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Washington County Museum “Transformation”
Broadening the view of local history with art, technology, diversity

The Washington County Museum is undergoing a transformation. It has expanded its mission to reflect the full spectrum of Washington County’s history and the museum has adopted the ambitious goal of being a leader among the region’s cultural institutions.

Guided by a new Executive Director and strategic plan, changes are already visible at the 53-year-old facility: new, more diverse exhibits that integrate art and technology, new collaborations with cultural and educational organizations, a spring event honoring two 100-year-old residents, and exciting new family programs.

“Over two months of intense strategic planning we’ve listened to the community, museum and tourism experts, and our members,” said museum board president Gary Imbrie, “They want us to become more relevant, to reflect the cultural diversity of Washington County and more aspects of its history. They want and deserve a first class museum.”

One of the leaders who participated in the strategic planning is Ruthie Reinert, President and CEO of the Washington County Visitors Association. “With its new plan, I see the museum evolving into a place for visitors from outside of the county. Most historic/cultural travelers agree that trips where they can learn something new are more memorable to them. They want to enrich their lives.”

The museum’s executive director, Sam Shogren, said bringing history to life remains the museum’s core role, “But we’ve also learned our community wants to know how art, culture, science and technology contribute to who we are. We have to show how Washington County was guided by a particularly innovative pioneering spirit, from the first settlers to the high tech companies of the present.”

The strategic planning process was guided by museum steward Susan Suran, of the Suran group, a national expert in organizational change and planning.

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Shogren, a veteran history museum manager and consultant, assumed the executive position in October, becoming full-time in January. One of his first actions anticipated the transformation: a partnership with the non-profit Print Arts Northwest that resulted in an exhibit of historic and recent prints. It also gave the museum the opportunity to more effectively engage families.

In January, the museum staff organized the first monthly *Family Day*, drawing 200 participants. Taking the experience beyond the material on the walls, print-makers were on hand to explain how they create their art. Parents and children used a variety of materials and stamps to express their creativity with their own prints. The museum built on that success with a three day Spring Break program, March 24 – 26. *Discovery Days* included activities, storytelling and hands-on demonstrations at the museum.

“Our community expects an educational *experience*,” Shogren said.

Washington County Museum will recognize living history with a new annual event: *A Taste of Washington County*. The May 28 dinner, open to the public, honors Washington County centenarians Barbara Peck and Curtis Tigard. “They have actually experienced, first hand, 100 years of development and change in Washington County that will impact generations to come,” Shogren noted.

Imbrie, the board president, said a critical step will be showing the public how a wide variety of cultures shape our history. “During our strategic planning, we learned that more than 80 languages are spoken here. Washington County may be the most diverse place in Oregon.” In May, the museum’s traveling exhibit on local Native American history, *This Kalapuya Land*, moves to the museum’s main exhibit hall on the PCC Rock Creek campus, accompanied by a large collection of Native American artifacts.

This expanded role has led the museums board of directors to adopt a long-term vision of being Northwest Oregon’s “best and most relevant cultural organization.” Imbrie added, “We are inviting all of the communities within Washington County to help us build it.”

“And to operate as efficiently and as effectively as possible,” Shogren said, “we’re focusing on creative collaborations, reaching out to other cultural and educational organizations to share resources.” For example, landscaping students at PCC Rock Creek are working with museum staff to hone their skills on the museum grounds, just outside their classrooms. The museum development director is also using the expanded mission to seek out new sources of grants and new members.

Shogren even sees opportunity in the economic recession. “In the 1930s, we saw a public that wanted to escape hard times into a world refashioned by arts and culture, attending movies and visiting museums. I think we’re going to see that again – for the institutions that offer a lot of value.”

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Part of that value extends outside the walls, in the museum’s popular outreach programs, including the *Mobile Museum*—which provides educational programs in area schools, the twice monthly *Scout Saturdays*—that helps both Cub Scouts and Girl Scouts to earn merit badges, and the monthly third Wednesday *Crossroads Lectures* on regional history and culture.

The institution also takes care of more than 50,000 historic artifacts and documents.

In many ways, the county’s largest and oldest museum is off to a new start. “I don’t think I could say it any better than our new mission statement does,” said Imbrie, quoting it verbatim, “The Washington County Museum ignites the imagination, actively engaging the public in learning how history, art, technology and our innovative pioneering spirit have shaped today’s communities—bringing to life the diverse cultures that have so richly defined this remarkable region.”

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The Washington County Museum is on the PCC Rock Creek Campus, 17677 NW Springville Road, just east of 185th Ave. The museum connects with Max via bus lines 52 and 67. Hours of operation are 10 a.m. to 4:30 pm Monday – Saturday. For more information about the museum, its events and exhibits, please go to www.washingtoncountymuseum.org.