

bays, a meeting room, a multipurpose room, dining room, kitchen, offices and training space, and a first for the district — sleeping quarters.

At one time the district's commissioners considered other potential sites in Winthrop but concluded they could not find one as suitable. The district created a site advisory committee in 2016 to evaluate other potential locations after citizens complained that the district did not adequately involve the public in planning a new station. Citizens also raised concerns about the Horizon Flats property, particularly the steep, curving road that provides access to the site.

A proposal developed in 2012 to build a 12,500-square-foot station at a cost of about \$2.4 million drew public criticism as too expensive. A levy increase to fund the new station was defeated by voters in 2014.

### 8 (tie) Grizzly restoration

As 2021 began, a lawsuit challenged the Trump administration's decision to abruptly end a six-year study on restoring grizzly bears to the North Cascades.

The decision to stop planning for grizzly bear recovery in the North Cascades violates the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), which requires conservation of wildlife listed as threatened or endangered, according to the lawsuit by the Center for Biological Diversity.

The lawsuit, filed in December 2020, asked that the National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the two lead agencies for grizzly recovery, be ordered to resume planning to restore the threatened species to the North Cascades Ecosystem.

Trump's interior secretary announced in the summer of 2020 that a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for grizzly restoration developed over the previous six years would be shelved. The announcement was made at a meeting in Omak hosted by Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Sunnyside, who has opposed restoring the bears to historical habitat in the North Cascades.

"The Trump administration's purely political decision to axe this conservation program was a massive blow to the grizzly bear recovery program," said Andrea Zaccardi, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity.

As of January 2022, the lawsuit is still pending, Zaccardi said last week. "We have been staying the case in hopes of initiating settlement talks, which won't begin until a director of FWS [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service] is confirmed. Hopefully that will happen soon."

The North Cascades Ecosystem encompasses 9,800 square miles in North Central Washington and 3,800 square miles in British Columbia. The U.S. portion includes all of the North Cascades National Park, and most of the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie and Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forests (including the Methow Valley Ranger District).

The area has been identified as one of six possible grizzly bear recovery zones in the United States, with habitat capable of supporting about 280 grizzly bears. There have been no verified sightings of grizzly bears in

the Washington portion of the ecosystem since 1996. Planning for grizzly recovery in the North Cascades has been underway for more than a decade.

### 8 (tie) Wagner ranch purchase

After a previous attempt to purchase the property fell through, the Methow Conservancy stepped up with a contract (and fundraising effort) to buy the historic Wagner Ranch on East Chewuch Road, and intends to donate the property to the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation to honor the valley's Indigenous people.

The Conservancy said planned to purchase the 324-acre property from the Western Rivers Conservancy (WRC), a Portland, Oregon-based nonprofit that buys and permanently protects land throughout the Western states. The WRC purchased the land in 2018 for about \$3.3 million, with the intent of eventually conveying it to the Yakama Nation's Upper Columbia Habitat Restoration Project. The sale was announced in July 2019.

The expectation was that the parcel would be sold to the Yakama Nation using anticipated funding from the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), but the BPA had decided not to fund the project. So the WRC put the Wagner Ranch back on the market, leading to the Conservancy's action.

The Wagner Ranch is about 5 miles north of Winthrop, east of the Chewuch River. Because of its scenic setting including a pond, pastures and a pristine collection of buildings, the ranch is well-known to locals and visitors who travel on East Chewuch Road. The ranch includes 1.6 miles of Chewuch River frontage, and adjoins a 14,800-acre unit of the Methow Wildlife Area.

Conservancy Executive Director Jason Paulsen said the conservancy intends to make a gift of all the property, but added that a small "uplands," non-riparian portion of the ranch that is east of East Chewuch Road might be sold to help finance the purchase if necessary.

According to "The Smiling Country, a History of the Methow Valley," by former Winthrop librarian Sally Portman, Otto and Kay Wagner purchased the Twisp lumber mill in 1939. The Wagners eventually bought what was then called the Leedy place on East Chewuch Road. The ranch was later sold to the Haub family, owners of Sun Mountain Lodge.

### 9 (tie) Comp plan, at last

After half a dozen years of lawsuits, thousands of pages of public input, and multiple deliberations by planning and county commissioners, Okanogan County has a new comprehensive plan. The county commissioners adopted the plan just two days before the year ended.

The comp plan sets out the vision for the county for the next 20 years, describing how and where the county will grow and the lifestyle its residents want.

The comp plan is a philosophical document that serves as the basis for other county plans. The zoning code will contain more details about exactly where



Photo by Natalie Johnson

The old Twisp Town Hall was demolished over the summer, making room for the new civic center.

development should take place and what kinds of activities and industries are permissible. Plans that protect water and wildlife habitat and that prepare the county for emergencies will also be based on ideals in the comp plan.

Although the new plan has similarities to the 2014 plan, noting the county's diversity of landscapes and people, it also changes the emphasis.

The vision statement in the 2014 plan described "the tremendous extremes in geography and weather patterns [that] have led to great diversity in occupation and lifestyle." It referred to "land and natural resources" and "a clean and healthy environment" for a place to prosper and grow.

The 2021 plan describes "the diverse and rugged natural environment [that] has fostered a range of historic uses and distinct communities" and specifically notes that "clean air, clean water and a healthy environment" nourish wildlife and recreational opportunities. The vision statement in the new plan honors the county's Native American heritage in the very first sentence.

The new plan explicitly supports the opportunity for communities throughout the county to develop their sub-area plans to reflect their own values.

It's too soon to say if the groups that sued the county in court (two conservation groups and the Yakama Nation) over the 2014 plan — its alleged failure to protect water quality and quantity, address wildfire risk, and protect agricultural and forest lands — will find the county's new plan satisfactory and in compliance with state law.

### 10 (tie) Friends of the Pool

Friends of the Pool, the nonprofit organization that is working to replace the Wagner Memorial Pool in Twisp with a new facility to serve the entire Methow Valley community, made progress in 2021 as it launched a feasibility study to come up with proposals for building and funding the ambitious project.

Friends of the Pool launched its "Big Splash" campaign for a new swimming pool in October with a public meeting to gather input from the community. Ballard\*King & Associates, a recreation consulting and planning firm based in Colorado, invited people to share their ideas about a future aquatics facility. The first phase of the feasibility study involves conducting a market analysis that looks at demographics of the Methow Valley and use of the existing pool.

Taking into consideration community input, consultants will consider potential amenities for the new facility and possible locations, and come up with a conceptual plan. They will develop information on construction and operating costs, and analyze how a special recreation district and partnerships could be used to fund a new pool facility.

A final report will be issued in April or May of this year, and there will then be more opportunity for public comment.

The need for a year-round swimming pool was a common theme expressed at the community meeting in 2021. The pool, owned and operated by the Town of Twisp, is only open two-and-a-half months a year. In 2021 it opened June 19 and closed for the summer about a month later due to unhealthy conditions caused by wildfire smoke.

An assessment of the Wagner Pool by an engineering firm a few years ago concluded that the Wagner Pool, built in 1967, "has outlived its life," and confirmed that replacing the pool was more cost-effective than repairing it. Since 2005, Friends of the Pool has raised money and given more than \$400,000 for pool repairs and operating expenses.

One possible funding mechanism is a special recreation district that levies taxes to support the facility. In 2014 a proposed recreation district to support recreation facilities valley-wide was turned down by voters, but a pool or aquatic center proposal would have different parameters.

The Wagner Memorial Pool is currently owned and operated by the Town of Twisp, across from

the town park. It has been heavily used as a valley-wide resource and as the training and competition facility for the Methow Valley Killer Whales swim team.

### 10 (tie) Twisp civic building

As the year ended, the new Twisp civic building and regional communications center had taken full shape on Glover Street, although it won't be completed and occupied until later in 2022. When it opens for business, the building will represent more than a decade of planning, public debate, design revisions and funding efforts.

Ultimately, a last-minute, \$1.5-million appropriation in the state's capital project budget, coming at the end of the 2021 state legislative session, completed the necessary funding to allow the town to tear down the old town hall and start construction on the new civic center on the same site.

As planning progressed over several years, the town struggled to match resources with projected costs, even with the state capital funds allocated in previous years. In May 2020, the first round of construction bids for the new building came in about \$1 million higher than the \$3 million cost estimated at the time by Architects West, the Idaho-based firm that designed the facility. That caused construction on the project, which was expected to begin in 2020, to be postponed to 2021.

A second round of construction bids, which were opened in February 2021, came in higher than the projected cost of about \$2.835 million. The lowest bid of the three submitted was \$3.587 million by Leone & Keeble of Spokane. The Town Council agreed to award a construction contract for the new building, contingent on approval of a federal loan to cover the funding gap. Sales tax, contingency funds, management and other related expenses bring the total project costs to about \$4.7 million. The state capital project funding made the federal loan unnecessary.

Public Works Director Andrew Denham and his staff, working with the architects, "value engineered" the building's specs to bring costs down.

Plans to replace the building began to take shape in 2011, after repairs to a leaky roof brought a host of other problems to light. The wildfire disaster and subsequent power and communications outages in 2014 also made clear the need for a building that could serve as a command center during future emergencies, town officials concluded.

The new one-story building was determined to need more square footage than the current town hall. To make room for construction of the new civic building, the Twisp Council approved vacating a portion of Third Avenue.

**Honorable mention:** Cyber attack takes down county's computer systems; Gebbers reaches settlement with state in COVID case. Also on the ballot: Gray wolves delisting challenged; appeals court ruling opens French Creek Road; new county prosecutor appointed; Burma Shores residential development proposal draws concerns; county sets moratorium on new cannabis farms; Methow Valley School District converts to middle school format; November local elections; Konrads pursue annexation, affordable housing project; Twisp council considers dissolution of PDA.

Natalie Johnson, Don Nelson, Marcy Stamper and Ann McCreary contributed to this article.

### 2020'S TOP STORIES

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- 2 Recall Jim DeTro
- 3 Cold Springs, Pearl Hill fires
- 4 Grizzlies in the North Cascades
- 5 (tie) Ken Westman's legacy
- 5 (tie) Subdivision moratorium
- 5 (tie) Portman retires
- 8. Twisp Restoration Project
- 9. French Creek Road dispute
- 10. (tie) Local elections
- 10. (tie) District 6 levy approved

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