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Columbia County Board of Commissioners approve lease of John Gumm School

(Columbia County, Oregon) – The Columbia County Board of Commissioners recently approved a three-year lease agreement for the main floor of the Olde School, LLC for the John Gumm School building to utilize the facility for the County’s Public Health Department and more adequately social-distanced meeting spaces.

Through December, the lease will be funded through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (or “CARES Act”) designated for necessary expenditures incurred due to the public health emergency with respect to COVID-19.

Under the Cares Act, the County can be reimbursed for expenses that meet certain criteria:

1. The expense is due to the COVID-19 emergency (i.e., the expense would not exist but for COVID-19).
2. The expense is “necessary” (i.e., reasonably necessary in the reasonable judgment of the County).
3. The expense is not filling a shortfall in government revenues. (Revenue replacement is not allowed).
4. Costs were not accounted for in the budget most recently approved as of March 27, 2020

“The Treasury has set forth guidelines that must be met to spend this money, and the most immediate priority within those guidelines we can qualify for is providing a safe and manageable working environment for our employees who are on the front lines of the COVID-19 emergency,” Commissioner Margaret Magruder said. “We must also utilize these funds by December 30, 2020.”

Each Columbia County department was asked to put forth a list of priorities based on their needs for their response to COVID-19. Public Health Director Michael Paul’s top priority was additional space for the Public Health Department.

“We’ve got a growing team. Additional staff has been brought on to help with our communicable disease response and contact tracing. With other increasing changes within our department, we have now gone from three staff members to 15,” Paul said. “We are currently housed in different buildings to adequately social distance, and it’s making it difficult to respond and collaborate as a team.”

Paul said all of these 15 positions are being funded through state or federal grants and/or licensing fees.

Additionally, there have been concerns raised amongst County staff that the County’s current public meeting space is not large enough for the public to attend in person and remain safely socially distanced. The John Gumm facility will allow for a larger public meeting space.

The County will lease the building on a three-year lease commitment at \$5,580 a month with the intent to make an acquisition down the road. The agreement includes a clause that gives the County first right of refusal, so any investments made will not go against the County in a purchase, according to Director of General Services, Casey Garrett.

“Since we have limited time to utilize the CARES Act funding, leasing allows us to have more time to do our due diligence,” Garrett said. “The owner of the building has already put a million plus worth of improvements into the building for things like seismic and environmental upgrades, and we’ll utilize the CARES funding to make some facility upgrades to the main floor to make the space sufficient for county operations.”