

O P I N I O N



Mr. SHS raised funds for Family Access Network with a pie-in-the-face event.

PHOTO BY JERRY BALDOCK

## School board protected coaches

By **Joey Hougham**  
Guest Columnist

The Sisters School Board took little action at their January 16 hearing concerning what actions should be taken against Brittany and Tom Neibergall, the SHS girls basketball coaches.

According to the Sisters School District's own report, the Neibergalls caused psychological harm to several student athletes during the 2018-2019 season when the coaches violated the District's policy against bullying, harassing, and intimidating students.

During the executive session, the School Board was guided by the District's legal counsel as well as the chairman's arbitrary rules and procedures that restricted the information the Board members were able to consider. Ultimately, this led to inaction and a missed opportunity to stand up to such abuse and to support student victims of such conduct.

The School Board agreed that the Neibergall coaching style previously involved harassment, intimidation and bullying of several girls in violation of school policy. The Department of Health Services (DHS), as well as mental-health experts, define this type of behavior as abusive.

The School Board agreed that the girls' testimony, claiming they were abused, was credible and believable and were sorry that it happened.

The School Board agreed that the Neibergalls' coaching style interfered with the girls' education and resulted in harm to the girls' psychological health.

The School Board agreed that the athletic director, Gary Thorson, failed to obtain positive references as was previously reported by the District's HR director. Mr. Thorson was warned by a highly respected Central Oregon school administrator before the season even started about issues with Tom Neibergall, that he would bring "trouble" to the program. Thorson ignored those warnings and then failed to disclose those warnings to investigators.

The Board recognized that the Neibergall coaching style last season was inappropriate, but agreed to retain them as coaches for another season based on the strength of the administration's assurance that it had taken corrective action with the Neibergalls and that they had modified their coaching style. However, in the January 16 hearing, Tom Neibergall testified that the administration had not taken any corrective action and that he continues to apply the same approach to coaching as he always has.

The retention of the Neibergalls was based on the false assumption that the administration had taken corrective action and that the Neibergalls had changed their ways. Tom Neibergall told the Board at the hearing that nobody had asked him to change and that he has not changed his ways.

An untold piece of the story includes several student athletes that were significantly affected by the Neibergalls' coaching behavior, to the point where they could not be around them because of fear and anxiety. This meant that they could not participate in a sport they had been involved with since elementary school.

The administration, through their action in keeping the coaches, left the victims with no other choice but to retreat while the coaches remained. The administration claimed they wanted the players back on the court but at the expense of facing their perpetrators which caused fear and anxiety. The District tried to mitigate this issue by hiring a monitor to keep the coaches in check. The District asked the Houghams to sign a confidentiality provision within a safety plan. Protecting the coaches was more important than the players.

This is a case where the School District did not do the right thing by terminating the coaches. Now they're having to navigate a potential legal mess that could have been eliminated from the beginning by protecting the kids instead of coaches.

## Editorial...

# A nation of laws

The Founders of this nation feared and detested one thing above all others: arbitrary power.

That's why the United States of America was created to be a nation of laws, not of men. That's why presidents should not intervene in judicial matters. It's also why the City of Sisters should not have the power to determine what individual businesses can or can't set up shop here.

Cities establish zoning to set what *types* of businesses are allowed in a particular area. Once that zoning is established, the government cannot decide what individual business is "allowed." If a business fits the zoning and code criteria, they have a right under the law to operate.

Neither City staff, nor the Planning Commission, nor the City Council can

decide that they like Business A and they don't like Business B, so Business B is out of luck. And that's as it should be. No government should be able to arbitrarily discriminate and pick who gets to enter the marketplace.

Not everybody is going to be happy with every outcome under such a system. But those who would seek satisfaction by allowing government to dictate who wins and who loses in the local economy might do well to consider how unhappy they would be if that kind of arbitrary power was turned on them.

Jim Cornelius, Editor in Chief

## Sisters Weather Forecast

Courtesy of the National Weather Service, Pendleton, Oregon

Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday
Sunny 47/23	Mostly Cloudy 49/27	Mostly Sunny 53/30	Partly Cloudy 53/33	Snow Showers 40/27	Partly Cloudy 40/22

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