

Project Turnkey faces community opposition

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Grant County officials face community opposition as they enter into the final phases of a grant process that would allow them to acquire a local hotel and convert it into transitional housing for people impacted by wildfires, COVID-19 and those released from incarceration as they enter back into society.

Grant County officials applied for a Project Turnkey grant, a statewide program that converts motels and hotels to permanent transitional or emergency housing, earlier this year and formed a steering committee in March.

In a Friday Zoom meeting, Community Counseling Solutions CEO Kimberly Lindsay said the Oregon Community Foundation would provide \$1.8 million to purchase the Dreamers Lodge hotel in John Day. Additionally, she said, the grant would provide \$110,000 for startup operations, \$39,000 for renovations and \$36,000 for deferred maintenance.

Probation officer Mike McManus said during the presentation Friday that the referring entities would be Grant County Probation Office, Community Counseling Solutions, Families First and Veterans Services.

Rhiannon Bauman with Families First said the target population would be Grant County residents on parole or probation or those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. In addition, there are homeless veterans coming out of drug and alcohol treatment, she said.

Opposition

Grant County resident Paul Sweany told the county court May 12 that he found out about the project during a Firewise meeting. He said what caught his attention was the location of the transitional housing a block from Main Street. Sweany said he is concerned about the transitional housing in the middle of John Day's economic revitalization project.

"I'm looking at two projects, both that have a great narrative, but I don't see them really lining up supporting one another," he said.

He said he has spoken with others in the community who feel the same way.

Sweany said he wanted people to be aware that he worked at family treatment centers and a drug and alcohol detox facility, in addition to volunteering at a transitional housing facility in Eugene.

"I certainly don't need to be sold on the need for transitional housing," Sweany said.

Kati Dunn of Strawberry

TOWN HALL PLANNED MAY 19

A public meeting to discuss the Project Turnkey grant will take place at 6 p.m. Wednesday, May 19, in Trowbridge Pavilion at the Grant County Fairgrounds in John Day.

Mountain Law said she sees the need for transitional housing as a 20-year public defender.

She said it is nearly impossible for people to progress when transitioning back into society if they do not have a home.

"We need to make sure that we're able to reintegrate them," she said. "We can't just give up on them."

Charlene Morris, a Grant County resident who said she worked for the state court system, told Dunn that the criminal justice system is a "revolving door perpetuated generation by generation."

Morris asked how many chances the system should give someone when they fail multiple drug tests.

Dunn said that is not the metric on which success should be measured. She said that is a question better left between a treatment provider and that person trying to get clean and sober.

Amanda Bogan, a Grant County resident who said she has been in recovery for two and half years, said one thing she did not have that is a "desperate necessity" was access to transitional housing.

Bogan said her mother passed away, and she did not have a family to move in with when she got out of treatment.

"Transitional housing made a world of difference for me, especially in a controlled environment where you're still held accountable, you still have to be sober," she said.

What now?

Bauman said the project would not move forward without the support of the community. She said the county could turn the hotel into permanent housing for people with vouchers from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development program. Or, she said, it could be used as transitional housing for workers coming to Grant County to work for the Forest Service or the hospital.

Nate Conklin, an outreach specialist with the Fletcher Group, said they would gauge the support by their feedback in the public meetings.

Lindsay said the CCS board would decide whether to move forward at their June 7 meeting.

County denies city's request to help fund Fourth Street repairs

Commissioners question why city didn't use relief funds

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Grant County officials denied the city of John Day's request for \$400,000 to help fund repairs of Fourth Street April 12 in a contentious county court session.

John Day Mayor Ron Lundbom called into the county's conference with Councilors Shannon Adair and Elliot Sky. Other city councilors were also on the call.

Lundbom told the court members that the city locked in a \$1.2 million grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to fix damage caused by flooding in 2019. He said FEMA would cover 75% of the cost with a 25% match required.

Lundbom said Fourth Street is a critical access route to the Grant County Regional Airport and other emergency services. He told the court that the city spent \$270,000 on the preliminary design, engineering and secured the grant funding.

"We at least should have some kind of dialogue as to what direction we should proceed together," he said.

County Commissioner Sam Palmer said the city received roughly \$350,000 in COVID-19 relief funds and asked if the council earmarked any money for infrastructure. He told Lundbom he spoke with Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, about potentially helping the city with the project.

Lundbom told Palmer the city would need to have the project completed within eight weeks. The city does not have time to see if the other funding sources would come through, he said.

Adair told Palmer the pandemic money did not have anything to do with the Fourth Street project. She said the council had not discussed using the American Rescue Plan money for the repairs.

County Commissioner



Eagle file photo

Spring flooding in Canyon Creek in 2019 eroded the steep embankment on Fourth Avenue Southwest in John Day leading to the Grant County Regional Airport, creating a serious road hazard.

"WE AT LEAST SHOULD HAVE SOME KIND OF DIALOGUE AS TO WHAT DIRECTION WE SHOULD PROCEED TOGETHER."

—Ron Lundbom, John Day mayor

Jim Hamsher said the money could be used for water, sewer and other infrastructure projects.

Hamsher said the county sent John Day upwards of \$157,000 in February, over \$168,000 the year before and \$2.2 million since 2006.

County Judge Scott Myers told Lundbom it was federal Secure Rural Schools funding. SRS provides funding for rural counties to replace revenue from falling forest receipts due to the decline in timber sales for schools, roads, law enforcement and other essential services.

Myers told Lundbom he thought the money would have gone to the maintenance line in the city's budget.

"Evidently, that maintenance line has been zeroed out, and I'm kind of curious as to where that money goes instead," he said.

He said it was "clear" the streets in John Day had not been kept up and that he had read the money allocated for maintenance of the roads had been used to cover other items in the budget.

Myers told Lundbom he was surprised the city needed a match for the repair given

that it had been two years that he knew the city needed to repair Fourth Street.

Lundbom told Myers those were questions the city could have answered in a work session the city requested, but the county had been giving the city the "cold shoulder."

He told Myers the money had gone to street maintenance over the years and that the city had been using other funds to support the police department.

"We need to do something with Fourth Street," Lundbom said. "It serves the county. It serves the county airport. It's emergency access."

Lundbom said the street repairs are an "extraordinary situation," which the city could not budget for.

He said Canyon City had a similar situation with its bridge that was damaged due to flooding in 2018.

Myers said Canyon City's bridge was damaged during an emergency, and the cost was \$38,000. He said the county had a partnership, and the cost to the county included engineering.

Austin resident Billie Jo George asked why the Forest Service, who shares the air-

port with the county, could not help fund the repairs.

Lundbom said the Forest Service would not be obligated to help the county repair streets and bridges in the county.

Myers said he was "disgruntled" the city budgeted that the county would chip in \$400,000 without any "budgeting authorities" from the county.

"That in and of itself is a violation of trust," he said.

Lundbom, owner of Napa Autoparts in John Day, told Myers the city had hoped the county would want to participate in the project.

Myers said he hoped that if his engine went out in his truck that Napa would foot the bill.

After Myers' comment, an unidentified caller said, "what a (expletive) (expletive)."

Myers said politics could become a good gauge of friendship. He said political issues have put distance between him and people he once considered friends.

Myers said he had seen emails that blame the county for increases to the city's water rates and developers opting not to build in John Day.

"The court has been threatened with recall, belittled, bullied and blamed for the financial situations and delays John Day's projects," he said. "...If I have to be one of those to protect the people's assets in this particular situation, so be it. I'm willing to do that."

Palmer said the Fourth Street repairs are a "public health issue." He said, however, the \$400,000 request was "steep." He said more people oppose than support the project and that he has to consider that.

"A lot of it is personality," Palmer said. "A lot of it is the project."

Several days after the meeting, Lundbom said neither he nor anyone else on the city council made the explicit comment about Myers on the call. He also said the state may be able to "kick in" the \$400,000 needed for the project.

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