

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Crucial meetings on public safety

A series of public meetings that will be scheduled later this year could have significant effects on public safety in Baker City and Baker County, and everyone should consider attending one.

The issue is ambulance service in Baker City and in about half of the county, including Baker Valley, and specifically which agency provides that service.

The Baker City Fire Department is a current provider for that service area. MedTransport Inc. of North Powder is also a licensed ambulance provider.

The Baker County Board of Commissioners has the legal authority to pick licensed ambulance providers for the service area. Commissioners recently received three bids for what's expected to be a minimum 10-year contract, awarded by June 1, 2020.

Baker City Fire Department and MedTransport both submitted bids. So did Metro West Ambulance Inc. of Hillsboro. County officials have not released details about any of the bids.

Jason Yencopal, the county's emergency management director, said the county embarked on the bidding process in part because officials expect to ask voters to approve a new tax or fee to cover the cost of ambulance service, or possibly to create a special taxing district. It's not clear whether such a measure would go to voters throughout the ambulance service area, including Baker City, or only to voters who live outside the city limits.

Earlier this year County Commissioner Mark Bennett said county officials feel an obligation to consider all possible options for ambulance service before asking voters to pay more.

In 2017 City Manager Fred Warner Jr. said the city might not be able to continue dispatching ambulances to some areas outside the city limits if the city didn't accept a three-year federal grant that allowed the fire department to hire three new firefighter/paramedics.

The city did accept that grant, but the money goes away in 2021.

But the potential ramifications of the commissioners' decision is not limited to ambulance service — it could affect the city fire department's ability to respond to fires as well.

Baker City Fire Chief John Clark, along with Jason Jacobs of the firefighters' union, have expressed concern about what would happen if commissioners don't pick the Fire Department to continue as an ambulance service provider. Ambulance billing supplies about 44% of the Fire Department's annual budget of \$2.15 million. City property owners contribute most of the rest through property taxes. The city doesn't receive property tax revenue from properties outside the city limits.

In a written statement, Jacobs said that if the city lost the ambulance contract the Fire Department would have to lay off up to six of its 16 paid staff immediately.

Clark said those staffing cuts would not only reduce his department's firefighting capacities inside the city, but it likely would mean the department would no longer respond to fires outside the city, where the department now renders aid to rural fire districts through mutual aid agreements.

Property owners inside the city could end up paying more for fire insurance, Clark said.

Yencopal said public comments made during the meetings will be forwarded to commissioners to consider as they review the three bids.

Meeting times and places will be published in the Herald. Residents should take advantage of the opportunity to learn more, and to express their opinions on this vital topic.

—Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

On tech integrity, Twitter takes the lead, but will Facebook follow?

Editorial from The San Jose Mercury News and East Bay Times:

Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey struck a needed blow for tech integrity and democracy last week when he said that the social networking company would pull the plug on political ads.

If only Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg would see the light.

For decades tech companies were renowned for embracing the highest standards of business ethics and respecting the needs of their customers.

Zuckerberg has arguably done more in the last decade to destroy public trust in tech than any CEO in Silicon Valley history.

His stubborn refusal to vet political ads for accuracy threatens the integrity of our elections — and those of countries around the world — and the future of democracy. If that wasn't enough, Zuckerberg continues to line his pockets by invading the privacy of Facebook's 2.4 billion users. Bill Hewlett and David Packard must be spinning in their graves. Zuckerberg may have a fortune of nearly \$70 billion, but history will not treat him kindly.

Even Facebook employees are appalled. The New York Times recently published a letter sent to Zuckerberg by 250 Facebook employees in which they said, "Misinformation affects us all," and

"Free speech and paid speech are not the same thing."

It wasn't a coincidence that Dorsey timed his announcement minutes before Zuckerberg made an earnings call that showed Facebook's financial performance exceeded analysts' expectations.

"We believe political message reach should be earned, not bought," Dorsey said.

Dorsey also tweeted: "This is about paying for reach. And paying to increase the reach of political speech has significant ramifications that today's democratic infrastructure may not be prepared to handle. It's worth stepping back in order to address."

No one knows how much misinformation played a role in the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. At first, Zuckerberg claimed there was no effect. But, as evidence poured out, Zuckerberg apologized after admitting in 2017 that Russian operatives used Facebook to spread divisive messages by purchasing at least 3,000 ads on its site.

Zuckerberg wrote on his personal Facebook page, "For the ways my work was used to divide people rather than bring us together, I ask forgiveness and I will work to do better."

Really? If so, it's hard to tell.

Zuckerberg tried Wednesday to defend Facebook's policy of allowing false politi-

cal ads by saying he didn't "think it right for private companies to censor politicians and the news."

That puts Facebook in the position of knowingly joining forces for financial gain with those spreading lies and misinformation for political gain. Separating fact from fiction in political ads is time-consuming work, but it's a basic responsibility for those who publish them. If Zuckerberg is not prepared to do the work, he should stop accepting the ads.

Zuckerberg is right when he says that political ads make up less than 0.5% of Facebook's revenues, or roughly \$300 million. But, while that might not be a lot of money to the billionaire, it's nearly half of all the money candidates have raised so far in the presidential election.

He's also correct when he says other companies, including Google-owned YouTube, publish false or misleading political ads. But that doesn't make it right. That others do it is a pathetic excuse for Facebook, especially given the company's record of enabling political manipulation.

A day of reckoning awaits Facebook and other tech companies if they fail to get ahead of basic integrity issues that threaten long-held American values. Twitter's Jack Dorsey took a step in the right direction. The question is to what degree will others — especially Facebook — follow?

Threats to America's national parks

Editorial from The Los Angeles Times:

National parks were created more than a century ago to be refuges for flora and fauna and the land on which they depend for existence, to protect them all from the ravages of human development. They have become refuges for humans as well — places where people can disconnect from the clamor of modern society and commune briefly with the natural world while surrounded by spectacular beauty.

To achieve both requires striking a balance between conserving the wildness of the parks and building the infrastructure needed to give humans reasonable access to it. So far, that balance has mostly been maintained in the 58 national parks. But it is now in danger of toppling, and not in the favor of preservation. President Trump's Interior Department seems determined to open up the parks to new business and recreational uses, even while it slashes their operational budgets.

President Reagan expressed interest

in privatizing and commercializing federal lands in the 1980s, and now Trump is back on the case. Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt has ordered the National Park Service to allow electric-powered bikes to zip around on park trails, and he is pushing worrisome measures to increase tourism at Yosemite (as if it needed the boost) such as allowing boats on Hetch Hetchy reservoir for the first time.

And further changes have been proposed: Soon, visitors might be able to take a break from strolling under the giant sequoias to stream the latest hot Netflix series, to order the latest electronic gear on Amazon and have it delivered right to their Jumbo Rocks campground (by drone?) or regain their strength after a hike through Badwater Basin in Death Valley at an array of food trucks.

Those are among the actual proposals cooked up by the Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee, a panel filled with representatives of park concessionaires and other private

industries that would profit from these ideas. We might laugh it off as fantasies of avaricious business people (really? Amazon deliveries?) were it not for the fact that it fits into a pattern of efforts by the Trump administration to privatize services provided by federal agencies such as Veterans Affairs and the U.S. Postal Service. The problem is that while privatization might work for some federal endeavors, it is in direct conflict with the *raison d'être* of the national parks. You can't simultaneously conserve and exploit a natural resource.

The justification given for these "improvements" is to attract the next generation of users. And a case could be made that improving Wi-Fi coverage in the parks would be good for public safety. But it's insulting to younger people to suggest they won't be interested in an outdoor experience without all the luxuries and conveniences of home. And it's not in anyone's interests to chip away at the very thing that makes the parks worth visiting.

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

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- 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.

- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.
- Mail:** To the Editor, Baker City Herald, P.O. Box 807, Baker City, OR 97814

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