

# Grants Pass Daily Courier

## Grants Pass City Council sets goals to boost economy, home construction

By Vickie Aldous of the Daily Courier

The Grants Pass City Council adopted a practical list of goals including economic development and more home construction this week — avoiding pie-in-the-sky past goals like developing a Rogue River whitewater park and using tax dollars to restore the towering century-old Redwoods Hotel downtown that's mostly vacant.

City councils in many communities adopt goals, with some coming to fruition and others abandoned, like the 2022 Grants Pass whitewater park and hotel restoration goals that faced massive regulatory and cost obstacles.

Although a wave of new councilors and a new mayor took office in Grants Pass in January, they're focused on many of the same 2023 and 2024 goals and issues of the councilors and mayor they unseated.

The new batch of goals include economic growth, a more vibrant downtown, addressing housing and homelessness, increasing public safety, fiscal stability and an improved park system.

Downtown, the council wants fewer vacancies, more businesses, a wider variety of companies, and more year-round activities and events. Grants Pass will publicize the incentives it offers to fill vacancies, especially in unused upper floors.

"Downtown vitality is super important for Grants Pass. Our downtown is a special place. I've heard from people that it's one of the best in Southern Oregon," said Seth Benham, a business owner who was appointed this year to fill a council vacancy.

He also serves as president of Main Street Grants Pass. Creation of an organization to boost the downtown was a council goal in previous years.

Benham said the downtown is already seeing improvements, including a revitalized First Friday.

During the celebration on the first Friday of each month, businesses stay open late, offering live music, art exhibits and special activities.

The council wants to identify the top blighted properties downtown and help initiate a catalyst project that would yield the biggest return on investment.

The Josephine County Library District is fundraising to eventually build a new multi-million dollar Grants Pass branch downtown. Supporters say the branch would boost visitation and attract people to businesses on the south end of downtown.

The council previously rejected a request to prioritize urban renewal money for the library project, with some councilors noting it wouldn't pay property taxes to the city.

Governments don't pay property taxes to each other.

City urban renewal money comes from property taxes diverted from other needs, like police and fire departments. The goal is to invest in development, boosting future property tax revenue.

Throughout Grants Pass, the council wants to promote start-up and growing businesses, extend infrastructure to make vacant industrial land more enticing, encourage the conversion of vacant business space into housing, and work with partners like Rogue Community College to retain and add skilled workers.



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Visitors enjoy food, drinks and shopping on G Street on Friday afternoon in historic downtown Grants Pass. The City Council adopted goals this week that include boosting the economy downtown and throughout Grants Pass.

Businesses throughout Josephine and Jackson counties often struggle to attract and keep workers because of high housing costs and a lack of supply.

The Grants Pass City Council wants to help increase the supply and price range of homes to rent or buy, including for affordable, transitional, supportive, workforce and market-rate housing.

In January, new councilors dissolved the Grants Pass Housing Advisory Committee, saying it was too focused on low-income housing.

Grants Pass is now seeking applicants for a task force that will review the city's development code to find obstacles that add cost and time delays to projects.

On homelessness, the council set goals to work with community partners to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness and create pathways to housing.

Addressing homelessness is tied in with other goals, including housing and public safety.

"So much of this hinges on what we do with the unhoused crisis that's going on," Benham said about the 2025 list of goals.

For the police and fire departments, the council wants to improve response times, expand crime prevention efforts, use more crime analysis and partner with other organizations to address underlying social issues that affect public safety.

The council wants to explore the feasibility of creating a Grants Pass municipal court.

Medford is among the cities that have municipal courts. The Medford Municipal Court can handle everything from parking and traffic tickets to misdemeanor crimes like low-level theft, disorderly conduct, harassment and criminal trespassing. It has the power to levy fines and impose jail time.

Shoplifting, trespassing, vandalism and disorderly conduct — such as walking into traffic, throwing things and yelling in public spaces — consume large amounts of Grants Pass police officer time. The crimes are often tied to drug use, mental illness and homelessness, with the same people getting arrested over and over.

The overloaded Josephine County district attorney's office sometimes doesn't prosecute those crimes in Josephine County Circuit Court, and the whole state has a shortage of public defenders for low-income defendants.

People who are arrested and jailed for low-level crimes are typically released quickly.

But there's a subset of people who are spending one-third, half and even two-thirds of a year in the Josephine County Jail. They commit a low-level crime, spend time in jail, get released, get arrested again and continue the cycle.

For other goals, the Grants Pass City Council wants to improve the fiscal stability of city government. Steps could include evaluating revenue options, identifying ways to control costs and seeking more grants.

For several years, cost growth has been outpacing revenue growth from sources like property taxes.

Controlling costs is difficult, with union and nonunion city workers pushing for higher pay, state-imposed costs like paid family leave and nationwide inflation.

In 2024, the City Council cut budget items and added a public safety fee on water bills to help close a budget gap.

Regarding the parks system, the council hopes to prioritize park upgrades in underserved neighborhoods and areas with population growth, seek grants and sponsorships, encourage volunteerism and add trees.

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