

Local

Bus driver shortage

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

“We get people who come through the door (the entrance of the Bus Barn, located at 2990 D Street, just west of 10th Street), and they say, ‘I’d like to talk to you about bus driving,’ and, we lay it all out for them. They turn around and leave, and, that’s the last time we ever see them,” Osborn said. This year, he said three individuals approached the District about the positions in this manner, without further contact.

The District has lost at least 10 drivers over the last couple of years, said Osborn, because of other employment opportunities, retirement, etc. In addition to that, he said, “Not to mention, you’ve got to be a very special person to drive a school bus. Not everybody can do it... You’ve got to be able to think in 14 different directions at the same time.”

He explained that many individuals have made it partially through training, and were not employed as drivers, because of the inability to handle the difficulties of the position on a regular basis.

Bus driver Shanna Golden (Osborn’s sister) added, “When somebody gets on that bus, and you have a bus load of kids—you’re out at midnight, and you have a bus load of 60 kids on board, we don’t just answer to the School District. Most kids have two parents, which we answer to. We have to answer to a bunch of people for what we do. People don’t look at it like that. Our responsibility is huge out there, and people think, ‘Oh, you’re just a bus driver.’ Well, you know what, come step in our shoes ...”

Osborn suggested just that for interested parties—a tour of what a bus driver experiences firsthand—by riding with them.

Osborn said that even full-time drivers for the District may log as little as 20 hours a week, and it’s difficult to provide enough driving time for everyone. There are 14 drivers.

Paxton said, “We lost all of our kindergarten (mid-day, with six drivers) routes this year, so, we’ve got people who’ve lost almost 10 hours a week.” Osborn said, “We’re down on the number of special needs kids this year. We’re only hauling three. Last year, we hauled eight.”

Senior bus driver Wendee Morrissey, who’s logged over 25 years of driving time, said, “Getting hours is the big thing for us. Because without the hours, we don’t make our full insurance ... When I came here, it was a good place to come work because you automatically had full benefits, and there was no pro-rating, and you worked a split-shift, because you worked mornings and nights... I was considered a full-time employee... And now, even though I’m the senior driver, they’ve cut me clear back to where I’m at 30 hours, so, I’m going to be under full-time this year, for my insurance. We have bus drivers who are out mowing lawns (for the District), to make up hours. Bus drivers who are washing buses—whatever needs to be done.”

“Right now, we would really, really need two substitutes, just to keep our heads above board, if something goes wrong,” Osborn said.

He cited the possibility of drivers calling in sick, bus breakdowns, drivers seeking other employment, drivers retiring, etc.

He mentioned a specific example of a driver calling in sick one day, while Osborn happened to be at the home of a former driver, prompting Osborn to recruit the former driver for several days. He was only able to do this, because the driver still held certification in order to operate buses.

Osborn explained that trips—athletics, school band, etc.—provide more income for the drivers, and they’re granted on a rotating basis, with senior drivers at the top of the list when the year begins, but even a scenario involving more potential income spotlights issues, because of the lack of drivers, and the lack of trips.

He said, “You don’t have that (the trips) on a consistent basis. This week, I might have enough trips for six drivers. Next week, I may have enough for two drivers. So, you can actually go three weeks without getting a trip. And, that can hurt.”

Osborn said that recently, a school choir trip was canceled because of the lack of drivers to cover it along with regular routes. “My son was in choir for four years, and it really just killed me to tell Deann (Sands, Baker High School Choir Teacher), ‘Deann,

I cannot cover your choir trip on the day you want to go. There’s no physical way possible.’”

A positive Osborn and Paxton pointed out is that there haven’t been major maintenance issues with the buses (there are 16 full-size buses), and they’re kept fully operational. “That guy right there keeps our buses at 100%. We don’t have buses sitting down, broken,” Osborn said, motioning to Paxton.

There’s one small bus in the fleet, but, Paxton said, “We can use it for anything, except hauling kids to and from home to school,” because it’s not equipped in the same manner as the regular buses.

When asked about a solution to the situation, Paxton replied that it’s difficult to say, but, he said, “I think, wages have come up a little bit, or stayed about the same. The total amount of (driving) hours over the week has gone down drastically, since last year... We’re seeing a bunch of fluctuation, and everything is hitting now. I’ve made some comments to them (District staff), but they haven’t come up with anything. We have a new Superintendent now (Mark Witty), and a new budget—last year’s (the 2015-2016 fiscal year budget) already been set,” as he explained that, in January of next year, District staff will begin the process of analyzing the budget once again.

Paxton cited issues including a wide-ranging spectrum of restrictions for bus and other commercial drivers, covering prescription medications and training, for example.

Osborn said, “Everybody we talk to, we say, ‘Hey, do you want to be a bus driver?’ But, here’s the other side of the coin: even if you have a Class B (endorsement), you’ve got to go through a minimum of 23 hours of training.”

Doug Dalton, Chief Financial Officer (CFO)/ Business Manager for the District, said, “It comes and goes. You can say that about, really, any area within the School District, and probably any company in Baker. There are times when you have more employment base than others. I don’t think there’s anything unique to that, that other employers in Baker County don’t see. There’s a shortage of a work force. Eastern Oregon sees that, whether

you’re hiring welders, bus drivers, or heavy equipment operators ...”

Dalton said, “Their budget (the Transportation Department) has got a lot in it ... The cost of fuel goes up, and we try and project that, repairs go up and down, bus leases and bus costs... It’s a pretty involved budget to run Transportation. It depends if the bus routes change, if the length of the routes change—there’s a lot to it ... It just depends on the year. The cost of diesel alone changes every day, so, depending on what I project for diesel next year, the budget will change. We don’t know until next Spring, and then, we start running those projections for next year.”

As far as recruiting new drivers, Dalton said that job listings are posted periodically, when there’s a need. He said, “It’s a confluence of events. It’s the time we’re in, and there have been times, you know, when you can post one of those positions, and have what you deem an adequate amount of responses, and there are times when you don’t. That’s where a lot of eastern Oregon is, when it comes to the work force... I think we’re doing the things we need to do...”

“Sooner or later, it’s going to catch up to us,” Osborn said, explaining that, with the shortage, Paxton also is filling in as a driver, though his normal duties are that of supervisor.

Morrissey said, “Yes, it’s going to catch up to him even (Paxton)... I called in while I was on a route. One time, I had a bee get up under my glasses and sting me, and instantly, my eye went shut,” as she and Osborn discussed how easy it could be for a bus to be put out of service while out on a route, or for an employee to call in sick, etc.

“He talks to them (District office staff) probably every day, telling them they need to get something fixed,” Osborn said, of Paxton. “Sooner or later, having him out (Paxton, on routes), and having everybody strung out, is going to catch up to us.”

Paxton said, “I don’t know if there’s going to be a solution, or if there could be ...”

Those interested in a potential career as a bus driver are strongly encouraged to contact the school district.

Sheriff’s office responds to ATV accident

• LA GRANDE WOMAN TRANSPORTED TO HOSPITAL

BY KERRY McQUISTEN
News@TheBakerCountyPress.com

Last Saturday just before 1 p.m., Dispatch received a report of an ATV accident in the Bennett Peak area. Deputy Robb, Deputy Rilee, and BLM Ranger Cox responded. Information was given to Forest Service. Search and Rescue (SAR) also initially responded.

Said Sheriff Travis Ash, “We sent several resources to the area, not knowing exactly where the crash happened. In previous crashes on Bennett Peak, we have had to use SAR to assist in getting injured out. In this case, they were able to get victim back to Tamarak Campground where she was treated and transported by ambulance.”

Eagle Valley Ambulance responded and transported 53-year-old Jamie Thiesfeld of La Grande to St. Alphonsus in Baker City. Thiesfeld’s injuries were not life-threatening.

Hunter injured on Dooley

At around 8:16 a.m. on Tuesday, Baker Consolidated Dispatch received a call for assistance from David Krieger.

While hunting in the Dooley Mountain area, David’s father, Jack Krieger, fell and rolled down a steep mountainside.

Baker City Fire Department, a Baker County Sheriff’s Deputy and members of Baker County Sheriff’s Search and Rescue responded to the scene and were able to reach Jack at about 9:10 a.m.

Jack was stabilized and the rescuers worked together to transport Jack up the steep hillside where he was transferred to a LifeFlight helicopter and flown from the mountain to a hospital in Washington.

Alpaca killed

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Madson opened her door to witness a pack of three dogs—two pitbulls and one mix—mauling her alpaca, Amaretto, a mere 100 feet from the house.

“The scary part is the attack was silent,” she said. She wouldn’t have known the attack was occurring at all, had it not been for the poodle.

Madson was able to shoot and kill one of the pitbulls in an attempt to save the alpaca, but not before the damage was done. “I hated taking the life of domestic dog,” she said, “but I had to protect Amaretto ... This is just a bad situation all the way around.”

When the dogs dispersed, Madson saw they had completely torn the ears from the alpaca, and inflicted a substantial amount of damage around the head and neck areas. Madson called out veterinarian Mark Berthelson, who determined there was no way to save the alpaca, and “put her down humanely,” said Madson.

Madson said between the cost of the alpaca and the veterinarian bill, her losses near \$750 at first estimate.

According to Madson, neighboring ranchers from around her area have reported cattle returning from pasture with ears torn off, while others have discussed witnessing livestock being harassed by dogs, but no official connection has been made between those various incidents.

Due to the rural location, no City ordinance exists that would guide local law enforcement on how to proceed with the case, including how to deal with the two remaining dogs.

An Oregon statute exists, 609.155, Impoundment for harming or chasing livestock, stating in part, “In a county with a dog control program, upon finding a dog engaged in killing, wounding, injuring or chasing livestock or upon receipt from a complainant of evidence that a dog has been so engaged, the dog control officer or other law enforcement officer shall impound the dog.”

Madson hopes the incident and discussion of existing laws will address county-wide dog issues, particularly in regard to shedding light on or perhaps creating a formal “dog control program.”

“No one really cares who enforces it, just so someone does,” she said.

Such a program could combine with state law to help law enforcement determine penalties, sanctions against offending owners, and remedial actions.

Other laws may also apply county-wide, but have yet to be determined specific to this case.

The dogs’ owner, neighbor Brian Marshall, has been contacted by Baker County Sheriff’s deputies as part of the investigation, which has also included photographing the attack scene.

Sheriff Travis Ash said he is still in the process of talking with responding deputy, and due to the investigation being in such an early stage, was unable to provide more definitive information before this article went to print.

More details on the case will be available for future updates to the story.

Long’s WaterWorks celebrates first year

BY TODD ARRIOLA
Todd@TheBakerCountyPress.com

Co-owner Jenny Long and employee Bonnie Allen, along with co-workers, family and friends, presented a Customer Appreciation Day last Friday, October 9, in celebration of Long’s WaterWorks’s one year anniversary as a new business in the community.

Those attending the event, which included a yard sale, were treated to a hot dog lunch, with bottled water and chocolate chip cookies, while they mingled and shopped.

Long said, about the yard sale, “When we bought

the place, it was just a big mess, and so, we’ve been organizing and cleaning, and trying to sort things out. We just thought we’d pull out a bunch of stuff, and see if anybody’s interested in any of it.”

Included in the yard sale were items dating back as far as the 70s and 80s, she said.

“We opened last year, and we had a really soft opening, and we spent most of the time counting inventory, and I didn’t even get the new sign up (a lighted sign, visible on the 10th Street side of the building) until, I think, the end of May... It was such



Todd Arriola / The Baker County Press

Long’s Waterworks celebrated a year in business with a customer appreciation day.

a valuable business when they had it (Larry Blum, and son Bob, of the former location of the nearly 40 year business Municipal Pipeline Supply Co., 2330 10th Street). It was missed greatly, so, people would

stop in and say, ‘Oh, I’m so glad to see this place is open again.’” Long said.

SEE LONG’S
WATERWORKS PAGE 7