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Solutions effort moves toward pinnacle

Discovery Center head hopes for improved awareness and aid

By Kathy Gray
of *The Chronicle*

Greater community awareness is perhaps the biggest thing the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center can expect from the Oregon Solutions process, which will hold its concluding event on July 15.

"For me, personally, the most important thing is that all these people involved in the process really have an understanding of our organization now," said Carolyn Purcell, center executive director.

With help from the governor's office, around 30 people have worked over the past three months to come up with ways to improve the future of the financially strapped Discovery Center, originally touted as a major tourism attraction to The Dalles. But the originally predicted 1 million annual visitors to the center never materialized, and neither did much anticipated federal funding for the center, which is the official interpretive center for the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

As a result, the center has watched its visitor base gradually dwindle from its initial 46,000 in 1998 to just over 30,000 ten years later, according to

statistics provided the group by Purcell. The center continues to rely upon the Kuck Trust — funding intended to sustain only the Wasco County Historical Museum half of the development — for more than a third of its annual budget, as well as annual debt payments of road and water-sewer infrastructure to the center.

For the first time last year, Kuck Trust administrators declined to pay the \$80,000 debt payment on the \$800,000 loan, leaving guarantor Wasco County obligated for the payment. Administrators argue that the payments are a violation of the trust's terms.

"I think that was really the catalyst for the whole process, trying to address the debt issue and get the debt payments met," Purcell said. "I think different people on the team had different ideas of how to do that."

Enter Oregon Solutions, which has tackled challenging projects around Oregon, including the Sherman County Library, Mosier bike and pedestrian path, gorge diesel fume clean-up, flood-ravaged Vernonia Schools and the Oregon Sustainable Agriculture Resource Center.

Oregon Solutions and local attorney Keith Mobley convened a team to tackle the Discovery Center question. And while Purcell, who has worked within the center's challenges for the past eight years, isn't expecting a magic answer, the center has already started to see some benefits from the process.

"There are some really special things that are being pledged," Purcell said. "Chris Zukin is going to provide billboard space. Gary Grossman is going to give us free radio time. The Forest Service is going to come up with money for a new projector in the theater — about \$5,000. We really need that equipment."

The Discovery Center will also get a new business plan out of the bargain, thanks to financial support from local organizations, including the Port of The Dalles, which donated \$500 to fund the process at their June 17 meeting.

"The Discovery Center will be without a business plan unless somebody puts time and effort into it," said Port Commissioner Ken

Farner, who is part of the Solutions team.

Bill Dick, who serves as chairman of the Wasco County Historical Museum and attorney for the port, tied the issue back to port issues, offering personal comments.

He noted the "evaporation" of the federal government's portion of the Discovery Center sustenance, which left Wasco County owing \$800,000.

"I think one of the port's interests is intergovernmental cooperation," Dick said.

In addition, the Discovery Center's opening drove the development of the Chenoweth Interchange, which helped spur development at the Port of The Dalles Industrial Park.

"That interchange has been very important to the port," Farner noted. "I don't know how you quantify it, but having access and escape from this area, without having to wait for a train at the train track has helped us immensely in getting locations here."

It also resulted in the push of urban-level sewer and road infrastructure into a rural portion of west The Dalles, which will benefit development if the urban growth boundary is expanded.

On a 3-2 vote, the port agreed to donate \$500 to the business plan effort. Farner, Kristi McCavic and Bob McFadden supported the move, while Mike Courtney and Rod Runyon opposed.

Other local organizations also contributed to the effort, after the business plan's expected author had to drop out of the process for health reasons. Mid-Columbia Economic Development District is carrying on with the planning process.

"I'm interested to see how this business plan will work," Purcell said. She said Dennis Whitehouse, facilities manager at North Wasco County School District, helped identify facilities needs as one component, which presented a huge question for Purcell.

"In order to be prepared, we should be setting aside over \$90,000 a year," she said. "For a nonprofit organization that can't make it's debt payment, who are we supposed to put aside \$90,000 a year?"

The same question goes for ambitious activity and exhibit ideas that have come out of the solutions process.

"The business plan is going to have to show some means of finding money to do these things," Purcell said. "I'm really interested in seeing how they'll do this."

The ceremony planned for July 15 at 2 p.m. will center around the signing of a Declaration of Cooperation by team members who have pledged some kind of service or collaboration to the Discovery Center.

It will be followed at 3 p.m. at the Google data center by Google's community partnership event. Last year's event was held at the Discovery Center and benefitted The Dalles Habitat for Humanity. This year's event benefits the Discovery Center. Parking for invitees will be staged out of the Discovery Center parking lot and attendees will be bused to the Google location.

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