

Kam Wah Chung opens for season

Virtual guided tours available

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

The Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site visitor center is open with limited services.

The 2021 season will go through Oct. 31, and the center will be open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. It will be open Tuesdays through Saturdays in May to start the season, and will expand to seven days a week as staffing becomes available.

Museum curator Don Merritt said only virtual guided tours of the Kam Wah Chung building will be available onsite, outside the interpretive center. The Kam Wah Chung building will be closed to visitors for 2021.

Virtual tours are contingent on weather and safety and are 45 minutes long. The tours start at the top of the hour and are closed at noon for lunch.

"Kam Wah Chung SHS will follow all COVID-19 protocols set forth by Oregon Parks and Recreation, including sanitizing procedures, social distancing and wearing of proper face masks," Merritt said in a press release.

The Kam Wah Chung building and interpretive site were closed last year due to COVID-19, but work continued behind doors with studies and designs in the works.

Merritt said no one was on site in 2020 until November, which was a good thing for the Kam Wah Chung building.

"It gave the building some time to breathe," Merritt said. "With all the visitors that were coming through, our biggest concern was the building being loved to death."

Merritt said, during the shutdown, the team was able to get information and data that showed how the temperature and humidity would be in the building without visitors. The



The Eagle/Rudy Diaz

Museum curator Don Merritt talks about his design for the future Kam Wah Chung Interpretive Center.

extended break helped provide consistent data.

"It turned out to be a silver lining for us and future management and preservation of the resources here," Merritt said.

In spring this year, Oregon State Parks provided \$20,000 to start a feasibility study on a new visitor center with Pinnacle Architecture helping with the preliminary design.

"At this point we're still laying out the design for the building for sometime in the future," Merritt said. "There are no hard set dates for any completion. This is something that has been in the works for a while, and this year, we've been authorized to go ahead and start the feasibility study."

The idea is to provide a bigger building than the current interpretive center, which can provide a larger exhibit space, extra space for researchers, a virtual reality room and a mock-up of the main room in the Kam Wah Chung building.

The plan is to also have the larger

building house both the interpretive center and the collections as they are currently in separate buildings.

"It's likely going to be where the pool is right now, but that is yet to be decided," Merritt said.

Merritt created his own preliminary idea of how he would like the Kam Wah Chung visitor facility to be: have the building's exterior match the historic feel of a Chinatown in John Day and have a particular Asian architectural style.

The layout map is also designed to incorporate the existing interpretive center to be complemented with the extra space provided in new building.

"We're thinking ahead, but it'll probably be a few years before we get to the point of construction," Merritt said. "It all depends on the purchase of the city park and if that goes through whenever that does, so there's a lot of contingencies on this, but we're starting to think ahead now."

Archives at the historic facility, which have been worked on since



The Eagle/Rudy Diaz

The Kam Wah Chung Interpretive Center homes an abundance of historical artifacts for visitors to enjoy.

2005, took center stage in 2020 as accessibility was improved on.

Merritt said most of the archives at Kam Wah Chung were scanned electronically, and the team continues to develop a searchable database so the public can easily research the historical artifacts.

"Our archive database, we want to make it searchable because it hasn't been done before, and no one has access to all the 20,000 documents," Merritt said. "Hopefully by making the searchable database, we'll be able to open up for a lot more research, and we've been finding all kinds of information."

Most of the documents are in traditional Cantonese and Chinese, and about 10% of the archives have been translated, according to Merritt.

Last year, Merritt produced a 360-degree video that tours the Kam Wah Chung building, which is available on friendsofkamwahchung.com and stateparks.oregon.gov. Merritt said a professionally produced virtual reality experience is in the works to be completed sometime this year.

Merritt said, even with the year of closure, many people are still interested and continue to wait for opening day.

"We're still getting lots of visitors calling about when things are open," Merritt said. "We've already had several visitors stop that are wanting to visit and so we're anxious to get back open as long as it's done safely."

Uptmor to continue as Grant superintendent

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

Grant School District 3 Superintendent Bret Uptmor submitted a letter of resignation in April, but is working on a new contract to continue as superintendent.



Bret Uptmor

Uptmor said during a board meeting last year in November that he was eligible to retire, but he was not ready to do that. He asked and proposed to the board that they would rehire him.

"In January, I brought materials for the board to review regarding hiring back, and either February or March, they approved my hire back," Uptmor said.

Uptmor said, in order for them to hire him back, he had to resign his current position. Uptmor submitted his resignation in April so the board can move forward with working on a new contract.

His last day under the current contract is June 30, but his request for hire back is for July 2.

"I have a one day gap, and then I would come back to work on July 2," Uptmor said.

The board and vice chair are going to meet with Uptmor this week to work on the new contract.

"I don't think either of us has any set numbers of years that we would put into the contract, but that's why we're going to get together to talk and make a good plan," Uptmor said.

Uptmor said his goal is that, when does officially leave the district at the end of his new tenure, he and the school board can have a good succession in the transition to a new superintendent so the work can continue without a gap.

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