

Three homes under construction in Canyon City

Town infrastructure in good condition

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Canyon City has the richest history of any community in Grant County. Founded in June 1862 with a gold rush that drew 10,000 miners within months, making it the largest city in Oregon, Canyon City has been the seat of county government since 1864 and is home to several notable tourist attractions.

Historic changes

About 700 residents live in the 1.4-square-mile city, which sits in a narrow canyon and is bisected by Canyon Creek. The main employers are county government and Grant School District 3, which has an elementary school in the city. It was incorporated in 1891.

Canyon City has seen extreme population fluctuations, growing by 57% in the 1880 census only to fall 22% in the next census. Population declined 24% in 1930 but increased by 62% in 1950 and by 28% in 1960. Growth has stabilized in recent years, growing by 3.2% in 2000 and by 5.1% in 2010, but the 2016 estimate shows a 4.7% decrease.

Construction began on the first spec home at the Canyon Mountain Heights subdivision in 2004. The subdivision's 85 lots, located above town between Humbolt Street and West Bench Road, came with water and sewer service and covenants, conditions and restrictions. Mayor Steve Fischer said about 20 homes have since been built there, with three more under construction this year.

Among Canyon City's attractions are the Grantville Theater, Canyon City Community Hall, Grant County Historical Museum and Jim and Mary Jensen's Oxbow Trading Company, which welcomes visitors to their carriage works.

"We're basically a bedroom community," Fischer said. "We have tourist attractions but little in the way of commercial businesses such as restaurants, other than Mabel's and Station 62."

Fires and floods

Canyon City has a tragic history of fires. Major fires hit the town in 1870, 1898 and 1937. The Canyon Creek Complex fire, ignited by lightning strikes in forest land south of town, threatened to consume the town again in 2015 as it raced north toward the city limits.

But the most active threat now is floods. Canyon Creek is confined by a man-made channel left by gold miners and sees additional runoff from slopes burned in the 2015 wildfire. In 2017, evacuation notices were issued for residents along the creek from the Nugget Street bridge north to the high school as the creek reached 750 cubic feet per second.

Flooding concerns returned in April 2019, with the gauge at the Adam Road bridge recording 1,150 cubic feet per second. The channel is expected to safely handle 850 cubic feet per second, Grant County Emergency Management Coordinator Ted Williams said.

The safety of the Portal, Nugget and Inland street bridges was in question during the flooding, and Nugget and Inland remained closed long after the floodwaters subsided.

The pedestrian bridge attached to the Inland Street bridge, which is just upstream from the high school's sport fields, was yanked out with an excavator when it posed a risk of falling into the raging waters and causing more havoc downstream.

A dike had been constructed at the Inland bridge following flooding in 2011, but now the bridge's future is in question. Fischer spoke with Army Corps of Engineers personnel about the need to inspect the bridge



The Eagle/Richard Hanners

Families make use of Canyon City's downtown city park as they wait for the '62 Days parade to start in 2019.



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A mural in downtown Canyon City promotes the town's Wild West and mining heritage.

before determining whether it can be repaired and reopened. The Nugget and Inland bridges belong to the city, but it lacks the financial resources to replace them.

City services

Flooding in Canyon City made its way into the John Day sewer collection system. As a result, about 1.5 million gallons reached the treatment plant, setting a record for a 24-hour period. The average for the two cities is about 230,000 gallons per day.

Canyon City has about 300 water and sewer customers. The city teamed up with John Day to build a new sewer system that was completed in 1980. But negotiations in February 2016 failed to resolve sharp disagreements over fees charged to Canyon City for wastewater treatment.

Nine months later an agreement was reached that included an annual 4-5% fee increase over the next five years. John Day is now making plans for a cutting-edge treatment plant, and its project plans note that Canyon City's continuing payments are critical to the project's success.

Canyon City's basic infrastructure is in good shape, City Recorder Corry Rider said in 2017. The city has adequate water sources, including a well in the Marysville area. Fischer said the city is looking for a grant to upgrade a main running from the springs to the storage tanks.

One of the two storage tanks will need to be replaced at about the same time, he said.

The city bought a crack-sealing unit to keep up its streets. The city will partner with Grant County and Oregon Department of Transportation this June to chip-seal Humbolt Street from end to end, Grant County Judge Scott Myers said. Canyon City will provide the oil, and the county will provide manpower and equipment, he said.

Canyon City does not have its own police department and relies on the sheriff's office for emergencies. The local fire department

is very active and keeps its equipment in great shape, Fischer said. The city's water main pressure and hydrants are in good shape, he said.

Civic amenities

Downtown Canyon City looks like a theme park, with historic buildings, good sidewalks and large murals. Sproul Park, in the center of town, features a playground, covered band stage, picnic areas and restrooms across the street, and frequently hosts summer concerts and other community events.

Across the street, the city-owned Canyon City Community Hall hosts events and meetings and is home to the Grantville Theater. The building underwent significant improvements since October 2010, including a new heating and cooling system, ceiling insulation, new lighting, new pressed-tin ceiling tiles, double-pane windows and energy-efficient doors.

Weekly movies returned to the Grantville Theater the next year. Fischer said new flooring was installed in the hall's first floor in 2017. A goal is to install a commercial kitchen on the second floor, he said.

Down the street, city crews plan to repoint a masonry wall near the historic Sels Brewery building, home of the Whiskey Gulch Gang, which organizes the annual '62 Days Celebration in Canyon City and the demolition derby at the fairgrounds.

A group of volunteers operating as the Community Action Team put grant money to work to complete several projects over the years, including sprucing up the Grant County Historical Museum and the Joaquin Miller Cabin as well as acquiring new tables and chairs for the Community Hall.

A footbridge over Canyon Creek just north of Izee Street, dedicated in the memory of former fire chief William A. Wall, was completed in 2004.

A community garden project was proposed for a county-owned lot on Adams Street in 2017.



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Canyon City Mayor Steve Fischer and his wife, Shelley, in downtown Canyon City during '62 Days in 2019.

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