

Opinion

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Yes on 5J bond

We won't try to minimize the Baker School District's \$48 million bond measure by dividing property owners' shares into monthly or weekly or daily amounts.

This isn't about passing up a few mochas or tossing your pocket change into a cup.

This is about a community's commitment to one of its more important and valuable assets — its public schools.

And like most commitments it is also a burden. A financial burden, to be specific, and for some property owners a significant burden that probably will continue for 30 years, the period over which the bond would be repaid.

But we believe the Baker School District has reached a point where that shared burden is one worth bearing.

We urge voters to approve Measure 1-88 on the Nov. 6 ballot, making it possible to build a new school for students in grades 1-6, remodel Baker High School to accommodate seventh- and eighth-graders, and improve the energy efficiency and security systems at all district schools, among other projects.

Put simply, there is no feasible way besides a property tax-supported bond measure to build a new school, which would account for the majority — an estimated \$37 million — of the bond revenue.

This is no less true today than it was in 1948, the last time the district's voters decided to increase property taxes to build schools.

The 1948 measure raised money to build four schools over the next seven years — Brooklyn and South Baker elementary schools, as well as Keating School and Baker High School (much of the current high school was built

in 1990-91, after a February 1989 fire destroyed a significant portion of the previous building).

We believe the taxpayers' investment over the past 70 years has been an excellent one. Each of those schools is still used, each refuting the notion that we can't trust school district officials to take care of what tax dollars paid for.

Moreover, the district's proposal, if voters approve the measure, calls for continuing to utilize Brooklyn as an Early Learning Center that would house kindergartners and potentially lease space for other community services.

The district has also made good use of other schools even older than those constructed with money raised by the 1948 bond.

Baker Middle School dates to 1934, and Haines Elementary to 1919.

But maintenance can't make a building bigger. And both elementary schools in Baker City — Brooklyn and South Baker — are housing more students than they were designed for. Brooklyn's enrollment of 465 exceeds its capacity by 117 students, and South Baker's 355 students are 68 more than its intended capacity. The Middle School's enrollment of 260 exceeds its capacity by 61 students.

We understand that the overcrowding at Brooklyn and South Baker is due in part to the district's decision, more than a dozen years ago, to close Churchill School and to use North Baker, which was built in 1909, for other purposes, including the Baker Web Academy and other educational programs.

But we don't believe that Churchill, were it still in public ownership, would be a viable solution to the district's pre-

dicament, mainly due to its age.

Churchill, which opened in 1926, is about a quarter century older than both Brooklyn and South Baker.

The Central Building on the middle school campus, which also has been closed for many years, is older still, having been built in 1916.

All of these structures cost more to heat than would a new elementary school.

The other benefits of a new elementary school are harder to quantify, certainly, but that doesn't mean these benefits aren't also valid and meaningful.

Schools built more than six decades ago were not designed with modern technology in mind, both in terms of learning and of security.

Money from the bond measure would pay for more secure entries, with key card systems, for existing schools. And the new elementary school would be designed with those measures.

Remodeling Baker High School to accommodate seventh- and eighth-graders — in a separate section of the building — makes sense because the issue at BHS is not too many students but rather too few.

The school, including the portions built following the 1989 fire, is designed to accommodate 830 students, but high school enrollment is only about 450.

Moving middle school students to an underused building is sensible from a purely numerical standpoint. But equally important, having the seventh- and eighth-graders on the BHS campus would allow them to take advantage of advanced classes without having to travel back and forth, as is the case now.

We understand that Baker City venerates its historic buildings, including publicly owned structures such as City Hall and the Baker County Courthouse.

But renovation isn't always the less-expensive option.

District officials did consider the possibility of remodeling the Central Building on the middle school campus and building an elementary school on that campus as well. But the total cost of that option is estimated at \$46 million, compared with \$37 million to build an elementary school on property the district owns between the Baker Sports Complex and Hughes Lane.

In any case, we believe public schools are unique, and that their purpose is more important than other civic buildings.

Schools reflect the value that residents place on educating their children and giving them the best foundation for a successful and rewarding life.

Although the current overcrowding is undeniable, we're not suggesting that students are receiving a substandard education in the current buildings.

But we do believe, and indeed Baker City's history proves, that occasionally a majority of residents agree that public schools are so vital that we should sacrifice on behalf of our students — that we can do better for them. History also shows that we do not make such sacrifices often.

The claim that school district officials won't long be satisfied even if voters approve the \$48 million bond measure on Nov. 6 is not borne out by history.

Seven decades have passed since residents decided to take on such a financial burden. A large majority of the voters who agreed to do so are gone now, but their selflessness has benefited at least four generations of Baker City students.

We believe today's voters, by casting a yes vote on Measure 1-88, will have a similarly valuable, and lengthy, legacy to add to their epitaph.

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

Your views

Re-elect Harvey as chairman of the County Commission

At the Eastern Oregon Mining Association meeting of Sept. 7, Commissioner Bruce Nichols indicated several times that he agreed with current Chairman Bill Harvey 99 percent of the time. Nonetheless, Nichols indicated that he would approach natural resource negotiations with federal and state agencies with a different tone than Harvey but would rely on Harvey for advice even though Harvey would no longer be a commissioner.

Bill Harvey indicated that Baker County commissioners in past years had concerns that collaboration and cooperation with those agencies did not result in positive outcomes or protections for Baker County, rather that coordination is a requirement. He agrees with that historical approach, while other counties in Eastern Oregon during that same period of time gave away their rights by deferring to government agency "expertise."

Since Bill Harvey advised early on his intention to seek a second and final term as

chairman, why not re-elect him since Bruce Nichols still has two years remaining of his first term as a commissioner? The voters currently have three commissioners of different expertise and styles of addressing issues that have worked well over the past four years.

The voters know these individuals but we do not know who might be appointed to Nichols' remaining two years on the commission by Commissioners Bennett and Nichols if Bill Harvey should not retain his current elected position.

I suggest that voters access the Commission meetings online minutes to determine who is actively engaged and how they vote, or attend

the remaining meetings before the election.

The history of Baker County has been and will be based on timber, ranching, mining, family, faith, and community values. We should vote to preserve these traditions and retain those values which comprise the texture of our county.

To long-term and new residents, please realize the importance of this election. Encourage your friends and family to vote. Do not let the current political atmosphere discourage anyone from voting. Your voice does make a difference.

Danny Johnson
Baker City

Wilson Price Hunt: The West's forgotten man

Wilson Price Hunt ought to be famous.

It's true that he died 176 years ago, which makes TV appearances and other forms of publicity troublesome.

But there are people of his vintage who remain widely known today but whose exploits, in my view, are inconsequential by comparison.

I admit that my opinion is influenced by provincialism.

Hunt, who was in the employ of the fur-trading magnate John Jacob Astor, in 1811 led the first party of white men — and one very notable woman, about which more later — to pass through what would become Baker County 51 years later.

Perhaps because Hunt arrived in the West six years after Lewis and Clark, and perhaps because he was dispatched not by a president but by a businessman, Hunt is nothing like as well-known as that pair of explorers.

Yet Hunt was instrumental in blazing sections of what became the Oregon Trail, and even though he did so 32 years before the first major wave of emigrants, his role, or so it seems to me, is sometimes given short shrift in Oregon Trail histories.

Hunt's legacy shines rather



JAYSON JACOBY

brighter, though, in Baker County.

The summit that juts to the east from the main spine of the Elkhorn Mountains northwest of Baker City, and is one of the more prominent peaks visible from town, is Hunt Mountain.

Hunt himself probably saw that mountain, which rises to an elevation of 8,232 feet, on Dec. 28, 1811.

Likely he was disturbed by the sight rather than entranced, however.

On that wintry day Hunt was struggling not only to fulfill his commitment to Astor, but also with the more pressing matter of merely trying to survive in a wilderness in which he and his party had been reduced, over the past month, to eating dogs.

And they were happy to have those.

I had been vaguely aware of Hunt's travels, but it was my recent reading of Peter Stark's fine 2015 history, "Astoria: Astor and Jefferson's Lost Pacific Empire," that both

enriched my knowledge and piqued my curiosity about this somewhat obscure frontiersman.

Stark describes the two-pronged campaign — one by land, one by sea — that Astor bankrolled with a goal of establishing a fur-trading post on the all but unknown Pacific Coast.

The oceangoing side of the operation was the ship *Tonquin*, captained by Jonathan Thorn.

The chapters devoted to Thorn and his eventful voyage are compelling enough.

But in part because I'm no sailor, and in part because the overland trek has such a local connection, it was Stark's account of the travails of Hunt's party that had me turning the pages as rapidly as I could get through them.

I read many of those pages while sitting in a chair in a shady corner of my yard. As I relaxed there in the dry July heat I felt that uniquely human desire to not only read about history but to experience it, a compulsion all the more powerful, it seems to me, because it's apparently unobtainable.

(I use the hedging word "apparently" only because the physicists, with their inscrutable equations and fantastic theories, might eventually figure out that H.G. Wells

was onto something more than science fiction.)

I tried to imagine what I would have seen and felt were I able to go back almost 207 years ago and to sit in this very spot, just a few miles from where Hunt and his party were trudging, their cheeks hollow and their stomachs empty and the keen winter wind freezing their cheeks.

They had struggled mightily over the previous two months, since Hunt decided to abandon his horses and float down the great river they called the Mad and we call the Snake.

Hunt believed the Columbia River, and thence the Pacific, might be only a modest distance away, and that he might arrive before winter settled in.

He was of course wildly off. After blundering into Hells Canyon during a snowstorm in early December, Hunt backtracked and was fortunate to convince a few Shoshone Indians to guide him through the Blue Mountains and on to the Columbia Basin.

The party was camping near a group of six Shoshone tipis on Dec. 30, 1811, when Marie Dorion, an Indian married to Pierre Dorion, who served as Hunt's interpreter,

gave birth to her third child (her two other children, ages 2 and 4, were also with the group).

This historic birth happened near what today is North Powder, and the event is commemorated by a sign along Highway 237.

Marie's newborn — the baby's gender, curiously, seems not to have been documented — died about a week later.

The Hunt party fared better once it reached the Columbia. The group arrived at the newly christened Astoria in February 1812.

Hunt was neither a mountain man like Jedediah Smith nor an inveterate explorer in the mold of John C. Frémont, which perhaps explains his comparative anonymity.

Yet the history of the Oregon Trail, and thus of Baker County, owes a great deal to Hunt and to the party he led.

Stark's excellent book had the effect on me that works of history should have, which is to say it made me wish I could share in Hunt's experiences.

Well, at least some of them. I have no taste for canine casserole.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.