

Center

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Kirk Borgerding from CB Construction Inc., a general contracting company based in La Grande, said the team hopes to officially start construction on Sept. 14 and finish the project by early May.

COVID-19, the weather and materials are some factors that could impact the timeline, but the team has until September 2021 to get the project finished for the grant requirements.

The federal Community Development Block Grant is the main source of funding for the project, awarding \$1.5 million, said Heart of Grant County Board Member Rick Minster.

“We’ve had to come up with some match money, but the majority of this project is going to be completed by those funds,” Minster said.

Minster said it’s great to experience the groundbreaking after years of work getting to this point.

The grant was awarded to Grant County, which sponsored the nonprofit application. Grant County Judge Scott Myers said he congratulates the Heart of Grant County for the groundbreaking and is happy for the new location of the trauma center.

“The location it was in was not safe or secure necessarily, being right on the highway,” Myers said. “This will be a much safer location, and it is a needed facility.”

Plan

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For the socioeconomic assessment subcommittee, Wallowa Resources Executive Director Nils Christofferson said BIC asked the Rural Engagement and Vitality Center, a joint venture between Eastern Oregon University and Wallowa Resources, to help implement a new tool to for socioeconomic assessment.

“A useful approach to socioeconomic analysis leads to more informed decision making and helps find opportunities for alignment between the leadership of the National Forest System lands and the counties,” he said.

Christofferson said he hopes the long-term goal with BIC charts a course for an effective Forest Service planning process.

He said the Blue Mountains forests are operating on a very outdated forest plan from 1990.

“It’s important that we have (a forest plan) that speaks to the current conditions and current science and allows us to respond to the needs today that are different from the 1990s when the plan was approved,” Christofferson said.

Grant County Commissioner Jim Hamsher, who is on the socioeconomic subcommittee, said the meetings were going well until the coronavirus outbreak.

Hamsher said it has taken over a year to get the different stakeholders to the table to define the issues.

“Even though we’ve been working on this now for about a year and a half, it’s kind of right now just in its infancy, and we’re really starting to



Malheur National Forest Supervisor Craig Trulock

Eagle file photo

“WE ALL CAN PLAN, MOVING FORWARD, WHERE WE NEED TO BE. OF COURSE, THERE’S A BIG DIFFERENCE OF OPINION OF WHERE WE NEED TO BE.”

—Rep. Mark Owens, Blues Intergovernmental Council access subcommittee member

Start

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he said. “We’ve tried to talk about desired conditions, and where we want to go. We all get positional rather quickly.”

Forest Service Deputy Regional Forester Lisa Northrup said a “key focus” of the subcommittee is on how to provide access for “human needs and protect important habitat.”

“To that end,” she said. “Our committee will be working toward reaching zones of agreements that we will bring back to the full BIC as part of their full recommendations to (the Forest Service).”

In the subcommittee meeting notes, Northrup said the group should find out what people want regarding access.

The meeting notes state, “Travel management needs be separated from creating a forest plan to guide management.”

Owens said he understands certain areas have wilderness or wildlife designations restricting motorized vehicle access. But he wanted to learn what roads are open and what roads are closed and why they are closed.

He said he wanted to see which roads were closed through the National Environmental Policy Act and which roads were closed by the Forest Service administratively.

“If they’re closed through NEPA, we really can’t get it back open unless we go through NEPA, but if you’re closed administratively then those are open for a conversation to the subject,” he said.

Owens said the Forest Service had not “teased out” why the roads were closed and by which process when the group viewed a map of closed and open roads.

In the next monthly meeting, Owens said the group would pick one area of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest to get a basic understanding of the access roads and how they were designated to be open or closed.

“In order to figure out where we’re going, we have to figure out where we’re at,” he said.

He said the group’s goal is to come to a common understanding when it comes to access so that county commissioners, partners and other stakeholders can share that information with their respective communities.

Association of Oregon Counties Solutions Director Greg Wolf, a subcommittee member, said access has a “long history of disagreement,” and it is essential that the group starts from a shared base of information to understand the existing conditions better.

“It is actually pretty complicated when you start trying to parse all that stuff out,” he said.

Owens said, while he is for an “open-forest designation,” he understands there will need to be compromises made as they move forward.

“We all can plan, moving forward, where we need to be. Of course, there’s a big difference of opinion of where we need to be,” he said. “Our general forest designation would be an open-forest designation, and we need the public to have access to it. But I am not bull-headed enough that there are sensitive spots in the area where we need to reroute a road or need to have seasonal closure for some migration. I’m OK with that, but I need to understand the impact on the forest by knowing where we’re at today.”

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Commissioner Jim Hamsher during a session of Grant County, who sits on the socioeconomic committee of the Blues council said the collective is just starting to ‘get stuff done.’

Eagle file photo

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—Nils Christofferson, Wallowa Resources director

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