

North Powder is getting a new playground

By ALEX WITTWER

The Observer

NORTH POWDER — Mike Morse, the interim mayor of North Powder, looked out at the nearly two dozen volunteers from across the state congregated just behind the old firehouse in North Powder. They were putting in the final structures of what will be the new playground in the small town on the edge of Union County.

“It’s about damn time,” he said.

The new playground replaces older dilapidated structures at the park, which sits at Fourth and D streets in North Powder. Many of those structures — a roundabout, swings, teeter totters and a climbing structure for kids — were worn down, with decaying wood and deteriorating metal.

“It was falling apart,” Morse said.

Funding for the project came from a sizable donation — \$10,000 — from the Masonic Lodge. The project broke ground on Aug. 25, and officials expect it to be finished before the end of October.

George Marston, the de facto project manager for the new playground, said the donation helped jumpstart the project but it wasn’t nearly enough to cover all of the replacement structures. The rest of the funds — totaling nearly \$57,000 — were gathered through grants and donations.

“The Masons had donated \$10,000 for a



Alex Wittwer/The (La Grande) Observer

Jordan Stout, a volunteer from Elkhorn Valley Wind Farm, assembles a teeter totter at the North Powder playground on Thursday, Sept. 30, 2021.

piece of playground equipment in the park,” Marston said. “The city really hadn’t done much with the \$10,000 for a year, and a decision was going to be made to do something with it or return it. I was asked by one of the Mason members here in town to help the city come up with more funds.”

The bulk of the cost would come from labor — from surveying to installation. Volunteers from Elkhorn Valley Wind Farm, as well as playground equipment installation professionals from the Oregon Recreation & Park Association and workers with the La Grande Parks & Recreation Department helped alleviate that cost, leaving the funds for purchasing expensive playground equipment.

“A lot of hands came together to help us today,” Marston said.

POLIO

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“The last time I saw her, she walked into a clinic with crutches and braces up to her hips,” Schott said.

She left the hospital on her fourth birthday — Feb. 28, 1947.

“They saved my life,” she said. “I wasn’t supposed to live. They told my parents I would die.”

But though polio spared Schott’s life, the virus never truly left her.

She used crutches until she was 13, and wore a brace on her right leg for many years.

“They were terrible. Solid metal,” she said.

The hospital stay was followed by physical therapy and hydrotherapy during the week, as well as four surgeries — three on her right leg, one on her left.

Schott became an ambassador for the hospital, and participated in fashion shows

to help raise money for a new building.

She also became a poster child for the March of Dimes.

Schott still has the posters and flyers, as well as the blue dress she wore.

The March of Dimes was founded by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1938 as a nationwide effort to eradicate polio. Much of the money raised helped fund research to develop a vaccine.

Some of that funding went to Dr. Jonas Salk, who developed a vaccine made from dead polio cells.

Schott received that vaccine. Although she’d already contracted polio, doctors told her parents that she could still catch the other strains. The vaccine would protect against all three.

Growing up, the crutches and braces limited her physical activity, so jacks and marbles helped pass the time.

And reading — a love that she credits to her second grade teacher, Ms. Holmes.

During that year, every day

Schott could choose a friend to eat lunch with in the classroom. As they ate, Ms. Holmes read “The Little House on the Prairie” series of books.

“She instilled a love of reading,” Schott said.

There were some times when her special abilities were sought for a playground game.

“They’d get me sometimes for kickball. If I had a cast, it was solid,” she said, chuckling at the memory. “I could kick it out of the field, and someone would run for me.”

An invisible virus changed her life three quarters of a century ago, but Schott said it also created the person she is today.

“I think who I am, my passions, and my concerns for those who are hurting, stem from this,” she said.

But she’ll never forget that virus.

“I’m never free of it,” she said. “I thought with time I would be, but polio still has a hold of me. I have no memory of not having polio.”

New At The Library

Patrons can reserve materials in advance online or by calling 541-523-6419. See everything new this week to Baker County Library District at wowbrary.org. Materials featured, and in library collection, does not indicate endorsement or approval of contents by the library. Selections are based on factors such as demand, public interest, diversity of viewpoint, community relevance, and others.

FICTION

- “Apples Never Fall,” Liane Moriarty
- “Enemy at the Gates,” Vince Flynn and Kyle Mills
- “Harlem Shuffle,” Colson Whitehead
- “The Sweetness of Water,” Nathan Harris
- “The Wish,” Nicholas Sparks

NONFICTION

- “Countdown bin

Laden: The Untold Story of the 247-Day Hunt to Bring the Mastermind of 9/11 to Justice,” Chris Wallace

- “Peril,” Bob Woodward and Robert Costa
- “Poet Warrior: A Memoir,” Joy Harjo
- “Preparing for the Inevitable: How We Get Back to Normal and How We Survive the Next Epidemic,” Scott Gottlieb
- “Vanderbilt: The Rise and Fall of an American Dynasty,” Anderson Cooper and Katherine Howe

MOVIES

- “Dear Zindagi” (Musical)
- “Garry Winogrand: All Things are Photographable” (Documentary)
- “Man With The Screaming Brain” (Horror)
- “Mare of Easttown: The Complete Limited Series” (Drama)
- “You Might As Well Live” (Comedy)

COUNTY

Continued from A1

He described the federal money as a “once in a lifetime community improvement opportunity,” and a chance to maximize the county’s ability to maintain and enhance the livability of the county and its cities, ensure that the county remains and moves forward in a stable financial position and focus on long term benefits to the county and its residents.

Some of the areas commissioners discussed Wednesday:

Infrastructure

Bennett discussed the possibility of expanding broadband internet and cellphone coverage countywide.

“That’s probably our number one project that we’re looking at,” he said.

Bennett said county officials learned last year, when students were taking virtual classes from home due to the pandemic, that there were “large areas where kids just absolutely had no access to

the internet whatsoever.”

“It’s starting to be more prevalent in other counties,” Martin said. “I know that there’s been a lot of the smaller counties that are also working on this project and there’s just a lot of funding for these types of projects. It seems to be more of a priority not only at the federal level but also at the state level for these types of projects.”

Roadmaster Nolan Perkins discussed the possibility of paving some gravel roads, such as Brown Road and lower Hunt Mountain Road, both in Baker Valley. The number of homes along those roads has doubled in that area over the past several years.

County officials will also look into possible bridge construction, improvements at county parks, the Mason Dam hydroelectric project, which dates back more than a decade but has not been constructed, and other clean energy projects.

Other possible uses for federal money include a veterans resource center, remodeling at the Health De-

partment building on Fourth Street, and staffing support for the temporary Oregon Trail experience at the Baker Heritage Museum while the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center is closed for more than two years for energy-efficiency upgrades.

Sheriff’s Office

Sheriff Travis Ash discussed hiring a community resource deputy to focus on community livability issues, homelessness, and at risk youth.

“We have a liaison person that would be tied in to folks that are experiencing homelessness, and we would work with our community partners not just to identify the problems, see if we could come up with some solutions,” Ash said.

Housing

Holly Kerns, director of the Baker City/County Planning Department, discussed the recently completed housing needs analysis in partnership with cities in the county.

“The housing needs

analysis that was completed last year gave us really good data on where our gaps are, where specifically we are missing housing types by income as far as apartments, single family, duplexes, that type of thing,” Kerns said. “We have really good data on where the needs are and where the demands are projected to be over the next ten years. So the key is trying to begin unlocking some of the challenges that are creating barriers to that housing need development.”

Baker City

Cities will also receive a share of American Rescue Plan Act money — \$2 million for Baker City in two installments, one this year and one next.

City Councilors met for a work session on Sept. 23 to discuss possible uses for the federal money. Like county commissioners, councilors didn’t take any action on approving dollar amounts, but City Manager Jon Cannon presented a list of possible expenditures.

These included:

- Administrative services: \$150,000. This could include money for new accounting software and training, and computers.
- Fire department: \$325,000. Possible uses include new equipment, including self-contained breathing apparatus, and overtime.
- Police department: \$200,000. This could include hiring a new officer and buying a new patrol car.
- Water fund: \$150,000 to continue the long-term project to replace the pipeline that brings water to town from the city’s watershed in the Elkhorn Mountains.

In other business Wednesday, county commissioners adopted an updated mask policy that follows state regulations. The county’s initial mask policy was approved Sept. 2, 2020.

Commission Chairman Bill Harvey said he opposes the section in the policy that requires county employees to wear a face mask outdoors when six feet of social distancing can’t be maintained.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Gloria Schott, after spending months in the hospital with polio as a toddler, was later was a poster child for a hospital fundraiser and the March of Dimes, a nationwide effort to eradicate polio. She still has the blue dress she wore for promotional photographs.

COVID

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Breakthrough cases accounted for 10% of total cases in Baker County during August, compared with about 18.6% statewide.

That trend continued through the first half of September.

For the week Sept. 12-18, for instance, Baker County’s breakthrough case percentage was 10.8% — 15 of 139 cases that week.

Statewide, breakthrough cases accounted for 23.6% of total cases that week — 2,821 of 11,968 cases.

But for the next week, Sept. 19-25, Baker County’s breakthrough cases were 20.9% of the total — 18 of 86. That’s only slightly below the statewide figure of 21.6% for that week.

During the most recent week for which statistics are available, Sept. 26-Oct. 2, Baker County had 16 breakthrough cases out of a total of 69 cases — a rate of 23.2%, the highest weekly rate the county has recorded.

Oregon’s overall breakthrough case percentage also rose that week, to 24.4% — 2,542 of 10,411 cases.

Staten said Dr. Eric Lamb, the county’s public health officer, said it’s to be expected that the number of breakthrough cases will rise as more county residents are vaccinated — breakthrough cases, by definition, can only be in fully vaccinated people.

But although the goal is to reduce cases overall, both in vaccinated and unvaccinated people, Staten said statistics showing that the vast majority of people who have breakthrough infections have minor symptoms or none at all, is encouraging.

According to the most recent breakthrough report from the OHA released Thursday, Oct. 7, of the state’s breakthrough cases, 4.5% have been hospitalized — a total of 1,263 people — and 0.8%, a total of 237 people, have died.

Age breakdown

Residents younger than 50 continue to account for a majority of Baker County’s cases.

During September, 65.5% of cases were in residents younger than 50, compared with 61.4% from Aug. 16-31.

The age groups with the largest share of cases during September were 10-19 years, with 19.4%, and people in their 30s, with 17.1%.

Those two age groups have lower vaccination rates than other groups of county residents.

The vaccination rate among residents ages 12-19 (those younger than 11 are not yet eligible to be inoculated) is 28.4%. The statewide rate for that age group is 61.5%.

The 30-39 age group has the second-lowest vaccination rate in the county, at 35.3%. The statewide vaccination rate for that age range is 73.6%.

Residents 70 and older, who have much higher vaccination rates, accounted for 12.5% of the county’s cases during September, and about 11.5% during August.

The vaccination rate for Baker County residents ages 70 to 79 is 68.5%, compared to a statewide average of 88.2% for that age group.

For residents 80 and older, the vaccination rate in Baker County is 70.5%, compared with a statewide rate of 80.7%.

PROPOSAL

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The Request for Proposals that the county sent out in early September included a scoring system for a variety of criteria:

- 5 points, cover letter
- 25 points, introductory statement and proposed plan of execution
- 15 points, staff
- 15 points, location
- 10 points, timeline for delivery
- 10 points, budget
- 10 points, performance measures and reporting requirements
- 5 points, references
- 5 points, conclusion

Tyler Brown, chairman of the lodging tax committee, said the final tally, by consensus of the committee, was 98 points for the proposal from the Anthony Lakes Outdoor Recreation Association, and

96 points for the Chamber of Commerce’s proposal.

Brown said both groups “knocked the proposal out of the park.”

Both were “incredibly well done,” he said. “It was very close.”

Brown said one of the lengthier discussions among committee members was about the proposed location of the visitor center.

The Chamber of Commerce proposes to continue

operating at its current location.

Anthony Lakes, meanwhile, would have a visitor center at 1828 Main St. in downtown Baker City.

Other committee members are Toni Thompson, Tori Thatcher, Buell Gonzales Jr., Mandy Clark, Brian Vegter and Shane Alderson. Alderson was absent from the meeting.

Gonzales said he was impressed with both proposals.

“Both of them were

well-done,” he said on Friday afternoon, Oct. 8.

Gonzales said he also believes that whichever proposal the commissioners choose, the county is in a good position in the future now that it has a specific list of performance expectations for the contractor.

“I was really happy walking out of that meeting yesterday,” he said.

Vegter had a similar assessment.

“Both proposals were really good, both were extremely competitive and detailed,” he said.

Vegter said he thinks it was vital for the county to compile a list of benchmarks it expects the visitor center operator to address, and the RFP, with its list of criteria, provides that.

“We’re telling them this is what we expect, and now we have a way to measure how well they’re doing,” he said.