

Nez Perce reclaim village site

By Cassandra Profita
Oregon Public Broadcasting

JOSEPH — The Nez Perce Tribe is reclaiming an ancestral village site in the Eastern Oregon town of Joseph more than a century after being pushed out of the area.

This month, the tribe purchased 148 acres of an area known as “the place of boulders,” or Am’sáaxpa. The purchase includes traditional fishing grounds and a meeting place.

Chief Joseph held council on the ridge above, before a sweeping view of the Wallowa Mountains. Hundreds of tribal members would camp there at the peak of the fishing season and catch sockeye salmon along the Wallowa River.

“There’s a lot of excitement buzzing around,” Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee Chairman Shannon Wheeler said. “We feel fortunate to be at this juncture in time to be able to say that we are on our way home. We feel the landscape misses us, and we

“We feel the landscape misses us, and we miss the landscape.”

— **Shannon Wheeler, Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee chairman**

miss the landscape.”

The land was part of an 1855 treaty that granted the tribe millions of acres and the right to fish and hunt on lands ceded to the U.S. government.

But then the U.S. Army forced the Nez Perce to leave the area in 1877, in violation of that treaty.

Nakia Williamson-Cloud, cultural resource program director for the Nez Perce Tribe, said many history books are wrong in saying tribal members never returned to the area after the Nez Perce War.

“The narrative is that the Nez Perce never went back there. That is not the case,” he said. “After that, our people would continue to go back there to hunt and fish under persecution. It was privatized

by non-Indian homesteaders.”

Those who returned were often harassed or cited for trespassing, Williamson-Cloud said, even though the 1855 treaty guaranteed their right to hunt and fish there.

“It’s been a long struggle for our people to maintain that connection, but they did,” he said. “Having that back and forth relationship with the land is what defines who we are. ... It’s not just some place our people visited. The very ground we walk on is made up of our ancestors. That’s how deep our connection is.”

The purchase consists of farmland previously known as the Hayes property, located behind the Joseph Rodeo Grounds. It includes Wallowa River frontage and some water rights.

The land has changed dramatically since the Nez Perce left the area in the 1800s. Now, there’s a dam blocking sockeye from swimming up to Wallowa Lake, so the fishery that was once the tribe’s

main attraction to that site isn’t possible.

Williamson-Cloud said the tribe is hoping to reintroduce sockeye to the area and create fish passage into the lake.

“Our culture and way of life is tied to the land, and the land has been utterly transformed and changed,” he said. “We’ve had to try to adapt to those changes as best we can.”

Buying the land back demonstrates the tribe’s resilience, Williamson-Cloud said, and it has much deeper meaning for the tribal community than simply having legal title.

“These places are defining characteristics of our people because our people’s lives, culture and spirituality are tied to these places,” he said. “When we’re disassociated from these places it affects our well-being as people.”

Wheeler said the tribe may use the land for tribal operations as well as traditional harvests.



Nez Perce Tribe/Contributed Photo

Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee Chairman Shannon Wheeler stands on the tribe’s newly purchased property near the Wallowa Mountains in Joseph.

“First and foremost is the healing that will take place for the Nez Perce people,” he said. “We speak to the land. We try to listen and under-

stand what the land is saying. That’s what (comes) first. We have promises that we’ve made to the land and we look to uphold those.”

COUNCILORS

Continued from Page 1A

The City Council sets policies and has the authority to choose the city manager.

Although the five newly elected councilors didn’t vote on the motion to hire Cannon, four of the five who responded to the Herald’s request for an interview in November — Kerry McQuisten, Johnny Waggoner Sr., Shane Alderson and Joanna Dixon — said they preferred Cannon, 43, who has worked as city manager in Saluda, North Carolina, a town of about 700, since August 2015.

That quartet, along with Heather Sells, will be sworn in Jan. 12.

They will join the two current councilors, Lynette Perry and Jason Spriet.

Perry was elected to a four-year term in 2018 and thus was not on the Nov. 3 ballot.

Jason Spriet, who was appointed to fill a vacancy in early 2020, was elected in November.

As one of the top three finishers in the election, Spriet, along with McQuisten (who received the most votes) and Alderson (who was second), was elected to a four-year term.

Waggoner, Dixon and Sells will serve two-year terms.

Councilors whose terms ended Dec. 31 are Mayor Loran Joseph, Vice Mayor Doni Bruland, and councilors

“We need more housing in Baker. We need affordable housing.”

— **Johnny Waggoner Sr., incoming Baker City Council member**

Larry Morrison, Arvid Andersen and Randy Schiewe.

Andersen and Bruland were on the Nov. 3 ballot but neither received enough votes to be re-elected.

Four of the councilors-elect responded to the Herald’s request to discuss some of their goals when they take office.

Johnny Waggoner Sr.

“A lot. We need to bring our ordinances up to date. That is one thing. But as a main goal, we need more housing in Baker. We need affordable housing. So what I want to look at, and I’m going to talk with everybody else, but I want to look at is maybe foregoing (city fees for utility) hook ups for new houses for so many years. That way people don’t just say ‘I’m putting in a new house’ and then they put it in there and then they sell it. That’s not what it’s for. But I’d like to forego the water and sewer hook up (fees) because the city in general is going

to make the money back providing the services and for every house that we build in Baker, it frees up the house those people were in for somebody else to buy or to rent.

“And the city, we’re not in this to really make profit, we’re in it for the people. That’s what a lot of people don’t understand. I think the city is there for the people to provide the services with the taxes and revenue that they make. So that’s one of the main things I want to work on is affordable housing.

“I want to talk to the other city councilors and see if maybe we can give some relief of our own to the residents and businesses. Maybe we can give them March’s water and sewer bill. Something like that. You know, give them something back. I realize it’s only 50 bucks for some people but it might be 200 for others but whatever it is, it’s giving some kind of incentive to the people because I know there’s lost wages. And people are just scraping, so maybe we can help them. Do our little bit.”

Kerry McQuisten

“Figure out how to get businesses in the community through to the other side of these COVID shutdowns. That’s my number one goal.

“What happens now since we are newly elected is each one of us becomes 1/7 of a team basically, so

“I have had direct communication with probably 100 people in the community and they all are all reaching out with one concern in mind and that’s how to survive Kate Brown’s response to COVID.”

— **Kerry McQuisten, incoming Baker City Council member**

none of our individual goals necessarily will happen. What will happen is we will get together and vote on our list of council goals and set that for the year, that’s kind of just standard procedure.

“I have had direct communication with probably 100 people in the community and they are all reaching out with one concern in mind and that’s how to survive Kate Brown’s response to COVID. So clearly that’s going to be the first thing we need to deal with. I can see that being on the agenda as soon as possible so that local business owners and individuals can come offer public testimony. We’re going to have to deal with that first. So we have got to do something. We’ve got to hear more from what people need and what they’re experiencing.”



McQuisten

Shane Alderson

“When I was running, one of the biggest things I see that’s an upcoming concern is the budget for the fire department and I’d like to get a couple more city police officers hired. When we come into the first meeting and then set our goals for the upcoming year, I think we kind of have to pick. We can have a handful we would like to see accomplished but probably each one of the members have one or two they think they can get accomplished. We kind of have to pick what’s going to be the best for the community that you can get done. My biggest challenge I think is budgeting for fire and police services.”

Joanna Dixon

“More affordable housing, better paying jobs, looking over the ordinances to make sure that we don’t have anything that’s outdated, making sure the watershed is secure and safe, and that we don’t have any issues with it. Get into office and just do the best that I can for the citizens of Baker.”



Alderson



Dixon

WARNER

Continued from Page 1A

Indeed, Warner’s replacement as Baker City manager, Jonathan Cannon, arrived 20 minutes or so later with his family to have a look around the 117-year-old City Hall.

Warner’s bemusement at how the last 17 years of his working life turned out is not hard to understand.

He grew up on his family’s cattle ranch in Baker Valley, one of the oldest operations in the county.

Warner himself worked cattle for many years.

But not long after the turn of the century he began to wonder whether he wanted to continue with the ranching life — what Warner describes as a “24/7/365” avocation.

Warner and his wife, Cammy, have two daughters, Courtney and Mackenzie, and he said both had other aspirations besides running the ranch.

And then in 2002 he was, as he puts it, “talked into” running for the position of chairman of the Baker County Board of Commissioners.

He won.

At the distance of almost two decades, Warner can talk about that dramatic juncture in his life with a certain detachment.

But the difficulty of that decision was revived recently when Warner’s father, Fred Warner Sr., died on Oct. 28 at age 94.

“It was really hard to give

“This has been a really strange year. Everybody’s been challenged by COVID. Our small businesses have really suffered.”

— **Fred Warner Jr. on Dec. 31, his final day as Baker City manager**

up ranching — it was hard on my dad,” Warner said.

He didn’t make the decision impulsively.

And Warner said he believes he chose wisely.

“I don’t make quick decisions,” he said. “It’s something that’s served me well, I think, over the years.”

That deliberate style is one Warner relied on during his 12 years as chairman of the Baker County Board of Commissioners.

After his initial election in November 2002, he was re-elected to four-year terms in 2006 and 2010.

Warner said he mostly enjoyed his dozen years as the county’s chief executive, being involved not only with setting policies but also responsible for carrying them out.

He said he particularly relished the chances to lobby on the county’s behalf in Salem, where legislators aren’t always well-versed in the issues most vital to rural, sparsely populated counties half a day’s drive from the Capitol.

Warner said he believes the political process was less polarized then.

The current political climate, with the divide between parties sharply defined, bothers him.

“I was always an advocate for nonpartisan,” Warner said. “It’s all about serving the people and what’s best for the community. I wouldn’t run for election now.”

Warner acknowledges that his own shifting political affiliations, though they didn’t actually represent a change in his attitude about public service, might not have furthered his political career.

He was elected as a Democrat in 2002, 2006 and 2010, before registering as a Republican in 2013.

He lost in the Republican primary to Bill Harvey, the current commission chairman, in May 2014. During that campaign an anonymously produced postcard was mailed to some Baker County voters, questioning Warner’s GOP bona fides.

Warner said he had previously been registered as a Democrat because when he was growing up, that was “the party of farmers and ranchers.”

He also was influenced by Al Ullman, a Democrat who represented Oregon’s vast Second Congressional District, including Baker County, for 24 years before losing in 1980 to Republican Denny Smith as part of the Reagan wave.

Although Baker County voters have gone for the Republican candidate in every presidential election since

1968 — Republican Gerald Ford’s margin over Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1976 in the county was just 31 votes — registered Democrats outnumbered Republicans in the county until the 1996 election.

Warner chuckles as he suggests his moderate approach perhaps isn’t well-suited to either party.

“I was never a very good Democrat and I wasn’t a very good Republican,” he said. “I hate the tags. I always voted for whoever I thought was the best person.”

Warner said he’s an independent now.

From county to city

Warner’s next “fork in the road,” as he describes it, happened less than two years after his loss to Harvey in the May 2014 Republican primary.

After ending his term as commissioner on the last day of 2014, Warner started selling real estate.

He said he enjoyed the work and was doing well.

But then, in early 2016, Baker City manager Mike Kee announced that he was retiring.

It might have been the only job that could persuade Warner to interrupt his budding real estate career.

“This was one job I always thought I might be interested in after leaving the county,” he said.

Warner said he believed his credentials were strong — his deep local roots and

his recent experience as commission chairman, a job with many similarities to the city manager position.

But also significant differences, as Warner learned after he was hired to replace Kee in late May 2016.

Most notably, he said, the appointed city manager, unlike the elected commission chairman, doesn’t make policies; that’s the job of the seven elected city councilors.

“I work with them on goals, and try to accomplish those goals,” he said.

Which is not to say that all residents understand the division of responsibilities between the councilors and the manager.

Warner said he occasionally had conversations with citizens who urged him to take some action that, based on the city charter, were the bailiwick of the elected councilor.

“It’s virtually impossible to please everybody all the time,” he said with a laugh. “I’ve always been able to sleep at night with the decisions I’ve made over the years. That doesn’t mean they were always the right decision, but at the time I felt comfortable that I was doing the best for the community.”

Warner said that when he accepted the city manager job he anticipated it would be his last job. He planned to work for five years.

“I didn’t quite make that,” he said.

His five-year anniversary is in May.

Warner said he couldn’t have predicted, of course, how his final year as city manager would turn out.

“This has been a really strange year,” he said.

And a very difficult one.

“Everybody’s been challenged by COVID,” Warner said. “Our small businesses have really suffered.”

The death of his father added a personal element to a period of upheaval and disappointment.

“I spent a lot of time with my dad over the past couple years,” Warner said. “I was proud of him and his heritage and his love of Baker County.”

COVID-19 precautions that limited visitations at Meadowbrook Place, where Fred Warner Sr. lived, made the situation even tougher.

On the positive side of the ledger, Warner said he and Cammy spent most of their summer and fall weekends hiking in the mountains, including visiting more than a dozen lakes in the Elkhorns.

The couple were hoping to travel extensively in 2021, but Warner said the pandemic likely will affect those plans.

In the meantime, he’s ready to turn over his office, and his job, to Cannon, who will be working for a City Council with five new members who were elected in November and will be sworn in later this month.

“I do believe the city is in great shape,” Warner said. “We’ve got great employees.”