



Butte Fall's community forest project aims to purchase over 400 acres of land

October 14, 2020

BUTTE FALLS, Or.- The city of Butte Falls is surrounded by acres of privately owned forest. Now, the tiny town is looking to purchase the land to make it and keep it local.

The town hopes by owning the forest around it, it can help prevent fires, boost the local economy, and continue ecological preservation.

“People will see a small town can do this,” Butte Falls mayor Linda Spencer said.

Butte Falls has a population of less than five hundred people but they are looking to buy the 430 acres surrounding it. The so-called community forest project is an ambitious plan to purchase the privately-held forest.

Butte Falls need outside help to reach its goal, but Mayor Linda Spencer says it's important to keep their rural way of life at the forefront.

“Because we have a different view of environment, of the forest, and how we were led to it we wanted to make sure that that view came through.”

The state agency Oregon Solutions stepped in to help Butte Falls organize and implement the plan. The agency specializes in working with local communities to make sure ambitious projects stay in the community's hands.

“We come in when invited by communities to help work on projects where there may be a complex layer of ownership,” said Karmen Fore, director of Oregon Solutions.

The forest around Butte Falls is privately held, but the purchase would go through The Trust for Public Lands. Butte Falls hopes to utilize the property to develop tourist interest, expand business, and prevent fires. Mayor Spencer says the community even personally battled the recent South Obenchain fire.

“We've learned that we've got the potential in the town to really manage that property well and to defend it well,” Spencer said of the local firefighting effort.

When assessing the project, Oregon Solutions interviewed dozens of individuals from a variety of organizations, businesses, and public offices. That sort of overlap is part of the effort to make sure the plan goes through smoothly.

“We’ve actually invited a wide range of individuals representing different interest to the table and ask them to sign off on the viability of this project,” said Bill Thorndike.

Bill Thorndike is one of the leaders of the project. He hopes that the forest project will provide a blueprint for other similar small towns.

“I think it will hopefully be a demonstration project to show a small community that can take more control over its future,” Thorndike said.

Mayor Spencer hopes Butte Falls can be an inspiration.

“I think there’s a defeatist attitude and a lot of small towns like ‘oh we’re just gonna wait away and die.’ and that doesn’t have to be the case!”

So far the community forest project is half-funded by a U.S. Forest Service Community Forest Grant. Butte Falls will have to fund the other half itself. Spencer says they hope to have the other half of the money by the end of next year.

About the author:

Grace Smith is co-anchor for NBC5 News at 6. The Chicago native is a recent graduate of University of Miami with a Communication Honors degree specializing in Broadcast Journalism. She minored in Creative Writing and focused her senior thesis on social media usage and engagement. During her time at the University of Miami, she anchored multiple award-winning student television programs, covering everything from music festivals to the Super Bowl.

Though she loved Miami’s beaches, she’s thrilled to be in the Pacific Northwest where she can experience all four seasons and have a real Christmas tree! When she’s not at work, you can find Grace glued to any television showing live sports (especially if it’s the Chicago Bears) or attempting a new recipe as she learns to cook.