

City approves senior center plans with extra investment

By **JADE McDOWELL**
Staff Writer

The city of Hermiston has decided to add a basement to the new senior center planned for downtown. The city council approved plans for the Harker Center on Monday night, including a \$550,000 basement that would come from the city's general fund reserves.

The rest of the building would be paid with the remaining \$1.63 million from a Community Development Block Grant. The city will pursue other options for the \$200,000 needed for the parking lot, but could eventually end up paying for that too if other possible funding sources don't pan out.

"\$2 million doesn't go as far as you'd think it would," grant director Larry Fetter said, referring to the original grant amount.

The current Hermiston Senior Center on the fairgrounds is 5,500 square feet. The plans approved Monday include a 7,200-square-foot main level (including great room, reception area, kitchen, storage, two breakout rooms and an office) and a 3,800-square-foot basement with elevator access.

Cutting back the main floor plan from the \$2.5 million design presented a month ago to the \$1.6 million design presented Monday came with some sacrifices, and members of the senior center told the council they were unhappy with the changes.

Virginia Beebe said changing the fireplace from a double-sided one in the center of the building to one against the wall meant people would end up looking out the window instead of at the fireplace.

"If we're going to have a fireplace it belongs in the middle of the building," she said.

There were also concerns that the kitchen size had been reduced — despite still being 50 percent

larger than the current senior center kitchen — and that the senior center bus would be parked in a secure area at the public works department instead of an on-site garage.

City administrators and councilors responded to the concerns by pointing out that the previous plans had included everyone's wish list, but budget constraints made it impossible to pay for everything on the list.

"We all have big dreams, but we also have pocket-books those dreams have to answer to," Mayor David Drotzmann said.

Previously, there had been some debate about whether it was worth spending \$550,000 to add a daylight basement. Councilor John Kirwan said he heard from several constituents that they hoped the city added the basement because it had been a long time since the city had made a major investment in the downtown area.

Contractually, the seniors will always have priority use of the building. But after five years the building can also be used by the community for events ranging from yoga classes to private wedding rentals.

"Bringing people downtown is hard to put a price tag on, but I do believe a basement makes this more marketable," Fetter said.

The city's next step is to refine the approved floor plans into architectural blueprints and put the project out to bid, starting construction in October and finishing sometime in summer 2017. The seniors will have to leave their current center in May 2017, when Hermiston School District begins demolition of the fair and rodeo grounds where the center is located.

City Manager Byron Smith said the city could pull the \$550,000 from the general fund reserve and still maintain the reserve levels required by city council.

New drainage basin at Newport Park collecting stormwater

By **JADE McDOWELL**
Staff Writer

The neighborhood around Newport Park experienced some flooding as last Wednesday's storm overwhelmed rainwater collection systems across Hermiston, but it would have been worse without renovations to the park.

In the fall the city removed elements of the park's softball field, including the dugouts, and lowered the field 18 inches so that it would act as a drainage basin during storms, like the one that blew through the area on Wednesday and filled the new basin to overflowing.

Hermiston Parks and Recreation Director Larry Fetter said after the softball field's elevation was lowered there were other storms that would have flooded the neighbors' homes in the past, but the water was diverted to the park instead. During those times the fine silt in the soil kept the park looking like a lake for days afterward, but Fetter said a series of gravel "dry wells" the city has since installed under the surface of the field should make the water drain much more quickly in the future.

"It did a great job of collecting water, we just want it to drain out of there," he said.

Right now the field doesn't have any grass on it, but Fetter said the city will hydroseed the playing field in the next week or so, and it will take four to six weeks after that for the grass to be ready for use.

"It'll come up pretty quickly," he said.

The project was controversial for community members with fond memories of playing Little League baseball and softball at Newport Park. But the city council greenlighted the project after hearing the city kept having to pay insurance claims to neighbors whose homes sustained substantial water damage when it rained enough to overwhelm a nearby city pump system.

The city doesn't schedule Newport Park for regular use by any teams, but there are some groups that use it unofficially for extra practices. Fetter said once everything is put back together they should be able to still use the field for batting practice or pick-up games unless there was a recent storm.

"We appreciate the neighborhood being patient," he said.

He said the city is incorporating a similar but much smaller drainage basin into its expansion of Sunset Park on Fourth Street to combat flooding there.



STAFF PHOTO BY DANIEL WATTENBURGER

Mike Arreola, working for the City of Hermiston, surveys a flooded Newport Park in downtown Hermiston on Thursday morning after a rain storm Wednesday night, May 4.



STAFF PHOTO E.J. HARRIS

A rain-water collection basin was created in the softball field of Newport Park to stop flooding in neighborhood houses around the park in Hermiston.



STAFF PHOTO BY JADE MCDOWELL

The Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center's main event building opens to the public May 13.

EOTEC:

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tion," Smith said.

Some of the events already scheduled for EOTEC, such as the Farm-City Pro Rodeo and private events like weddings, would take place in Hermiston no matter what. But Smith said Heather Cannell, EO-

TEC's business manager, is talking with home and garden shows and other events that haven't taken place in Hermiston in the past.

"There just hasn't been a place large enough to do that," Smith said.

Once the event center piece of the project opens Friday, there is still much work to be done.

Designs for the livestock

barns to be used for the fair and other agricultural events are complete and ready to go out to bid, with a bid package for the rodeo arena not far behind. Contractors will also need to be hired to complete smaller projects such as food stalls, restrooms, fencing, landscaping and lighting. And the EOTEC board is in negotiations for the water

rights to irrigate massive green spaces used to host everything from outdoor concerts to RV parking.

The public is invited to celebrate the event center building's grand opening on Friday from 3-7 p.m. with opening remarks at 4:30 p.m. The event will include tours, refreshments, entertainment and souvenirs.

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