

FUNLAND

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memories of taking the various youth sports teams he has coached to the park for after-game celebrations. His wife, a physical therapist, often takes young patients there and watches them play to assess their mobility.

“It’s amazing how many different types of people are there,” he said.

The cause of the fire that started about 2:45 a.m. on Friday is still under investigation, but most people who talked about rebuilding assumed it was human-caused.

The fire that burned the original playground on July 28, 2001 was ruled an act of arson, but no arrests were ever made. Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston said the department had a “prime suspect” at the time but was never able to gather enough evidence to arrest the person. He said police and the fire marshal were working hard to gather evidence.

“It’s very much an uphill battle for us, but we have

solved uphill battles before,” he said.

Parks and recreation director Larry Fetter told the *Hermiston Herald* that the city was interested in rebuilding a playground that retained the character of the first two iterations but were made out of compressed plastic, metal or other non-wood materials. He also said the new playground would have fewer places where people could hide from view and would have an improved security camera system.

“I’m very interested in replacing it with materials that are non-combustible,” he said. “It’s just too heart-breaking to go through it again.”

He said the city would be getting some insurance money but it wasn’t clear yet how much that would be. It was also yet to be determined how much could be salvaged from the park, but Fetter said more than half the playground was obviously a total loss and much of the section that was not blackened had still been damaged by heat.

The original Funland was



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

More than half of the Funland play structure at Butte Park was damaged in a fire early Friday morning.

a community project built in 1996, built by volunteers and predating the city’s parks and recreation department. After the fire in July 2001, insurance paid out \$345,000, the city donated \$10,000 and the community raised thousands more before coming together to build the park in six days during March 2002.

Many people who helped build that version are still living in Hermiston. During

Monday’s city council meeting, Charlie and Carol Clupny, who were instrumental in building the first two playgrounds, urged the council to include community members — particularly children — from start to finish.

Carol, who was on the executive committee for the past playgrounds, said it was amazing how much the projects had united the community.

“We had superintendents working alongside dropout kids,” she said. “I think the volunteer aspect is really important to bring people together.”

Charlie was a captain over several crews of volunteers during the 1996 and 2001 builds. He said his crews involved everyone from mothers and children to National Guard members and inmates.

He got choked up when talking about Friday’s fire.

“I haven’t been over to Funland yet because what burnt is what I was in charge of building,” he said. “... I never thought in my lifetime we were going to be building another one of those again.”

On Saturday from 9 a.m. to noon hundreds of volunteers from local churches will be cleaning up litter, restoring flood-damaged sections of Riverfront Park and doing other beautification around town as part of the annual I Love My City event.

While it is too soon to put those volunteers to use demolishing the burned

playground, Pastor Terry Haight said that he would be asking participants of a follow-up worship service on Sunday to give a “love offering” toward rebuilding Funland. Last year’s service drew about 1,200 worshippers. This year’s is at 10 a.m. at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center.

The city is also accepting donations at city hall. On Monday the council agreed that they should put together a steering committee of city councilors and community members as quickly as possible and then use that committee to research options and gather community input. Fetter said his goal was to have plans for the new park done by October and ground broken next February.

Mayor David Drotzmann thanked everyone for their generosity, noting he had hoped to see his future grandchildren play at Funland.

“This community rises to the occasion when it comes to children,” he said. “I think we will have no problem reaching whatever target we need to reach to rebuild.”

HEMP

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toward this.”

The plan is for Columbia Basin Extraction to spend the summer retrofitting the former vegetable-processing plant to accommodate a cold-extraction method with denatured ethanol. Sometime between October and December the extraction plant should be online. Cleaver said he will likely have 30 to 40 employees working shifts on the floor plus a few office and administrative staff.

The real increase in jobs will come from the fields, he said, as industrial hemp is a “high-input” crop that takes a lot of labor to produce.

Cleaver grew 400 acres of hemp last year to be processed elsewhere and planted more than 1,500 acres this year. Currently, he said, most operations can process between 1,000 and 2,000 pounds per day. Columbia Basin Extraction will be able to handle about 40,000 with room to grow.

While hemp plants in the field have a marijuana-like odor, they will be dried out and processed into pellets out on the farm before being brought to the extraction plant. Cleaver said there shouldn’t be a noticeable odor around the facility.

Hermiston Foods was one of Hermiston’s 10 largest employers from 1990 to 2017, when its

parent company NORPAC announced it was closing the vegetable-processing plant and laying off its more than 200 employees. The building has been on the market for the last year and a half.

Despite its lack of high-inducing THC, research on CBD oil was restricted by all cannabis species’ classification as a Schedule 1 illegal drug until last year, when Congress included a provision in the farm bill allowing farmers to grow industrial hemp.

“There hasn’t been a lot of work done with it yet,” Cleaver said.

The FDA has so far only approved CBD oil for treatment of epilepsy, and has cracked down on com-

panies selling CBD products under promises that it will cure other ailments.

However, Cleaver said now that the federal government has opened the door for pharmaceutical companies to perform legal research on hemp products he hopes that more FDA-approved uses are coming soon. He said much of his hemp crop last year was purchased by universities for research purposes.

Cleaver presented information about the planned plant to the Hermiston city council on Monday. Councilors asked him multiple times about whether the project would create odor problems for the city, but Cleaver said the operations he had vis-

ited had not had a noticeable smell outside the building.

He did acknowledge he had received complaints from neighbors about the smell of the plants while they were growing out on his farm, away from Hermiston. He also said the plants — which look and smell like marijuana — had drawn some would-be thieves who mistakenly thought they would be able to use them to get high.

“We had a great sting going on with the Morrow County Sheriff’s Office last year,” he said.

Councilors thanked Cleaver for being transparent and willing to answer questions about the project.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Alan Cleaver, owner of Cleaver Farms, holds out some pelletized hemp biomass. The business is purchasing the former Hermiston Foods plant to extract CBD oil from industrial hemp for pharmaceutical purposes.



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