

Local & State

LOCAL BRIEFING

Baker City Ambulance Billing

Fiscal Year	Medicare/Medicaid		Insurance/SAIF		Total	
	Billed	Collected (%)	Billed	Collected (%)	Billed	Collected (%)
2017-18	\$1,276,068	\$429,000 (34)	\$404,803	\$294,479 (73)	\$1,772,945	\$788,770 (44)
2016-17	\$1,042,404	\$419,510 (40)	\$302,805	\$203,018 (67)	\$1,431,153	\$624,000* (44)
2015-16	\$1,202,569	\$444,242 (37)	\$327,144	\$214,016 (65)	\$1,615,945	\$714,043 (44)
2014-15	\$1,127,162	\$451,875 (40)	\$363,485	\$212,501 (59)	\$1,565,979	\$717,166 (46)
2013-14	\$1,047,303	\$401,953 (38)	\$341,121	\$196,878 (58)	\$1,466,002	\$652,438 (45)

*This figure is an estimate. Starting in 2017, on the recommendation from the city's auditor, ambulance revenue received during July and August are added to the total for the previous fiscal year, which ends June 30. For July and August 2017 that revenue totaled \$54,000.

BILLING

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The city estimated that hiring the contractor would boost the city's ambulance billing from about \$723,000 in 2015-16 to about \$813,000, the amount included in the budget for 2016-17.

Instead, the city ended up collecting about \$640,000.

As Warner said in May 2017, that tactic "did not work at all."

Jeanie Dexter, the city's finance director, said an official from the Texas company made an impressive pitch to the city and seemed to have the knowledge and credentials to increase ambulance revenue.

But the reality was quite different.

Dexter said city officials learned, over a period of months, that the company in some cases billed the wrong company, and in others didn't bill the patient at all.

The reduction in revenue of about \$90,000 from the previous fiscal year, when the city was still handling billing, did not reflect a meaningful drop in the number of ambulance runs, Dexter said.

Rather, the contractor simply fell short on billing, she said.

For the 2016-17 fiscal year the company billed \$1,431,000 — a drop of

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— Jeanie Dexter, Baker City finance director

\$185,000 from the previous fiscal year.

Dexter said she was able to recover some of the lost revenue, even though the time frame for submitting bills had expired, by filing appeals with Medicaid offices.

She tried the same thing, with somewhat less success, for patients who have private insurance.

The failures of the contractor became even more apparent during the following fiscal year — which ended June 30, 2018 — as the city's ambulance billing, and revenue, rebounded to exceed levels from the three most recent fiscal years when the city also handled billing internally.

The city's total billing increased by 19 percent over the year when the contractor was responsible for billing.

"We definitely saw a significant change in what we were collecting after we went back to doing ambulance billing on our own," Dexter said. "It was definitely a bad choice (to hire the contractor).

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Collection challenges

The city never collects every dollar it bills for ambulance rides, and this is reflected in how the city budgets for revenue.

The majority of the patients are covered by Medicare or Medicaid, neither of which pays even close to the full amount the city bills.

The city charges \$1,079 per trip for a city resident requiring basic life support, and \$1,550 for a ride requiring advanced life support.

Rates for nonresidents are \$2,144 and \$2,550, respectively.

During the 2017-18 fiscal year, with the city again handling billing, the city billed \$1,772,945 for ambulance services. Of that, 72 percent (\$1,276,000) was for patients who are covered by either Medicare or Medicaid (and in some cases, by both federal health insurance programs).

Those federal programs paid the city 34 percent of the amount the city billed —

\$429,701.

Most of the rest of the billing — \$404,803, or 23 percent of the total — went to patients who have private insurance.

The city collected a much higher percentage from private insurance — 73 percent, a total of \$294,479.

The city also collected \$64,590 from FireMed subscriptions.

Baker City's total ambulance revenue for the 2017-18 fiscal year was \$788,770. The city had budgeted for \$730,000 in revenue.

"Things went back to normal," Dexter said.

That trend has continued into the current fiscal year, and Dexter is optimistic that the city will be able to collect a higher percentage of what it bills in the future.

A new state program is designed to increase the amount that ambulance services in rural areas, including Baker County, receive for transporting patients covered by Medicaid.

Dexter said the city strives to collect from ambulance patients — including sending some delinquent accounts to a collection agency.

But she said laws prohibit the city from billing many patients for the portion of the bill not covered by Medicare or Medicaid, a process known as "balance billing."

Cattlemen's annual banquet Saturday

The Baker County Cattlemen's annual banquet is set for Saturday, Dec. 15, upstairs at Lefty's Taphouse, 1934 Broadway St.

Social hour starts at 6 p.m., with a tri-tip and ham buffet dinner at 7 p.m. Cost is \$25 per plate.

A general business meeting, with election of officers, is set for 1 p.m. on Saturday at the Sunridge Inn.

Bentz picked for GOP Leadership Team

SALEM — State Sen. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, was picked Tuesday to serve as one of five members of the Senate Republican Leadership team in the Oregon Legislature.

Bentz, whose district includes Baker County, is one of three deputy GOP leaders.

Sen. Herman Baertschiger Jr. of Grants Pass is the Senate Minority Leader, and Sen. Dennis Linthicum of Klamath Falls the Republican Whip.

The other deputy leaders are Sen. Chuck Thomsen of Hood River and Alan Olsen of Canby.

"It is an honor to be added to the Republican Senate leadership group," Bentz said in a press release. "I look forward to working with my Senate colleagues to address the challenges facing our systems in education, health care, taxation, water, transportation, and public safety, to name just a few of the many areas of concern."

Bentz, 66, represents Senate District 30, which includes all of Baker, Grant, Harney, Jefferson, Malheur and Wheeler counties, and parts of Clackamas, Deschutes, Lake, Marion and Wasco counties.

Bentz previously served for a decade as a state representative for a district including Baker County.

He was appointed by county commissioners in January to replace Sen. Ted Ferrioli, whom Gov. Kate Brown appointed to the Northwest Power & Conservation Council.

Bentz in turn was replaced in the Oregon House of Representatives by Lynn Findley, a Republican from Vale.

Garden Club meeting Dec. 19

The Baker County Garden Club will meet Dec. 19 at 11 a.m. for a meeting and Christmas luncheon hosted by the Leonnigs, 1638 Broadway St.

Community Christmas Eve service at BHS

A community Christmas Eve service is planned for Dec. 24 at 6 p.m. at the Baker High School auditorium, 2500 E St.

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With a 19-inch base, early season conditions exist, according to resort managers.

Season pass holders can pick up their passes Saturday starting at 8 a.m. upstairs in the main lodge. Lift tickets will go on sale at the ticket booth starting at 8:30 a.m. Saturday. There will be live music by Elwood Saturday from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. in the Starbottle Saloon.

Anthony Lakes will re-open on Saturday, Dec. 22, and then be open daily, except Christmas Day, through Jan. 6. The resort will close at 1 p.m. on Christmas Eve.

More EOU freshmen staying into sophomore year

By Max Denning
The (La Grande) Observer

LA GRANDE — In 2014, Eastern Oregon University retained only 56.7 percent of its freshman class into its sophomore year. Three years later, 70.1 percent of EOU's freshmen returned.

Retention rates are defined as the percentage of first-time full-time students who enroll in the fall and are still enrolled in the university the fall of the following year. At elite academic institutions, retention rates often are between 95 and 99 percent. But at universities with higher acceptance rates and smaller price tags, retention rates are often lower, sometimes significantly so.

The website Unigo, a business that helps match students with colleges and

scholarships, asked a myriad of college counselors why retention rates were important. Mollie Reznick, a college counselor for a private company, said retention rates can signal whether students are enjoying a university.

"This figure can be useful when assessing schools because there is an undeniable correlation between this figure and the overall happiness of students on campus," Reznick said on Unigo.com. "If a school has a retention rate of higher than 90 percent, it's likely that most freshmen are pleased with their experience on campus."

The increased retention rate isn't just the sign of a more committed class of students at EOU — it's also the result of EOU's endeavors to focus on student success and

improve retention rates.

Kathleen Brown, the student success coordinator at EOU, said the school's efforts to increase retention include giving personalized attention to students across campus.

"One of the things we have noticed throughout the years is you have to individualize retention efforts," Brown said. "You can do efforts that are broad-based for all the groups, but different subjects (of study) have different needs for support, (and) different populations have different needs for support."

Brown, who has been in her position at EOU for three years, said the university has initiated an early alert system for at-risk students.

"Because of the term systems in Oregon, once you get behind, it's extremely

difficult to get back," she said. "So we are trying to figure out how to support students before they get behind."

In addition to the individualized efforts, Brown and the team at the university focused on retention have different strategies for retaining online students. Brown noted while students on campus are largely between the ages of 18 and 24, online students are often older and are dealing with a differing set of issues that might hinder them from pursuing their education.

"You're looking at a group who are already in the work-

force and have families and different things like that," Brown said. "Some of the basics are the same, but the belonging piece you have to look at in a different manner."

While retention rates have improved with Brown in her current role, she also continues to see room for improvement.

This winter, EOU will be rolling out the Mountaineer Success Team in order to keep improving the student experience and the university's retention rate. The team will be composed of faculty and staff members across the

campus who will act as academic coaches for struggling students.

"Basically what it's creating is an additional net for students to be caught in if they're struggling at all," Brown said. "It's just another person for people to talk to. We wanted to train people so they can be part of the solution and for it to be clear that retention is important for everyone on campus."

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SPIDER-MAN: INTO THE SPIDER-VERSE PG
Miles Morales comes across the long-dead Peter Parker. With Peter's guidance, Miles will become Spider-Man, and through that he will become part of the ever-expanding Spider-Verse!
FRI & SAT: (4:00) 7:00, 9:35
SUN: (3:45) 7:00 MON-WED: 7:00

WIDOWS R
Four women with nothing in common except a debt left behind by their dead husbands' criminal activities, take fate into their own hands.
FRI & SAT: (3:45) 6:45, 9:30
SUN: (3:45) 6:45 MON-WED: 6:45

INSTANT FAMILY PG-13
A couple find themselves in over their heads when they foster three orphans.
FRI & SAT: (4:10) 7:10, 9:40
SUN: (4:10) 7:10 MON-TUE: 7:10

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