

Pendleton Children's Center makes urban renewal pitch

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — After hearing a pitch from Pendleton Children's Center, the Pendleton Development Commission left the door open to financially contributing to the nonprofit, a deviation from its previous philosophy.

Two representatives from the children's center — consultant Britney Jackson and Secretary-Treasurer Kathryn Brown — made their case to the development commission — which also is the Pendleton City Council — at a special meeting, Tuesday, March 8. The nonprofit

organization recently acquired the former Pendleton senior center, 510 S.W. 10th St., and is in the process of buying the office building property next door, all with the goal of providing a space for infant and toddler care.

Jackson highlighted her many years in child care and early childhood development before describing what Pendleton could look like with an adequate supply of childcare. Jackson predicted it would not only be a boon to children and parents, but also teachers, mental health professionals, social workers, employers, law enforcement and more.

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Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

The Active Senior Center of Pendleton, 510 S.W. 10th St., is going to be home to the Pendleton Children's Center. The nonprofit that aims to provide child care is seeking to become part of Pendleton's urban renewal district to qualify for funds from the Pendleton Development Commission.

Pitch:

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"Imagine when this is no longer just my vision and dream, but a reality that everybody gets to wake up to and consequently sleep soundly at night," she said. "A place where children are safe, appreciated and given a chance to develop their skills and strengthen their foundation. Where the windows of opportunity for growth and development do not open and close without being nurtured and maximized."

Jackson's speech segued into Brown's pitch, which focused more on the logistics of what the children's center needed to open and expand.

The children's center acquired the former senior center in January and now is working toward opening in the fall. But the building needs a number of renovations before it can begin welcoming students. According to the children's center, the facility needs new heating, ventilation and air conditioning, plumbing, electrical work, fire suppression sprinklers and more.

The children's center estimates it will take up to \$2 million to complete the remodel and already is fundraising toward that goal. Brown said the children's center has secured \$250,000 from the Oregon Community Foundation and received commitments from some of the city's largest employers, including Hill Meat Co. and St. Anthony Hospital.

Transforming the structure next door from an office building into a child care facility brings its own costs. The children's center plans to allow the building's tenants on the lower floor, which includes a church, a dog groomer and counseling offices, to stay. The upper floors will be used for children's center operations, and renovating that space will cost the nonprofit another \$3.5 million plus another \$600,000 to purchase the building.

Councilor McKennon McDonald told Brown the development commission had traditionally avoided investing in nonprofit projects. For past commissioners, focusing on private projects ensured a rise in property value, which would eventually come back to the urban renewal district through property taxes.

While the children's center plans to hire the equivalent of 40 full-time positions once it's in full operation, Brown argued the economic impact of the children's center was larger than that. By offering quality child care to the city's residents, the children's center would help put Pendletonians back to work.

"I think it will be significant, and over the years that will really add up to many hundreds of thousands of people," she said. "I think when people hear that there's a large, high quality child care center in Pendleton, and they're thinking of moving here or somewhere else, they're going to move to Pendleton."

And while previous iterations of the commission shied away from contributing to nonprofits, there's no law or rule that requires the urban renewal district to direct its funds to for-profit projects. Charles Denight, the commission's associate director, said the development commission has made contributions to nonprofits, including Pendleton Underground Tours and the Horizon Project in the past.

While the commission gave the children's center no assurances or promises,

members seemed amenable to striking a deal. Mayor John Turner encouraged Brown to emphasize the children center's economic development potential in an application to the development commission.

But before it can file an application, the children's center will need to become a part of the urban renewal district itself.

The children's center's facilities lie just outside the district's boundaries, the railroad tracks that form the border to the district lying just northeast of the buildings.

The children's center wasn't the only entity looking for expansion. A couple members of the audience also went up to the podium to tell the commission their properties lie just outside the district but also wanted to be included.

At the request of the commission, Denight said he would look into the laws surrounding urban renewal expansion and would return at a future meeting with more details on the process.

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