

Opinion

EDITORIAL

Cougar controls

Statistically speaking, that a cougar killed Portland hiker Diana Bober in the Mount Hood National Forest doesn't mean the big cats pose a greater threat to people than they did before.

But for many Oregonians this tragic event — the first such attack on record in the state involving a cougar not in captivity — is not about statistics.

The reaction is more visceral, a reaction to the reality that a predator which roams not only Oregon's wild country but also sometimes its cities is capable of killing a person.

Of course this has been true throughout the state's history.

But the situation with cougars in Oregon has changed — again, in a statistical sense at least — over the past quarter century.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife estimates that the state's cougar population has grown from about 3,000 animals in 1994 to about 6,600 today. We use 1994 as a starting point for a reason — that's the year Oregon voters decided to ban cougar hunters from using hounds to track the cats, by far the most effective hunting method.

Since then, ODFW's computer model projects that cougar numbers have more than doubled even though hunters, thanks to cheaper tags and a year-long season, have actually killed more cougars in many years than they did before the ban on hounds took effect.

Oregon's cougar management plan, most recently updated in October 2017, lists the 3,000-cougars threshold as a "biological 'safety net' to ensure cougar population resiliency." So long as the estimated population exceeds 3,000, ODFW, according to the plan, "will proactively manage cougar-human safety/pet conflicts."

ODFW acknowledges in the 2017 plan that such conflicts are likely to become more common, noting that "as cougar numbers increased and the human population expanded into rural and suburban areas, the potential for cougar human/pet conflicts has increased."

But as Bober's death shows — she was hiking in a national forest, not in a neighborhood park — the risk to people isn't geographically limited.

ODFW has tried to reduce the cougar population in specific areas by employing hounds — the agency is exempt from the 1994 voter-approved law in such cases. But the purpose in those instances was to reduce predation on deer and elk herds.

The agency admits in the management plan that relying on sport hunters, who can't use hounds, to control cougar numbers has been futile, and the agency has been "unable to control cougar populations or attempt to resolve cougar-human conflicts through hunting alone."

Oregon voters haven't shown any interest in making a change. In 1996 they rejected a measure that would have overturned the 1994 ban.

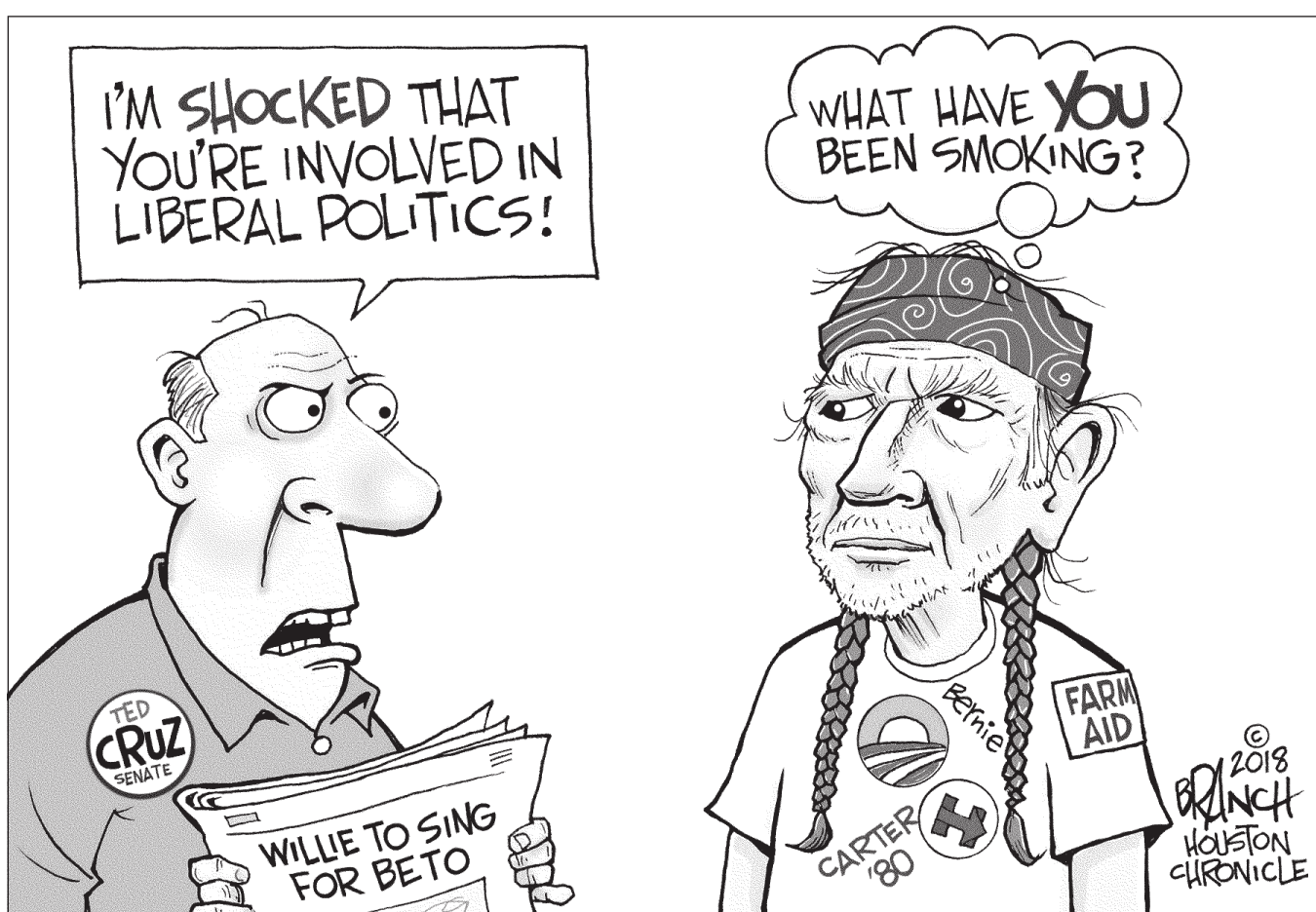
But more than two decades later, with the cougar population continuing to rise, we'd like to see the Legislature put the matter back on the ballot.

From the Baker City Herald editorial board. The board consists of editor Jayson Jacoby and reporter Chris Collins.

Letters to the editor

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.
- Letters are limited to 350 words; longer letters will be edited for length. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- The writer must sign the letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be published.
- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.

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Your views

It's time to act to reduce the threat of pit bulls

I guess I'm getting old and am easily confused. A couple of weeks ago I was driving over to my mother's house in South Baker and saw a man walking his dogs, or maybe more accurately, being pulled down the street by three pit bulls. At the time I thought that "here is a situation that is not going to end well." The fact that my sister often walks that street with her 3-year-old granddaughter was a concern.

In the meantime the press has covered the death by a cougar of the woman on Mount Hood and the previous death of a man in Washington by a cougar and the woman in California is mentioned often. There was more on cougars in the Sept. 14 Baker City Herald, front page and in color. The second page on the top, black and white, is a story about Michelle Dean Segerdahl being killed by a couple of his six pit bulls. It seems that a couple of the dogs were dead from fighting each other and evidently the rest were "euthanized" by the police. Did that mean that they were shot because trying to capture them and take them to the pound was too dangerous?

I'm not a fan of cougars in town or near human habitation especially if there are children around but what gets me is that one cougar death on the other side of the state seems to generate a lot of press and now we have had our second pit bull death in Baker City. The odds of being killed by a pit bull far exceed any probability of being killed by a cougar or bear. I know, the usual outcry if you say it is time we do away with dangerous dogs will bring about the usual "it's just how they are raised" stuff, but it's not hard to find statistics that prove that the pit bull is a genetic time bomb waiting to go off. It's time for city government to get on with getting

this menace out of town and the county commission should do the same with the rural parts of the county.

Steve Culley
Baker City

Many reasons to vote No on the school bond measure

It has been heartening to read the recent batch of commonsense letters urging a no vote on the school bond. It was particularly pleasing to read that a no vote isn't a vote against kids. The yes for kids slogan is just a spurious ploy that attempts to shame people into voting for an unnecessary and grandiose building plan. Here are some reasons for voting against it:

- Many can't afford it. 14 percent of all households or about 2,400 people in Baker County live below the poverty level. We can't afford to buy lattes or eat out so we don't have extra money to put in a jar for the school district. This measure threatens low-income property owners, and even renters to some degree, by taking money we don't have when we already have difficulty keeping our heads above water.
- Small businesses will suffer as discretionary income for everyone else shrinks due to bond payments.
- The board acted irresponsibly by selling Churchill School in 2007. It just sat there as it became apparent that classroom space was needed, but they didn't buy it back. Instead, Kevin Cassidy, bond committee member Bonebrake, and a former member of the board when the school was sold, Ginger Savage, gleefully celebrated it being taken over by commercial interests, who purchased it for \$194,104. That's almost \$11,000 less than the district had originally sold it for.
- Voters are being asked to approve a \$48 million school bond when the Facilities Master Planning Committee

thought that "the most urgent needs for building improvements" were estimated to cost about \$26.7 million.

• Cost overruns are almost inevitable, and when they occur, they will be back for more to finish projects. According to the Oregon School Boards Association and others, cost overruns have plagued recent district building projects from Hermiston to Portland, and all down the coast to San Diego.

• Teacher effectiveness, socio-economic status, safe and supportive home environments, class size and student intellectual resources are far more important factors affecting student achievement than the age of buildings.

For more information see <https://bakercityorg.blogspot.com/>

Christopher Christie
Baker City

Yes vote for school bond part of our community legacy

We are voting yes for kids because we want a part of our legacy to read "They supported our children's children's children's quality of education." We thank those family members who passed the school bond in 1948 for their foresight in providing improved schools for our learning, but things have changed over the past 70+ years and the needs of our current and future youngsters are not being met by those facilities. If we don't act now, when will those changing needs be acknowledged? Granted, increased taxes will impact our current lifestyle but the support for our future generations will be of significant value to our community.

What will your legacy be? Please vote yes for kids.

Hal and Doni (Colton)
Huntington
Baker City

GUEST EDITORIAL

Editorial from The Chicago Tribune:

Anyone who wants to buy a gun from a licensed dealer is required to fill out a "Firearms Transaction Record." It asks various questions to determine if the customer is legally prohibited from getting a gun — because he or she is a felon or a fugitive from justice, received a dishonorable military discharge, has been "adjudicated as a mental defective" and the like. It also notes that the purchase may not be made on behalf of another person.

The application notes that "any false oral or written statement ... is a crime punishable as a felony under federal law." To lie in order to acquire a weapon that you are legally forbidden to have is, as the form notes, punishable by up to 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

That's fair warning to anyone tempted to lie. But a surprising number of people do so anyway. A new report from the federal Government Accountability Office says that last year, 112,000 people tried to buy guns from licensed dealers but were caught giving false information on the form.

It's reassuring that so many felons and other ineligible people were blocked

from acquiring guns. What's not reassuring is how few of them were prosecuted. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives referred just 12,700 cases to field offices for investigation. Of those, the Justice Department prosecuted exactly 12 — one of every 9,333 alleged liars.

The message to criminals is clear: What have you got to lose? Maybe you'll get the gun in spite of your disqualifying record. If you don't get the gun, no worries, because you will almost certainly go unpunished. The pattern and practice are notorious enough that there's even a name for this approach: "Lie and try."

The GAO says federal prosecutors put a low priority on these offenses. They "generally do not accept and prosecute denial cases that do not involve aggravating circumstances, as these cases can require significant effort for prosecutors relative to the short length of punishment and may offer little value to public safety because the offender does not obtain the firearm."

In Chicago, which is plagued by violent crime fueled by illegal trafficking in firearms, this is especially distressing. A report last year by the city said, "The vast majority of crime guns were

handguns possessed by adults who were not the original purchaser of the firearm" and were legally barred from gun ownership.

Claiming to buy a gun for yourself and then delivering it to someone else is illegal, as the form makes plain. The ban is ineffectual, though, unless violators can expect to face punishment. And "straw purchasers" also rarely face federal prosecution.

The lax approach is an argument for universal background checks. Otherwise people blocked from a purchase from a dealer may simply go to a private seller, who under federal law is not required to do the background check. Illinois has its own laws effectively barring such sales, but criminals face no such obstacle in most places.

It's also an argument for the shift requested by Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who in March urged U.S. attorneys to "swiftly and aggressively" prosecute people who give false answers on the firearms form.

Americans have plenty of disagreements over whether new laws are needed to prevent gun crimes. There should be no disagreement about enforcing the ones we already have.