

# Umatilla prepares for growth spurt

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NEWS EDITOR

Political pundits may wring their hands about rural American communities in decline, but Umatilla is one small town that's not going anywhere.

The city of 7,320 has seen a 47% increase in population since 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and Portland State University's population research center predicts similar growth in the next 20 years. City Manager David Stockdale expects the community will add about 100 new housing units per year for the next five to seven years.

"It's not that growth is coming to Umatilla — it's already here," he said. "We're already making plans for the growth we expect."

For more a decade, the city saw fewer than 20 new homes per year. But in 2018 they issued 66 building permits. This year, Stockdale said, they have issued 38 and plan to issue another 20 next week, with almost five months left in the year.

Another developer is waiting for the city to complete changes to the development code before launching a 48-home subdivision they plan to complete in 18 months, Stockdale said, while two other 250-home subdivisions are also in the works.

"It's kind of coming at us from everywhere," he said.

Stockdale said developers seem to be putting in homes that land around the \$225,000 to \$245,000 price point, but one developer is in the preliminary phases of planning new town homes for \$145,000 to \$160,000, which is "a really great price point for people starting out with their first home."

Business growth and housing growth often go hand in hand, but Umatilla Chamber of Commerce Board Chair Mark Ribich said he hasn't seen the influx of "support businesses," from dentists to dry cleaners, that he had hoped would hit downtown as Umatilla sprouts new subdivisions.

"The growth has been phenomenal to say the least, but the business climate is not growing as quickly as the housing has," he said.

Instead, people tend to visit Hermiston 7 miles down the road for many of their needs, leaving some downtown buildings empty.

Ribich said he hoped to see the city's business offerings catch up to the housing growth, making Umatilla more of a destination and less of a "bedroom community."

"I think we have to prove ourselves as a city," he said. "It's like that old saying, 'If you build it they will come.' We have to provide the environment first."

Businesses already located in town are seeing successes. In July, Rae's Dayz Diner moved next door to a larger location to meet the demand for more seating. The main restaurant is open at 1226 Sixth St., now, and they will open a banquet room in the building within the next month.

"There are lots of new homes going in, and they're going to need somewhere to eat," owner Raelynn Gallegos said.

She said she moved to Umatilla from Kennewick



Isaiah Aquilar fastens a 2 by 4 piece of lumber in a new home construction project in Umatilla.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan



Jacob Edens carries a pocket door frame into a new home construction project in Umatilla Thursday afternoon.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

in 2017 to start her business based on a belief the community would continue to expand, and she hasn't been disappointed.

"I really like the growth going on in the area," she said. "I see a lot of potential in this area."

One of the biggest drivers of growth in Umatilla has been the nondescript gray concrete buildings popping up along the Columbia River and the south side of the city. Everyone who deals with them gets sworn to secrecy, but somehow the

entire community knows they are Amazon data centers.

The company, operating under the name Vadata, hires a steady stream of people to work in various technical positions, security and construction.

Stockdale said other businesses have also begun trickling into town, such as the River Dawgs restaurant that opened earlier this year. He said United Grain Growers just brought a dozen jobs to Umatilla, Two Rivers Correctional Institution is



A pair of nearly completed homes undergo construction work in an expanding development in Umatilla.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

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— David Stockdale,  
Umatilla city manager

adding jobs, a security company opened a satellite campus downtown and even the city is adding new positions as the tax base grows.

As the city hopes to draw more restaurants, services and retail to support the growing population, he said that population growth

should help the city provide a stronger argument when it tries to recruit new business.

#### Preparing for the surge

In June, the city received the results of a housing study by Angelo Planning Group and Johnson Economics. That study predicted a need for 1,151 new housing units in Umatilla in the next 20 years.

In order to encourage developers to fill that need, the city has been making changes to its zoning and development codes, such as decreasing lot size minimums to increase density.

Stockdale said some city projects have been moved up in order to accommodate that expected growth. Improvements to their wastewater treatment plant, for example, will take place in 2021 instead of 2023. They are also looking at developing their water right from the Columbia River and want to either add a water tower or expand an existing one.

Heidi Sipe, superintendent of Umatilla School District, said the district is well-equipped to handle growth if it continues in a "pretty stable way."

"Umatilla has really low class sizes," she said. "Each grade level has room to add students."

The city has a fairly large retired and empty-nester population, she said, which has helped keep the schools below capacity. Despite the city's overall population growth, the school district had 1,364 students in May 2014 and 1,346 students in May 2018.

When the city's planning commission is considering applications for a new housing project, they solicit feedback from the school district on the impact on local schools. A letter provided by Sipe in 2018, for example, estimated that a new subdivision under consideration would add about 28 new students across grade levels, making the impact "manageable" for the district.

While Umatilla may see unusually high growth in the next few years, Stockdale said he doesn't see it bringing a huge cultural shift to the community.

"Going from 7,000 to 9,000 people in five years, if that's the growth we see, I think Umatilla will still feel like a small town, maybe with a few extra restaurants or stores," he said.

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