Action plans established for tourism in John Day

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

A virtual two-day summit in John Day established possible action plans to accomplish various tourism goals in the city.

The Recreation Economy for Rural Communities program, which is a program sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency, held the summit Sept. 21-22.

Local stakeholders and federal partners participated in discussions and workshops focused on the goals for tourism in John Day and possible actions to accomplish them.

Holly Fowler from Northbound Ventures and Meryl Harrell from Meryl Harrell Consulting hosted the summit and presented to the John Day City Council the key points.

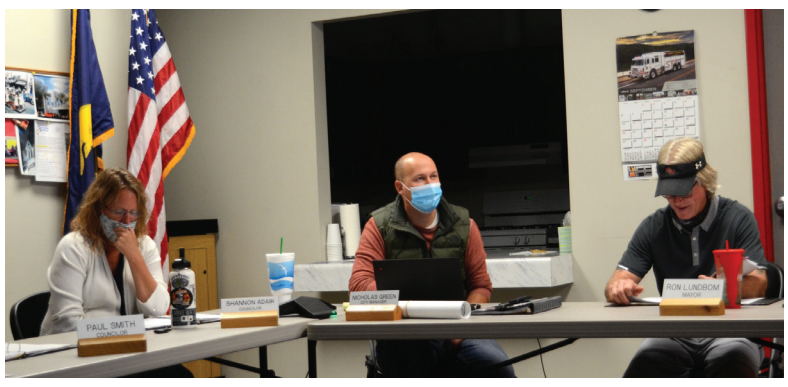
"EPA does this because it advances their mission of building healthy places, protecting human health, and this is a way for communities to achieve the type of place where they want to live and thrive," said Harrell.

Harrell said the steering committee came together to identify goals for the workshop that would feed into the action planning.

The goals shared during their presentation were: promoting John Day's Main Street and the gateways near public land and communities with a focus on new branding and new promoting in the city; accelerating and incubating businesses in John Day to expand services that connect to outer recreation; galvanizing community support and participation in John Day's recreational economy; and expanding outdoor recreation opportunities for everyone in John Day.

For promoting John Day's Main Street as a gateway and new branding for the city, the steering committee thought a cohesive branding and communication strategy needed to be worked on, according to Fowler.

"To do that they wanted to make sure there was a stakeholder group that was broad and diverse helping shape that (branding) and then there were concrete infrastructure ideas around information kiosks in key locations," Fowler said.



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John Day City Councilor Shannon Adair, left, City Manager Nick Green, center, and Mayor Lundbom during the city council meeting Sept. 22. Holly Fowler from Northbound Ventures and Meryl Harrell from Meryl Harrell Consulting presented to the council online.

"And then the idea is to have distant entrance and exit markers for town."

For accelerating and incubating businesses, there were four actions the steering committee came up with. Harrell said the first action was creating a plan to use the Iron Triangle shop near government road, which was recently acquired by the city, as an outdoor recreation business incubator.

"With the idea that sometimes when you're starting a business, space can be a premium, and that's a high startup cost," Harrell said, "why not provide this space as a way to drive down those early costs and at the same time facilitate a network of businesses that can support one another?"

The space could also be used as storage for outdoor recreational businesses and rentals.

Other action items were to host a community roundtable to continue to identify gaps in services, amenities and businesses that community members want to see; re-evaluate the use of lodging tax funds and organize a partnership to provide more business training support.

For galvanizing community support and participation in recreation economy, one action idea was to have a community coordinator position tasked with outreach and making sure community members will have opportunities to provide feedback for planning or decision making.

For expanding outdoor recreation opportunities, Fowler said some of the key actions are to provide a regional trail master plan with the many developing trails in John Day, a recreation map and building an aquatic center.

"We understand that there is some history here, but the leading sentiment (from the steering committee) was we can't raise a generation of outdoor water enthusiast and be a river community if kids don't know how to swim," Harrell said.

Meryl said there will be three more calls and sessions to work together to refine and add more details for the action plans, which will give the city tangible next steps to accomplish.

"The master plan would really help shape all of those policy changes that need to happen and give more weight to each one," City Manager Nick Green said. "We talked specifically about ATVs (at the summit), and it's great that we can open up highway corridors, and we need to do that, but we also want to have guys that can do rentals and guided tours."

Harrell said this is the inaugural year of this program with 170 applications submitted from communities around the nation with 10 communities chosen.

"It was very competitive, and only 10 communities received this assistance, and John Day is right in there," Meryl said.

Green said no dollar value is associated with the program, but the city is receiving help from a planning team to consider challenges and opportunities for the recreational activities prioritized and develop an action plan.

John Day greenhouse sees progress online

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

The John Day greenhouse continues to grow its online roots.

John Day City Manager Nick Green presented a report that showed the greenhouse's first 90 days on the e-Commerce platform, and broke down the $13,115 gross sales ($11,522 net sales after discounts applied) and statistics on the website traffic.

Online, the greenhouse managed to sell 1,504 leafy greens, 1,396 cucumbers, 708 pounds (or pints) of tomatoes, 510 fresh herbs and an assortment of fruits, salad packs and miscellaneous items at the John Day Farmer's Market, according to the agenda for the meeting.

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A variety of produce at the John Day greenhouse can be bought online through their website.

While leafy greens is the item most sold based on volume, slicer tomatoes have brought in the most amount of gross sales.

The three-bay hydroponic greenhouse, which was financed by a $350,000 Special Public Works Fund loan from Business Oregon, now provides 18 products such as a variety of cucumbers, tomatoes, cantaloupes and lettuce.

The first challenge the greenhouse faced in 2020 was the shift in customers of the greenhouse in March due to COVID-19.

"Our go-to market strategy was business-to-business sales, primarily through the grocery store, so we wanted to sell through Chester's (Thriftway) and then to our restaurants," Green said. "By March our restaurant customers had pretty much been wiped out. They were forced to close due to COVID."

In April, the city began testing direct-to-consumer sales, according to Green. The decision was made in May to sell directly through the website johndaygreenhouse.com.

They city still does business-to-business sales to local restaurants and grocery stores while running the e-commerce. Business-to-business customers receive a 40% discount while restaurants and retailers get a 20% discount.

Green said that the website receives about 20 unique visitors per day, and almost 8% become customers.

"This is the one that I would say we're the most proud of, customer retention," Green said. "Year-to-date there are 176 people that purchased through the platform, and two-thirds are repeat customers. That's a stable customer base for a start-up venture."

Green said the greenhouse site has also received more traffic than other city sites as well.

"This has become a great tourism and marketing platform for us, and we have not even attempted to market outside of Grant County," Green said.

The greenhouse also completed their first internship program with Zachary Ostberg, a high school student who started his freshmen year this year. Ostberg worked with the greenhouse crew for a month in August.

He worked about 20 hours a week and would help a greenhouse employee with seed propagation, transplanting, fertilizing, pest management and getting orders ready for customers.

"When I got there I enjoyed it, and it was really fun," Ostberg said.

Another problem the greenhouse had to solve was an infiltration of aphids, bugs that sap nutrient liquids from plants, which affected the lettuce production.

The city eradicated the crops that had been infiltrated, reseeded and had to start over with some of the crop.

"We had a crew come in and reseal every potential penetration, put up new bug netting and tripled the amount of bug traps," Green said.

The city also used Neem Oil, an organic pesticide, to help eradicate the bugs.

"We figured it out and they were completely eradicated," Green said. "Hard lesson to learn, and we learned it the hard way, but I think we're back on track and the lettuce should be back online again."

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