

Media Kit - Grove of the States Restoration Project

Summary of the project and its significance to Oregon's public

The Grove of the States Restoration Project is supported by state and local government officials, and community non-profit organizations. Corporate and individual sponsorships, and in-kind contributions will also fund the project.

Oregon's Grove of the States is located at the French Prairie Rest Area (southbound I-5 at Milepost 281), near Wilsonville. The Grove is believed to be the oldest arboretum of state trees in the US—and was originally a collection of trees from 53 US states and territories. The concept for the Grove was conceived and implemented by former Oregon Attorney General Robert Thornton in the mid-1960s.

How the Grove was formed

In 1967 Attorney General Thornton hosted the 61st annual conference of the National Association of Attorneys General in Portland. As a conference event, Thornton intended for Oregon's Grove of the States to honor Lady Bird Johnson and the passage of the 1965 Highway Beautification Act.

Thornton involved two large Oregon emissaries in the Grove's logistics: The Oregon State Highway Department (now called Oregon Department of Transportation) contributed a parcel of land and the Oregon Association of Nurserymen (now known as Oregon Association of Nurseries) provided tree stock for the new collection.

Members of the Oregon Green Thumb Program (currently called Experience Works) were responsible for the hands-on construction and planting of the site. In response to the mid-20th century's War on Poverty, the federal government created a small rural demonstration program to help economically challenged retired farmers. It offered them a chance to put their "green thumbs" to work beautifying America, while they earned a much-needed income. It was common to see crews wearing bright green hard hats (throughout Arkansas, New Jersey, Oregon, and Minnesota) painting picnic tables, fixing playground equipment, and serving as groundskeepers for city parks and national forests.

During the August 28, 1967 Grove of the States ceremony, Thornton emphasized the significance of the grove to all Oregonians in his address.

"First it (the Grove) will commemorate the visit to the State of Oregon of Attorneys General from nearly every state in this nation. Secondly, to the people of Oregon, the Grove of the States also will be symbolic... emigrants, if you please, have made this state what it is today and what it will become in the future; for there are scarcely any states in the United States of America today that did not send literally scores of its citizens by covered wagon, ox cart, horseback, sailing ship or on foot... to settle in Oregon."

An article published the following morning in The Oregonian quoted National Association of Attorney Generals President David Buckson, who drew analogies between the Grove and American entrepreneurialism.

“As we watch these trees grow in strength and beauty, may we also watch these United States grow,” Buckson said.

A photo published in the same article depicts South Dakota Attorney General Frank L. Farrar and his wife kneeling beside a tiny white spruce tree. Little did Farrar or other conference participants suspect that over the next half century, the trees would be battling for space and growth of a different kind.

The downward spiral of a national treasure

Unfortunately the trees in the original Grove of the States were planted in symbolic geographical locations without long term plans for their health. Both extreme Pacific Northwest weather and the encroachment of Oregon’s prolific native tree species contributed to the collection’s decline.

Nearly 50 years later, Grove of the States is suffering significant specimen loss from the highly crowded conditions, and it is growing worse each year.

In a 1998 article published in The Oregonian by Terry Richard, Richard noted that after 32 years, the Grove was “... somewhat worse for wear.”

“Due to storm damage, New Hampshire and Massachusetts are no longer represented,” wrote Richard. “And the Arkansas pine remains only as a sawed-off stump.”

Richard affirmed that Pacific Northwest species such as Douglas-fir trees flourished while others struggled to maintain their health.

Currently the original Grove plantings face a looming crisis that cannot be resolved without intervention. A total of eight trees have died and an additional 18 are flagged by professional arborists as being in very poor health.

Oregon Travel Experience assumed management of French Prairie (formerly known as Baldock) Rest Area in 2010, and in 2012 the agency and members of the Oregon Heritage Tree Program performed an assessment of the Grove. It was clear OTE would need help from its partners and other local organizations to save the Grove from demise.

Rescuing the Grove

The first step in preserving and restoring the Grove of the States is to protect the health of the remaining trees. Key to this process is the thinning and/or removal of approximately 40 Douglas-fir trees that line the perimeter of the Grove. The firs have crowded the Grove of the States’ original plantings and created a dense canopy where little sunlight manages to penetrate.

In OTE’s initial project assessment, staff documented over 588 Douglas-fir trees (and one or two other native species) surrounding the Grove. Trees identified for thinning or removal in the restoration project represent approximately two percent of all trees found in the immediate vicinity.

In addition to replanting and relocating Grove trees, restoration efforts will improve accessibility to public walking paths, and provide interpretation about the Grove's origins to Oregon's travelers.

Approximately 4.5 million motorists use French Prairie Rest Area each year. Many are out-of-state travelers who are drawn to the rest stop's park-like beauty and magnificent trees. The Grove of the States retains an important place in Oregon history, and as Thornton aptly noted in his grove dedication speech, is an oasis of beauty that captures the diversity of Oregon's populace.

Project timeline leading up to 50th Anniversary of Grove of the States in 2017

Steps in the GOS Restoration Project:

2016:

- GOS partners worked with landscape architect to create new planting plan
- OTE established RFQ contract to thin trees identified as potential hazards and/or contributing to the ill-health of viable Grove trees
- The GOS partners established sponsorship guidelines for business and/or individual contributions to help fund the restoration project
- Restoration partners (Friends of Trees and Oregon Department of Forestry) are locating Grove replacement trees and establishing a planting date

2017 (slated for):

- Walking pathways and GOS footprint expansion construction will begin
- New representational tree plantings will take place
- New public interpretational signage will be installed
- August 2017: 50th Anniversary of the GOS public celebration

How the GOS restoration is funded

The TIC/OTE will not use any state or federal Highway Fund dollars to support the GOS Restoration Project. Funding is expected to be derived from several sources, including (but not limited to):

- Sponsorships by businesses and/or individuals of key features or work performed
- Grants
- Other donations, cash or volunteer work performed (by business or individuals)

Project contacts

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Project partners

The project is a joint effort between the staff and members of TIC/OTE, the Oregon Department of Forestry, and Friends of Trees.

About Oregon Travel Experience (OTE)

Oregon Travel Experience is the business name of the Oregon Travel Information Council. OTE is charged with helping motorists find their way across Oregon—guiding them safely to services within communities around the state. OTE operates 29 highway safety rest areas (along I-5, I-84, and at Tillamook and Government Camp). An important part of OTE’s mission is preserving the Oregon Heritage Tree and Historical Marker Programs for future generations.

OTE was formed by the Oregon Legislature in 1972 to oversee permits for Interstate Business Logo Signs—the large blue and white signs that direct motorists to upcoming services such as gas, food and lodging. As the agency matured, additional responsibilities and programs were delegated by lawmakers.

Nancy DeSouza is the TIC/OTE Executive Director. The TIC is the agency’s governing body and consists of eight governor-appointed members as well as one member from the Oregon Transportation Commission. The agency website may be found at www.ortravelexperience.com.