

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Ambulance concerns

Baker County Commissioners have an obligation to try to ensure their constituents who live outside Baker City have access to ambulance service that meets both their needs and their ability to pay.

But in trying to fulfill that obligation the county has put Baker City's Fire Department — the agency that operates ambulances within the city limits and for more than half the county — into a potentially perilous position.

As prescribed by state law, county commissioners establish ambulance service areas and choose their allowed providers. When the county recently sent a letter of interest to 21 potential providers, it received four responses — one from Baker City and three from private providers.

The county will next send a formal Request for Proposals. Baker City Manager Fred Warner Jr. said last week that he's confident the city will make a compelling case for continuing to serve the ambulance service area. And County Commissioner Mark Bennett said the city has "provided excellent levels of service."

But because the county expects to ask voters next year to approve a new fee or tax to help pay for ambulance service, Bennett said he believes the county needs to consider all potential options.

That's reasonable.

But the prospect of the county choosing a provider other than the Baker City Fire Department is troubling. Without ambulance service, which makes up the majority of the Department's work as well as generating about 44% of its revenue, the city would have to severely reduce its paid fire staff, which would affect its ability to respond to fires.

Bennett emphasizes that the county does not intend to harm the city's fire department, and his sincerity is not in question.

But Bennett and his fellow commissioners, Bill Harvey and Bruce Nichols, need to keep in mind the ramifications of their decision. Until Baker City is officially retained as the ambulance provider, the Fire Department's future will be a bit hazy.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

No reason to spend money to stop train whistles

Once again we see people moving to Baker City and then complaining about the railroad's noisy operations. How was the house purchase made? Over the internet? Didn't you see the tracks? Not a day goes by without trains rolling along those tracks. While the complaining party lives a few streets closer to the tracks than we, the sound levels are not intrusive in our house, especially with the windows closed. We don't complain, in fact we rather enjoy the added dimension in hearing the commerce of our country rolling through. Let's face it, from most places in town you

can hear the sounds of the interstate, aircraft flying overhead and yes, the sound of the train horn.

Another thought — do the complainers have neighbors? Interesting — there has only been the occasional whiner trying to shape the world to their particular vision as regards the railroad.

The federal requirement to change the crossings in order to create a "silent" zone adds an additional cost to the city that we cannot afford. Portland economics won't work in Baker City. Perhaps the complainers would offer to pay for the upgrades needed. I have no interest in paying for their poor decision-

making and I'm betting the majority of citizens will agree. By the way folks, don't bother taking the survey as listed in the article — your only option is agree with them. What kind of survey is that?

As to the sound of the trains, if it really bothers you, move. You must accept that this is a personal problem and not try to demand an expensive city expenditure to make up for your poor choice in location. Might I suggest a town like Sumpter? Oh no, they have a train as well. Sorry. I guess if you prefer La Grande's ryles y'all should live there.

R.G. Rienks
Baker City

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Music nostalgia, and why 'Airplane!' matters

I was walking toward the sunset and toward home, the air soft in a way exclusive to June, when I had that rare feeling that makes the distant past suddenly seem so near that it's as if all the intervening years were just an especially clever illusion.

It is a queer sensation but also a pleasant one.

I suspect something quite like this happens occasionally to all of us — a moment when we don't so much remember the past as suspect we are in some way reliving it. Such moments require stimulation.

In my case there were two triggers — the pinkish-orange light in that wondrous period between sunset and dusk, and a song from 1986.

I was listening to a podcast as I strolled along, watching the color and quality of the light change as the sun slunk farther below the jagged silhouette of the Elkhorns.

The song is "Kyrie" by Mr. Mister, the American pop group that achieved brief but considerable success with that tune and one other, "Broken Wings."

"Kyrie" is far from my favorite song. I don't own it, or indeed any other music from Mr. Mister (a band name, I'll submit, that could only have come from the 1980s).

But it's a decent enough song, its chorus an irresistible hook that overcomes the characteristically anodyne '80s production which dooms less cleverly crafted efforts from that era.

(Drums have never had a worse decade than the 1980s. I have a theory that this has much to do with the deaths of Keith Moon in 1978 and John Bonham in 1980.



JAYSON JACOBY

Although disco might be at fault. It's an easy scapegoat, at any rate.)

I was just about to cross the railroad tracks when the combination of the light and the song struck me.

In that instant I remembered, with the clarity of one of those old black-and-white photographs so crisp that the image seems etched, standing in the parking lot at Stayton Union High School and listening to that very melody coming through the open window of the dirt-brown Chevrolet Nova my parents were thoughtful enough (and inexplicably trusting enough) to let me drive.

I can't be certain, despite how vivid the memory was, that I was recalling a specific moment.

It might well be that my brain conjured instead an amalgamation, the scene itself imaginary, albeit one contrived from actual fragments of the past.

The connections that caused my synapses to fire were obvious, in any case.

The parking lot at my high school also had an expansive view to the west, although the mountains in the distance were the gentle hills of the Coast Range rather than the imposing eminence that is the Elkhorns.

Yet the texture of the evening light, I'm confident, was much the same.

And it's quite plausible that I might once have listened to "Kyrie," which was for a time ubiquitous,

while standing next to the Nova in that patch of blacktop.

(The paint job of which I have faithfully described, a color you would not find in a new car showroom these days.)

But whether the memory was real or only a simulation, the sensation was powerful.

For that interlude, which lasted no more than the 50 strides or so that carried me across the tracks, I felt, in a way I hadn't in many years, what it was like to be 16.

I remembered how fine it was to feel the warm air on my face and to be aware of the beauty of the setting sun, to stand beside a car I had a license to drive, to listen to a song I liked.

These are simple things, all of them.

But they are not as simple when you're 16 and on the cusp of adulthood, as when you're 48 and on the cusp of, well, something else.

At 16 the act of twisting the key in the ignition and hearing the engine come alive, the notes of a familiar song wafting from coaxial speakers, these are moments of no small magic.

It was refreshing, all the more so for being so unexpected, to feel, however fleetingly, a connection with a time, and a person, that it's all too easily to believe are forever beyond reach.

I was on two recent evenings diverted from my normal nighttime procedure of falling asleep as quickly as possible by coming across the movie "Airplane!," already in progress, on one of the myriad cable channels whose number I usually

remember but whose name I've never bothered to notice.

Surely, you would think, I could resist the lure of a 39-year-old film, especially when my eyes are heavy with the accumulated events of the day.

But no. "Airplane!" though it has a disappointing lack of gladiator scenes, is otherwise a work of genius.

Comedic genius, to be specific.

The creation of writers Jim Abrahams and brothers David and Jerry Zucker, "Airplane!" is not so much a movie as a seamless series of sight gags and one-liners.

Its brilliance lies its complete refusal to take anything seriously — including itself. The film is so dedicated to making every scene — almost literally every line of dialogue — a joke that it requires multiple viewings to even begin to grasp how omnipresent the silliness is.

This commitment to satire is far more difficult to pull off than it might seem. Other bastions of irreverence such as The Onion share this sense of effortless simplicity — the jokes are so obvious that we immediately understand why they're funny. But maintaining this throughout a movie requires a rare combination of talent and sheer stamina.

But what struck me, as I giggled my way through the movie, is that it's all but certain that neither the original "Airplane!" nor even a considerably sanitized version would be released now.

Based on today's much less flexible standards, a significant portion of "Airplane!'"s" jokes — just as a guess I would peg the percentage at more than half — would likely

be widely deemed as racist, sexist, homophobic or abhorrent for some other reason.

In one sense I understand this.

I fully support that our society is far less tolerant than it once was of truly hateful bigotry, of acts intended to cause harm both psychological and, too often, physical.

These were, and remain, unequivocally serious matters.

But "Airplane!" is the antithesis of serious.

It lampoons everyone and everything.

I don't mean to suggest that some type of equivalency justifies hatred — that it's acceptable to demean one group so long as you demean all groups.

But I don't think "Airplane!" demeans anything or anybody.

True bigotry by its nature is divisive, an exercise in accentuating our differences and using them as a thug might brandish a cudgel.

Bigotry is certainly not amusing.

But "Airplane!," besides being hilarious, is inclusive, bringing every color and creed beneath its umbrella of absurdity and farce.

What I take from the movie is that we're all pretty much the same — which is to say we're all equally worth laughing over because our differences are superficial.

When it comes to equality this doesn't rival, say, the right to vote or to speak or to worship.

But laughter — and the kind that comes at everyone's expense and thus at no one's — seems to me something for which there is no surplus.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.