

FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK

Taking a break from sports, but not news or community

The Observer is taking a break from sports coverage. The outbreak of COVID-19, the 2019 coronavirus, has prompted the Oregon School Activities Association and local school districts to suspend sports seasons. The Cascade Collegiate Conference and Eastern Oregon University also nixed events for the time being, as have the NBA and NHL. Major League Baseball is pushing its season back as well.



PHIL WRIGHT
OBSERVER EDITOR

No high school or college sports means there is quite a lot less

to sports to cover. No sports news makes it tough to fill a sports section.

We understand the precautions are necessary to prevent the spread of the disease, and we would like to see them end as soon as possible. But for the next couple of weeks, Ronald Bond, our intrepid sports reporter and editor, is taking on some new assignments — news coverage and filling in as editor of our related paper, the Baker City Herald, while its editor, Jayson Jacoby, takes a well-deserved vacation.

We still could have a sports section during this span as stories crop up, such as college signings. We also will cover what the virus means for high school and college sports as new developments occur.

We also may find ourselves in a longer break from regular sports coverage.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released new a “interim guidance” Sunday for the 2019 coronavirus. The latest significant recommendation: For the next eight weeks, organizers should cancel or postpone in-person events of 50 people or more throughout the United States.

State and local authorities have not ordered such drastic measures. But with Oregon Gov. Kate Brown considering shutting down restaurants and bars, postponing baseball games and track meets for two months does not seem so far out.

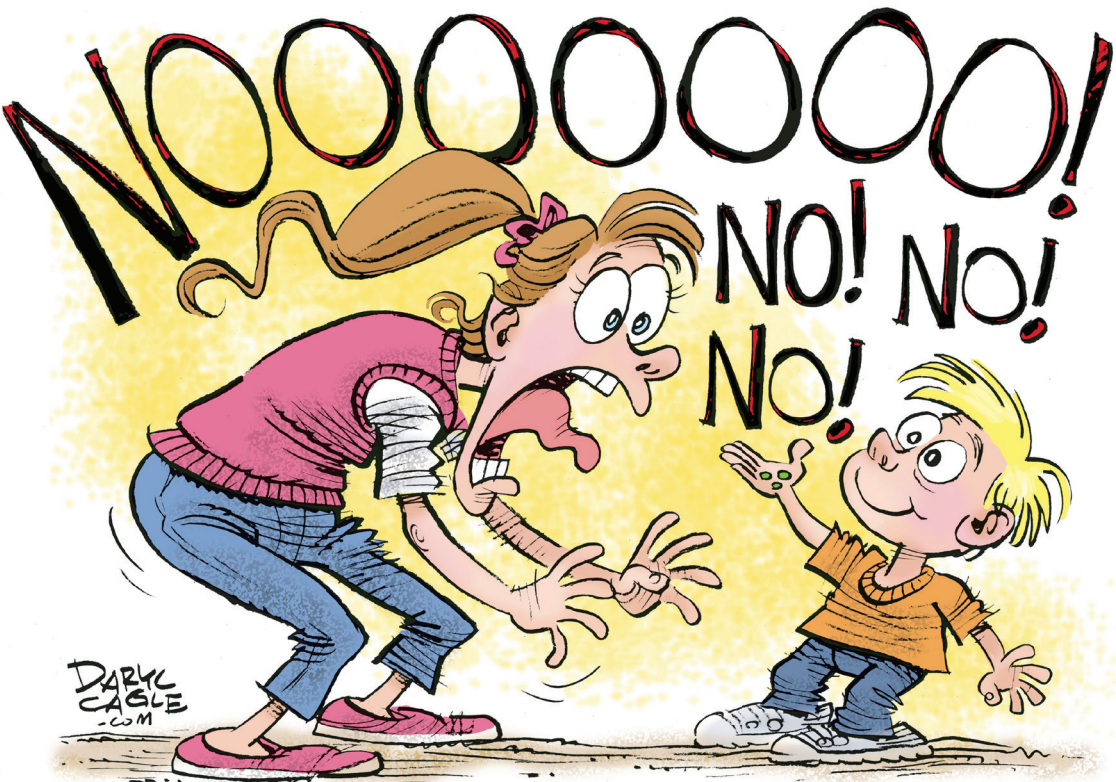
Once we pass this crisis, The Observer will return to providing the sports reporting our readers have come to rely on. The break also provides us the opportunity to evaluate our work and consider overhauling the look of the sports section. We think we provide solid reporting on local sports, so we should have a sports section that looks as good as the reporting is. The Observer last week began working with a new page designer. The process has not been flawless, but we are moving toward making the paper look better than it has in some time.

The Observer also cannot ignore how drastic the changes to our lives have become in the span of a few weeks due to the outbreak. While we have plenty of other local topics to cover — and we will cover them — the coronavirus and its various tendrils are news. We are dedicated to reporting on as many of those as we can.

Along that line, residents of small towns in Eastern Oregon take some pride in supporting their community. But the virus has contaminated that attitude, leading to clearing store shelves of hand sanitizer, canned goods and toilet paper.

Yes, we need to be careful about contact in public. Yes, we should limit the size of gatherings. Yes, we want to protect our families first, that’s a natural reaction in a crisis.

But when stores stock up again, we need to be mindful we’re not the only ones who need supplies. Nothing about the outbreak of COVID-19 should spark us to abandon community.



YOUNG JACK TRADED HIS MOM'S HAND SANITIZER FOR THREE MAGIC BEANS.

MY VOICE

Looking toward the future of BMHA

Big changes are happening at the Blue Mountain Humane Association shelter, also known in the community as the Animal Rescue and Adoption Center of Eastern Oregon. Just over a month ago, the previous director resigned his position after serving for the better part of a decade, and thus began a wave of change.

There are understandable concerns. We have them too. The new members of the board are involved for the very reasons outlined in the recent articles and editorial printed by The Observer. There hasn’t been clear communication with the county. There hasn’t been a good relationship with Animal Control or the local veterinarians. There haven’t been consistent business hours or enough people to operate the facility well. Most important, there hasn’t been a good relationship with the community for a long time. We are here to change that.

In the two and a half weeks since the first Observer article was published, there has been a number of rumors floating around. Rumors that, at this time, are just that — only rumors. What we can confirm is that significant turnover in the BMHA/ARACEO board has occurred. Seven of the nine board members are newly appointed.

One of our major initiatives with this turnover is to repair and enhance the relationship with the community at large. The board members are aware of the previous director’s reputation in the community and the concerns about possible “sketchy” goings-on out at the shelter. In the recent editorial by Phil Wright, the new board was accused of “shutting out The Observer,” and through that, “shutting out the very public the association seeks to build trust with.” That is not at all our intention. What we seek is to have a full understanding of what the

board is walking into and to be able to provide the very transparency desired by all parties. We do not want to spread more misinformation or rumors by speaking publicly when we don’t have all the information.

We are proud that we have increased volunteer hours from 70 hours in February 2019 to 460 in February 2020. We have provided Animal Control unrestricted access to the shelter — something that hasn’t been allowed since shortly after John Brinlee became executive director. We have updated our Facebook page, initiated an Instagram account for increased exposure and launched an entirely revamped website that features our animals and provides a monthly letter from the president to update the community about what’s happening at the shelter.

On the horizon, we will be addressing our business hours, creating foster and updating adoption policies, initiating volunteer training and “big project” days, and coordinating with ASPCA to ensure our facility is no longer described as a “hoarding situation,” which they noted in their recent visit on Feb. 22. We are also working to improve our cleaning procedures for the safety and well-being of all animals in our care.

All of this being said, we were deeply disappointed by the editorial published in the Feb. 29 edition of The Observer. Despite our requests for more time, they pushed forward and we feel discouraged by the lack of support. We explained to The Observer, off the record, what we were trying to do and why we needed time and were informed it was “too late” by both Phil and Sabrina Thompson. We attempted to reschedule the photo session and interview with Sabrina referenced in the editorial, but our calls and requests went unanswered. One of our board members also reached out and indicated he was The

Observer’s point of contact and they ignored that request and instead attempted to reach out to all of the board members at various points through Facebook Messenger. We felt it would be inappropriate and unprofessional for us to comment as we did not have all the facts at that time.

So what are we asking for? Time. Space. Trust.

Time to assess and address the current situation at the shelter. That includes infrastructure repairs, outside space clean-up, revising and updating policies and procedures, assessing our financial situation and budget, creating standard operating procedures, and ensuring we have adequate staff to care for the animals as they need — and deserve — to be cared for.

Space to address these tasks without pressure from The Observer to speak when we aren’t ready. We fully intend to share our findings, but appropriately and within the confines of the law. Right now, we are not yet in a place to share as we do not have full understanding of where we stand.

Trust — this one is hard. We are asking something of you that you’ve given freely in the past and had violated. What we are asking is not that you give us trust without strings, but rather give us time to show you we deserve your trust.

We understand all these changes are a lot to take. We believe that, given the opportunity, the work we are doing will all make sense and create a better shelter for the community. We can and should do this together. Let’s get to work.

Blue Mountain Humane Association board:
Beverly Beach, president; **Bob Rynearson**, vice president;
Bri Troutman, secretary;
Terri Bradley, treasurer;
Mary Horn, **Lani Jones**, **Rebecca Lord** and **Shawn Mangum**, board members

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