

# Columbia Court Club rebuild bogged down

By **JADE McDOWELL**  
Staff Writer

Six months after a fire at the Columbia Court Club the owners are still caught in a long, slow disagreement between their insurance company and the state building codes division.

Steve Watkinds said he understands the community's disappointment in losing its only indoor swimming pool and track for so long, and he would love nothing better than to re-open.

"Nobody's more frustrated than us," he said.

Not only is the damage to the Hermiston club extensive, but the Watkinds can't repair or rebuild until Hannover Insurance settles their claim. The problem is that the state says it won't issue building permits unless everything is brought up to current codes, including expensive updates such as elevators and installation of a fire suppression system. The insurance company doesn't want to pay for that.

"The insurance company wants to rebuild exactly as it was at the moment before the fire, but the state says no," Watkinds said. "We can't rewire with 1970s-era wiring; it needs to be ADA accessible."

The process of negotiating over every piece of what needs to be rebuilt has been extremely slow, Watkinds said. Adding things like elevators and handicapped-accessible showers will take up extra space the club doesn't have, so

they would rather rebuild completely. But the insurance company has yet to give them a final answer on whether it will pay for a complete rebuild instead of tearing everything down to the studs then remodeling.

From the outside, the building looks usable, but inside the upper floor where the fire started is charred. Light shines through small holes dotting the roof and puddles of melted snow collect underneath. Steel beams around the point of origin are warped.

Down below, the former locker rooms have been stripped down to the wooden studs and the pool has been drained. The pool's pump equipment and the vast majority of the club's workout machines are no longer functional after the corrosive influence of smoke, soot and fire suppression chemicals. The free weights have already rusted for the same reason.

"All this machinery is now ruined," Watkinds said. "It's not salvageable."

In areas not damaged directly by fire or water, black marks fan out from electrical sockets and other breaches in the drywall, showing where the smoke that billowed through the walls tried to escape. The popcorn ceiling texture, which had previously been painted over to seal in the asbestos, had to be scraped clean at a cost of \$67,000.

In the farthest reaches



STAFF PHOTO BY JADE McDOWELL

**One wall is charred and the others have been stripped away in the area where a fire started in the Columbia Court Club on June 20.**

of the club, sections of dry-wall have been torn out of the racquetball courts in a "selective demo" by the insurance company looking for damage. The hardwood floor in the courts and the gym have gaps between the floor and wall where the floor contracted as a result of months without heat.

The fire started upstairs on June 20, in a storage area adjacent to the childcare area and a mirrored fitness classroom. It was ruled accidental, caused by an electrical short in a power strip.

Watkinds and office manager Mary Marsing said they are extremely grateful it happened in the afternoon, after the senior citizens and children who were there in the morning had already left and before the after-work rush. At the time, they esti-

mated about six gym members were present.

Watkinds said he was working on repairing a drinking fountain when the music went out, then the lights. Loud bangs (likely exploding cans of treadmill lubricant stored near the point of origin) sounded from upstairs, causing Marsing to start shouting for Watkinds, asking if he was alright. As smoke filled the club they realized there must be a fire and started ushering everyone out.

Watkinds returned inside twice before the fire department arrived; once to retrieve a woman who was still showering in the dark and smoke ("She must have been in shock") and once to find a man's keys so he could move his truck from in front of the entrance.



STAFF PHOTO BY JADE McDOWELL

**The former locker rooms at the Columbia Court Club have been stripped down to just the wooden beams as the club's insurance company decides what it is willing to pay to rebuild.**

"I was coughing when I came out," he said.

Marsing said court club members do not need to worry that their year-long contracts, which will automatically renew. No one has been charged for membership fees since the fire, she said, except for some past due accounts that a

collection agency continued to pursue.

"At the current pace, we will not be reconstructed by June 2017 and if by some chance we were able to accomplish that task, we would always take the honorable high road and ask our old members to rejoin the new facility anyway," she wrote in an email. "This business philosophy is what helped us sustain 38 years of service to the Hermiston market."

Until the weather got too cold, the club paid its staff members to conduct free fitness classes at McKenzie Park so that its members would have another option for continuing with their fitness goals.

Updates on the status of the club's insurance claims can be followed on their Columbia Court Club Commit To Be Fit page on Facebook.

Contact Jade McDowell at 541-564-4536.



Gary L. West | Editor • gwest@hermistonherald.com • 541-564-4532  
 Tammy Malgesini | Community Editor • tmalgesini@eastoregonian.com • 541-564-4539  
 Jayati Ramakrishnan | Reporter • jramakrishnan@hermistonherald.com • 541-564-4534  
 Jade McDowell | Reporter • jmcowell@eastoregonian.com • 541-564-4536  
 Jeanne Jewett | Multi-Media consultant • jjewett@hermistonherald.com • 541-564-4531  
 Shannon Paxton | Office coordinator • spaxton@hermistonherald.com • 541-564-4530  
 Audra Workman | Multi-Media consultant • aworkman@eastoregonian.com • 541-564-4538

To contact the Hermiston Herald for news, advertising or subscription information:  
 • call 541-567-6457  
 • e-mail info@hermistonherald.com  
 • stop by our offices at 333 E. Main St.  
 • visit us online at: [hermistonherald.com](http://hermistonherald.com)

The Hermiston Herald (USPS 242220, ISSN 8750-4782) is published weekly at Hermiston Herald, 333 E. Main St., Hermiston, OR 97838, (541) 567-6457.

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES  
 Delivered by carrier and mail Wednesdays  
 Inside Umatilla/Morrow counties.....\$42.65  
 Outside Umatilla/Morrow counties.....\$53.90

Periodical postage paid at Hermiston, OR.  
 Postmaster, send address changes to Hermiston Herald, 333 E. Main St., Hermiston, OR 97838.

Member of EO Media Group Copyright ©2016

## Umatilla County Fire District to staff station 24/7

### Full-time crews to start in March

By **JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN**  
Staff Writer

Umatilla County Fire District 1 will soon operate its station on Diagonal Road and East Punkin Center Road all day, everyday.

The station, which will start operating full-time on March 1, 2017, will have two paid firefighter/paramedics and one resident intern at all times, said Chief Scott Stanton.

"The station is 31 years old, but this will be the first time it will be staffed 24/7, 365," Stanton said. "We tried it before, but we didn't have the staff."

The district's main station on South First Street

in Hermiston is also staffed 24/7. The stations on Westland Road in Hermiston and West Coe Avenue in Stanfield are not, with staff working at them as needed.

The increase in hours for the second station was made possible when the new district was created earlier this year — the result of a merger between the fire departments of Hermiston and Stanfield, and the dissolution of those cities' individual departments. The consolidation, which took effect July 1, resulted in a combined tax rate of \$1.75 per \$1,000 assessed property value for Hermiston and Stanfield residents.

The merger was expected to generate about \$900,000, which would go toward new staff, replacing vehicles and toward

staffing the Diagonal Road station. Stanton estimated that of those funds, about \$625,000 would go toward staffing the station.

"That's built into what we're already paying for," he said.

He said the inside of the building will need some minor capital improvements, likely totaling around \$10,000.

"When you put people into a building full time, you need some upgrades," he said. "There's no phone or pager system, it needs some computers."

The restructuring of the

fire departments began in 2014 with an administrative merger, when Stanfield's fire chief became the training chief for the Hermiston Fire Department.

"We didn't really gain any people with the administrative merger," Stanton said. "We also took over the transportation service in Umatilla, and with that we hired about three." He said the department has had to hire about six new employees to staff the new station — and those employees will attend fire academy in February.

**AFTER CHRISTMAS SALE**  
**50% OFF STOREWIDE**  
 \*EXCLUDING FRESH FLOWERS

Flowers • Candles • Jewelry  
 Plants • Balloons & More!

Put a smile on the heart with  
 the power of flowers.

HWY 395, HERMISTON  
 541-567-4305

Mon-Sat 8am-6pm • Sun 12pm-5am  
[www.cottagefloweronline.com](http://www.cottagefloweronline.com)

**TAI CHI - MOVING FOR BETTER BALANCE**

FREE class to work on balance, strengthen muscles, improve posture and core strength. Great for all ages!

**Monday & Wednesday Starting January 16th**  
 Basic/Beginners class: 9-10am  
 Advanced Class: 10-11am

GSMC Wellness Center (behind the hospital)  
 Call 541-567-2185 or 541-667-3509 to register

**BODY & BALANCE**

FREE class using the Bal-A-Vis-X approach to safely improve balance, movement, and strengthen body control. Great for all ages and fitness levels!

**Monday & Wednesday Starting Jan. 4th**  
 11:00 - 12:00pm

Call 541-567-2185 or 541-667-3509 to register

**BEGINNER & INTERMEDIATE BANDS CLASSES:**

Strengthen & improve flexibility and overall health & balance.

**Tuesday & Thursdays Starting January 3rd**  
 Beginners class: 8:15-8:45am  
 Intermediate Class: 9-9:30am

GSMC Wellness Center (behind the hospital)  
 Call Kathy Thomas, 541-667-3400 x3050

Information or to register  
 call (541) 667-3509  
 or email  
[healthinfo@gshealth.org](mailto:healthinfo@gshealth.org)  
[www.gshealth.org](http://www.gshealth.org)

GOOD SHEPHERD

**Ring in the New Year Here**

**Cory Peterson**  
**New Years Eve 2016**  
 10pm  
 \$10 cover

Party Favours, Midnight champagne toast, Food & Drink specials. Come have a ROCKIN Good time!

541-567-3022 The Pheasant  
 149 E. Main, Hermiston Blue Collar Bar & Grill

**GREAT SERVICE! GREAT FOOD! BEER GARDEN!**

**Midway Bar & Grill**

1750 N. 1st St. • Hermiston, OR • 541-567-5180  
[www.midwaytavernbarandgrill.com](http://www.midwaytavernbarandgrill.com)

**NEW YEARS EVE!**  
 DJ / KARAOKE MUSIC!  
 FIREBALL PROMO NIGHT! CHAMPAGNE!

**NEW YEARS 80's BASH**

Party Starts @ 8pm  
 \$10.00 at the door  
 No reservations needed

Party Favours & Champagne

UMATILLA, OR  
 541-922-4112

**80's DJ Music in the lounge**  
 (NO adult entertainment)

**LIVE MUSIC Pollywog**

Comedian Susan Jones

COPPER TO GOLD: PENNY TASTINGS EVERY DAY IN JANUARY  
 Visit us online for winter hours and closures.

2014 WINERY OF THE YEAR  
 2015 PACIFIC NORTHWEST WINERY OF THE YEAR  
 2015 SUNSET TRAVEL AWARDS

**15th Anniversary**

9774 HWY 14, GOLDENDALE, WA 98620  
 OPEN DAILY 10AM-6PM MARYHILLWINERY.COM