

EDITORIAL

Giving counties long-term security

It's almost literally the million-dollar question, and for Baker County government, that's a significant sum.

It's a federal government program and as might be expected, given the feds' affinity for attempting to create acronyms, this one often goes by its initials — PILT.

This stands for Payment In Lieu of Taxes. The program is pretty simple. Since 1976 the federal government has made annual payments to almost 1,900 counties across 49 states — Baker County among them — to compensate those counties for the property taxes they can't collect for the federal land within their borders (the federal government is exempt from paying property taxes).

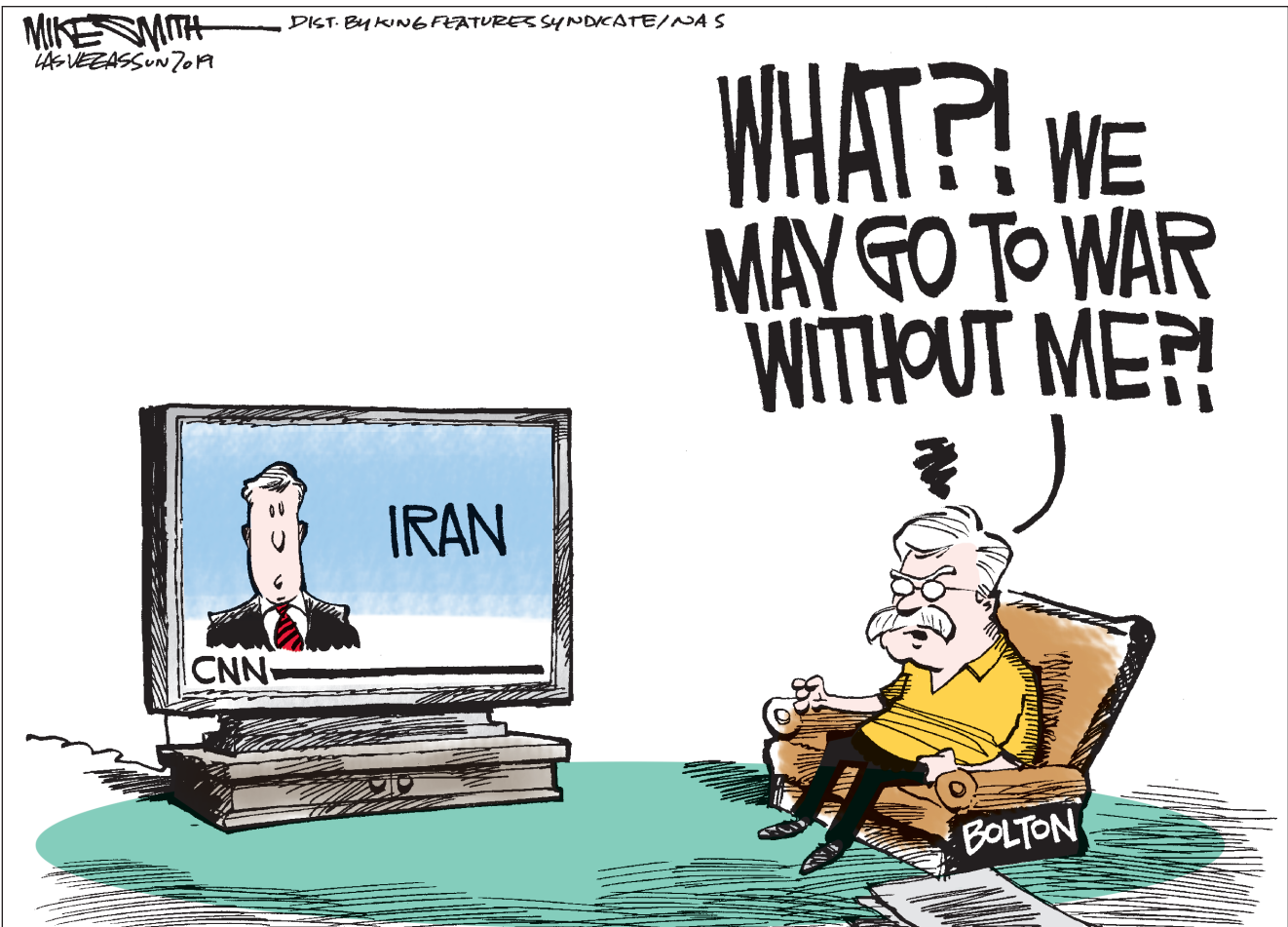
This is a major issue in Baker County, where about half of the 2 million acres is under federal management. The county expects to receive a PILT payment of about \$975,000 for the fiscal year that started July 1. That's about 8% of the county's projected general fund revenue. The general fund includes many core functions of county government, including the sheriff's office, jail, justice court, district attorney's office and emergency management.

The problem with PILT is its lack of stability. The government has continued to make the payments but multiple times over the past decade members of Oregon's congressional delegation have said they're concerned that the program might be canceled.

A group of senators, including Oregon's Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden, is sponsoring a bill that would reauthorize PILT, not for a year or two but for a decade. This would be a boon for counties as they prepare budgets.

In any case, PILT should continue. The federal government has an obligation to compensate counties for the property tax revenue — potentially millions of dollars annually for many counties — they forego because so much of the land is publicly owned.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OUR VIEW

Ag policy needs broad viewpoint

Oregon agriculture is a big tent. From the smallest acreage in Western Oregon to the largest ranch in Eastern Oregon, from the newest hemp farm in Central Oregon to the multi-generational grass seed operation in the Willamette Valley, and whether they follow conventional, organic or even biodynamic practices, they are all Oregon farmers.

They feed, clothe and shelter all of us.

More than 200 crops are grown across the state. Combined with the solar and wind power generation, Oregon farmers — and their counterparts across the country — are on the leading edge of 21st century agriculture.

Oregon agriculture is an on-the-ground celebration of that diversity. To travel from one corner of the state to the other is an extraordinary experience. Large and small, nursery, livestock, timber and crops — irrigated and non-irrigated — each farm and ranch is an example of how ingenuity, hard work and expertise can coax a crop from the ground and nurture livestock.

Every one of Oregon's more than 38,500 farms and ranches is evidence of all that is good about agriculture.

It saddens us, then, when we hear about some groups that want to draw lines through agriculture and divide it. They want to pit small against large, organic against conventional — every day, it seems, new lines are being drawn in the soil.

And we don't know why. We don't understand why, in the viewpoint of a few, some types of agriculture are "good" and other types aren't. They will tell you it has to do with their standards, and that's fine, until they try to impose those standards on everyone else.

When Marty Myers, general manager of Threemile Canyon Farms, was first appointed to the Oregon Board of Agriculture four years ago, these groups started drawing their lines. They argued that the Boardman farm was too big. It's actually several farms — three dairies, row crops, feed crops and a compost operation. It also takes waste and wind and produces sustainable electricity. Many of the things they do are cutting edge. Threemile Canyon has even developed a "closed loop" that allows byproducts to be constantly recycled and reused.

Oh, yes, it's also profitable.

In short, it is an example of how diversification works in favor of a farm, whether it's 93,000 acres, as is Threemile Canyon, or 9 acres. If done wisely, diversification will flatten the revenue roller coaster and assure positive cash flow.

Other farmers, whether their operations are large or small, would do well to study what Threemile Canyon has accomplished and consider how those lessons can be applied at different scales.

Recently, Gov. Kate Brown reappointed Myers to another term on the Board of Agriculture. That was the right thing to do. He brings an unmatched level of expertise and experience to the board, which advises the state Department of Agriculture.

For the record, seven appointed members of the board must be farmers or ranchers who represent different segments of agriculture, and two members represent consumers. The 10th member is the chair of the Soil and Water Conservation Commission. That's according to state law.

Along with the viewpoints of the rest of the board, whose membership represents a wide variety of farming operations, Myers' viewpoint should be sought out and welcomed.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the Baker City Herald. Columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the Baker City Herald.

Letters to the editor

We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Letters are limited to 350 words. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days. Writers must sign their letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Email letters to news@bakercityherald.com

Trailer ownership has me backed into a corner

There is nothing quite so depressing as that moment when you must accept the reality of a new and spectacular example of your own unique brand of ineptitude.

When such an appalling epiphany happens near your 49th birthday, a time when your mastery over even simple tasks is apt to show blatant signs of slippage, well this coincidence merely heightens your level of despair.

I am incapable of backing up a trailer.

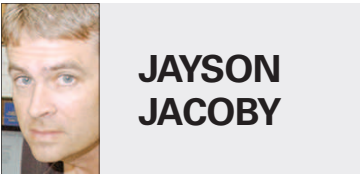
Actually that's not exactly correct.

I can back up a trailer quite well, since I long ago figured out how to select reverse on many types of automobile transmissions and press on the accelerator, these constituting about all that's required to go backward.

What I cannot do is back up a trailer into the space where it is supposed to be, or at least where it fits without causing considerable damage to the trailer or to harmless granite boulders, subalpine fir trees and other innocent bystanders.

This is something of a problem.

Backing the trailer into its designated space, one devoid of



JAYSON JACOBY

hapless squirrels and people's toes, is, after all, the ultimate object of the endeavor, and frankly the only important one.

This latent gap in my aptitude might well have remained hidden if not for the otherwise happy occasion that is our acquisition of what I know as a tent trailer.

(These portable residences apparently are more commonly referred to these days as "pop up" trailers. I suspect the manufacturers decided on a moniker that implies their products are rather more substantial than tents on wheels.)

It is a wonderful vehicle, and all but ideal for our purposes.

Its tidy dimensions and modest weight are well-suited for our tow vehicle, and the trailer is vastly more accommodating — indeed it's lavish by comparison — than the actual tent we typically occupy if we don't stay in a motel.

Our kids, Max and Olivia, seem

to prefer the trailer to our house, and I suspect both would gladly live in it, at least until the real cold sets in.

(Although the trailer's heater, based on our limited experience on a moderately chilly night, puts out a prodigious amount of BTUs, so they would probably try to ride out a blizzard inside if given the chance.)

The whole experience would be pretty much idyllic but for my incompetence behind the wheel.

I had a niggling suspicion that this might be so, given a handful of brief, unpleasant experiences with a trailer.

Yet the comprehensive nature of my failure, and my apparent impotence at doing anything about it, has been distressing.

I don't mean to imply that backing up a trailer smoothly is a skill that comes naturally to most people.

The challenge is adjusting to what is, in two ways, a reversal of the normal course of things.

Which is to say, if you desire your trailer to move to the right, you turn the steering wheel so that the rear end of your rig goes left.

I understand this in a purely

intellectual way.

But the instant I shift into reverse and begin to gingerly let out the clutch, my brain undergoes the organic equivalent of a computer lock up.

The world turns fuzzy and its normal physical realities, so comforting in their reliability, suddenly seem incomprehensible and fraught with danger.

Every bit of advice I have heard and read disappears as rapidly as algebraic equations departed my mind back in ninth grade (although I'm not sure the equations ever made even the smallest cranial penetration so I suppose it would be misleading to suggest they actually left).

Instead of gentle movements (backing a trailer is not wholly dissimilar from driving on ice, both carrying the risk of jackknifing) I yank the steering wheel from side to side as though I were trying to wrench it loose from the hub.

I twist my neck to an alarming degree. My eyes bulge.

I jab at the pedals in a way more reminiscent of Fred Flintstone than Mario Andretti.

(Or Lewis Hamilton, if you'd prefer a more contemporary com-

parison.)

I'm temporarily unsure of whether the trailer actually needs to move right or left, and at that point I'd as well close my eyes and hope.

I have managed in each case to deposit the trailer within a reasonable distance of its ideal parking place.

But all were ordeals. When I finally finished and had set the emergency brake my forehead was beaded with sweat and I felt a trifle delirious, as though I had just completed a sprint.

I am assured that, as with many skills, my trailer backing will improve with practice.

But I'm not mollified. For one thing, these claims come from people who already know how to handle a trailer.

Worse yet — much worse — I was told precisely the same thing about algebra.

And even now, more than three decades later, I react to the sight of 2x (3y + 2) much as I do to a large and angry dog that stands in my path and is restrained by nothing but its own predilections.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.