

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

5J board listened

The Baker School Board and its school improvement committee obviously learned something last November when voters defeated, by a wide margin, a \$48 million property tax bond measure to build a new elementary school, remodel Baker High School to accommodate seventh- and eighth-graders, and make other improvements to schools.

In a post-election analysis the school district commissioned this past spring, the most common reason voters cited for rejecting the measure was that the district was asking for too much money.

It's no coincidence that the committee's proposal, submitted to the board Monday, calls for a \$7.5 million bond. The board will meet Nov. 21 to discuss whether to put the measure on the May 2020 ballot.

The new proposal is quite modest compared to the rejected 2018 version, both in the tax rate increase — 66 cents per \$1,000 of assessed valuation compared with \$1.97 last year — and in duration — 10 years versus 30 years.

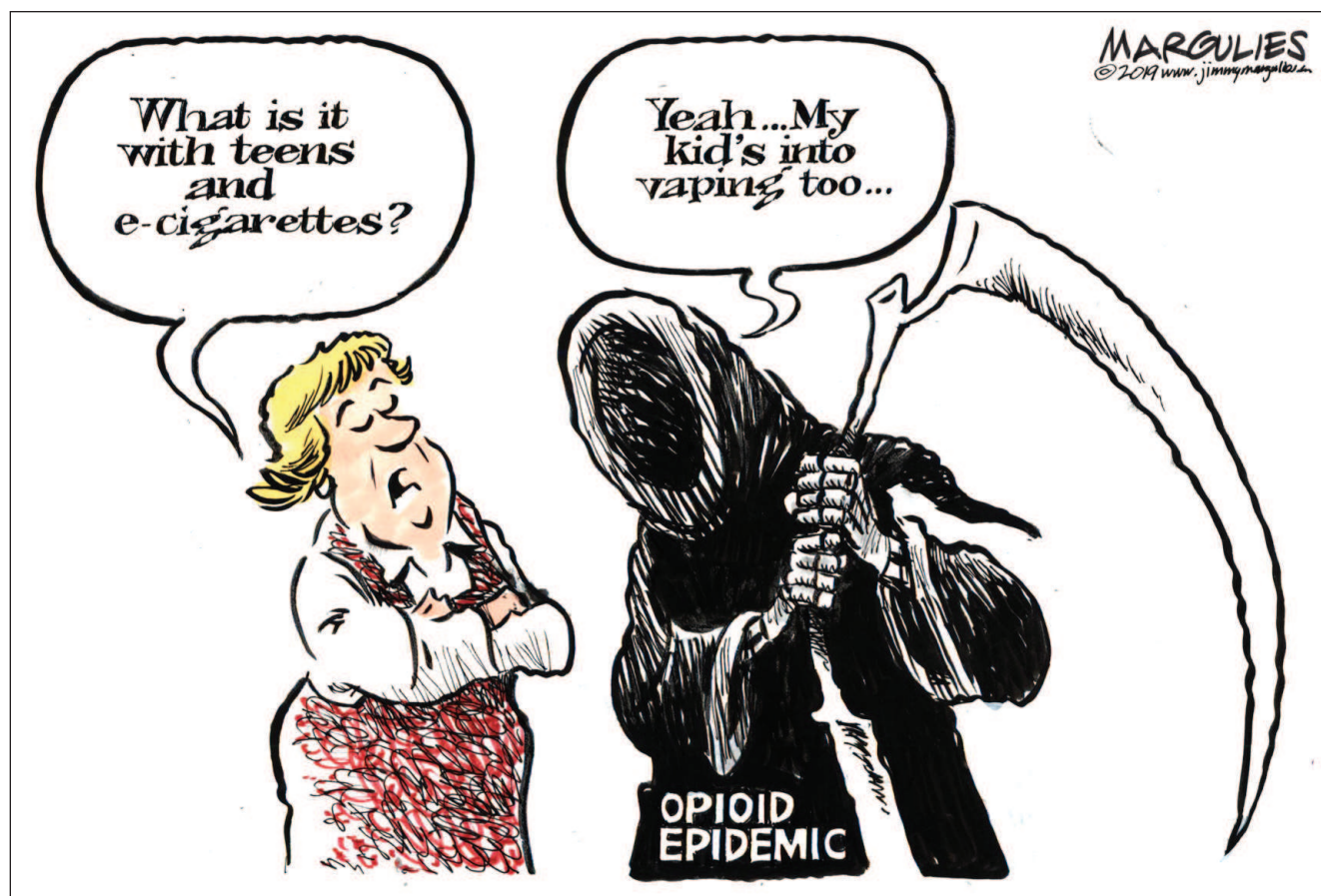
But the board and committee didn't listen only to voters who opposed to 2018 measure.

That analysis showed that among supporters of the 2018 measure, moving seventh- and eighth-graders to a remodeled section of Baker High School ranked third among the reasons voters cast a yes vote.

The BHS remodel is part of the current proposal, and that makes sense. Baker High School is being underused, with about 450 students occupying a space designed to handle up to 830.

The board will solicit public comments during the Nov. 21 meeting. Residents should take advantage — the district has already proved that it listens.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

A poetic plea to keep cell towers out of town

I hope that I shall never see
A cell phone tower masked as a tree
One that's planted in concrete
Made of metal measuring 70 feet
There's no way: you cannot fool me
That's a cell tower not a tree
But our planning commission wanders lost
Corporations profit at the public's cost
And we're prohibited from mentioning EMFs
Because the FCC blocks out all due

process

As Verizon lobbies with its corporate wealth
They sacrifice up the public's health
For EMFs are really real
From their effects we do not heal
And our view of the mountains? It will go away
As soon as Verizon gets its way
Verizon says it'll speed our data
That a tower's looks don't really matter
A quick vote of no was what we was wishin'
But no such luck from this commis-

sion

Our planning commission they agree
That a cell phone tower can be a tree
So their conclusion seems forgone
Because Verizon now has them conned
Their lone spat is what kind of tree
Should our cell phone tower really be?
Poems are made by fools like me
But believe me Verizon: that's not a tree

Whit Deschner
Baker City

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 that do not include this information cannot be published.

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Special protection risks journalism's reputation

You might assume that because I derive my livelihood from working in the news media I would endorse any law intended to protect journalists from physical harm while they're doing their jobs.

But no.

Perhaps I would feel differently about the Journalist Protection Act, which has failed to gain much traction in Congress, if there was compelling evidence that journalists working in the U.S. face a demonstrably greater threat than the average citizen, and solely as a result of their profession.

(I include the "working in the U.S." distinction intentionally; the situation for reporters in some parts of the world is decidedly different, which is to say, much more dangerous.)

I expect my opinion about the proposed federal law would be altered as well if there weren't already laws in effect, in every jurisdiction in the country, regarding assault against anyone, regardless of their profession or whether they happen to be engaged in it when they get slugged.

I understand the potential symbolic effect of the Journalist Protection Act, which several Democratic members of Congress have introduced a few times over the past two years.

The Act would make it a federal crime to assault a journalist who is gathering the news, if the suspect knew the victim was doing so.

Ensuring journalists can do their work without undue fear of reprisals, most especially from the government (hence the First Amendment) but also from other citizens, is fundamental to the concept of a free society on which America is based.

And I think it's worthwhile to emphasize on occasion this aspect of our shared history — to recognize that there is an inherent, and indeed a unique, value to journal-



JAYSON JACOBY

ism.

But an even more crucial factor in the profession's effort to uphold its ideals, I believe, is its independence.

Although perhaps objectivity is the more apt word.

What I'm getting at is that I believe journalism loses much, if not all, of its vitality and its moral authority when it sacrifices its autonomy.

I don't mean to suggest that journalism, or journalists, are or should be aloof.

But what troubles me about the Journalist Protection Act is that it would confer on journalists a special status whether they want it or not. It seems to me that the Act conflates the legitimate notion that journalism as a profession is special, with the untenable position that journalists as individuals ought to be sheltered by the federal government in a way their neighbors are not.

This strikes me as the sort of cozy relationship between government and any profession or group that journalists not only eschew but actively seek to expose — and rightfully so, since such arrangements occasionally involve bribery or other unsavory, not to mention criminal, acts. But when journalism itself is tucked beneath the protective cloak of government I think the result is an erosion of the credibility which is to journalism what oxygen is to our lungs.

This is, I'll concede, potentially a matter of public perception rather than reality.

Yet that perception, whether or not truly justified, is inextricably tied to the reputation of journalism

or any other profession.

And it seems to me beyond dispute that were Congress to create a new, specific federal crime for assaulting a working journalist, a significant number of people would wonder whether reporters, having had a particular protection bestowed on them by Congress, would, or even could, scrutinize their legislative benefactors with quite the same commitment.

The answer to that question might well be that yes, journalists could continue to serve as the public's watchdogs over the government as effectively, and independently, as ever.

But I fear citizens would not be mollified by any such assurances from journalists, any more than reporters assume every statement by a politician or government official is beyond reproach.

(Public opinion polls about the reputation of journalism suggest to me that the profession ought to be aggressive in protecting the meager credibility it generally has.)

The impetus for the Journalist Protection Act is hardly a secret.

Its supporters frequently cite President Donald Trump's caustic jibes about "fake news" and the dishonest media as responsible for creating what Rep. Eric Swalwell, a California Democrat who has sponsored the Act, deemed "a toxic atmosphere."

U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Connecticut, is also a co-sponsor of the legislation. He recently justified the Act based on a parody video, shown at the Miami golf resort Trump owns, that depicts the president shooting and stabbing opponents, including journalists.

Notwithstanding a White House statement that Trump "strongly condemns" the video, Blumenthal and other supporters of the Act seem to hold Trump responsible for putting journalists in a danger they wouldn't otherwise be subject to.

I don't find the evidence for that claim compelling.

The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker catalogs cases of journalists who have been, among other things, physically attacked (30 so far in 2019) or arrested (8). But the organization's database dates only to 2017 — the year Trump took office.

According to the Press Freedom Tracker's website (pressfreedom-tracker.us): "We do not feel that data collected retroactively would meet our rigorous research standards. We believe that data collected before we established a tracking system, methodology, and outreach is likely to be less comprehensive and therefore likely to underestimate the number of incidents before 2017."

That's reasonable. But the lack of historical context also makes it difficult for anyone to conclude, with any level of confidence, that Trump's rhetoric is directly responsible for journalists being at a greater risk than they were before he took office — the very justification, of course, for the Journalist Protection Act.

To be clear, I find Trump's anti-media fixation abhorrent. But his tantrums generally strike me as ludicrous rather than threatening.

That's because, by and large, he's simply wrong when he claims the media are dishonest and inaccurate — a contention he regurgitates with the absence of nuance, much less evidence, that is his hallmark. A significant amount of what Trump and his acolytes construe as "negative" journalism about the president is based largely, if not entirely, on his own public pronouncements.

Trump produces vastly more fiction than do the journalists he so often chastises.

And yet, when I examine the evidence, I just can't make the case that our country needs a new, largely superfluous federal law to

protect journalists and ensure they can continue to perform their vital role in our society.

It is indisputable that the media have been consistently aggressive in pursuing allegations of wrongdoing by Trump — as well they should.

And I think it's equally true that the opinion side of journalism, as distinct from the straightforward news-reporting side, has been more antagonistic to Trump than to any other president in the past few generations.

This, too, seems to me appropriate given Trump's animosity to the press and his unprecedented volume of invectives against the profession.

But my point is that journalists can match the president's scurrilous charges with as many words or images as their employers see fit to publish or broadcast. The media in the era of Trump is hardly under siege to the point that its healthy future — literally, in the case of individual journalists — depends upon the intervention of Congress. If anything, the president's disdain has invigorated journalism, spawning fact-checking campaigns and organizations such as the Press Freedom Tracker that were curiously absent, or greatly muted, during previous administrations.

Indeed, perhaps my greatest challenge in putting together the Herald's Opinion page over the past three years has been finding syndicated editorial cartoons, columns and editorials that deviate even slightly from an anti-Trump theme.

The issue isn't that this administration's "toxic atmosphere" is stifling the free press.

It's that journalism has been speaking with what at times seems to be a single voice, and I can scarcely hear anything else.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.