

Grants will help start trail beside Elgin to Joseph railroad

By **BILL BRADSHAW**

Wallowa County Chieftain
ENTERPRISE — The Joseph Branch Trail Consortium, the nonprofit working to establish a 63-mile trail-with-rails between Elgin and Joseph in Northeastern Oregon, announced Tuesday, Nov. 9, it has received two grants totaling more than \$272,000 that will fund construction of the first trailhead and inaugural trail segment, as well as final planning and design for another 13-mile segment.

The trail has been in the planning stages for about 10 years and will eventually offer a nonmotorized alternative transportation route to Highway 82 in the form of a trail that will run beside existing railroad tracks in the railroad right-of-way owned by the Wallowa Union Railroad Authority. With one end in Elgin, the other will terminate 63 miles later in Joseph.

City officials at each end of the proposed trail are eager to see it accomplished, anticipating both economic and health benefits. Elgin, at 1,700 population, currently has no accessible trails from downtown, according to a press release announcing the grants. Joseph, with roughly 1,000 people, also will benefit from the trail.

Interest at each end

As it turns out, Brock Eckstein has an official interest at each end. He's Elgin's city administrator and also is interim city administrator for Joseph.

"Our city staff, collaborating closely with the Joseph Branch Trail Consortium and WURA, are prepared to lead and assist as needed to ensure the project is a success, because the potential economic and health impacts from this trail for our city, community, and region will be momentous," said Eckstein of the benefits to Elgin.

"In the future, it'll be really great for Joseph," he added, lamenting the delays in the project over acquiring funding.

A board member of the Wallowa Union Railroad Authority, which owns the right-of-way alongside the tracks, Eckstein sees the grants as a step forward in solving the financial woes of the project.

"I'm really excited getting two grants," he said.

One grant, from Oregon State Parks' Recreational Trails Program, will fund construction of the trailhead, which will also serve as a pocket park for the city of Elgin. The trailhead/pocket park will be located on a parcel of city-owned land directly across from the train depot in downtown Elgin.

Eckstein said there is a "time cap" of December 2024 to get the first 13 miles done.

"We're just taking it piece by piece until we get the whole thing done," he said.

In addition to trail information, the trailhead/pocket park will include an electric vehicle and e-bike charging station (the only one between La Grande and Enterprise), an Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant parking place, ADA-compliant picnic tables, interpretive signage about the area's earliest inhabitants and more recent history, a bicycle maintenance stand, a water fountain and more, the press release stated.

The Oregon State Parks grant also will fund construction of the inaugural 0.6 mile of the trail that will be an

ADA-compliant path running out of town along the railroad tracks.

A second grant, from the Oregon Department of Transportation's Transportation Growth Management program, will fund development of a detailed refinement plan for the 13-mile segment of the trail between Elgin and Lookingglass in rural Union County on the Grande Ronde River near Palmer Junction. This funding will also support local outreach and education about the trail.

Parts of the trail, near trailheads located in towns, will mostly be ADA-compliant and made of hard-packed gravel, said Gregg Kleiner, project coordinator for the consortium.

"The ADA-compliant sections will accommodate electric wheelchairs, and E-bikes will be allowed on other parts of the trail," Kleiner said in an email. "Other parts of the trail will be a more basic gravel trail that can be used by hikers, bicyclists and equestrians. ... We hope it might be used by local school athletes, like cross country teams."

Grants a perfect fit

Kleiner, who joined the consortium as its first project coordinator in March, finds the grants a perfect fit for the project.

"These two grants dovetail perfectly and will be a catalyst for the larger project, which has been in the plan-

ning stages for many years now," Kleiner said. "This funding will establish a wonderful, fully accessible community asset for residents of Elgin (and Joseph) to enjoy while also generating an economic boost for the city from visitors stopping in town to hike or bike out of town along the Grande Ronde River on the initial trail segment ... or to charge their electric vehicles."

He said students enrolled in Eastern Oregon University's Sustainable Rural Systems Program are helping research and develop content for the interpretive signage and other components of the project.

The project also will help draw people to the Eagle Cap Excursion Train, which runs from the train depot in Elgin up to Minam and back about twice a week from late spring through fall.

Previous small grants from the Schwemm Family Foundation and the Roundhouse Foundation also will support development of the trailhead/pocket park.

Kleiner was enthusiastic to get state support for the trail project.

"It's wonderful to see the state of Oregon so supportive of this trail, which will offer users of all abilities and ages a safe way to get out and experience nature," he said. "And the interpretive signage will help hikers, bikers and horseback riders learn about the local history and the indigenous people who lived — and still live — in this area."

Turkey and the trimmings



Samantha O'Conner/Baker City Herald

The Salvation Army continued its tradition of providing free turkey dinner boxes at the Albertsons and Safeway parking lots on Tuesday morning, Nov. 16. Holli Diamond, the Eastern Oregon Field and Service Center director for The Salvation Army, said 180 dinner boxes were put together with money donated through the Turkey Bucks program at the two grocery stores. Customers could either round up their bill or choose an amount to contribute. From left, Albertsons employees Michelle Fisher, Sarah Lee, Annette Mauer as the Turkey Lady, and from The Salvation Army, James Bobo and Diamond.

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 President and Chief Nursing Officer
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