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Child center makes play for facilities

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East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the depth of the country's child care issues, and the Pendleton Children's Center is attempting to fill the local gap.

The center, a nonprofit, has spent more than a decade trying to establish a facility to help solve Pendleton the area's child care crunch. As the city begins to emerge out of the pandemic, the children's center now is looking toward

Pendleton's two biggest educational institutions — the Pendleton School District and Blue Mountain Community College — to help get a start.

Prior surveys from the district and college have shown a local demand for affordable child care, but the center got extra ammunition when it distributed its own survey in January and February 2020.

Of its 322 respondents, more than 95% agreed there was a need for more child care. Four in five survey takers indicated infant and toddler care was needed and at least two-thirds of respondents wanted more quality, affordability and flexibility out of Pendleton child care.

Kathryn Brown, the secretary and treasurer of the children center's board of directors, said the need is only more acute after the onset of COVID-19.

"The results of the survey

See Facilities, Page A9

Facilities:

Continued from Page A1

is that there was a significant need for infant and toddler care, and also preschool," she said.

Brown is the former publisher of the East Oregonian and an owner of the EO Media Group, the parent company of the East Oregonian.

Brown said the center has spent 2021 looking to address its short-term and long-term facility needs. She said the board looked at office spaces across Pendleton, but none of them had enough space or amenities to meet their requirements.

The center soon zeroed in on BMCC, which had available space. The board eventually identified it as a place where it could house an interim facility while it pursued building a new building that would eventually serve 150 children.

Brown said the potential marriage had advantages for both sides: The children's center could begin offering concrete services while Blue Mountain could use the center to offer child care services to students and staff. Brown said the center expected to launch at the college on Sept. 21, with the number of children it enrolls dependent on the



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

The Pendleton Children's Center is in talks with the Pendleton School Board to acquire this bare lot adjacent to the Pendleton Early Learning Center and construct a new children's center.

college facility it uses.

Green said the college and the center still are trying to identify a specific building to use, but the college was open to helping the nonprofit get started.

"We're the baby step," she said.

But the children's center doesn't want to stop at BMCC. Brown said child care policy experts have told

the board that a child care facility needs to serve at least 100 students to make the concept work financially.

Brown recently met with the Pendleton School Board to begin talks on the children center's acquiring bare land next door to the Pendleton Early Learning Center.

Prior to the 2013 bond, the land had a building that housed the district offices

and Hawthorne Alternative School at various points of time. The bond brought about a facility reshuffle that led to the leveling of the building and an empty lot.

Brown told the school board the children's center was looking to build a new facility on that land, paying a nominal rent to the district. During the presentation, board Chair Debbie McBe

suggested the children's center secure a grant to buy the property outright, which would allow the district to garner fair value for the land while the center doesn't have to worry about rent.

Brown said talks haven't advanced past the presentation but she expects discussions to continue as the school board swears in three new members in July.