



CITY OF JOHN DAY

---

---

**MEMORANDUM**

---

---

**TO:** JOHN DAY CITY COUNCIL  
**FROM:** NICHOLAS GREEN, CITY MANAGER  
**SUBJECT:** MAINTAINING JOHN DAY'S UNIQUE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IDENTITY  
**DATE:** AUGUST 20, 2019  
**CC:** JOHN DAY PLANNING COMMISSION; ADVISORY COMMITTEES

---

John Day is one of Oregon's last frontier communities. Its unique character is tied to its cultural and historical identity. It was forged on the backs of immigrants and pioneers – rugged souls who came west looking for hope and new opportunities. They were inspired by a sense of adventure – a reckless yearning to go deep into America's wilderness to seek out a land of their own. A place they could call home.

Today, John Day is one of the last communities unblemished by big box stores, trendy retailers and urban sprawl. It's quaint downtown, historic buildings and unique montage of homes, businesses and industry speak to the town's history – its heritage as a mining, ranching and timber community protected in time by its rugged terrain and surrounding wilderness. Its isolation is part of its character – the people of John Day and Grant County learned to survive and thrive independent of outside support. They came together to forge a community that could largely take care of itself. Though never wealthy, it was always self-sufficient.

That character and history lives on today, but it has been largely overshadowed by recent economic downturns from which the community has not fully recovered. The hope remains, the echoes of a more vibrant past still reverberate in the hills surrounding John Day, but a sense of despair also settled over the community as livelihoods were lost, jobs destroyed and generations of John Day residents were forced to look elsewhere for work, education and opportunity.

Recovering is about more than jobs and population growth. It's about restoring our identity. It's about building a community that stands the test of time. It's about hope. Creating a place where people can still pursue opportunities without sacrificing their culture and history.

Honoring John Day's character is a central tenet of the Innovation Gateway Area Plan. The plan identifies several code requirements to ensure the natural resource heritage that shaped John Day is reflected in land use decisions, building design and the natural environment. These principles should also be applied to the rest of the city. Our character and identity should be reflected in our built environment.

To guide the committee's thinking on these principles, I would suggest a simple rubric. Ask yourself this question:

**What should it feel like to come to John Day?**

## PLACEMAKING

The [Project for Public Spaces](#) defines placemaking as “both an overarching idea and a hands-on approach for improving a neighborhood, city, or region”:

*Placemaking inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community. Strengthening the connection between people and the places they share, placemaking refers to a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value. More than just promoting better urban design, placemaking facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution.*

The City of John Day has several places that could be better developed to showcase their unique identity. Using a District Overlay with specific design criteria and development standards that reinforce the distinct character of each district is one approach to accomplish this objective. Some potential districts/places are:

**Downtown/Historic District.** Downtown John Day can be both quaint and frustrating. It's a charming place – with several historic buildings and small shops. It's also run down. Storefronts lack paint, several buildings are structurally deficient or abandoned, it is plagued at times by inadequate parking and at other times appears to be totally abandoned. As one city councilor put it, you could fire a cannon down Main Street at six o'clock in the evening and never hit anything. Historical buildings like the Seventh Day Adventist church are shadowed by abandoned buildings with decaying concrete. One could say John Day's downtown is the place “where you almost stopped but didn't” on your way to somewhere else.

Downtown needs to be more inviting. We need our historic buildings to be more prominent. Our facades and storefronts should be more appealing. We need to create clearly marked public parking spaces, public restrooms and amenities that encourage people to get out of their cars and spend some time with us. While they're here, they need to learn about John Day and Grant County – really come to appreciate how we got here, why we're here and where we're going. Downtown needs to be more pedestrian-oriented but it also needs to push people further into the city to explore our riverfront recreation areas, the Innovation Gateway and our public spaces.

John Day's downtown should also invite people to drive three miles south to Canyon City (and vice versa) to really appreciate our area's heritage. It should make them want to visit Prairie City and Dayville and our other small communities. It could do more to anchor Silvies Valley and our ranchers by emphasizing local food and local places. It should not reek of despair or neglect. It should not suffer from urban blight. Restoring downtown is about creating an inviting space for people to congregate, come together as a community and meet other people.

Specific placemaking investments the council should consider for downtown are:

- 1) **Diversified Parking.** Creating small, dispersed public parking spaces and improving existing parking to accommodate 5<sup>th</sup> wheels, RVs and longer vehicles. The electric vehicle pocket park adjacent to OTEC's substation and other undeveloped land downtown should be acquired by the city and turned into parking.
- 2) **Public Restrooms.** Public restrooms should be built downtown to encourage motorists to stop and to promote pedestrian-oriented activity. These should be built adjacent to or near our parking areas.
- 3) **Public Art and Waypoints.** Wall murals, sculptures and signage for the downtown/historic district should be distinct from other areas of the city. Waypoints should lead visitors to and from other city districts.
- 4) **Clearly Delimited Boundaries & Appropriate Zoning.** The downtown/historic district should extend to Kam Wah Chung and incorporate Ing-Hay Way and portions of NW Canton Street. This area should remain open to small businesses and retailers but should restrict development of box chains. Storefronts and design standards should reflect the historic and cultural identify of John Day.
- 5) **Kam Wah Chung Heritage Site.** The Kam Wah Chung site is our largest tourist attraction and an important part of our history. The City should advocate with state planning officials and elected officials to reinvigorate efforts to build a new interpretive center in John Day. That site should be integrated with trails to the city's integrated park system that emphasize Chinese heritage through lighting, landscaping and design. Things like Chinese lanterns, pavilions and other unique cultural attractions would be appropriate for this location and would make John Day stand out in positive ways from other communities in eastern Oregon by emphasizing something that is uniquely ours.



**Innovation Gateway.** The former Oregon Pine mill site, from Patterson Bridge Road to Johnson Drive, is the western gateway to the city. It is the start of the city limits on both the north and south sides of Highway 26. This should be the area that people recognize as the entrance to John Day. It should invite people to slow down, stop and enjoy our community. It should also clearly show them who we are and what we value.

Several specific investments have been identified for this area. They include: the City shop, greenhouse, community pavilion, reclaimed water lake, water gardens, the potential conversion of the saw mill to a conference center, and a site for a new hotel. Grassy areas around the community pavilion and pond are surrounded by trails connected to the John Day River trail through the Oregon Pine bridge, which will be restored with cross laminate timber provided by DR Johnson Lumber.



The community pavilion should be a public gathering space that emphasizes John Day's timber heritage. It should be complimentary to the Grant County Fairground. Landscaping and design should blend the old and the new. In the words of advisory committee member Levi Manitsas, "honor the past but step on the gas." Creating a balance between innovation and heritage at this site will make it truly unique as a gateway to both the city and to our future.

To emphasize this area as our western approach, and to compliment this investment on the east end of the city, the following specific investments should be considered

- 1) **Monument Signage with Banners.** Large monument signs should be placed at Patterson Bridge Road to mark the west entrance of the city and the Innovation Gateway and at the east entrance to downtown at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Street Extension/City Hall buildings. The western sign will identify the public land offices, OTEC and other businesses at the gateway. The east entrance will identify and direct traffic to the Fairground, John Day River, in city campsites, and to the City Hall/Police Department. Monuments should be built from stone and timber and allow for banners across the highway to identify in-city events that can be periodically updated. An example is shown below.



- 2) **New Hotel.** The design for the new hotel at the west end of Oregon Pine should reflect the design standards for the rest of the Innovation Gateway and incorporate wood, stone and landscaping that works with the natural environment and existing structures.
- 3) **Arts & Culture.** The community pavilion is designed to showcase public art exhibits. These should include pieces from the historical museums and activities should emphasize local foods, food production, and natural resources. The Prairie Sky Center for the Arts could be engaged to help direct the city's investments and the city should consider an Art Walk with pieces that can be periodically updated and exchanged to keep it interesting for locals and visitors alike.

**Riverfront Recreation Area.** The City of John Day, Grant County, JDCC Parks & Recreation District, Grant School District 3 and Oregon State Parks & Recreation Department own and operate over 160 acres of public lands along the John Day River and Canyon Creek. The City's proposed integrated park system will connect six of these spaces: the Innovation Gateway; Davis Creek Park; Hill Family Park; 7<sup>th</sup> Street Sports Complex; Grant County Fairground, and; Kam Wah Chung site.

Like the downtown/historic district and the Innovation Gateway area, the riverfront recreation area should have distinct identity and character. Each park is unique and offers its own amenities, but they also form a cohesive unit that will be connected by Canon Creek and the John Day River with series of multi-modal paths and bridges.

Specific investments in these areas should include:

- 1) **Diverse lodging.** A new hotel, RV campsites, yurts and even tiny homes for BnB establishments would provide a variety of lodging options for visitors to our parks. The City should create a design plan for in-city camping at the site of current public works shops/treatment plant after the existing infrastructure has been removed. This plan should compliment the existing campsites at the Fairground, which could also be expanded upon.
- 2) **Waypoints.** Waypoints that are unique and identify steps to each park would create visually interesting and useful guide-posts for visitors to our parks.
- 3) **Public Amenities.** Thought should be given to placement of public restrooms, parking facilities, and other public amenities along the John Day River and our park systems to make our riverfront more accessible and enjoyable for visitors and residents. Thought should also be given to event hosting and how to accommodate large crowds for events like fair week, sporting events (cross country, swim meets, etc.) and concerts to allow people to park anywhere along the park system and walk comfortably to and from these events.
- 4) **Natural Play Areas.** John Day has many active recreation options at the 7<sup>th</sup> Street Sports complex. Natural play areas and potentially a dog park near the riverfront would compliment these more active recreation options. Picnic shelters for large groups adjacent to the river at the Hill Family Park and near the future city campground and potentially elsewhere along the riverfront would create a variety of options for people to enjoy our waterfront.
- 5) **River Restoration & Improvements.** The John Day River is now accessible by trail along much of its length within the city limits, but

the banks are overgrown, debris covers the ground and little vegetation grows in the area that was dredge mined. Fishing, water sports and other water recreation activities are nearly impossible due to steep banks, woody debris, concrete rip rap and other remnants of past uses. The John Day River is part of our namesake and heritage. We need to enhance it and improve it. A specific plan for the riverfront is needed to guide these investments and engage the public in a meaningful way to restore and improve our river. Partners like ODFW, OPRD, the EPA and other state and federal agencies can assist in this process.

### **PROMOTING JOHN DAY AS A RECREATION GETAWAY**

John Day is leaving significant revenue opportunities on the table because we lack a cohesive strategy for promoting our community as a recreation getaway. Shorter, less expensive and less planning-intensive vacations are becoming increasingly popular options for vacationing.

With the infrastructure investments the City has already made we can position John Day as a recreation getaway for people looking for scenic drives, long weekends or shorter vacations close to home. John Day's downtown could become the gateway to recreating in the Blues, the Malheur National Forest, the John Day Fossil Beds national monument and for visiting our smaller cities and ranches.

Specific investments that would be needed for this include the following.

- 1) **Build stronger relationships.** Travel Oregon, our regional destination organizations and non-profit agencies can assist us in these efforts. Stronger relationships and more coordinated planning are needed to get everyone on the same page about our plans and the outcomes we are seeking. We should also work closer with our working ranches that are trying to attract visitors so that links to their sites include ours, and vice versa.
- 2) **Maps that Make Sense.** The Chamber of Commerce is inundated with maps! We have maps for everything. Scenic drives, destinations, local attractions. It's overwhelming. We need a brochure map of John Day without the distracting advertisements that simply help people navigate our town, learn what to do here and how to enjoy John Day.
- 3) **Marketing Campaign.** People need to know that John Day is open for business! We are getting our story out there, but we need to build on the momentum with a stronger focus on attracting visitors to our community. We're not looking for a tsunami of tourists. We're looking to host (in a responsible way) visitors who want to travel to eastern Oregon, who are looking for a fun and relaxing destination, and who are looking for a frontier vacation.

- 4) **Rentals and Outfitters.** We have a lot of local residents who know their way around our mountains, but they can be intimidating to visitors. Hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, ATVs – you name it, we've got it. But we're really bad at accommodating visitors. You can't rent ATVs or snowmobiles in John Day. You'd have a hard time finding an outfitter to lead you on a guided hike or tour. Even equipping here can be difficult as we don't always offer (or advertise) where you can pick up the things you accidentally left behind on your trip over here. More thought needs to go into how to help strengthen our local businesses and open new avenues for tours, rentals and experiences people vacationing here can have in John Day.

## **SUMMARY**

John Day has a unique opportunity to brand itself as Oregon's last frontier. The City should do the things necessary to maintain that aspect of our culture, heritage and identity. Once it's gone, it's gone forever. We will not get it back. We can grow responsibly, add new residents and increase our population. We can achieve the economic outcomes in our Strategy for Growth and our Community Investment Strategy. We can do these things without sacrificing our identity. But we need to make sure our planning incorporates placemaking efforts to ensure these things don't get lost in the shuffle.

Creating specific districts for the city is one way to recognize and preserve our character. Placemaking investments like the ones outlined in this memo will also help honor our past and maintain those things that are unique to John Day.