



Eagle file photo

A single-engine aircraft flies over the Grant County Regional Airport. A recently awarded federal grant will improve airport safety by decoupling two intersecting runways.

Grant County overcomes challenges to improve services

Fairgrounds, airport, domestic violence shelter among key projects

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

The challenges facing Grant County are clearly economic. Loss of timber mill jobs has impacted all sectors of the local economy. But there are successes. County government continues to provide for the health, safety and welfare of the area residents, balancing budgets and keeping up critical infrastructure.

Tough numbers

Grant County's population has been declining since the 1990s. This pattern is projected to continue, according to the most recent forecast by the Population Research Center at Portland State University.

Nearly all the cities in Grant County have experienced a similar population loss since 2000, but the decline has stabilized since the Great Recession and remained fairly steady since 2010. At the same time, the county's population is aging, with a trend toward more residents over 70, and the active labor force has a somewhat lower educational attainment level than the state, according to U.S. Census data.

According to data in the May 2019 draft Economic Opportunities Analysis report by Johnson Economics, cumulative employment growth since 1998 for the U.S. and Oregon has been about 25%, while Grant County has seen a decline of 15%.

Employment in the county peaked in the mid-1990s at more than 4,550 jobs, or an estimated 1.35 jobs per household, the report states. Since then, employment has consistently fallen, reaching an estimated 3,780 jobs in 2017, or about 1.2 jobs per household.

Local employment is also seasonal, reflecting agricultural and forest-related industries. The Grant County employment base also has a higher share of self-employment compared to the U.S. and Oregon, including agricultural and owner-operated businesses, the report states.

Unemployment in Grant County tends to be 2-3% higher than the U.S. and state averages, but this elevated unemployment rate persisted until 2013 following the Great Recession, lagging far behind the national recovery, the report states.

The timber and forest-related industry has been a significant economic driver in Grant County, with local employment in natural resource jobs running nearly six times the national average, the report states. But



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Wind Fields performs at the MoonLIT Music Festival at the Grant County Fairgrounds celebrating the total solar eclipse in 2017.

this local economic sector has seen a sharp decline, which is largely attributable to falling production on public lands since 1993, the report states.

Working residents in Grant County commute to jobs inside and outside the county. Local residents hold about 73% of the available jobs in the county, while about 39% commute outside the county for work. While John Day accounts for about 23% of the county's population, about 63% of the jobs are in John Day.

As a result of the general population decline, the county has seen little development activity since the 1990s. Grant County Judge Scott Myers said lack of affordable workforce housing and family-wage jobs is a significant challenge for the county.

New housing starts in the county definitely have slowed down from the busier 2006-2008 time period, Grant County Assessor Dave Thunell said. His office reported 25 new "stick-built" single-family residences and 16 manufactured homes on Jan. 1, 2008, but only eight "stick-built" homes and four manufactured homes on Jan. 1, 2018.

According to the Grant County Planning Department, 33 commercial building permits were issued in 2014 worth \$1.3 million and 44 residential building permits were issued worth \$3.3 million. The numbers for 2018 were 23 commercial permits worth \$2 million and 47 residential permits worth \$6 million.

County projects

Roads and bridges in a 4,500-square-mile county with just 7,400 people can also present a significant challenge. Myers said the county tries to chip-seal 40 miles of county road each year.

This year's chip-seal project will take place on a county road near Silvies Valley. Some older bridges present challenges, including ones near Long Creek

and Monument, Myers said.

Myers points to recent projects at the courthouse as local successes. Fluorescent lights have been converted to energy-efficient LED fixtures, and an elevator installed in 2016 will help the public facility meet ADA-compliance regulations.

The Legislature provided the county with about \$150,000 for the elevator project, and the county put up about \$70,000. Re-roofing the courthouse could cost from \$100,000 to \$150,000, and Myers said he has requested help from Association of Oregon Counties to lobby legislators for assistance in this project.

Maintaining and repairing existing courthouses is more cost-effective than building new ones, Myers said, noting that Deschutes County was looking at spending \$30 million for a new courthouse.

The same goes for the county jail. Built in 1997, the facility has 41 hard beds and options for up to seven more temporary beds. The daily jail population rarely exceeds 20 inmates, according to the county website. An upgrade to LED light fixtures is currently underway.

Last year, the county court approved spending about \$4,500 to install a new time-keeping hardware and software system. The upgrade will help the county secure contracts to house inmates from other jurisdictions, Commissioner Jim Hamsher said last year, and the county's insurer offered to cover some of the costs as it reduced liability.

Unfunded mandates

Hamsher sees Eastern Oregon's weak position in the Legislature as a serious challenge for Grant County. He cited proposed carbon cap-and-trade legislation and stricter firearms regulations.

"Our voice is not big enough," he said. "That's why the court sends letters



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A bill to increase the tax on phone bills to support local 911 dispatch agencies was passed in the Oregon House.

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