

Local & State

Baker City couple drop effort to get permission to build home in Union

By Sabrina Thompson
The (La Grande) Observer

UNION — Jane and Frank Wentzel of Baker City in August 2018 bought land in Union they hoped to build a home on.

The property at 103 N. Bellwood St. is near Catherine Creek and close to their daughter. The Wentzels, both in their 70s, saw it as an ideal spot.

What happened with trying to build there was far from ideal. After fighting for more than a year to live on the land, the Wentzels ended the effort.

“The most maddening part was we wanted to use that land and live there, right by the riverfront,” Jane Wentzel said. “But we came to a dead end.”

Union City Administrator Doug Wiggins said the Wentzels purchased the land knowing they would have to get a conditional-use permit in order to build a home there. The city zoned the 2.2 acres the Wentzels purchased as commercial property in 2015 after completing a nearly \$30,000 study to develop a zoning map of the city.

Jane Wentzel said she thought getting the permit would be a “no-brainer” because two houses were established nearby. The Wentzels submitted an application for the permit on Oct. 10, 2018. The city’s planning commission considered the matter

a week later at a public hearing.

Prior to and during the hearing, locals spoke for and against the permit. Business owners who shared the road with the property were concerned about their ability to grow their businesses and stood in opposition. Other locals were concerned it would take away land from new businesses that might revitalize the community.

“You will add another nail in Union’s coffin if this is approved,” Dick Middleton, a longtime Union resident, told the commission.

The commission decided in a 3-1 vote to deny the permit. According to the letter the city sent the Wentzels, the denial was because allowing the land to be used for a residence would contradict the master plan for the city.

“We felt like it was a gut punch after the planning commission meeting,” Jane Wentzel said.

Wiggins supported the decision.

“We don’t have a lot of commercial ground in town,” he said.

As a compromise, the couple decided to split the land into three lots, and the planning commission unanimously approved. With two new lots for potential businesses and buyers, the Wentzels looked to change the zoning on the third lot to residential.

They filed for a zone change in April in addition to suggesting a zone swap for a residential property on Medical Springs Highway owned by Coy Wilde. Under that scheme, the Wentzels figured the city would not lose any residential or commercial property.

However, the city denied the Wentzels’ proposal. The city in a letter cited the rejection was due to Wilde’s noncompliance with zoning conditions and out of concerns Wilde would not follow through on using his property for a business.

The Wentzels presented their proposal during a June 19 public hearing before the planning commission. The final decision regarding the matter went to the city council Aug. 12. During both public hearings, the Wentzels attempted to address concerns that opponents raised to the zone change.

Some, such as Dennis Clark, who owns a workshop near the Wentzels’ property, said having people living in the commercial zone could lead to the city getting noise complaints. And Union resident David Orcutt said, “I can see problems in the future with mixing and matching commercial and residential properties.”

Not everyone disapproved. Gary Koegler of Union said he was in favor of the zone change because it would en-

courage more people to move to town.

The council again voted 3-1 against the zone change. The planning commission and city council both cited the 2015 study in their decisions.

That was enough for the Wentzels.

“We made the decision to stop digging in a hole that has no bottom,” Jane Wentzel said.

She said they anticipate closing soon on a deal to sell two lots for \$34,000 total, which will go toward paying off their debt incurred from purchasing the property.

“The thing that kills me is they are just going to park equipment on the land,” she said. “I hope the city is happy with their decision. They could have had three new families.”

But that was not the city’s intention for the land.

“The city is not holding out for anything other than recognizing that it was zoned commercially and wishes to maintain that zone for commercial use,” Wiggins said.

“The property was originally a flour mill until it was torn down in the mid-1990s. It has always been commercial property, and the city continues to maintain it in that fashion.”

Jane Wentzel said she and her husband plan to keep the remaining lot at 103 N. Bellwood St. as an area to spend time with family and will keep horses there.

FINDLEY

Continued from Page 1A

“I am looking forward to the opportunity to serve the people of Senate District 30,” Findley said in a press release issued Monday afternoon. “I have worked hard to represent the voices of Eastern Oregonians since I have been in the House of Representatives and there is much more work to be done. It has been an honor to serve the people of House District 60 and I am looking forward to this new challenge.”

Although party committee members nominate candidates, the final choice is made by commissioners from the counties in District 30. That district, the largest geographically in the Oregon Senate, includes all of Baker, Grant, Harney, Jefferson, Malheur and Wheeler counties, as well as parts of Deschutes, Lake, Wasco, Clackamas and Marion counties.

Each county is allocated one vote for every 1,000 registered voters or major

fraction of 1,000 (more than 500).

Baker County, which has slightly fewer than 12,000 registered voters, had a total of 12 votes, meaning each of the three commissioners — Bill Harvey, Mark Bennett and Bruce Nichols — had four votes each.

The vote breakdown by county: Baker, 12; Deschutes, 17; Grant, 5; Harney, 5; Jefferson, 15; Lake, 1; Malheur, 16; Wasco, 16; Wheeler, 1. Neither Clackamas nor Marion county had votes because the parts of those counties within District 30 are mainly in the Cascade Mountains, and neither has more than 500 registered voters.

Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett said the vote tally was 60.33 for Findley; 15.99 for Runyon; and 11.34 for Wattenburg.

Bentz resigned Jan. 2 so he could focus his attention on running for Congress. Bentz hopes to replace Greg Walden as representative for Oregon’s 2nd Congressional District. Walden announced last fall that he won’t seek re-election.

This is the second time Findley, a Republican from Vale, has been appointed to replace Bentz in the Oregon Legislature.

In January 2018, when Ted Ferrioli, the Republican who represented Senate District 30, was appointed to the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, commissioners from the counties in District 30 picked Bentz, then a state representative, as Ferrioli’s replacement.

Bentz’s appointment in turn left his House seat open, and commissioners chose Findley to replace Bentz.

Findley was then elected to a two-year term in November 2018, running unopposed.

Findley’s appointment to replace Bentz in the state Senate leaves Findley’s seat in House District 60 vacant.

The same process to fill that vacancy should start soon.

The Oregon Legislature convenes for its abbreviated 2020 session on Feb. 3.

Mark Owens, a Harney County commissioner, has already filed for the Repub-

lican nomination for House District 60 in the May 2020 primary.

LOCAL BRIEFING

Eagles Past Presidents Club dinner Friday

The Eagles Past Presidents Club will have a dinner Friday, Jan. 10, from 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at the Eagles Club in Baker City, 2935 H St. The menu is lasagna, salad, garlic bread and dessert for \$8. Members and their guests are welcome.

County needs volunteers for boards

Baker County has vacancies for volunteers to serve on the following:

- Economic Development Council
- Transient Lodging Tax Marketing Committee
- Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Advisory Committee
- Parks and Recreation Board

Volunteer forms are available at www.bakercounty.org/commissioners.

OTEC seeks board candidates

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative is seeking candidates for a board of director seat for Baker County.

The incumbent is Aletha Bonebrake.

OTEC members interested in running for the seat should call 541-524-2831 or go to otec.coop/annual-meetingboard-elections

A nominating committee will pick candidates, and members can also submit petitions, which are due by March 3.

The board elections will take place in May.

Conservation Districts dinner Jan. 17

The Baker County Association of Conservation Districts will have its annual dinner meeting Jan. 17 at the Baker Elks Lodge, 1896 Second St. A no-host social hour starts at 5:30 p.m., with dinner served at 6:30 p.m.

The Association will recognize local landowners and partners and showcase their contributions to conserving natural resources in Baker County.

There are four districts in the county: Baker Valley, Burnt River, Eagle Valley and Keating. The Association staff helps landowners employ conservation projects through grants and U.S. Department of Agriculture programs.

Cost for the dinner is \$15 per person, payable at the Association office at 3990 Midway Drive in Baker City (near Saint Alphonsus Medical Center). Due to limited seating, RSVPs are required by visiting the office or calling 541-523-7121, extension 100 or 109.

‘Bag It’ movie to be shown Jan. 15

The documentary “Bag It,” which follows a man who’s trying to reduce his use of plastic, will be shown for free on Jan. 15 at the Baker County Library, 2400 Resort St. Doors open at 6 p.m., with the film starting at 6:30 p.m. The showing is sponsored by Baker City Trash Talk and the Baker Food Co-op.

Popcorn and drinks will be provided. Please bring drink and food containers if possible. Baker Food Co-op will have door prizes, and there will be a conversation about reducing the use of plastic products.



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HEART TO HEART

Baker County families ready to help kids

Innumerable stories about the foster care system can be found in today’s headlines. I’d like to highlight a few positives and acknowledge that having a successful foster care system depends on having a supportive community. Although Baker County may be small, our need for foster homes remains high. Every day there are families who are answering this need by either providing general foster care or relative care. These families open their homes, their hearts, and invest tireless hours meeting children’s needs while helping them through heartaches and navigating a system that is sometimes difficult to say the least.

These families and those who support them all deserve

a huge thanks and recognition for taking on a task most of us wouldn’t even consider. Every year Baker County comes together to do just that. Due to the generosity of the community, each foster child’s Christmas wishes are fulfilled, and foster and relative care families are supported during a time that can be stressful for any parent no matter the circumstances. To all of the anonymous individuals who donated gifts, thank you! Your generosity is amazing.

Our community of foster and relative caregivers also receive tremendous support from the staff of Powder River Correctional Facility who host their very own giving tree program, from CASA of Eastern Oregon who partners with Child Welfare each year to host events for our foster

families and assists with gift giving, from Community Connection, who for the last three years has offered a terrific space to celebrate our foster parents through events tailored to them, and from Lew Bros. Les Schwab, which does a toy drive every year! Additionally, the ladies of the Baker City Quilt Club take it upon themselves to sew beautiful quilts for each child new to foster care. The generosity that blossoms during the holiday season in this community is awe-inspiring!

In closing, thank you to all who helped support our foster children and families either directly or indirectly. Your support no matter the season is invaluable and essential to raising healthy, happy children.

Brooke Myers
Baker City