

Under construction: Work begins on DHS site, other projects

By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

Excavation work has begun in northwest Grants Pass at what will be the new location for the Oregon Department of Human Services.

The work marks the latest of several construction projects begun in the last few months in Grants Pass, as Josephine County pulls out of the Great Recession.

Other local projects currently underway include WinCo Foods grocery store on the Grants Pass Parkway across from Wal-Mart, AllCare health care offices at Seventh Street and Hillcrest Drive, and People's Bank of Commerce at Seventh and J streets. The projects are good news for local subcontractors and their employees



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An artist's rendition shows the new DHS building, which will house offices for child protective services, senior services and aid to needy families. The building will consolidate DHS services now located at four locations in Grants Pass.

One of those, excavator operator Chris Sandquist of Robco, was at work at the DHS site on Tuesday, shoveling dirt and rock into trucks.

"I've got to get back to work," Sandquist called out, after taking a quick break at the site, on Hawthorne Avenue north of Morgan Lane.

The new DHS office building will consolidate local programs dealing with child protective services, senior and disability services, and help for needy families. The programs currently are scattered at four sites around Grants Pass.

"We've outgrown our current situation," explained Portia Harget, a local manager with the agency's self-sufficiency program. "We've outgrown it some time ago. It's much needed."

For more than 25 years, the agency's main local offices — dealing with child welfare, food assistance and financial assistance for needy families — have been located between Sixth and Seventh streets just north of A Street. And for about the last decade, the agency's senior and disability services offices have been located at Vine Street and Hawthorne Avenue. All will move to the new building after construction is finished in the latter half of next year.

The state will then lease the 57,000-square-foot building, being built to suit by Fortis Construction for Melvin Mark Development Co., both of Portland.

Craig Lewis, vice president of Melvin Mark, said the building is pretty basic: single story, with a brick exterior and a glass entryway. It will have 220 parking stalls.

"We think it's going to be a great fit for that neighborhood," Lewis said.

The location has residential to the west, across Hawthorne Avenue, and is surrounded otherwise by commercial and industrial operations, including Roguewood's furniture making facility. "It will be a nice buffer between industrial and residential," Lewis said.

About a block away is Siskiyou Community Health Center.

Workers began excavating the slightly sloping site within the last two weeks. At one point, about 150 truckloads of excavated dirt and rock were being removed a day, Lewis said.

The material is being hauled to a vacant lot that once was a golf driving range, on Vine Street near Hawthorne Avenue, just a few blocks away.

Lewis said it was fortunate to find a property so close. The property owner was happy to get the free fill, according to real estate agent Chris Barnett, who has that seven-acre property listed for sale.

"Everybody's been calling me on that," Barnett said. "A lot of people have been talking about it."