, drawn by special touches like staff recommendations, a "wish list" for videos to add to the rental selection and even home delivery for a few special customers who couldn't drive in. Dozens of local teens have worked there over the years.

Then, in 2010, Blockbuster declared bankruptcy, and by 2014, all corporate-owned stores had shuttered. That left locally owned franchises to fend for themselves, and one by one, they closed.

When stores in Anchorage and Fairbanks, Alaska, shut down last summer — barely outlasting a Redmond, Oregon, store — Bend's Blockbuster was the only U.S. location left.

Tourists started stopping by to snap selfies, and business picked up. Harding ordered up blue-and-yellow sweatshirts, T-shirts, cups, magnets, bumper stickers, hats and stocking caps from local vendors emblazoned with the words "The Last Blockbuster in America," and they flew off the shelves.

Then, this month, she got a phone call: The world's only other Blockbuster, in Perth, Australia, would soon close its doors. A new T-shirt order went out — this time with the slogan "The Last Blockbuster on the Planet" — and the store is already getting a new wave of selfie-snapping visitors from as far away as Europe and Asia.

On a recent weekday, Michael Trovato of Melbourne, Australia, stopped by while visiting his twin sister in Bend.

After posing for a photo, Trovato said he misses a time when choosing a movie meant browsing hundreds of titles and asking a video clerk for insight instead of letting a movie-streaming service recommend one for him based on a computer algorithm.

"I miss quite a bit being able to walk into a Blockbuster or CD store and have that social experience and see people looking at stuff and talking to people," Trovato said. "It's something you don't get from the slick presentation of a music service or, you know, from the internet."

The Bend store doesn't seem to be in danger of closing anytime soon.

Its newfound fame has been a shot in the arm, and customers stream in to buy \$40 sweatshirts, \$20 T-shirts and even \$15 yellow-and-blue beanies hand-knit by Harding herself. The store pays Dish Network for the right to use the Blockbuster logo and has several years left on its lease.

People regularly send the store boxes of old VHS tapes and DVDs. They also donate Blockbuster memorabilia: a corporate jean jacket, key chains and old membership cards.

Employees always send a thank-you note, store manager Dan Montgomery said.

Recently, Harding has noticed another type of customer that's giving her hope: a new generation of kids dragged in by their nostalgic parents who later leave happy, holding stacks of rented movies and piles of candy.

Jerry Gilles and his wife, Elizabeth, brought their two kids, John, 3, and Ellen, 5, and watched with a smile as the siblings bounced from row to row, grabbing "Peter Pan" and "The Lion King" and surveying dinosaur cartoons.

"How could we not stop? It's the last one," said Gilles, of their detour to the store while on vacation from Memphis, Tennessee. "They need to see that not everything's on the iPad."

STATE BRIEFING

State House votes to ban fracking for oil, natural gas for a decade

SALEM (AP) — The Oregon House approved a 10-year ban on fracking to explore for oil and natural gas.

Lawmakers voted 42-12 on Monday to prohibit the process, which injects high-pressure liquids into underground rock to extract oil and gas. The measure now goes to the Senate for consideration.

There are currently no fracking operations in Oregon. But developers say there's potential for coalbed methane extraction in the Willamette Valley, which this bill would also block.

Environmental advocates say fracking can contaminate groundwater and pose other environmental risks.

The Trump administration announced last year that it planned to roll back federal regulations on the process, making it easier to frack on public lands.

New York, Vermont and Maryland have enacted fracking bans, and Florida and New Mexico are also considering outlawing at least some forms of the practice.

Oregon's 2018 fire season, topping \$533 million, was most expensive ever

The 2018 fire season was the costliest ever in Oregon, totaling more than \$533 million, according to the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center. The 2017 season had held the record with \$447 million, but due to the longevity of the fires in 2018, that record was easily surpassed.

In the Northwest, more than 1 million acres burned in the 2018 fire season, which continued through mid-November. More than 901,000 acres in Oregon, and 438,000 in Washington burned over the summer months, according to a summary from the U.S. Forest Service regarding the wildland fire season.

According to the summary, the longer the fire season — and the more severe the season becomes — the more hours the fire personnel are exposed to. It said there were more than 7 million work hours within the Pacific Northwest and Alaska regions spent suppressing fire.

"Statistically, we know we can expect a serious accident or fatality at about a tenth of that number," according to the summary. "In that regard, the work our people did in managing risk at all levels can be considered successful."

Through the season, Risk Management Assistance Teams provided analytical support to fire officials so they could make strategic risk management decisions focused on "integrating lessons learned into a best practices model that can help bolster decision quality for those managing large fires."

The summary also listed the communities most threatened by wildfire. Locations were identified with greater potential for reaching housing units using a purely spatial approach.

To read the summary in its entirety go to: bit.ly/bfirereport.

— WesCom News Service

College student goes to court to obtain city council president's handwritten notes

PORTLAND (AP) — A West Linn college student has taken the president of the West Linn City Council to court over her refusal to provide him with her handwritten notes taken during council sessions.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reports 2018 West Linn High School graduate Rory Bialostosky previously tangled with the city council over parking restrictions near the high school.

He says in watching council meetings he's seen council president Teri Cummings "constantly" taking notes on a note pad and, knowing they were public records, asked in January to see them.

After city officials turned him down, Bialostosky in late February emailed Cummings directly with the request. Oregon law says she has seven days to respond. Bialostosky says she still hasn't.

Lawmakers want to encourage affordable housing construction

By Sarah Zimmerman
Associated Press

SALEM — Democrats want to design their way out of Oregon's housing crisis and are considering a proposal clearing the path for developers to build more apartments and townhouses.

The move comes on the heels of a landmark rent control measure and is meant to be part of a multi-pronged approach to combat the state's housing shortage.

Speaker of the House Tina Kotek said Monday the effort will "increase housing choice and the supply of more affordable housing."

The bill would end single-family zoning. Cities with more than 10,000 people would be required to offer, in addition to single family homes, what's known as "middle" housing options. That means building more residential structures with multiple dwelling units,

like duplexes and triplexes.

Proponents hope the idea will give residents more affordable housing options in cities and suburban neighborhoods, while allowing for more development. If passed, Oregon would become the first state to eliminate single-family zoning. Minneapolis voted to restrict the practice last December,

The Oregon measure also responds to criticisms from the state's recent rent control law, which broadens tenant protections and limits the amount landlords can increase rent per year. Economists have warned that the state needs to focus on housing supply, and that rent control could dissuade developers.

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