

# Sewer

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in funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The USDA money will be a mix of grants and loans, with the proportion yet to be determined.

The loan package is expected to carry a 1.5% interest rate, to be repaid over 40 years, Green said. It will also include some consolidation of existing loans on the treatment plant that could bring the total project cost down to as low as \$15.5 million, he added.

“Our goal is to get our wastewater rates down so we can make it more affordable for our residents,” Green said. “USDA has been very willing to work with us to try and get our rates down.”

Right now, the residential sewer rate is \$60 a month — comparable to the rate in Portland. Based on a widely used economic index, Green said, an affordable rate for John Day residents would be more like \$35 a month.

As with so many of the city’s financial woes, Green said, one way to address the high sewer rates is to rebuild the community’s declining population base.

“Widening the customer base by adding new residents and housing could bring it down significantly,” he said.

In conjunction with the new sewage treatment plant, the city plans to build a reclamation system that would allow much of the treated wastewater — approximately 80 million gallons a year — to be reused rather than simply discharged into the ground to percolate into the John Day River.

The wastewater will be treated to Class A standards, the highest level of treatment. While it can’t be used for drinking, it can be used for almost anything else.

“It’s bottled water quality,” Green said.

Plans call for a “purple pipe” distribution system that would run from the treatment plant to carry the water to end-users. Potential uses for the reclaimed water, according to Green, include a fill-up station for fire tenders; irrigation for agriculture, parks and water fea-

tures; log deck cooling for Malheur Lumber; and even data center cooling, should the city be able to attract that type of tenant to the Innovation Gateway.

Any treated wastewater left over would be discharged into underground basins, from which it would filter into the aquifer. That means the city will no longer need the percolation ponds north of the river that hold treated wastewater from the current sewage plant — another benefit of the project.

“The current site will be graded,” Green said. “That’s about a 30-acre redevelopment zone that will be available on the riverfront.”

The water reclamation project will be paid for by a \$3 million grant from the Oregon Water Resources Department.

“If you look at that as part of the total project ... the combined package puts us at about \$18.5 million in total investment,” Green said.

“But because that’s 100% grant-funded, any revenue from reclaimed water sales helps buy down our wastewater rates.”

Once the purple pipe system is fully operational, the city estimates it could generate around \$60,000 a year in reclaimed water sales, which could be used to subsidize sewer rates.

Another potential element of the project that is still under consideration is a solar array. The city is working with Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative to determine whether the idea is feasible.

The goal of that project would be to generate enough electricity to power new public infrastructure improvements such as the wastewater treatment plant and the proposed aquatic center and use net metering to sell surplus electricity to OTEC.

The cost of the solar array would depend on its size, which is still being worked out, but Green thinks most if not all of the expense could be covered by grant funding.

“There’s a host of sources that provide grants for publicly owned renewable energy costs,” he said.

# Expansion

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longer in use, but Bradley said any structure over 50 years old falls into the category of a historic building.

“We’ve heard the Gleason Pool is probably the second-oldest pool in Oregon,” Bradley added.

There are things that can be done to mitigate the preservation office’s concerns, including putting up an interpretive panel that explains the history of the pool and shows what it looked like.

Closing on the Gleason Park and Gleason Pool properties is critical to the expansion of the site. Current plans have the new interpretive center’s location overlapping with where the pool currently sits. According to museum curator Don Merritt, the 3-acre Gleason Park site will remain largely unchanged for the time being.

## More artifacts, virtual tours

The Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site’s current facilities, park managers say, are just too small.

Limited space in the interpretive center means it can only display roughly half of the artifacts in its collection. The size of the facility also restricts the number of virtual tours that can be conducted — an important way of reducing foot traffic in the original Kam Wah Chung building, which is showing signs of age and wear.

The expansion will add around 2,000 square feet to the 8,600 square feet the heritage site occupies now.

A new 500-square-foot theater will double the number of virtual reality tours the site can offer. Virtual tours are popular at the site, but there’s only enough space for 10 tours at a time. The new theater room will be able to conduct 20 virtual tours at one time once completed.

In a feasibility study released in May, the state unveiled two proposed designs for the new interpretive center. The first is a single, large structure inspired by Chinese architecture of the late 1800s and early 1900s. The key characteristic of the building would be a sweeping roof design and gable framing similar to traditional Chuan-Dou framing. The building would be located where the community pool currently sits and would have visitor access and parking off Northwest Canton Street.

The second design incorporates traditional Eastern Oregon architectural features. Instead of a single building, the interpretive center would consist of two buildings with roofs at different heights. The goal with this design is to break down the scale of the interpretive center to better match the existing scale of the historic Chinese buildings on-site. The design would feature a double-sloped roof in two different sections.

This design would allow for a separate entrance for staff into the area and break up the mass of the building.

With this design, the interpretive center would also sit where the community pool is currently located, but visitor access and parking would be behind the building as opposed to Canton Street. This design



Pinnacle Architecture/Contributed Image

This conceptual drawing shows one of two possible designs, called Option 1, for the new interpretive center at the Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site.

would also leave an existing archeological site free for research purposes.

A final decision regarding the design of the new heritage site hasn’t been made yet, but Merritt says they are “heavily leaning” toward the second, two-building layout.

## The money is already there

Funding for the expansion was provided by the 2021 Oregon Legislature through Senate Bill 5506, which authorized \$50 million in general obligation bonds to fund park projects throughout the state.

“Kam Wah Chung was fortunate enough to receive some of that funding, so that’s where the funds are coming from,” said Bradley.

The cost of the project is estimated at \$4.5 million.

In conjunction with the Kam Wah Chung project, the city of John Day plans on sprucing up the downtown business district and strengthening the connection between downtown and the renovated heritage site. The city received a \$1 million state grant for infrastructure improvements.

At a John Day City Council meeting on Feb. 8, City Manager Nick Green outlined a detailed proposal regarding how the money will be spent. Half of the \$1 million grant will be spent on improving sidewalks, parking, signs and wayfinding markers along Canton and Main streets.

Another \$250,000 would be used for landscaping and site beautification, while \$200,000 would be spent on aesthetic improvements to Main Street businesses that could include fresh paint, new signs, facade improvements, upgraded streetlights and murals.

Another \$50,000 would go toward demolishing Gleason Pool and compacting the soil there. The city has set aside \$22,000 from the sale of the park and pool properties to cover the remainder of the estimated cost of demolition.

The city has also applied for an Oregon

Main Street grant worth up to \$200,000. If approved, the grant would double the size of the city’s investment into upgrades along Main Street.

## Economic impact

The economic impact the facility already has on the county is eye-opening.

According to the results of a survey conducted by the Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site, the facility had 9,382 visitors in the year before the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020. More than 5,400 of those visitors were from out of the county, and 145 of them were international visitors.

Those numbers mean an economic impact on the community that is hard to ignore. On average, non-residents spend a little over \$111 within the community after touring the Kam Wah Chung site, according to the survey.

Those numbers added up to almost \$605,000 a year in revenue for the community prior to the renovation, but the renovated and expanded site will undoubtedly bring more tourists to the area, which should translate into more revenue for local merchants — especially when combined with the projects slated to begin on Main Street.

Merritt says the number of visitors continues to grow every year, and the trend will only continue following completion of the project. “We estimate 10-12,000 visitors the first year after the expansion, and those numbers will probably continue to go up every year.”

The Kam Wah Chung project is scheduled to be completed by November 2023, according to the feasibility report, but Bradley says the project is behind schedule due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We haven’t closed on the Gleason Pool project yet,” he said. “We have time, but the schedule is going to be a little flexible. Kam Wah Chung is in good shape.”

Merritt expects the project to break ground early next year.

# Tilly

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Justice about how remains were stored in the lighthouse and issues with refunds. Some families told the New York Times in 2007 that they felt misled by promises made by Morissette’s company, Eternity at Sea Inc. In the 1990s, vandals reportedly broke into the lighthouse and made off with two urns.

Morissette said when Eternity at Sea started selling spaces in the columbarium, they hadn’t realized the metal they were using to house urns could not withstand a maritime environment. Then there was the issue with the state license that dragged on for years. Morissette said she

pushed pause to regroup.

Whoever buys Terrible Tilly will be taking on a difficult-to-reach island property that — besides acting as a home to the dead — shelters seabirds like cormorants and common murres on its basalt crags. Sea lions are known to haul out on the rocks below. In fact, the last time Morissette tried to visit the island, she couldn’t leave the helicopter because there were too many sea lions blocking the way.

Terrible Tilly, built in the 1880s, became notorious for being dangerous as well as expensive to operate. It was decommissioned in 1957.

Today, the lighthouse exerts a strong pull on amateur and professional artists and photographers and can be seen from various viewpoints within the popular Ecola State Park.

The lighthouse is a privately owned part of the federal Oregon Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service holds a conservation

ease over the property. According to Brent Lawrence, a spokesman for the Fish and Wildlife Service, Morissette has agreed to only visit the island at certain times of the year to avoid disturbing birds during the breeding season.

While cormorants and common murres roost at the property, they no longer appear to nest there like they once did historically. Black oystercatchers, however, have been documented breeding there. The oystercatcher’s global population is small and citizen scientist volunteers closely monitor nesting activity near Cannon Beach.

## ‘Something that we all have to face’

Morissette said she was raised around lighthouses and her first priority for Terrible Tilly has been to ensure its preservation. If the lighthouse sells, she is dedicating \$1.5 million of the proceeds to put back into repairs and cleanup at the property. Morissette plans to retain a 3% royalty on

future urn niche sales.

Though her plans for a columbarium were not as lucrative or straightforward as she had hoped, Morissette does not regret her purchase all those decades ago.

The lighthouse is an important part of American history, she said, and she’s proud to have had a hand in keeping it standing.


Then there are the 31 urns. The families of the people whose ashes are stored inside Terrible Tilly cannot visit them.

But this is how Morissette sees it: You can ride a horse down the beach. You can throw a flower to the waves. You can hike to viewpoints in Ecola State Park, maybe hold a family reunion at the park. You can go salmon fishing nearby and take time to say “hello” to the loved one in the lighthouse.

“So in other words,” Morissette said, “I’ve been able to take something that we all have to face and sort of take the macabre out of it.”

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