John Day embarks on ambitious project

Former mill site restoration to feature greenhouses, pavilion and riverfront trail system

By Nick Green
For the Blue Mountain Eagle

Contributed image

A conceptual map of the Innovation Gateway project in John Day made by landscape architectural consultant Walker Macy includes, left to right, a 150-170 room hotel, a water garden at the former sawmill building, a riverfront beach, a seasonal or permanent lake, a pavillion built from the former planer shed and a five-bay greenhouse complex.

Two years ago, the city of John Day embarked on an ambitious project — to purchase and restore the Oregon Pine mill site to create a home for our new wastewater treatment plant. But it wasn't just any old site. It was the gateway to our city. And it wasn't just any old treatment plant. It was a reclaimed water facility that would allow us to harvest and reuse 100% of our solid and liquid waste, turning an environmental liability into an economic asset.

Nick Green

Oregon Pine was chosen as the site for the new treatment plant both for its buildable area north of the John Day River, which lies outside the 100-year flood plain, and for the potential of its large open space adjacent to the highway. As we got to know the property, we realized it had tremendous public benefit for riverfront recreation, parks, trails and greenway. The property could also be used to expand commercial and industrial opportunities in emerging industries like controlled environment agriculture.

After two years of planning, we are now ready to present our work. The John Day Innovation Gateway and Riverfront Recreation Area is an 83-acre site that integrates 20 new initiatives, including a hydroponic greenhouse, an open-air pavilion and community gathering space, and a system of parks, trails and greenways that connect our residents to the river and our neighbors to each other. It includes new street improvements to enhance our local street network and leaves room for future growth in mixed-use development, smart agriculture and other advanced industries.

The area plan was created by an integrated design team led by Walker Macy, a leading landscape architecture, urban design, planning and sustainability firm. The economic strategy that accompanies the plan was developed by EcoNorthwest, Oregon's premier economic development consulting firm. Our teams have done an excellent job of bringing what's great about John Day and Grant County to the forefront of our planning process — honoring our heritage as a natural resource community — while also creating viable opportunities for economic expansion and diversification into new frontiers.

I've had the opportunity to present these concepts at state and national conferences as they've developed. This year, I'll be presenting the John Day Innovation Gateway concept plan at the Oregon Association of Clean Water Agencies annual conference in Bend and at the 2019 Oregon Infrastructure Summit in Salem. We have also been featured in WIRED magazine and Oregon Business magazine articles for our recreation and economic development initiatives. People are talking about our community in positive ways because they believe in our potential and the work we are doing.

The greenhouse at Oregon Pine

The first greenhouse at Oregon Pine is now fully operational. This 6,240-square-foot fully-automated facility is expandable to 10,400 square feet (with two additional bays). Advanced technology allows the automation of parameters such as temperature, humidity, CO2 levels, irrigation and fertilizer. While the greenhouse is initially operating with fresh, potable water from the city water system, the design includes a purple-pipe extension to the future wastewater treatment plant. Using reclaimed water, treated to a class A effluent for irrigation within the greenhouses, we are hoping to launch a new industry in John Day.

Hydroponics and controlled environment agriculture have been used for years by researchers, educators and commercial farmers. By combining these three most common users, we are doing our part to remediate a rural food desert and jump start our recovering economy. Our goal is to attract commercial-scale growers who can use the city's reclaimed water supply, land and growing climate to expand their existing business. The greenhouse can also be used for research and development of new products and as an incubator or accelerator to help local growers establish their own hydroponics markets, all while delivering fresh, locally grown produce for our residents.

Community pavilion

The Oregon Pine mill site is in a prime location to be a gateway to the city and to provide a significant message about our identity and energy. When redeveloped, this site will be home to a myriad of community events, markets and connections to the river and downtown. The community pavilion project will provide a signature space for events and community markets and become an important marker for our family-oriented identity.

This former mill building will come to life daily with community arts, gatherings and family use. Its renovation will mark a significant step in our emphasis on livability and vitality and will help establish a new creative community space for residents.

The proposed use for the main shed structure visible from the highway is an open park pavilion that can be used for a variety of community events including farmers markets, performances, food festivals and large community gatherings. The building will be structurally stabilized with steel or timber cross bracing to meet current codes. A new slab floor will be provided with an artistic paving pattern and openings on both the north and south sides will be expanded to provide generous connections to the adjacent outdoor spaces. The trusses, columns and wood framing will be lightly sandblasted and sealed to retain the current appearance. Exterior materials will be repaired or replaced with similar industrial materials including corrugated siding and metal roofing, with skylights allowing natural light into the center of the building. Large openings will be created to capture views of the river, site and surrounding mountains while also providing views of the activities within.

Integrated park system and riverfront trails

We have begun the site preparation and construction of our new trail system along the north side of the river and are actively planning the expansion of this system to connect to our existing parks at the Kam Wah Chung heritage site, Grant County Fairgrounds and Seventh Street Complex.

We are also investing in two new riverfront parks at Davis Creek and north of Canton Street. The city of John Day, the John Day-Canyon City Parks and Recreation District and local nonprofits have also worked together to build a new playground, splash pad and bike park at the east end of the Seventh Street Complex. Our hope is that these new amenities will benefit all our residents by creating more opportunities for outdoor recreation close to home.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our community advisory committees, city staff and city councilors who have spent months reviewing plans, providing critical feedback and sharing their values and priorities with our consultants. Their efforts have helped make this our plan for our community. We hope you'll enjoy these projects as much as we have and take the time to share your voice with the city in our future planning efforts.

Nick Green is the John Day city manager.

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Eagle file photo

A Blue Mountain Telecommunication Services bucket truck is used to run an optical fiber cable along South Canyon Boulevard from the John Day Fire Hall to the Grant County Education Service District building on April 3.

Grants could connect all county cities to broadband

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Bringing broadband internet connectivity to Grant County has been a geographic, financial and political challenge, but some light glimmers at the end of the tunnel.

Grant County ranks No. 2 among Oregon counties on the Digital Divide Index produced by Roberto Gallardo at Purdue University, after Wheeler County.

Major internet trunk lines are routed along U.S. highways 97 and 20 and Interstate 84, basically circling around Grant County. On top of that, the internet infrastructure serving Grant County is a patchwork quilt of different companies utilizing copper phone lines, optical fiber cable and satellite.

The Digital Divide, which measures lack of broadband access, "is the number one threat to community economic development in the 21st century," a John Day city resolution stated in 2018.

John Day led the effort to improve broadband connectivity in Grant County as part of the city's overall strategy for success. In February 2017, City Manager Nick Green lobbied in Salem for grant funding, visiting Gov. Kate Brown, Rep. Cliff Bentz and Sen. Ted Ferriolli.

Fiber-optic access would boost internet capabilities and help local residents and businesses as well as potentially attract new ones, Green told the officials. Increased connectivity could also play a critical role in public safety.

In July 2017, the city learned that Ferrioli's broadband funding request had been approved, providing John Day with $1.82 million to improve internet access in the county.

The city took steps to establish a coalition between the county and several cities to utilize the funding, the Grant County Digital Network Coalition, but it immediately ran into opposition.

Canyon City Mayor Steve Fischer and Prairie City Mayor Jim Hamsher said more information with better financial figures was needed before their city councils could approve an agreement to join the project and assume uncertain financial obligations.

Hamsher, who is also a county commissioner, noted that Prairie City and Mt. Vernon had good internet access through fiber-to-home service provided by Oregon Telephone Corporation.

Several emotional hearings were held by the county court before Grant County would join the broadband coalition. Support came from the economic development office, Grant School District 3 and numerous residents and business people.

Opponents raised three key issues — fear of trapping the county in a financial agreement that could go awry, the need to provide broadband to Long Creek and Monument not just the John Day Valley and the need for the coalition to work more with current internet providers, Ortelco and CenturyLink.

In March 2018, the county court agreed to join John Day and Seneca in the broadband coalition. Two months later, after two years of private negotiations, a public-private partnership between the coalition and Ortelco was officially unveiled.

"Ortelco is excited to be able to continue to do what we do best, which is to continue to offer service to outlying areas comparable to our existing service areas," Ortelco General Manager DeeDee Kluser said at the time. "We look forward to opportunities ahead."

The coalition lined up a team of experts to help develop their goals, including Fiber Channels, Commstructure Consulting, CTC Technology & Energy and the Cohen Law Group.

With a phased approach to how a fiber cable could be run from Burns south to John Day, the coalition made plans in May 2018 to apply for a $3 million USDA Community Connect grant leveraged by the $1.8 million state appropriation.

Plans called for running fiber throughout Seneca as a way to boost the grant application's chances and to use a server room in the John Day Fire Hall as a hub for the new broadband network.

In November 2018, the coalition began to take steps to build public support for the broadband network. Many county residents didn't understand the need for broadband in the county or that the coalition was a state-funded agency that was not using local taxpayer funds, coalition officials said.

The coalition received bad news in December 2018. A total of 124 project applications were submitted for $33 million in grants and $58 million in loans available from the USDA Community Connect program, and 19 projects were awarded. But the Grant County Digital Network Coalition was not one of them.

As additional federal grant and loan programs for rural broadband became available, the coalition looked at the USDA ReConnect program.

During a Dec. 18 town hall meeting, however, Christopher Mitchell, director of the Community Broadband Networks Initiative at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, noted that most new funding would go to the most organized agencies because federal officials typically don't like to see failure, he said. The Grant County Digital Network Coalition must be willing to "grind it out," he said.

Local plans took a leap forward in May this year when the coalition announced it would join Ortelco in the company's application for a ReConnect grant large enough to connect Seneca to John Day and Mt. Vernon to Long Creek, Monument, Kimberly and Spray.

The coalition would apply again for a Community Connect grant to connect Seneca to Burns, while existing Ortelco fiber cable would connect Dayville, Mt. Vernon, John Day, Canyon City and Prairie City.

Success with the two grant applications would result in a "hat trick," as coalition board member Josh Walker characterized it. All of the county's cities would be connected to the broadband network, and internet would be brought into the county on fiber cable from three directions — east, south and west.

By June, the grant applications had been submitted, with a $1 million commitment by John Day on behalf of the coalition.