

Opinion / Local

— EDITORIAL —

Econ dev services worth six figures?

We definitely raised our eyebrows this week after the Economic Development Board voted to renew Representative Greg Smith's contract to continue providing economic development services—to the tune of \$96K per year in Smith's salary alone.

First, we were surprised because we didn't see a mention of Smith's contract negotiation on any agenda. Maybe we managed to miss it somehow. However, if we hadn't been a little curious and scheduled a reporter for that meeting, this bit of information would have slipped by unnoticed.

Though the County's Budget Committee added the funds to the economic development line item during the budgeting process two weeks ago, which enabled the Economic Development Board to vote on whether to extend the contract, there was quite a bit of concern among the Budget Committee members. Member Pat Sullivan, for one, found Smith's salary exorbitant and the benefits provided to the County minimal.

In the interest of full and honest disclosure, we had one incredibly negative experience ourselves when one of our own turned to that office for "confidential" assistance back in 2012 and 2013. We're trying not to let that experience taint our opinion of the issue.

And that issue is whether or not the benefits of the Economic Development office are worth six figures to local taxpayers.

Keep in mind that Smith's salary is just the beginning. That office is staffed with one other employee. There are other expenses such as rent and utilities. There

are even expenses past that for marketing materials development, travel, trade show attendance, etc. This doesn't add up to chump change.

In addition, for years Smith himself has provided similar economic development services for some of our neighboring counties. We don't believe it would be possible for anyone under those circumstances to remain loyal or faithful to just one county. Not if they wanted to keep those two or three other paychecks coming in.

Wouldn't it be wiser to simply hire one person, dedicated solely to Baker County's interests? Or ask Smith to stay ... fiscally monogamous?

In addition, since Smith is a legislator, when session is in, he isn't here. At all.

We can safely say from experience that entry-level economic development coordinators in the private sector, whose posted duties are identical or nearly identical to Smith's, begin around the \$40-45K range.

Besides, we have several resources in our area that are already here to promote and market us. We have the Chamber of Commerce. We have Historic Baker City, which is currently rising back from the ashes. We have the Small Business Development Center hosted by Blue Mountain Community College with Gene Stackle and Jeff Nelson. We've seen these guys get things done. The Base Camp Baker site, featuring a huge Facebook following created by the photography there is another asset. The loan assistance the Economic Development office offers really amounts to referrals to local banks or to the Northeast Oregon Economic Development District, all of which will advise applicants on their own without a middleman, as we discovered. Does anyone else see an expensive duplication of effort?

Trade shows, presentations, pretty speeches, and smoke and mirrors are not bringing new businesses into the County. And yet that same Economic Development Board also gave Smith the go-ahead to attend one particular trade show in Utah for the third year.

What businesses came to Baker County as a result of those first two years?

We think it's time for change. Sadly, with the signing of this contract renewal, we're in for two more years of the same.

—The Baker County Press Editorial Board

— GUEST OPINION —

Closed meetings and conspiracies: Creating controversy out of thin air

By Suzan Ellis Jones

I would like to put to rest the silly accusations stated about the Baker County Republicans in the last two issues of *The Record-Courier*. They are born of ignorance. That paper's editor raises questions about the local Republicans holding "closed" rather than "open" meetings. She expresses anger that only the 46 existing Republican PCPs are allowed to attend when the meetings are closed. "That's a whole lot of Baker County citizens ... who aren't allowed to attend," she complains.

Well, yes! Because these are meetings for *Republican PCPs* – the same PCPs who donate money as well as hundreds of hours of volunteer time in this community. If you're on the Board of Directors for Pepsi, are you offended when you're not allowed to sit in on a Board meeting for Coke? If you're a Boy Scout are you angry when you're not notified about Girl Scout meetings?

In the past three years, only a handful of our monthly meetings have been closed. The remainder, including the one last week, were open to the public. The Democrats and Republicans in most counties across most states hold closed meetings. By comparison, we're extremely open. Our closed meetings were specifically to hold the nominating convention for the replacement County Commissioner, which required ballot security, as most would imagine. Other closed meetings have been to handle internal business such as the welcoming of new PCPs, election of new officers, resolution debate, etc. Holding a closed meeting to deal with internal business is just good common sense. Apparently to some it is suddenly fodder for a conspiracy theory.

That paper's editor, who signs off only as "GDP," also questions whether our group may be violating public meeting law.

The answer is no! A little legal research would have shown that fact prior to print. Political central committees aren't governed under public meeting law the way City Council members or County Commissioners are. ORS 248.015 Sec. 3 (7) states we shall not be considered a public officer. We're treated, by law, more as a private political action committee.

We realize the complaints about the legality of closed meetings are coming primarily from a handful of people who signed on to support non-partisan initiative 1-63, along with GDP and her family. Our group opposed that initiative.



Submitted Photo

Suzan Ellis Jones is the current Chair of the Baker County Republicans.

We saw this complaint pop up online in various venues, in some odd effort to detract from the local party we suppose—to detract and distract from the actual issue at hand. Now that 1-63 has failed, it seems the proponents' axe still needs grinding.

GDP refers to our monthly meetings as "secret." The meeting schedule is announced at the beginning of the calendar year, and then again two weeks in advance to all 46 members, and when they're open, announced in press releases to most local newspapers in advance. I guess we need to look up the definition of "secret." Somebody sure has it wrong.

This same editorial then skips on to accuse the County Commissioners of having a hidden agenda regarding a Public Lands Resolution presented to them by our group. She accuses them of suppressing information from the agenda, when this just isn't so. The editorial also reads: "One of the important items which was absent from the May 20th agenda was a representative from the Baker County Republican Central Committee ..."

Chuck Chase, who presented our draft of the resolution is a duly elected precinct committeeman and Chair of the committee's Natural Resource Committee, which drafted this resolution. Who better to present this resolution? He chose to attend the Commissioners' session and present the resolution during the Citizens Participation section of the meeting. This section of the meeting is open to all, and items within it are never specified in advance in an agenda. When Mr. Chase tried to respond with a Letter to the Editor to *The Record-Courier*, GDP refused to print it, and sent a letter to him calling him rude, said he was "spewing hate" and that his opinion was "nonsense."

GDP goes on to question why Montana Rep. Kerry White attended the same meeting as Chase, and why his visit also wasn't on the agenda. Well, because it was a public meeting and people can show up without notice – which is exactly what White did while here on vacation with family.

It's ironic that in one breath, the editorial complains about Republicans not being open enough with meetings, and in the next, has a problem with us legally attending them. It's enough to make your head spin.

— LETTERS TO THE EDITOR —

Does BLM listens when public speaks?

To the Editor:

The comments are in and the public has spoken — or has it? Over 400 letters sent to the BLM in response to the Boardman to Hemingway Draft Environmental Impact Statement all nicely sorted by category of responder — federal, tribal, state, county, local, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, businesses, and finally individuals. The next sort the BLM says will be by subject, wonderful!

Most letters are well-written, thoughtful, sincere and provide many suggestions for improvement. You can count on both hands the number of letters in support of the project. Even Idaho Power spends 391 pages "improving" the DEIS that so many of us have found inadequate.

There has been no indication that the BLM, with the Wallowa-Whitman tagging along, is considering significant changes.

With all governmental bodies critical if not outright opposed, and many of our friends and neighbors in the same position, to continue with the same project makes no sense at all.

The need is questioned, the route is outright opposed by most, Oregon receives no real benefit, sage grouse legislation is changing and the cost is now estimated at \$1.2 billion.

Please read the letters, they are an eye-opener.

Letters are here: <http://www.boardmantohemingway.com/deiscomments.aspx>

Regardless of what and when the BLM decides, we will have only 30 days to respond. The Wallowa-Whitman has its Travel Management Plan, the BLM has its Boardman to Hemingway project and each of them seems to be ignoring the public that they should be serving.

Gail Carbeiner
Bend

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Wallowa Mountain Loop Road construction schedule set

Southern 13 miles closed and gated until June 18.

June 18 – June 30:

Southern 13 miles closed and gated Tuesday at 8 am thru Thursday at 5 p.m.

July 1 – October 15:

Open every day but travelers can expect up to 1 hour delays and a flagger / pilot car.

Forest Service Road (FSR) 66 to Fish Lake is

open and free and clear of

snow all the way through

from Halfway to the 39 rd.

This is the detour route for

the construction on the 39

road.

The detour route is 30

miles in length and is a

well-maintained single-

lane gravel road with pull-

outs. The route is suitable

for vehicles with trailers;

however it is not recom-

ended for motor homes.

If unsure of suitability,

please contact the Wallowa

Mountains Office at 541-

426-5546 or the Pine Field

Office at 541-742-7511.

Letter to the Editor Policy: The Baker County Press reserves the right not to publish letters containing factual falsehoods or incoherent narrative. Letters promoting or detracting from specific for-profit businesses may not be published. Word limit is 375 words per letter. Letters are limited to one every other week per author. Letters should be submitted to Editor@TheBakerCountyPress.com.

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