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A disco ball spins Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022, in the main hall of the Active Senior Center of Pendleton. The nonprofit Pendleton Children's Center took ownership of the building Jan. 10.

Finding a home

Pendleton Children's Center acquires the former senior center

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — A local nonprofit is looking to turn the Active Senior Center of Pendleton into a facility that serves residents on the other end of the age spectrum.

On Monday, Jan. 10, the Pendleton Children's Center announced it had acquired the senior center at 510 S.W. 10th St. with the intention of renovating it into a child care facility that will eventually serve 150 or more children between the ages of six weeks and kindergarten-age.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

The Active Senior Center of Pendleton, 510 S.W. 10th St., is going to be home to the Pendleton Children's Center.

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Mark Seder/Seder Architecture

A rendering shows the Pendleton Children's Center's plans for the former Active Senior Center of Pendleton.

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"Pendleton could be 'The Most Child-Friendly Community East of the Cascades' — but it will take all of us working together to make this dream a reality," the email announcing the acquisition stated.

The center's announcement ends a months-long process to find a home for the nonprofit. Opportunities to build a child care center on an empty lot across from the Pendleton Early Learning Center and at Stillman Park were scuttled after the school board voted against the proposal and the city realized its historic preservation code prevented it, respectively.

Kathryn Brown, secretary-treasurer of the children's center board, said the group heard back in October that the Pendleton senior center board was readying to part with its main building. By Dec. 1, the children's center board submitted a proposal to the senior center with a number of letters of support from some of Pendleton's top employers, including endorsements from St. Anthony Hospital, Blue Mountain Community College and Interpath Laboratory.

"It was probably overkill, but we really wanted it," Brown said.

In the eyes of the children's center board, the senior center offered a central location and close proximity to the Pendleton Early Learning Center, which serves an overlapping population.

In the coming months, the children's center plans to launch a capital campaign to fund several renovations the building will need before it can open, including adding a playground, classrooms and more bathrooms. While there weren't specific details in the email on how much the nonprofit would need to raise, the email states that the campaign will include multi-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Christine Funk, left, offers a tour Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022, of the former Active Senior Center of Pendleton to Kathryn Brown, Pendleton Children's Center board secretary-treasurer, after the senior center transferred ownership of the facility to the children's center.

ple sponsorship levels and donor recognition options.

Brittney Jackson, a consultant for the children's center with years of experience as a Pendleton child care provider, said the nonprofit will need to conduct a detailed assessment of their new asset before they can formulate a specific goal for their capital campaign.

Nor does the children's center plan to solve Pendleton's child care shortage overnight. Although the group has set a tentative goal of opening later this fall, Jackson said they will start with a modest enrollment before ramping up to their ultimate goal.

Senior center remembered for the good times

On Jan. 12, the building that will become the Pendleton Children's Center looked equipped to handle a room full of seniors.

The folding chairs and tables still were set up for meal time, the senior center's small thrift shop was stocked and an overhead disco ball gently glistened over the main hall.

Senior center board members Christine Funk and

Rachel Eastman provided a tour of the building to Brown and Jackson, one of the final items on their checklist before completely handing over control to the children's center.

The Quonset hut at 510 S.W. 10th St. served a number of purposes since the 1940s: a Seventh-day Adventist church, a recreation hall, a school gym and a furniture store. But since the 1980s, the building belonged to the seniors.

Funk and Eastman said the senior center not only provided a hot meal every day, but also a sense of camaraderie and community for its patrons.

Eastman said she and her husband went a few times, but her husband didn't like going, because there were too many "old people." After he died, Eastman started attending more frequently and was able to connect with other widows who understood what she was going through.

Funk also took to the senior center, where she met her long-term partner. But the good times couldn't prevent modern economic reality from setting in.

Even before the pandemic, the senior center was struggling to keep up with the costs of providing meals and paying utilities. After COVID-19 completely shut down the senior center's operations, the board made the decision to donate the facility.

Funk said the board received an offer to buy the property, but members preferred to donate it to another nonprofit. The board unanimously supported the children's center proposal, especially since many of their patrons were watching grandchildren or even great-grandchildren because their family couldn't find child care.

Funk and Eastman will miss the people they met and commiserated with, but they are glad to pass on the building to an organization that will serve the community. And should the children's center outgrow its environs at some point in time, the pair hopes the organization will pay it forward again.

— *Editor's Note: Kathryn Brown is the vice president of the EO Media Group, the parent company of the East Oregonian.*