

Oregon Trail advocates lobby for preservation of ruts on depot

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

As the Columbia Development Authority and U.S. Army work toward transferring the former Umatilla Chemical Depot to local control, Oregon Trail enthusiasts are unhappy with a deal worked out for preserving the sections of Oregon Trail that run through the depot.

Walla Walla historian Daniel Clark, trail advocate Sam Pambrun of Pendleton and Wendell Baskins of the Oregon Historic Trails Advisory Council and Oregon-California Trails Association gave testimony at a meeting of the CDA board on Thursday afternoon. They asked the board to preserve more of the trail than planned and to place a covenant on the property that would bind any future owners of the property to the agreement in perpetuity.

“While the trail advocates would like to preserve the entire trails through the depot, they are willing to discuss with you the designation of practical exceptions. ... What trail advocates are unwilling to accept, which is their bottom line, is the transfer of the depot lands without a necessary protective covenant for this common heritage of ours,” Clark said, reading from a pre-written statement.

While people think of the Oregon Trail as a single line, pioneers actually split into multiple routes through Oregon. A roughly 3½ mile trail runs through the northern part of the depot, while an approximately 5-mile section of ruts runs to the south. Pambrun said evidence indicates the trails date back to at least the 1840s, and the northern trail is the older of the two routes.

Under a deal worked out between the CDA — a partnership between Umatilla County, Morrow County, Port of Morrow, Port of



Contributed photo

Oregon Trail ruts filled with snow can be seen on the former Umatilla Chemical Depot.

Umatilla and Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation — and the CTUIR, the northern trail would be preserved as part of the 5,676-acre wildlife preserve the CTUIR will manage.

The southern portion runs through a National Guard training facility and portions of industrially zoned land that will be transferred to the CDA for industrial development. To mitigate for portions of the trail that would likely be destroyed by the development, the CDA plans to complete aerial documentation of the ruts and to preserve a 200-yard section, complete with educational kiosks and picnic tables for the public to visit and see the ruts for themselves.

Not all Oregon Trail ruts are the same, Pambrun said. Different routes were in use during different time periods and by different numbers of people. Some ruts are better preserved than others, and in longer sections. Sometimes previ-

ous assessments have been incorrect, such as a map that marked where the Army had installed a telex line instead of the actual trail.

An expert still needs to look at the big questions, he told the CDA, which are where the two trails on the depot property are coming from and going to.

“I really don’t think we know enough about this,” he said.

Don Russell, chair of the CDA board, said some people believe that enough of the Oregon Trail has already been preserved and others believe that everything left should remain untouched

forever.

“Somewhere between there’s a happy medium,” he said.

He said the CDA, Army and tribes had worked to come up with a solution that would protect portions of the trail but also balance the need for economic growth.

Companies have expressed interest in major developments on the property that would boost both counties’ tax rolls and bring hundreds of new jobs to the area.

CDA director Greg Smith said they hoped once the land was transferred to the CDA that they could con-

tinue to have conversations with partners on preservation and mitigation while still allowing for development on “key” industrial land the southern trail crosses.

Baskins, speaking for the trail organizations he was a member of, said that “in a perfect world we would save them all, but both organizations understand the need to allow economic development to happen.” However, he said they needed to make sure they saved “significant” portions with a covenant that would make sure their children and grandchildren would still

have access to the trail even after the CDA sold land to developers.

CDA board member Kim Puze said he felt uncomfortable making any permanently binding decision that would bind “our descendants,” not knowing what the future may hold.

Clark stated that such a covenant was circulated in draft form in 2018 for comment, but it was his understanding that Smith brought the process to a halt by rejecting a proposal that the group Restore Oregon be responsible for monitoring and enforcing the covenant.

“Instead of exploring other proposals for a monitoring party, the Army then without consultation declared that the land would be transferred without a covenant,” he said. “This is clearly unacceptable to the parties representing historic trail interests, also fails to protect the cultural values of the tribes, and we believe is subject to legal challenge.”

He said a different organization, the Archeological Conservancy, had offered to do the monitoring instead at no charge. He asked if the Army would use them instead.

Ed Orloski of the Army’s Base Realignment and Closure office responded that he couldn’t speak for whether the Army could change course based on that, but they couldn’t consider the idea without a written proposal outlining all the details. Clark said they could send one.

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