

OREGON TRAIL INTERPRETIVE CENTER

Renovations will close center for 2-plus years

BY JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

Starting about a year from now, people who visit Baker County to learn about the Oregon Trail will have to go somewhere other than the Interpretive Center that has stood atop Flagstaff Hill for almost three decades.

But only temporarily. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which owns and operates the Center, is planning a major renovation of the building to make it more energy efficient.

The Center, which has welcomed nearly 2.4 million visitors since it opened on May 23, 1992, about 5 miles east of Baker City, will be closed during the approximately 2½-year project, which will cost at least \$3 million, said Larisa Bogardus, acting director for the Center.

During the closure, the BLM will have a temporary “Oregon Trail Experience” in Baker City, Bogardus said.

BLM officials are working on plans for the temporary facility, including its location, she said.

“It will absolutely be in Baker City,” said Bogardus, who is also the public affairs officer for the BLM’s Vale District, which manages the Interpretive Center. “We’re very cognizant of the economic role of the Interpretive Center in Baker County.”

Bogardus said the current plan is to put the renovation project out for bid in July or August of this year.

Construction will start on March 1, 2022. The Center will likely be closed for at least a couple of months before that to allow workers to move artifacts, Bogardus said, and for a couple additional months after the renovations, to allow staff to prepare the Center for re-opening.

The impetus for the project, by far the largest since the Center opened, was a nationwide survey comparing the energy efficiency of BLM buildings, Bogardus said.

That survey, which included an inspection of the Interpretive Center in May 2018, earned the Center the “dubious distinction” of being the agency’s least efficient building, she said.

Among the findings is that the Center’s “Energy Use Intensity” — a measure of its inefficiency — was 170 kilo-British Thermal Units per square foot. The average for BLM facilities is 84, according to the survey.

The Center, which operates solely on electricity (natural gas isn’t available on Flagstaff Hill), runs up a monthly power bill averaging about \$1,000, Bogardus said.

Its location contributes to the Center’s energy glut. The crest of the hill that gives visitors a panoramic view of the Baker Valley and the Elkhorn Mountains also exposes the Center to the summer sun and to year-round winds that often gust above 25 mph.

“The siding takes a beating up there,” Bogardus said. She said today’s building materials, including insulation, are more effective at protecting buildings from heat and winter chill.

Heating and air-conditioning systems have also become more efficient since 1992, and all of the Center’s HVAC equipment will be replaced during the renovation project. The work will be extensive. The contractor will replace the Center’s siding and roof, in effect stripping the outside of the building and installing all new materials, Bogardus said.

Although the Center itself



S. John Collins/Baker City Herald File

Exhibits in the grand hall at the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center give visitors a sense of what emigrants experienced on the trail during the 19th century.



Lisa Britton/For the Baker City Herald

The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, on Flagstaff Hill about five miles east of Baker City, has welcomed more than 2.3 million visitors since it opened in May 1992.

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Larisa Bogardus, acting director for the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center and public affairs officer for the BLM’s Vale District

will be closed, a portion of the trail system on Flagstaff Hill, including the Oregon Trail ruts, will remain open.

Bogardus said BLM officials are working on the details. The upper sections of trail will be closed for safety reasons, since workers will be removing and replacing large parts of the building.

Although the extended closure of the Center and the need to set up an alternate Oregon Trail experience for visitors is a daunting challenge, Bogardus said the renovations will ensure the Center remains a major attraction in Baker County for decades to come.

“It’s very exciting to see the agency make the commitment to the longevity and efficiency

of the Interpretive Center,” she said.

Bogardus said that about 30% of the money for the renovation will come from the Great American Outdoors Act, a bill that President Donald Trump signed into law on Aug. 4, 2020.

That law includes up to \$1.9 billion a year for five years for maintenance on public lands, including national parks and national forests.

Shelly Cutler, executive director of the Baker County Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center, said the Interpretive Center is a vital part of the county’s tourism industry.

She estimated that at least 70% of visitors include the Center on their travel itinerary.

“People are fascinated with the Oregon Trail and the Old West,” Cutler said.

Although Cutler said the Center’s extended closure will have an effect on the county’s tourism sector, she’s “thrilled” that the BLM will operate a temporary “satellite” visitor center in Baker City.

She said that will help preserve Baker County’s reputation as a destination for people interested in the Oregon Trail.

Cutler said visitors, even while the Interpretive Center is closed, will be able to see wagon ruts and explore trails below Flagstaff Hill.

Timothy Bishop, the county’s contracted tourism marketing director, said the Center’s extended closure presents “significant marketing challenges.”

Most notably, Bishop said, the county, working with Travel Oregon and other partners, will have to figure out the most effective way to ensure

that travelers understand that although the Center on Flagstaff Hill will be closed, the BLM will have an alternate facility open, and that they can experience the Oregon Trail in other ways, such as hiking to the wagon ruts below the Center.

Bishop said he expects many prospective visitors will be receptive to that marketing message because, although the Interpretive Center is sure to be on their itinerary, they also want a broader experience, and Baker County can offer that despite its biggest attraction being temporarily closed.

He said he’s “super excited” to work with Bogardus on preparations for the closure period.

“She is really passionate about finding a way to make sure the Center has a presence in Baker City during that time,” Bishop said.

The temporary closure also creates a chance for the BLM to work with other local entities, such as the Baker Heritage Museum, to potentially display some of the exhibits from the Center. That could bring more visitors to the county-owned Museum, Bishop said.

Center visits affected by the pandemic

The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center has been one of Baker County’s top tourist attractions since it opened during Memorial Day weekend in 1992.

The Center was especially popular during its first six years; its annual attendance hasn’t reached 100,000 since 1997.

After welcoming 201,545 people in 1992 (despite being open for slightly more than seven months), the Center has its biggest year in 1993, with 347,981 visitors. That surge was no coincidence, as 1993 was the 150th anniversary of the first large migration on the Oregon Trail.

There were multiple special events in Baker County that year, including the annual convention for the Oregon-California Trails Association. Attendance dipped to 197,307 in 1994, and to 170,405 and 140,281 the next two years.

Annual visitor numbers haven’t fluctuated as much in the past dozen years, ranging between 60,231 in 2010 and 32,764 in 2013.

The yearly average between 2008-19 was 43,745.

Due to the pandemic, which has forced the Center to close from March 20 through June 17, and again since Nov. 18, 2020, visitor numbers dipped substantially, to 11,462 in 2020.

Admission was down even during the summer, when the Center was open.

July’s total was 2,456, compared with 7,291 for the same month in 2019.

— Jayson Jacoby

More casual tourists present another sort of challenge, he said.

Bishop said some of those travelers stop at the Interpretive Center not as part of a week-long itinerary, but because they’re looking for a place to stretch their legs during a long freeway journey.

That category of traveler is more likely, he said, to drive past Baker County without stopping once they learn the Interpretive Center is closed.



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