



# Carousel of Smiles restoration passes halfway point

*New renderings released of potential new home on Sand Creek*



By Ben Olson  
Reader Staff

If the renovation of the historic Carousel of Smiles was a horse race, it would be rounding the bend and heading for the home stretch.

Restoration of the classic 1920 Allan Herschell carousel began in 2018, two years after owners Clay and Reno Hutchison announced the project to the Sandpoint community. Since then, the ongoing work has received generous support and widespread interest. Hundreds of residents turned out when the horses and machinery were first unpacked from the trailers that housed them for more than 64 years, and later when the Hutchisons and volunteers re-assembled the then-unrestored carousel at the Bonner County Fairgrounds.

Meanwhile, an army of volunteers under the direction of the Hutchisons have poured their hearts into this effort.

“There have been so many volunteers who have helped with this project,” Clay told the *Reader*. “We’ve had probably 100 total volunteers, 50 who have been reasonably active this whole time. This restoration is only

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made possible by the generosity of our volunteers.”

Reno estimated that more than 10,000 volunteer hours have already gone into the renovation effort, which has passed the halfway point.

Volunteers tackled the project one horse at a time. Of the 36 horses, 18 have been brought back fully (maybe more so) to their former glory. Restoration has begun for another eight horses, leaving another 10 that have yet to be started. There are also two chariots waiting to be completed.

The process is slow and methodical, with attention to detail and gentle handling paramount, given the carousel’s vintage.

Progress has also been made on the 14 medallion shields, each of which contains an original head cast out of metal.

“What’s really cool is that we were able to contact the great-grandson of the man who carved the cast heads,” Clay said. “If everything goes really well, the carousel will be done by the end of 2024.”

One of the most exciting aspects of the project is the unveiling of a facility to house the carousel, which will double as a “cultural house” inspired by similar

architecture in small towns across Scandinavian countries. Think of them as cultural centers combining art, recreation and public gathering spots for the public to use all year long.

The Hutchisons tapped local architect Tim Boden to design the building to house the finished carousel, with a tentative plan to place it along Sand Creek at the old Lakeside Inn location west of the tracks by Sandpoint City Beach.

“When Clay came to us and said he wanted to have us do the carousel and arts center, we were thrilled,” Boden told the *Reader*.

When he first began work on the project, Boden said he kayaked to the possible future site and took extensive photos and notes on how the building could best fit there. Known for his work on important projects such as the Amtrak station renovation, the Skyhouse at Schweitzer and the Belwood’s historic renovation, Boden began to see the building grow from the empty space.

“The form of the building was dictated partially on the shape of the carousel,” Boden said. “The carousel is a historic piece of architecture ... and I wanted to form some kind of tent-like

**Header images:** The first 18 restored horses for the Carousel of Smiles. Images courtesy Reno and Clay Hutchison.

**Top:** A rendering of the potential new Carousel of Smiles building sitting on the shores of the Sand Creek west of the train tracks.

feeling to the building.”

“Tim is an incredible local talent,” Reno said. “He’s lived in Sandpoint for a long time and he’s vested in this community. Who better to design a building for a community than him?”

Instead of just a place to contain the carousel, Boden and the Hutchisons collaborated on ideas to turn the future building into an arts and community center that can provide residents and tourists alike somewhere to gather regardless of the season.

“The space will be way bigger than just a carousel,” Reno said. “It’s going to be a community space, where children’s birthday parties can happen, weddings, corporate events. I see this building as a community center that will bring year round activity not only to the carousel, but art exhibits, reading rooms, learning centers. We’re even



hoping to have an artist in residence and maybe even a sculpture park outside.”

Also included in the building are plans for a second floor with a balcony, 2,000 feet of art gallery space and a specially designed roof featuring solar panels that could potentially be tapped to power the carousel itself.

Reno lamented the fact that there is often a lack of places where people without means can go to spend time with family — especially in the winter.

“It takes a lot of money to go skiing, so if you have a building like this in your community to spend an afternoon and it doesn’t really cost anything, that’s something that’s priceless,” she said.

With their sights first set on placing the carousel at the City Beach, the Hutchisons adjusted the potential location to the parking lot along Sand Creek and Bridge Street, and have delayed launching a capital fundraising campaign to cover the costs of the building until the carousel’s new home has been made official.

Sandpoint City Administrator Jennifer Stapleton told the *Reader* that due to a variety of competing uses already at City Beach, as well as taking public comment into account, it was deter-

mined the Sand Creek parking lot was a preferred location for the carousel. Because that property was acquired by the Idaho Transportation Department for the Sand Creek Byway project, Stapleton said City Hall was still doing its “due diligence for the siting and a potential ground lease” for the carousel.

“A survey of the site is almost complete,” Stapleton wrote to the *Reader*. “The city funded the survey and engaged the survey firm to speed up the process. Once the survey is complete, ITD will prepare the appropriate documents to transfer the property. Until this is complete, the city cannot enter into a ground lease with the carousel or move forward with any of the projects anticipated in the adopted concept plan or as may be updated through the downtown waterfront design competition. Ultimately, we expect the land transfer [to] occur next spring.”

The design competition, introduced by the city in September, aims to take a “more holistic approach that provides for broader community participation” in the style of private development, ensuring designs “uniquely fit the goals, history and character of Sandpoint,” according to Stapleton.

Stapleton said the city expects that

the Sand Creek site will remain the preferred site.

“The design teams will not be tasked with designing the carousel building per se, but they will consider the site location and scale of the building related to other publicly owned elements at that site,” she added.

Currently the downtown waterfront concept has included a non-motorized boat launch at that site, as well as a connecting boardwalk from Sand Creek to City Beach that extends under the railway and byway.

Stapleton said that while the land transfer process with ITD was moving slowly, she’s hopeful the transfer and design competition processes will wrap up by next summer.

“We look forward to continuing to work with Clay and Reno, the carousel board of directors, and the many artisans and community volunteers who have continued to move this project forward,” Stapleton said.

The Hutchisons presented a project update including building designs to the Sandpoint City Council on Dec. 7.

While the Hutchisons are excited about the potential of locating the finished project on Sand Creek, Clay

**Above:** A view of the building design from above, showing a series of solar panels above the room housing the carousel. Top and above images courtesy Tim Boden Architecture.

pointed out that, “The carousel itself doesn’t care where it lives, it just wants a place and the community will take care of it.”

Boden agreed.

“This project has just taken the community by storm,” he said. “Clay and Reno are infectious with the way they present this project. ... They are the driving factor behind it and they’ve really kept the momentum going.”

With several hurdles still yet to come, Clay and Reno remain optimistic that the carousel will find its forever home in Sandpoint soon.

“The community loves this carousel,” said Clay. “The carousel is going to love them back.”

*For those interested in catching up on the project, visit [thecarouselofsmiles.org](http://thecarouselofsmiles.org) online or check out the restoration efforts in person at their physical location on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Cedar Street in the Misty Mountain Furniture building.*