

Umatilla eyes Corps land

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
STAFF WRITER

Fifty years ago, construction of the John Day Lock and Dam east of The Dalles changed the city of Umatilla forever.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, acting on flood predictions, acquired the city's land along the banks of the Columbia River, requiring everyone north of Fifth Street to move to higher ground. Much of the site never did flood, but the Army Corps of Engineers still owns hundreds of acres of land within Umatilla's urban growth boundary.

A group of Umatilla citizens believes it's time to return the shoreline to local control.

"The land is just sitting there idle, and it's been idle for 50 years," Mark Ribich said. "It's a major attraction for the city and they need to be able to utilize that."

Ribich has put together a private group called the Umatilla Riverfront Advisory Council with two stated goals: educate the citizens of Umatilla about the issue, and lobby for legislation that would "compel" the Army Corps of Engineers to re-convey land within Umatilla's urban growth boundary back to the city of Umatilla.

So far the advisory council's members include Ribich, Raelynn Gallegos, Mel Ray, Dave Meade and Kelly Nobles.

The problem

According to Umatilla City Planner Brandon Seitz, about 39 percent of the 6,756 acres within Umatilla's urban growth boundary are federally owned, with a majority owned by the Army Corps of Engineers. Beyond the roughly 130-acre Old Town Site, the Corps' property also includes space along the Umatilla River, a long stretch of land north of Third Street and the Umatilla RV Park & Marina, which the city operates under a lease from the Corps.

"It's a unique challenge," City Manager Russ Pelleberg said.

Pelleberg said the city hopes to someday create a "Central Park" project along the Corps-owned strip of land along Third Street, expanding the current lease for a community soccer field there to include permission for a new four-field softball complex, picnic shelters and more. The city has also been working for years with the Corps and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation on trying to craft an agreement



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers owns the majority of the riverfront property along the Columbia River, including the marina, in the city of Umatilla.

that would allow the city to add trails and interpretive panels to Old Town Site and remove some invasive plant species before opening it to the public. The site contains archeological features significant to the tribes.

Pelleberg said while the Army Corps of Engineers staff are "great to work with," as with any federal agency there are a vast number of boxes to check for any project, slowing down timelines considerably.

That's complicated by the fact that the dividing line between the Army Corps of Engineers' Portland District and Walla Walla District runs along the Columbia River bridge, dividing Umatilla in half. The city has to deal with two completely different sets of Corps staff on either side of the line.

Proposed solution

Such complications are the reason the Umatilla Riverfront Advisory Council would rather do away with leases and jump straight to city ownership.

Ribich was inspired to pursue that course after learning about similar efforts being undertaken by the Tri-City Development Council, which has retained legal counsel to argue that the addition of six U.S. dams upstream since then has negated the Corps' reason for ownership of those properties.

Rep. Dan Newhouse (R-Washington) sponsored legislation in 2017 requiring an inventory of shoreline properties in the McNary Pool of the Columbia River and their costs.

"What we need to do now is ask for the same thing on the downstream side, in the John Day pool," Ribich said.

He said the Corps-owned land in Umatilla means "nothing" to the Army Corps

of Engineers but is "vital" to the city's growth and development. New softball fields could draw athletic tourism, re-opening the beachfront to public access could be a recreational draw and historical Old Town Site tourism could bring new dollars into the city.

Kelly Nobles, one of the Umatilla residents who has joined the newly formed effort, said the Corps also owns lands along the Umatilla River, near property owned by the Nobles family. Nobles had been pursuing a project that envisions an eventual pedestrian/bicycle trail from the mouth of the Umatilla River to the city of Echo.

"There's just a lot of opportunity for future development," he said.

Challenges

Transferring land from the federal government isn't usually a simple or quick process.

Gina Baltrusch, a spokeswoman for the Army Corps of Engineers' Walla Walla District, said re-conveyance of any of the properties within Umatilla's urban growth boundary would be a long, complex process.

"When the government disposes of property it has to go through all sorts of inspections," she said.

Environmental laws would still apply, cultural resources would have to be protected and the new owner would still be restricted by rules about the type of use and infrastructure allowed

on the property.

A previous act of Congress gave permission for the Corps to "outgrant" some properties to municipal governments, but Baltrusch said the Umatilla properties were not part of that law, meaning it would take another act of Congress to get the ball rolling for Umatilla. And the land would have to go to the city, not a private group.

She said the Corps acquired the property by using taxpayer dollars to pay fair market value, and as a result if a city wanted to take ownership of land previously owned by the Army Corps of Engineers they would also need to be prepared to pay for it.

"It's not fair to the American people to put them on the hook for that," she said.

Ribich said the Umatilla group, which officially formed April 25, hasn't gotten that far yet. They have yet to sit down with the Corps or a variety of stakeholders such as the Port of Umatilla.

Ribich is no longer on the city council after abruptly resigning in April, and he declined to give his reason for leaving. But he said the city would need to sign onto the effort at some point.

Pelleberg said if a private group wanted to undertake laying the groundwork for possible reconveyance, he would be supportive of that, but in the meantime the city would continue to work on leases and easements it is pursuing.

District explains Battle of the Books withdrawal

By **JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN**
STAFF WRITER

Hermiston School District administrators said their decision to pull their youngest students from a statewide reading competition had nothing to do with the transgender topic of one of the books, but rather the graphic nature of portions of the story.

The principals of all five elementary schools sent a letter home to parents recently, stating that one of the books, "George," was incompatible with the district's human growth and development curriculum.

The book by Alex Gino tells the story of a child, born male and known to all as George, who identifies as female and prefers the name Melissa. Through the story, the child explains this to her best friend and others with the help of a school play.

Tricia Mooney, the district's interim superintendent, said she read the book and the school principals had all reviewed portions of it. She noted that the book has not been banned, and is available at the middle school libraries.

"We just didn't feel it was appropriate for elementary schoolers," she said. "In reading the book, there are scenes where the content is more mature, if you will, than what we feel is appropriate at that grade level."

Mooney said they felt some scenes in the book were too graphic. In one, George's older brother comes into the bathroom and makes a comment about having a dirty magazine, assuring George that he won't tell their mother. In another scene, Mooney said, a transgender woman says that what's between her legs is nobody's business but hers and her boyfriend's.

"This has nothing to do with George the character, or the transgender issue," Mooney said. "But with some of the things we feel are too graphic."

She said the issue was first brought to a building principal's attention by a teacher. The principals then reviewed the book



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"George" by Alex Gino is the story of a transgender girl and part of the Oregon Battle of the Books curriculum for 2018-19. The Hermiston School District has opted to not participate in the statewide competition because of the subject matter.

and brought their concerns to the attention of the state Battle of the Books committee, who chose to keep the book on the list.

Mooney said the Battle of the Books board said students wouldn't be asked questions of a graphic nature.

"But they'd still have to read (the book)," Mooney said.

Mooney said deciding to pull out of the competition was an administrative decision, made by both her and the building principals.

Vickie Read, a member of the Pendleton chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), said she had not read the book yet but was disappointed in the decision.

"I think it sends a huge statement to any family or child in the Hermiston School District that's transgender that they're invisible," Read said, noting some children may already know a transgender child.

Read said she disagreed with the district's claim that the book was just not appropriate for that age group.

"Children who read a lot have a real strong foundation of knowledge, that kind of surprises us in the older generation," she said.

The Cascade School District, near Salem, also decided to pull their elementary schoolers out of the statewide competition last week.

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