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Rounding up the horses

Carousel of Smiles finds a new home

By Ben Olson
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The horses have finally found a home. In 2016, after Clay and Reno Hutchison unpacked two trailers and brought an intact 1920 Allan Herschell carousel into the light for the first time in decades, many in the community knew something special had come to Sandpoint. Of more than 3,000 wooden carousels created during the “Golden Age of Carousels” — from 1870-1930 — fewer than 200 are in operation today, and fewer still are original and intact with the same ponies and mechanisms used in their heyday.

Now, after 20,000 volunteer hours of restoration and several changes of venue, the Hutchisons have found a new home for the beloved project: inside the former Bizarre Bazaar building on Church Street and Fifth Avenue.

The Hutchisons announced they would begin moving the 36 ponies, the studio and workshop to the new location on Oct. 1, joining Marketplace Antiques Center and the Pie Hut, which will both remain in their current locations.

“Due to the cooperation of the building owners, we have secured an option to purchase the building, so this may well be the permanent and operating home for the Carousel and its other anticipated art programs,” Clay told the *Reader*.

The property is an ideal location for the carousel, creating a bridge to the Granary Arts District and the downtown core of Sandpoint.

The Co-Op Gas and Supply Company initially built up the neighborhood in the 1930s, constructing a grain elevator in 1934. After that, 520 Church St. was a tire and auto repair shop in the 1970s, later selling to Celeste Kilmarlin and Deanne Johnson, who ran a gallery and design business called Eklektos until the complex became home to

Marketplace Antiques and the Pie Hut, with the Community Assistance League’s upscale resale store Bizarre Bazaar occupying the main building.

CAL is moving to a new location at 114 S. Boyer Ave. with a reopening scheduled for the last week of August, and their vacancy opened up the opportunity for the Carousel of Smiles.

When the Hutchisons unpacked and showcased the vintage carousel in 2017, it was the first time the horses had gone on display since being packed up by the Kansas State Fair in 1952. Community members turned out in droves to check out the future Sandpoint attraction, buzzing with excitement for the day the project would be complete.

Then the restoration efforts began, with more than 100 volunteers donating tens of thousands of hours to restore 36 hand-carved horses and the 40-foot diameter mechanism that propels them, as well as rounding boards, original artwork and other elements that made these old carousels something special.

“This is an all-volunteer project with North Idaho artists and craftsmen,” Clay said.

The fact that the carousel had been packed away and resurrected completely intact makes the project even more special.

“It’s very rare to find one intact like this,” Clay said.

Restoration of the carousel — now at 85% — is one of two main hurdles the Hutchisons have faced in bringing the ponies back to life. The other is finding a permanent home to share it with the public.

Since bringing the project to Sandpoint and establishing a nonprofit organization, the Hutchisons have been in yearslong talks with the city of Sandpoint to determine where the carousel would find its forever home. The city’s master planning incorporated the carousel into its vision, with locations like City



A rendering of the new location where Carousel of Smiles will move starting Oct. 1. Courtesy photo.

Beach offered as possibilities. Eventually, the city and the Hutchisons believed the parking lot on Sand Creek just west of City Beach — which locals will remember as the old Lakeside Inn location — would house the carousel in a “cultural house,” inspired by architecture in small towns across Scandinavia. The Hutchisons tapped Tim Boden with Boden Architecture, who designed a unique facility that they said was an example of “destination architecture.”

“Despite not requesting any taxpayer or city funds to be used for this project, working over the years within Sandpoint’s governmental dynamics — with its various priorities and agendas — has been more difficult and elusive than anticipated,” Clay said.

After years of back-and-forth discussions with then-City Administrator Jennifer Stapleton, then-Mayor Shelby Rognstad and councilors, the Hutchisons’ dream of finding a home for the carousel continued to experience setbacks as the city’s design competition, lease arrangements with ITD and other hurdles continued to delay the process.

Unable to launch fundraising efforts because of the uncertainty of where it would end up, the Carousel of Smiles was stuck in limbo.

After Mayor Jeremy Grimm took office in January 2024, the Hutchisons met with him to take the temperature on finding a location. Grimm

told the *Reader* he was a fan of the project, but was pivoting from “visionary amenity projects to practical infrastructure” projects.

“I told them at that point, learning from the James E. Russell Center, the location and placing and encumbering public ground is such a more sensitive process and so wrought with feedback, it’s not something I was comfortable making as an elected official,” Grimm told the *Reader*.

“If they wanted to pursue that location [along Sand Creek], I was willing to put it to a vote of the public and I would follow the will of the public,” Grimm said.

With the National Carousel Association’s annual convention slated to take place in Sandpoint in September 2025, where the restoration project will be showcased — a huge deal in itself — the Hutchisons felt a great deal of pressure to secure a home. When the 520 Church St. location opened up, they jumped on it.

“I think time brings you to exactly where you need to be,” said Reno. “Like so many other aspects of this project, it’s almost like it’s fate that that building came available at a time when we really needed to house it.”

Even though it didn’t work out with the carousel and the city of Sandpoint, Grimm applauded the project.

“I’m thrilled they found a private sector solution

that works for them and works for their supporters,” he said. “I think the carousel will inevitably be a draw and benefit downtown. It will be of interest to many people. It’s unique and that location will anchor it near the arts district. ... I salute anyone who is that passionate to put that much of their personal financial backing and energy to preserve a historic timepiece.”

The Hutchisons told the *Reader* they expect restoration efforts to wrap up soon, with the carousel ready to operate by the fall of 2025. The completion of the project is especially touching for Reno, who said it’s a way to give back to this community that has given her so much over the years.

“I’ve lived here since 1981 and I was a single parent of three children a lot of those years,” she said. “It was hard to live here as a single parent. That I can give something like this to the community that held me up through some of my hardest moments, I can’t even find a word to describe how that makes me feel. It’s a way for me to pass on some magic that I always wanted to create for my own kids but couldn’t.”

To learn more about the Carousel of Smiles, visit thecarousel-ofsmiles.org.

