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SUMMARY: Mountain life | Urban renewal funds, and shops and condos, bring change to Government Camp

GOVERNMENT CAMP --Every little town needs a museum, but "Govie," as locals call it, isn't like every other little town.

Which is why exhibits in the Mount Hood Cultural Center and Museum include wooden skis, ironwork from Timberline Lodge and a replica of a U.S. Forest Service fire lookout tower.

As Government Camp explodes with new condos, chalets, street improvements and businesses, backers say the 4-year-old museum is a touchstone to the village's heart and history.

"Government Camp is coming into its own," says museum board member Nancy Spencer.

Govie never was an ordinary place. For starters, it's not a city --it's an island of privately owned lots sitting at about 4,000 feet elevation and surrounded by the Mount Hood National Forest.

The 200 to 250 year-round residents endure 5 to 10 feet of snow each winter --locals like to describe Govie as a "drinking community with a snow problem."

"No church, no school, no grange hall --nothing," said museum curator Lloyd Musser, a retired Forest Service snow ranger.

That's changing. Clackamas County approved an urban renewal plan for Government Camp in 1989, making tax increment financing available for public projects and stirring changes that began taking hold in 2001.

Urban renewal money paid for a new sewage treatment plant and extension of a 12-inch water line to the site of the Collins Lake condominium complex. Urban renewal also provided half the purchase price of a 9,000-square-foot bed and breakfast that became home to the museum.

A nonprofit museum group, formed by ski shop owner Betsy Vallian, had already scored a collection. The estate of Everett and Ida Darr, ski area operators and founders of the Mountain Shop in Portland and Government Camp, donated an estimated 4,000 items.

Climbing, skiing and mountain rescue clubs also donated items. The walls are lined with the work of noted landscape photographers Ray Atkeson and Hal Lidell.

Musser said the museum's board agreed to begin displays chronologically, with the early exploration and exploitation of the mountain by white settlers.

"We're not going to do the Native Americans," he said. "(The Confederated Tribes of the) Warm Springs is just down the road, and they do it a heck of a lot better."

The museum enjoys broad community support and wins praise for its displays, but it lacks an elevator. Because it isn't accessible to visitors who use wheelchairs, it can't attract the grants necessary for what Musser calls "whiz-bang interpretive displays."

On the horizon is a \$620,000 to \$650,000 payment on the property that comes due in a couple of years. The museum board and the Clackamas County Development Agency, which oversees the urban renewal program, are talking about how to meet that obligation.

"They've done a wonderful job," said Gary Cook, with the development agency. "But fundraising is not to the point where they'll be able to meet the balloon payment down the road."

One idea is to have the agency buy the building and lease it back to the museum, Cook said.

"It's recognized as a community attribute, and we want to keep it as such," he said.

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