

New circuit court site raises concerns

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 new Morrow County Circuit Court building until she left office in December of 2022.

The county was able to move forward with the building because of state funding that was approved a couple of weeks ago, at the end of the 2023 legislative session.

The county has received \$12,745,000 in state funding toward the new circuit court building through Oregon Senate Bill 5512. Morrow County Board of Commissioners Chair David Sykes, Oregon Sixth Judicial District Presiding Judge Daniel Hill, Representative Greg Smith (R-Heppner) and several others from the county had written letters of support or testified at a Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Public Safety March 9 to voice their support for SB 5512.

The state grant is a 50-percent match, with half the cost coming from the county. That made the land already owned by the county especially attractive, since the value of the land can be used toward the county's share of the funding.

Sykes rolled out the site selection at the board of commissioners meeting July 5 in Heppner. He said this work on the project started when he took office in January. Hill asked him where the county was with the new circuit court building.

"I was not only not up to speed, I was at a dead standstill," said Sykes.

Sykes said he worked to get up to speed and kept in touch with Hill. Also working on the project at the county level are Morrow County Interim Administrator Roberta Vanderwall and Morrow County Finance director Kevin Ince.

Sykes said he also contacted Heppner Mayor Corey Sweeney, who said the city was behind the project. The Heppner City Council held a work session and came up with nine sites, which they passed on to the county.

The county committee narrowed the options to four sites and then hired DLR Group in March to conduct site analysis. Based on that analysis, the county committee decided the current site near the Morrow County Fairgrounds in Heppner is the best fit.

"This is the best site that we came up with," said Sykes.

"Right now this project is teed up really nicely," he added. "The money's there. We're ready. We have the site ready. We have the preliminary analysis."

Vanderwall said she was finishing up a request for proposals for the project, and Sykes added that they also want to request proposals for a project manager, especially since the county will soon transition from Vanderwall to a new, full-time administrator.

"This is not our area of expertise. We don't have anybody on staff. We don't want to dump this on a

new administrator," said Sykes. "I really would like to see a project manager get on board soon to help us through the whole works."

"I think it's essential," added Vanderwall.

Sykes also addressed the topic of the current, historical courthouse.

"My interaction with the public on this has been, 'What are you going to do with that courthouse?'" he said. "I think we need to have at least a conceptual idea of where we're going to go with the historical building."

Drago said it was his understanding that some of the offices in the current courthouse would remain there, which Vanderwall confirmed. For instance, the justice court will remain in the historical building.

"So it's not going to be historically a museum or anything," said Drago.

The board directed staff to develop a high-level, conceptual design of what would happen to the 1902 courthouse.

"I want people to know, we're going to take care of that building," Sykes said.

While the funding and the selection of a site for the new building are major milestones for the project, not everyone is thrilled at the prospect of having a circuit court building as a neighbor.

Patrick Collins was present online on behalf of adjacent property owners, and asked the commissioners if they had any idea about the project timeline. Sykes responded that they did not, since the funding had come through so recently, and probably wouldn't know until they had a project manager to work out the details.

"To throw a time out there, Patrick, would be irresponsible at this time," said Sykes. "But we intend to be very open and transparent with the public on all of this and, as soon as we have a definite timeline, make it public."

Collins also asked if the site selection was firm, or if there would be any public input on the process. Sykes responded that he believed the process for the conditional use permit was the appropriate place for public input.

"Because it is located in the city limits and it will require that," said Sykes.

"That's the purpose of planning, is to have these things talked about and vetted," he added. "We definitely want to keep the adjacent property owners, as well as the whole town of Heppner and the county to a degree, we want to keep you in the loop what's going on."

Leann Wright, also an

adjacent property owner, said that it looked like the plans cross her property line.

"We're not going to cross any property lines," Sykes replied. "This is a very preliminary plan. We're not going to take anybody's property. We're not crossing anybody's lines."

He also said that, while the county had rolled out the plan to get the process going, no one had been notified because the plans weren't solidified.

"This is the first step," he added. "You have to start somewhere."

"We're not going to just ram this through," Sykes said. "We want adjacent property owners to know exactly what we're doing. It's just in the really preliminary stages right now."

Heppner citizens also voiced concerns over the proposed circuit court site at the Heppner City Council meeting earlier this week. Fifteen members of the public attended the regular council meeting, many of them concerned over the placement of the new circuit court building.

Heppner Mayor Corey Sweeney recognized their concerns but emphasized the importance of the new building for Heppner.

"We don't want the jobs to leave Heppner. We don't want Heppner to lose any more than we've already lost in the last 20 years," Sweeney told the gathered crowd Monday night in Heppner. "We're hoping the city can work with individuals and property owners and take your comments... whatever we can do to come to a good resolution for this courthouse being built."

Heppner Interim City Manager Tommy Wolff also addressed the specific question about rodeo parking during fair and rodeo. He said that, in a meeting with Sykes last week, Sykes had specifically said there would be no circuit court hearings during that week. He also pointed out that part of the lot would contain public parking for the courthouse.

"Chair Sykes assured me that during fair and rodeo week, that parking lot would be available for rodeo contestants and participants," Wolff added.

Terri Gentry, vice president of the Oregon Trail Pro Rodeo Association, said she was confused as to whether concerns should be addressed to the county or the city, and whether the "serious discussions" were already done.

"I don't know who's in charge," she said.

Sweeney said discussions have yet to take place within the Heppner plan-

ning commission, but there was an ongoing need for communication.

"Yes, moving forward, we're going to have to iron out what works for the rodeo, what works for the neighbors, what works for everybody," he said. "Right now, we've got to get it out to the public and get their feedback on it."

"I realize in the scheme of things, the rodeo uses that land three, four days a year," said Gentry. "So it's not in the interest of everyone to not have the courthouse there so we can use it three days a year. We understand that."

"But the bottom line with the rodeo is, if you put that building there, we probably will not have a rodeo," she added.

Sweeney reiterated that the council was looking for public input.

"It's not breaking ground till 2025," he said. "This is the first step, is for everybody to process it, think about your concerns."

Kyle Robinson echoed Gentry's concerns, adding that the rodeo is a big economic boost to Heppner.

"This is the first of, hopefully, many meetings," replied Heppner City Councilor Cody High. "The county is the one deciding what they want to build, so you want to talk to them about what you want to see them build. The city determines if issues have been corrected for them to be approved to build, so you want the city to know what your issues are so your councilors—because we represent you guys—can make sure those issues are resolved."

A couple of citizens questioned why the mill site was not selected, but Sweeney said the city does not own that site, and he could not speak as to why it was not selected.

Wolff reiterated that the county had made it clear that the site had been picked, and the city's only role was in the conditional use permit. He urged residents to go to the county board of commissioners with concerns.

"I'm going to pass the buck here, but the city has no decision-making capabilities on the site at this time," he said.

Heppner City Attorney Bill Kuhn clarified that, because the site is within the Heppner city limits, the build will require the Heppner planning commission's permission as far as meeting the city's specifications for the site.

"Everyone will not be happy," High added. "But our job, and what we want to see, is the best route."

The next step for the county will be to apply for a conditional use permit through the City of Heppner Planning Commission.

Umatilla National Forest moves to Phase A public use restrictions

Due to increased fire danger and dry weather conditions, Phase A of the Public Use Restrictions (PURS) for smoking, off-road travel and chainsaw use went into effect on the Umatilla National Forest on Tuesday, July 11.

Phase A is the first level of restrictions, generally implemented when the fire danger is moderate to high. PURS are phased in collectively, as conditions warrant, and may differ from forest to forest. Restrictions under Phase A include:

- Chainsaws may be operated only between the hours of 8 p.m. and 1 p.m. local time. A one-hour fire watch is required after saw operations cease. Saw operators are required to have an axe (minimum two-pound head, 26 inch length), shovel (eight inch wide, 26 inch length), and fire extinguisher (minimum ABC eight ounce) in their possession. Chainsaw operation associated with commercial and personal use firewood permits are regulated under the conditions of the permit and are not impacted by this public use restriction.

- Smoking is allowed only in enclosed vehicles, buildings or cleared areas.

- No off-road/off-trail vehicle travel or travel on roads not cleared of standing grass or other flammable material; no vehicle travel on those Forest Service roads where access has been impeded or blocked by earthen berm, logs, boulders, barrier, barricade or gate, or as otherwise identified in the Fire Order.

The public is also encouraged to practice safe campfire principles when recreating in dispersed and developed campsites. Forest officials recommend the following campfire safety precautions:

- Campfires should be in fire pits surrounded by dirt, rock or commercial rings and in areas not conducive to rapid fire spread. All flammable material

shall be cleared within a three-foot radius from the edge of the pit and free of overhanging material. Use existing pits wherever possible.

- Campfires must be attended at all times and completely extinguished prior to leaving.

- Persons with campfires should carry a tool that can serve as a shovel and one gallon of water in their possession. The intent of this recommendation is to ensure individuals with a campfire have the tools necessary to completely extinguish their campfire.

The public's awareness of the increasing fire danger and cooperation is essential to a safe fire season. Recreationists, firewood cutters, hunters, and other forest users can all help by closely adhering to restrictions, operating safely and cautiously, and keeping up to date on the latest orders and regulations.

Regulated closures may be in effect on State and private lands protected by Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) in northeast and central Oregon. Please check with your local Oregon Department of Forestry office for PURs on lands protected by ODF. For more complete information, contact a local Oregon Department of Forestry office or visit one of the interagency dispatch centers' webpages: Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch webpage, www.bmidc.org, or John Day Interagency Dispatch webpage, http://bicc-jdcdc.org/index.shtml.

For more information about the Umatilla National Forest's Public Use Restrictions, please contact the Umatilla National Forest Information Hotline at 1-877-958-9663, or visit our website at www.fs.usda.gov/umatilla/.

More information about the Umatilla National Forest is available at https://www.fs.usda.gov/umatilla.

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