

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Amtrak: Unlikely, but idea has merit

Enough time has passed — 22 years — since the last Amtrak passenger train rolled to a stop in Baker City that some people likely have only a hazy memory, if any at all, of seeing the train parked at the former station just north of Broadway Street.

A group of people who think 22 years is too long for Baker County and the rest of Northeastern Oregon to go without train service plans to meet Saturday at La Grande to talk about their campaign to get Amtrak back on our local rails.

The Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates (AORTA — railroads as transportation arteries, get it?) will meet from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Cook Memorial Library, 2006 Fourth St.

History — or at least the past 22 years of it — suggests their quest has more than a slightly quixotic flavor.

But however unlikely, their goal is reasonable.

Amtrak's Pioneer route, which ran from Seattle to Chicago, passing through Baker City, La Grande and Ontario, among other stops, was canceled due to budget cuts. But Jon Nuxoll of Eugene, AORTA's president, argues that the need for passenger trains has increased rather than receded since 1997.

He makes a compelling case.

Other forms of transportation haven't rendered Amtrak superfluous in the past two decades.

Greyhound has only one daily bus on Interstate 84 from Portland to Boise, and one from Boise to Portland.

For scheduled passenger flights, then as now, we have to drive to Pendleton or Boise.

And the freeway has been more likely to close due to inclement weather and rashes of crashes over the past decade than was the case during the 1990s.

Amtrak is not a perfect solution to local transportation issues, to be sure.

It's not the least expensive option. Riding from, say, Portland to Spokane would cost \$93 to \$219, depending on the type of seat.

And Amtrak is heavily subsidized by the federal government — close to \$2 billion annually in recent years.

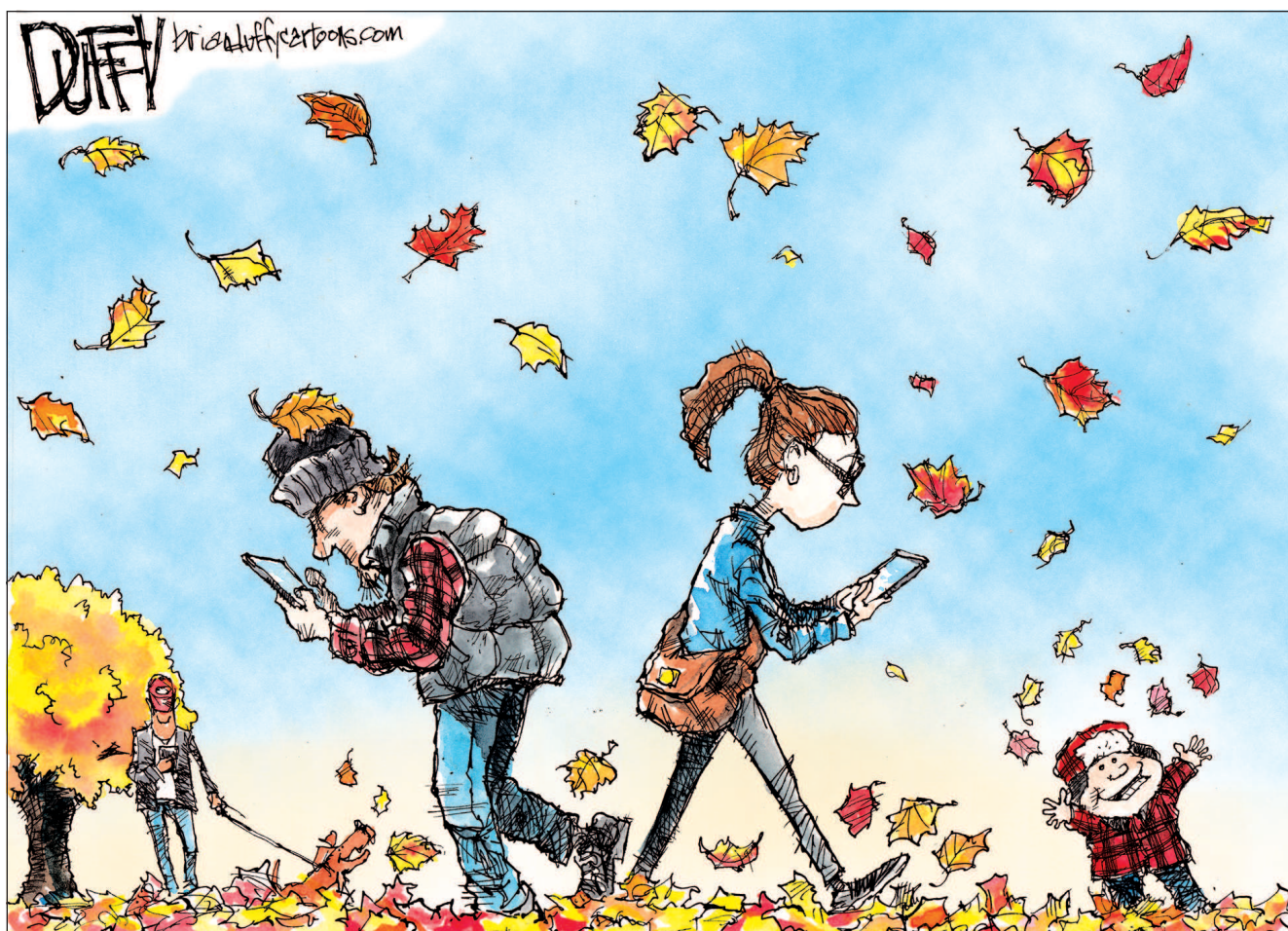
But taxpayers have been propping up Amtrak since long before the Pioneer route was canceled. And for the past 22 years, even while subsidies continued, Northeastern Oregon has been part of a gaping blank spot on the passenger rail service map. To the north, Amtrak's Empire Builder runs between Seattle and Chicago, with connecting trains from Portland through the Columbia Gorge and the Tri Cities, Washington. To the south, the California Zephyr rolls daily from San Francisco to Chicago by way of northern Nevada, Salt Lake City and Denver.

Since 1997 there has been an occasional flurry of interest, sometimes involving members of Congress, in reviving the Pioneer route, or at least a version of it.

In 2009, at the urging of lawmakers including Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden and Rep. Greg Walden, Amtrak compiled a preliminary report estimating the costs of restarting the Pioneer route. That report predicted annual operating losses ranging from \$25 million for a Seattle to Salt Lake City route, to \$35.3 million for a Portland to Denver train.

But after an absence of 22 years it's difficult to predict how much pent up demand there might be in our region for daily passenger trains. Costs and subsidies aside, environmental factors could play a role, as well, as studies have shown that trains are more efficient, using less energy per passenger mile, than buses, automobiles and airlines.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OUR VIEW

American values, or commerce?

We welcome the recent news that China has agreed to buy between \$40 billion and \$50 billion in U.S. agriculture products as part of a “cease fire” in the ongoing trade war between the two countries.

President Trump has agreed to suspend planned hikes in tariffs on Chinese goods as talks continue. Unfortunately, the cease fire does nothing to eliminate punishing tariffs on U.S. goods that are already in place.

But talks continue. China is an important trading partner for farmers and ranchers in the Pacific Northwest. Any improvement in trade relations between the United States and China is good news for farmers.

Yet our enthusiasm for this recent development is tempered by other actions of the Chinese government that made the news last week.

Exercising his First Amendment rights, Daryl Morey, the general manager of the Houston Rockets basketball team, tweeted his support for demonstrators in Hong Kong protesting a proposed ordinance that they fear would put residents and visitors to the region under the jurisdiction of the mainland Chinese communist government.

American basketball is very popular in China, and China is very important to the National Basketball Association.

Beijing responded by threatening to call off a series of planned NBA exhibition games in China. Morey pulled his tweet and apologized to the Chinese government. The Rockets disavowed Morey and the NBA groveled.

And the NBA isn't alone. With billions of dollars at stake, just about everyone that does business in China works hard not to run afoul of the leadership.

Google and Facebook facilitate censorship. Hollywood tempers its scripts to avoid touchy subjects such as Tibet, the Dalai Lama, the Tiananmen Square massacre and the sovereignty of Taiwan. Apple has given a state-run company control of its iCloud operation in China, along with the encryption key that has given the government access to emails, text messages, photos and other data of Chinese customers.

Nike pulled the products of one of its affiliated brands from Chinese shelves after its principal designer tweeted support for Hong Kong protestors. In contrast, Disney remained silent when the actress playing the title role in its live-action movie “Mulan” tweeted her

support for the police beating Hong Kong demonstrators.

The People's Republic of China is a totalitarian, communist regime that doesn't tolerate departures from the party line. It uses forced labor; it persecutes religious minorities; it imprisons dissenters in “re-education” camps; it is said to harvest the organs of detainees.

Unfortunately, it's also an economic powerhouse that isn't afraid to throw its weight around.

None of this seems to have anything to do with agricultural exports to China. To our knowledge, the Chinese have not put the arm on American farmers and ranchers to moderate their views.

But what happens if a social media-savvy soybean farmer acknowledges in a tweet that Chinese President Xi Jinping resembles Winnie the Pooh? (He does, and it's a sore spot.) U.S. agriculture might have to make the choice between American values and \$24 billion in Chinese sales.

It's a hard choice to contemplate.

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.

OTHER VIEWS

Choice not enough with education

Editorial from The Philadelphia Inquirer:

More than two decades after the charter law in Pennsylvania was passed, school choice remains the center of a lively but largely unresolved debate — one that has taken on new shapes.

“School choice” used to be synonymous with vouchers, but that is no longer the case, at least in Pennsylvania. Now, the state offers a range of public education options: district schools, brick-and-mortar charter schools, cyber schools, private and parochial school scholarships publicly funded via a tax credit program. Across Pennsylvania, 137,000 students are enrolled in charters and another 50,000 go to private or parochial schools using the tax credit program. In all, the state spends \$2 billion on these alternatives to traditional public schools.

The bedrock belief of those championing choice is that parents deserve options for where they send their children to school, and that parents know what's best for their child. For some lawmakers, parental choice is a civil rights issue, ensuring that a child's zip code doesn't dictate the quality of his or her education.

Sound arguments, but too often, choice for its own sake is treated as the goal, rather than quality education options.

If choice alone were enough, that would make Philadelphia — with more charter schools and other offerings than any other city in the commonwealth — the epicenter of academic excellence and equity.

But despite academic progress, Philadelphia district schools have a ways to go. Just as some district schools are high quality and some are troubled, many charter schools excel, while many fall short. Cyber charters, according to recent studies, post “overwhelmingly negative” results in student performance.

Not only have there been no reforms to the original law that created these choices, but there are few longitudinal studies tracking student achievement and outcomes across all types of school options. For example, fewer high school graduates in Pennsylvania are heading to college now than 15 years ago. What's behind that decline, and what role, if any, do school choices play?

As for equity, a recent provocative body of research suggest that choice has

led to schools increasingly segregated by race, ability and language. Earlier this year, the Education Law Center found that traditional charter schools are failing to ensure equitable access for all students, with high levels of segregation in charters.

That echoes recent research from across the country suggesting that more choice has led to more segregation, which is reshaping the choice debate yet again. One reason is that parents don't have equal access to accurate and understandable tools and information needed to make informed choices.

The school choice model is based on free market principles. That's both good and bad news. Bad news because education is more than a commodity to be advertised on billboards. It's a public good — and legally compulsory. The upside is that parents as “consumers” have the power to demand more: better choices, more equitable funding and more tools for measuring and understanding school performance.

Parents should make it clear, especially to lawmakers, that choice alone is not enough. They deserve to have choices that provide the best education to their children.

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 will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.
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