

## Baker County Rushes to meet BLM Rule Deadline: Public Told No Time for Input

Submitted by Mary Jane Guyer

Last week, during the Commission's regular session, it was made clear that time was dwindling for Baker County to submit its comments on a proposal by the Bureau of Land Management. The proposal would change existing planning regulations governing the agency.

That tight deadline, according to Commission Chairman Bill Harvey, pre-empts any public review, comment or input before Baker County submits its final document to the BLM.

What is at stake?

According to BLM, the agency is currently in the process of revising regulations that govern how land use plans are developed. Commonly referred to as "Planning 2.0," BLM claims the new rule will establish public involvement earlier, increase transparency, provide flexibility in resource management, and improve the bureau's response time in a number of issues.

Commissioner Bennett sees it differently. "The language has the potential to seriously weaken our place at the table," stated Bennett. "We have had a long-standing, positive relationship with the BLM. I am concerned the proposed rule has the potential to lessen our relationship with the BLM. It may leave us to carry a much greater burden in making our case. That could be very expensive and time-consuming."

The BLM published the proposed 62-page rule in the Federal Register on February 25, 2016. The public, including Baker County, was given 60 days to submit comments. BLM extended that deadline by 30 days, making Wednesday, May 25, the new deadline. This allowed interested parties a total of 90 days to submit comments.

For almost a decade, Baker County Commissioners have relied heavily on the citizen-based Natural Resource Advisory Committee (NRAC) to help prepare its comments in response to proposed rules made by federal agencies. Today, the Committee is comprised of 19 Baker County citizen volunteers who bring personal and professional expertise in the areas of timber, mining, ranching, and other natural resource-based areas. Though advisory in nature, County Commissioners have relied on their commitment of time and experience to help draft Baker County's comments.

Over the years, they have advised on such matters as the Oregon Wolf and Sage Grouse Plans, the Little Dean and Snow Basin timber projects, Food Safety Modernization Act, and the Oregon Integrated Water Resources Strategy, just to name a few.

On March 25, Chairman of the NRAC Committee, Doni Bruland, forwarded (as requested by Chairman Harvey) to NRAC Committee members, an email that contained information from BLM public affairs. In it, Kris Mastrofino of the BLM briefly outlined the purpose of the rule, cited the location in the Federal Register, and highlighted a number of public information meetings. Mastrofino encouraged NRAC members to contact her with questions.

However, there is no record of a Baker County NRAC meeting or any follow-up by NRAC regarding the BLM Planning 2.0. Rule. In a subsequent email, Bruland cites the lack of a meeting space available in the County as a reason for canceling NRAC meetings during this comment period.

During the most recent Commission meeting held last Wednesday, Commissioner Mark Bennett commented at length regarding the reputation Baker County has had and the important role of public involvement.

Bennett stated, "In years past, the County has had a good reputation of putting in good, clean comments. We have faithfully gone out to get community input."

Bennett also stated that Baker County's public comments have been used by the BLM as an example for others on how to secure input.

It appears, comments from our county's Natural Resource Committee have not been requested or considered. Instead, Baker County has sought the input from an outside organization, the American Stewards of Liberty.

According to their website, the American Stewards of Liberty (ASL) is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting private property rights, defending the use of our land, and restoring local control. Additional information regarding the BLM

proposed rule can also be located on the ASL website.

A donation of \$1,000 from private individuals to Baker County's General Fund has secured Baker County's place as a member of the American Stewards of Liberty Coalition, and, according to Chairman Harvey, "provides us information regarding the 2.0 BLM revision."

This outside help has not been without controversy over the past few weeks and spilled out during the most recent Commission session. Numerous members of the community expressed concerns regarding the American Stewards of Liberty.

Baker County resident, Brenda Holly, opened the discussion questioning the process and asking how "special interests can raise and funnel money through Baker County?"

Chairman Harvey replied, "Money was designated to the General Fund and designated for this purpose. Let me clarify, this is not a special interest group. They are individuals. So they can do anything they'd like."

Holly went on to ask if the donations were a matter of public record.

"No Ma'am," said Harvey, "that is not necessary."

"Are you sure?" asked Holly.

"Yes Ma'am," replied Harvey.

Commissioner Bennett later released an email stating that this information, in fact, is subject to all laws and policies governing public disclosure.

It was clear that most in the Commission Chambers agreed that the amount of time and technical expertise expected of Baker County and other rural areas, to address growing federal regulations is an overwhelming challenge. The best way to approach that problem, however, again divided the audience.

Chuck Chase, Executive Director for the Eastern Oregon Mining Association, praised the American Stewards of Liberty saying, "We were so impressed with the Stewards of Liberty and what they have accomplished."

Chase went on to note the group's efforts in "stopping 15-20 endangered species from being listed" and their work in stopping an imminent domain claim in the trans-Canada corridor.

"It's tough out there," said Chase, and he thanked the Commissioners for their efforts regarding the 2.0 Planning Rule.

Dave Hunsaker encouraged Commissioners to "put our money towards organizations that have [a] reputation, are professional, and have expertise in every field."

Hunsaker said, "I would much rather work with NACO (National Association of Counties) which has resources and expertise in every field, rather than a group I have seen fail in every one of its efforts made on public lands."

Commissioner Bennett confirmed to the *Record Courier* that he did forward information from NACO to Chairman Harvey regarding this the 2.0 Planning Rule.

As the discussion drew to a close, Commissioner Kerns asked when he and Commissioner Bennett would receive their copies of the County's document.

Chairman Harvey replied, "It [the timeline] is real, real tight. I still have to write ours in conjunction with the information we get in two days."

Harvey did not anticipate any information would be available from the American Stewards of Liberty before Monday, May 23 or Tuesday, May 24. Harvey also stated he and the County's Natural Resource Coordinator, Eric Wuntz, would be writing the comments for the BLM no later than Wednesday, May 25. Harvey assured his fellow Commissioners that they would receive the information.

It is not clear what draft documents have already been prepared over these past three months by Baker County to prepare for the 2.0 Planning Rule.

Baker County citizen, Vicki Valenzuela asked Commissioner Harvey if the public would have time to review the final documents before they were submitted to the BLM.

"We will turn it [the document] out after we have responded. We don't have time to rewrite this about 13 times," stated Harvey.

"This doesn't do anything," Harvey added. "This does not lock down anything. These are just comments," Harvey concluded.

## Public Concerns Heat Up

Over the past several days, concerns about the lack of transparency regarding Baker County's response to the BLM's 2.0 Proposed Plan Rule, reached a pitch with some local citizens. These concerns were shared by Commissioners Bennett and Kerns when news of a request from the American Stewards of Liberty to Baker County surfaced asking that their (ASL) comments not be made public until after the May 25 deadline. Bennett and Kerns confirmed to the *Record-Courier* they were made aware of the request from Chairman Harvey over the weekend and both objected.

Commissioner Bennett told the *Record-Courier* that he informed Harvey this was not acceptable. "No way can we do this," said Bennett. "We made a commitment to the public as far back as April that we would release the document. We have to do this."

When asked by the *Record-Courier* if he knew in advance there was going to be a request to not make the document public, Commissioner Kerns replied, "Not in the least bit. It must be made public immediately."

The American Stewards of Liberty document was released on Monday morning. Baker County's final comments regarding BLM 2.0 Proposed Plan Rule were made available by the County for the first time to all NRAC members and the public late Tuesday afternoon, May 24, one day prior to the BLM deadline.

## Fred Warner, Jr. Named City Manager

By Gina Perkins

Fred Warner, Jr. has been officially hired as the new City Manager for Baker City.



Warner, Jr./ Submitted photo

"It's an exciting opportunity," says Warner. "Baker City faces some challenges, but they've got a good staff and engaged City Councilors," he added.

Warner believes his 12 years of experience serving as County Commission Chairman will make the transition smoother.

Warner accepted the terms of the contract offered to him by the City which includes an annual salary of \$98,000.

## Albertsons Returns with a Newly Remodeled Store in Baker City

Albertsons, one of the largest food and drug retailers in North America, is proud to be unveiling a newly remodeled store in Baker City, Ore., in early Fall of 2016.

Albertsons is extremely proud of its plans for an entirely new store. The popular supermarket chain plans to begin hiring 50-80 people this summer to work at the remodeled location.

The grocery store's upgrade will include all of the traditional customer favorites including, but not limited to, piping hot French bread, delicious fried chicken, and fresh cut fruit.

In addition, Albertsons is working on having a Starbucks available. The Grand Opening celebration will include sampling, a ribbon cutting, cake and a generous donation to the local community. More on the ceremony, and a community invitation, will be shared as the grand opening date draws near.

"We can't wait to unveil what will be a beautiful and highly upgraded Albertsons store in Baker City. The extensive enhancements we are making will give shoppers an enjoyable experience each time they visit the store. We look forward to serving the needs of the Baker City community again," said Greg McNiff, Portland Division President for Albertsons.

## Thank you, Correspondents

My first exposure to the newspaper business was as the Haines correspondent for the *Record-Courier*. I enjoyed being able to write and share information about the community and local events.

This newspaper has been blessed with dedicated (and sorely underpaid) community correspondents for over 10 decades and I wanted to give a special shout out to them all.

I also wanted to especially thank Eden Taylor, who for years, has written a variety of school sports articles, given special coverage of school concerts and included articles about the drama program. Eden and her husband Tim's youngest son, Teancum, is graduating this year from Baker High School, but we are hoping that she might consider continuing to write for us if her schedule allows.

Again, whether you are a past, current, or future correspondent for the *Record-Courier*, please know how much you are appreciated by your community, by this newspaper...and especially by me.

Thank you, Eden, for sharing your wonderful writing and photography with our readers. Several subscribers have shared with me that the sole reason they began their subscription to this paper is because of your excellent coverage (and especially of Middle School activities) over the years.

Readers, I invite you to send in letters regarding your favorite correspondents. I also invite any past correspondents to send us a note. We will publish all received.

It's good to be back. We will resume our weekly publishing as of now.

Gina Perkins, publisher



Submitted photo  
Eden Taylor with son, Teancum

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With the emergence of the world's first mutant, Apocalypse, the X-Men must unite to defeat his extinction level plan.  
FRI & SAT (3:30) 6:30 9:30  
SUN & MON (3:30) 6:30  
TUES-THURS 6:30

**ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS** PG  
Alice returns to the whimsical world of Wonderland and travels back in time to save the Mad Hatter.  
FRI & SAT (4:00) 7:00 9:35  
SUN & MON (4:00) 7:00  
TUES-THURS 7:00

**ANGRY BIRDS** PG  
Animation, Comedy. Find out why the birds are so angry.  
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