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CREATING A DESTINATION

Eagle photos/Sean Hart
Dan Hixson, who
designed The Links
at Silvies Valley
Ranch, tees off on
the 16th hole of the
Hankins course.

Ranch resort aims to attract visitors, improve economy

By Sean Hart
Blue Mountain Eagle

Most business owners want to make money. Dr. Scott Campbell already did that. In his latest venture, The Retreat and Links at Silvies Valley Ranch, the retired veterinarian hopes only to break even.

His goal: Improve the local economy by bringing in outside money.

His method: Invest his own money to make Grant and Harney counties a destination for tourists.

After six years of building on the ranch in the secluded Silvies Valley between John Day and Burns, Eastern Oregon is now home to a high-end reversible golf course, luxurious lodging and a ranch-to-table restaurant.

The resort recently wrapped up its first season, and plans are underway to begin sell-



LEFT: The Links at Silvies Valley Ranch opened for a trial year in 2017. Dr. Scott Campbell, an owner who attended high school in Burns, hopes the resort will bring destination tourism to Grant and Harney counties. CENTER: Jeff Wallach, left, and Renee Renfrow enjoy a round of golf at The Links at Silvies Valley Ranch. RIGHT: The John Hopper Homestead, built in the late 1800s, is one of six homesteads preserved on the Silvies Valley Ranch.



ing vacation homes on the serene country property.

"What we're trying to do here is give back to our community in a way that's sustainable," Campbell said. "One little thing like this is not going to change the world, but you've got to start someplace."

Recognizing the need

When Campbell graduated from Burns High School in 1975, he said, Harney and Grant counties often boasted the highest per-capita state income with high-paying jobs from lumber and support industries.

Growing up on a ranch, the son of a rural doctor, Campbell said he intended to return to the area after college, but few opportunities existed for him and his wife, Sandy, a registered nurse.

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RESORT

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Instead, they moved away, and Campbell purchased a veterinary hospital in Portland in 1987. He grew the business into Banfield Pet Hospitals, which leased space from PetSmart, with 750 hospitals in 42 states, the United Kingdom and Mexico.

Campbell sold the business and retired a decade ago, about the time he purchased the Silvies Valley Ranch as a real estate investment.

During his time away, however, the counties' economies fell from the best to the worst in the state with the implosion of the lumber industry. He said Oregon State University's dean of forestry told him, even with a virgin forest that had never been harvested, newer technology would allow sustainable logging in the area to be completed by only a few hundred people — not nearly enough to bring back the economic prosperity of his youth.

"You really just need to create a stronger economy," Campbell said. "What's going to be the economy here?"

Community focus

On 90,000 acres of private land with an additional 50,000 acres of federal grazing allotments, Silvies Valley Ranch is a working operation with 2,700-3,500 head of cattle and 1,700 meat goats — all certified organic, Vice President Colby Marshall said.

Marshall, also originally from Burns, formerly served as deputy chief of staff for Rep. Greg Walden but said, after spending time with the Silvies team, he and his wife knew they wanted to raise their children here.

"This is a hometown project, so there's a passion to help those communities we come from," Marshall said.

Campbell said local contractors and materials were used to construct and make upgrades for the resort and golf course. It took six years — instead of one or two with help from outside contractors — but the goal was to help the local community, he said.

In August, the business employed 93 people: about half for the resort and golf course, a quarter for construction and a quarter for the ranch, Campbell said. Next year, when the resort is fully operational, another 30-40 employees will be needed, he said.

With the increase in property value, Campbell said the construction already completed would add significantly to Grant County's tax base, even before building any of the 500 vacation homes approved by the legis-



Eagle photos/Sean Hart

Silvies Valley Ranch Vice President Colby Marshall sends a target down the line at one of the shooting ranges at The Retreat at Silvies Valley Ranch. The Retreat features three shooting ranges: rifleman, sharpshooter and pistolero.



Guests and staff enjoy a cocktail before dinner in the bar at The Retreat at Silvies Valley Ranch.

lature for the property. He said the goal is to sell 5-10 per year, which would be needed for the resort to "break even on a cash-flow basis."

Marshall said they plan to market what the property has in abundance: beautiful vistas, recreational opportunities and quiet.

"It's a new frontier for recreation. It's a new frontier for tourism. It's a new frontier for golf," Marshall said. "If we can attract people here, we can maybe start changing the economy in a positive way."

Economic opportunities

For The Links, course designer Dan Hixson created a reversible course — the first to be started in 500 years, Campbell said, though a course in Michigan was completed before it and several others are now under construction.

The two 18-hole courses share some fairways and greens, and staff alternate between them daily to offer golfers a more diverse experience. Hixson designed the "big, wide course with lots of architectural challenges" to be enjoyable for different levels of golfers.

"We knew we had to have a quality that would draw people from markets all over," Hixson said. "It's really cool to think about people coming to Eastern Oregon who have lived in Oregon their whole life and have

never been here."

The Links also features a nine-hole, par-3 course, and a seven-hole challenge course is under construction.

To avoid competing with courses in Burns and John Day, the course is not priced for local customers — \$290 with a required cart — but residents who are members of the local clubs can golf for \$110. The course can also accommodate more than 80 rounds per day, Campbell said, but the resort only has 34 rooms, potentially boosting the demand for lodging locally and encouraging local economic activity.

"There's a lot of opportunity for people to piggyback on this," Campbell said. "The communities are going to have to learn how to cater to everyone."

The resort features shooting ranges, but not a trap range because Seneca already has one. Local art is displayed, but guests who want to see more will have to travel to local galleries. Tours of the ranch will be offered, but it's not a dude ranch, Campbell said, so others could provide a more hands-on ranch experience for visitors.

"There's a lot of places that certainly aren't as pretty as Grant County that have thriving economies from destination tourism," Campbell said. "If we can bring in people from outside the state — or the country — that's new money."