

DECEMBER

■ Highest Temperature: 49, the 12th

• Lowest Temperature: 11, the 16th

• Total Precipitation: .08 (avg.: .94)

County Officials Seek Revenue Sources For Hewitt, Holcomb Parks

Park Problems



S. John Collins / Baker City Herald file photo

Holcomb Park is on the north shore of the Powder River arm of Brownlee Reservoir about three miles east of Richland. Baker County owns and operates the park along with its neighbor, Hewitt Park.

By Samantha O’Conner
soconner@bakercityherald.com

and Jayson Jacoby
jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

DECEMBER 4 — Declining revenue from the two Baker County parks on Brownlee Reservoir due in part to low water levels and blooms of toxic algae has county officials looking for other ways to raise money to run the parks, some with short-term potential and others that would be more sustainable sources in the long run.

Officials have also discussed the possibility of asking Idaho Power Company to take over operation of Hewitt and Holcomb parks on the Powder River arm of the reservoir about 3 miles east of Richland.

“It’s not a sustainable operation,” said Karen Spencer, the county parks coordinator.

“We try desperately to take care of the needs of the people who come in and use the parks but with fewer and

“It’s not a sustainable operation.”

— Karen Spencer,
Baker County Parks
Department coordinator



fewer people coming out all the time, the revenue that is normally generated is greatly reduced,” said Bill Harvey, chairman of the Baker County Board of Commissioners. “So it’s a struggle to keep a parks director and two part-time people out there working when they don’t have anywhere near the revenues we used to. So it’s a struggle to find some mechanism that will work to keep the park open.”

The county collected a yearly average of about \$57,680 from the two parks during the 2016-17 and 2017-18 fiscal years through a combination of camping fees, season passes and sales of ice, firewood and water.

The yearly average for the previous

two fiscal years, 2014-15 and 2015-16, was about \$70,900.

During the 2008-09 and 2009-10 fiscal years, revenue from the parks averaged about \$85,000 annually.

The biggest factors in the recent decline in revenue are low water levels in Brownlee, which at times has made it difficult to launch boats, and advisories regarding blue-green algae, Spencer said.

Both issues discourage people from using the parks, which means less revenue for the county, she said.

Ed Elms, chairman of the county’s parks advisory board, said those bad years have lasting effects.

“It’s hard to get those people to return,” he said, talking about boaters who can’t launch a boat due to low water.

Despite these cyclical challenges, the parks department has largely been self-sustaining in the past, Spencer said.

Pair gets out of truck just before train hits

By Jayson Jacoby
jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

DECEMBER 9 — Two Baker City residents escaped injury Friday evening by jumping out of a pickup truck before it was struck by a Union Pacific freight train near Haines.

The pickup was stranded on the train tracks after it became entangled with a truck hauling potatoes.

No one was hurt.

The incident happened around 5:13 p.m. where Pole Line Lane crosses the railroad tracks, just

west of Highway 30 about six miles north of Baker City.

Tynan Morrison, 17, was driving north on Highway 30, toward Haines, with one passenger, Isaac Furtney, 18, in the 2001 Ford F-250 pickup truck, according to the Baker County Sheriff’s Office.

Furtney said they were following a potato truck that was driving at about 25 to 30 mph.

The potato truck was driven by Donald Richardson, 40, of Nampa, Idaho, according to the Sheriff’s Office.



Baker County Sheriff’s Office

Two people escaped from this pickup before it was struck by a Union Pacific freight train Friday evening near Haines.

After Morrison began to pass the potato truck, the truck started turning left onto Pole Line Road. Furtney said they didn’t see a turn signal. The potato trailer collided with the pickup, and the two became entangled, according to the Sheriff’s Office.

Jobless rate near record low

By Jayson Jacoby
jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

DECEMBER 4 — Baker County’s unemployment rate remains near record low levels, a trend that dates to 2016.

The county’s seasonally adjusted jobless rate in October was 5.1% — the lowest ever recorded during that month based on statistics from the Oregon Employment Department that date to 1990.

Prior to 2017 the lowest seasonally adjusted rate for the county was 5.3%, in February 2007, said Christopher Rich, regional economist at the Employment Department’s La Grande office.

The unemployment

rate dipped to 5.3% in May 2017, and the rate has been at that level, or lower, in 16 months since then.

That period includes a rate of 5.0% in July 2019,

the lowest ever.

Through October the annual rate for the year was 5.2%. The lowest annual rate of 5.5% was set in 2017 and duplicated in 2018.

The average annual wage countywide, including both the private and public sectors, rose from \$35,001 in 2016 to \$35,760 in 2017 and to \$36,779 in 2018.

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Cell tower turned down

By Samantha O’Conner
soconner@bakercityherald.com

DECEMBER 6 — The Baker City Planning Commission voted 5-2 Wednesday to deny Verizon Wireless’ application to build a 70-foot cellphone tower on the north side of town.

Several people who live in the area north of Leo Adler Field and the Fairgrounds testified at previous Commission meetings this fall that they believe the proposed tower would mar their views and reduce their property values.

And although federal rules prohibit the Planning Commission from considering health issues related to cell towers, several residents also objected to the tower based on their concerns about the health effects from radio frequency emissions.

Holly Kerns, director of the Baker City-County Planning Department, said Verizon officials have 14 days to appeal the Commission’s decision to the Baker City Council.

A. Lakes to take over golf course

DECEMBER 11 — The nonprofit corporation that owns Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort will take over operation of the city-owned Quail Ridge Golf Course.

City Manager Fred Warner Jr. told city councilors during their meeting Tuesday evening that the Baker County Development Corporation, which owns Anthony Lakes, has agreed to take over the lease that Mike Brooks has had to manage the 18-hole course since 2017.

The City Council agreed to transfer the lease, which expires in one year, from Brooks to the Baker County Development Corporation.

Councilor leaving

DECEMBER 11 — Baker City Councilor Ken Gross announced Tuesday night that he will be resigning Dec. 31. Gross said his job requires him to move away from the city.

Gross was elected in November 2018 to a four-year term.

The remaining six city councilors will choose someone to replace Gross. The city will solicit interest from volunteers and meet with applicants on Jan. 8. Councilors’ tentative plan is to choose Gross’ replacement during their regulation meeting on Jan. 14.



Gross

Bag ban looming

By Jayson Jacoby
jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

DECEMBER 18 — Jamie Kassien walks out of the Baker City Albertsons grocery store carrying something that will be illegal there in two weeks.

Kassien is hauling his groceries, on this chilly and blustery Tuesday morning, in a pair of thin plastic bags.

Starting Jan. 1, Oregon grocery stores and most other retail businesses will be banned from handing out those ubiquitous bags.

Gov. Kate Brown signed House Bill 2509 into law on June 20.

The law bans grocery stores and other retail businesses, including restaurants, from giving customers what the law describes as “single-use check-out bags” — the ones hanging from metal racks at the check-out in many businesses.

Playground plan gets national attention

By Samantha O’Conner
soconner@bakercityherald.com

DECEMBER 18 — Baker City’s plan to build an all-inclusive playground this spring at Geiser-Pollman Park has gained national attention.

On Nov. 24 city officials learned from PlayCore, a maker of playground equipment, that the Baker City project had been selected as a national demonstration site.