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Front Page News

Wednesday, June 26th, 2024

GP School District trades land to RCC for free scholarship program

By Chris Bristol of the Daily Courier

Few people in Grants Pass know the school district has owned more than 350 acres of undeveloped woodland well south of town for 80 years.

On Tuesday, the school board decided it didn't want to sit on the land any more and approved giving it to the Rogue Community College Foundation.

The price: free scholarships to District 7 high school students.

The deal was made without fanfare in part because it has yet to be ratified by the board of the RCC Foundation, which is meeting Thursday.

The land in question is off of Stringer Gap Road, a rural area south of town between New Hope and the Jerome Prairie district that is home to RCC's Redwood Campus.

There are two parcels. One is 320 acres and appraised at \$860,000. The other is 36.07 acres and valued at \$190,000. The road cuts between them.

The properties were given to the school district sometime in the 1940s, back when logging was a mainstay of the economy and there was a need to teach timber basics.

Those times are long gone and the land has sat unused and neglected for decades. These days it is a liability, attracting squatters and garbage.

The school board did not want to speak about the deal publicly until the RCC Foundation signs off on the agreement. It met in executive session Tuesday, and some of the details remain unclear.

But what is known is that the district expects the foundation to immediately set up an account providing \$20,000 per year for five years for scholarships to District 7 high school students.

The foundation, meanwhile, intends to sell the land and set up an endowment for the purpose of generating interest from the sale, which in turn will underwrite scholarships theoretically in perpetuity.

After five years, the foundation will review the status of the endowment fund to determine the level of annual scholarships that can be sustained by the endowment.

The school district could have sold the land itself but chose to partner with the RCC Foundation because both are in the education business and college credits for high school students is good business these days.

District 7 is still trying to recover from a stubborn enrollment decline of 500 students stemming from upheaval caused in part by ill-fated attempts at "distance learning" quarantines during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The district is already budgeting \$100,000 for RCC tuition, which paid last year for about 1,800 credits.

The hope is that the endowment will pay for up to 175 more credits a year, improving the district's marketing efforts in an education field across Southern Oregon that is becoming crowded with charter schools.

Reach city editor Chris Bristol at 541-474-3716 or cbristol@thedailycourier.com.



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409 S.E. 7th Street, Grants Pass, OR 97526-3003 | P.O. Box 1468, Grants Pass, OR 97528-0330
Phone: (541) 474-3700 | Toll-Free in Oregon: (800) 228-0457.
Office Hours: Mon. - Fri. 8 a.m - 5 p.m.