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NINEMILE

Historic Ninemile community center wins county stewardship award

PETER FRIESEN peter.friesen@missoulian.com Jun 15, 2017 Updated 11 hrs ago



Rebekah Welch, Missoulian

Sharon Sweeny (front-right), chair of the Nine Mile Community Board, shows advisory board members of Parks and Trails around grounds of Nine Mile's community center on Thursday afternoon. The Parks and Trails staff gave the Nine Mile board a stewardship award for upkeep and management of the historic building as an active post for the community, almost solely on volunteer work.

Standing in lush, knee-high grass behind the Ninemile Community Center, Sharon Sweeney pointed out a wooden fence and row of young trees and shrubs marking the boundary between their property and the neighbors', all put in by volunteers.

Sweeney chairs the Ninemile Community Center board, which won the 2017 Missoula County Parks and Trails Stewardship Award Thursday for their dedication to preserving the former two-room schoolhouse and the surrounding grounds.

“It’s an honor,” Sweeney said. “But it’s not about our board so much as the history of all our board members ... it’s for everybody’s recognition.”

The Stark Schoolhouse was originally built in 1915 after the Anaconda Copper Company started logging operations in the valley.

It served as a de facto meeting center throughout World Wars I and II, even after it stopped serving as the schoolhouse.

In 1948, it was officially named the Ninemile Community Center and the board was established.

Thursday, after County Commissioner Dave Strohmaier and Parks and Trails Board Chair Martha Yates presented the award, Sweeney gave a tour of the schoolhouse, the Ninemile Community Church and their pavilion and grounds.

Sweeney said the schoolhouse basement, which is now used for craft fairs and other events, used to house regular dances and before that it was a gym with a basketball court.

“The people must have been a little short,” she laughed.

The original pair of outhouses are still there, though their wooden bench seats were splintering and overrun with pine needles and cones. A federal grant bought an updated kitchen and indoor bathrooms around a decade ago.

The church, which was moved onto the grounds in 2006, holds an annual Christmas Eve service, filling its 70-person capacity.

“When you look around this place — the painstakingly preserved historic buildings, the meticulous grounds — it’s hard to believe that there isn’t even a single part-time staff person to coordinate routine maintenance,” Yates said in her comments before handing over the award.

In the last two decades, Missoula County has given almost \$19,000 in nine matching grants to the community center, according to Yates.

While Ninemile doesn’t actually have any county parks or trails, Yates said the award can go to any community group who maintains public recreation facilities.

“It is kind of the park for this part of the county,” County board member John Stegmaier said.

Ninemile board member Steve King said the community center and grounds costs about \$5,000 per year in upkeep.

They make up the money through rentals for weddings or parties, and county and federal grants and donations.

The valley is generous, King said, and donations range from \$20-\$40 up to \$1,000, which allows their board to plan events and fix woodpecker holes in the wooden pavilion.

“It’s a well-preserved slice of Western history,” King said. “It’s been a community hub for a hundred years and it’s still thriving.”

Peter Friesen