

OUR VIEW

Streets & Money

Baker City has a problem with its streets. Actually, Baker City has had a problem with its streets for the better part of two decades.

And it’s getting worse, as problems are wont to do, rather than better.

The problem is relatively simple, unlike the potential solutions.

The city doesn’t have enough money in its preventive maintenance budget — about \$515,000 for this year — to prevent its 61-mile network of paved streets from gradually deteriorating.

At that level of spending, the percentage of streets rated as good or very good has dropped from 87% in 2006 to 41% in 2019.

Most streets have dropped only to the fair category — middle of the road, so to speak — but in 2019 the mileage rated as poor (very poor is the worst of the five categories) was 4.53 miles, the highest the city has recorded.

Most of the maintenance money comes from property taxes or from the city’s share of the state gas tax. Dollars the city might divert from property taxes would probably affect the police and fire departments, the two biggest recipients of that money. And state gas tax revenue isn’t likely to rise rapidly.

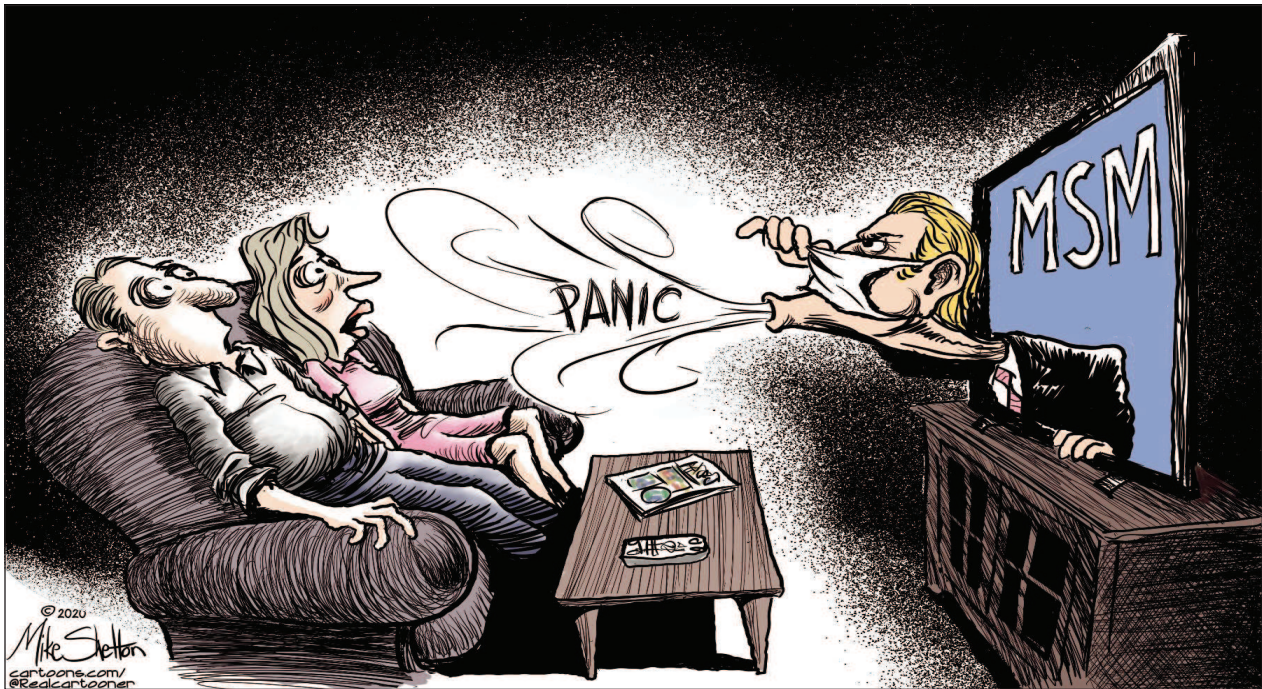
The City Council had a brief discussion about the situation Tuesday while reviewing the annual Pavement Management Plan. It should be the first of many.

None of the plausible options for raising money is attractive.

A local gas tax has the advantage of ensuring that local residents don’t bear the burden alone, as visitors would also pay the tax when they fuel up. The downside is that even a modest tax of a few cents per gallon could persuade some drivers to bypass Baker City. A local “street fee” would tap only Baker City wallets.

Regardless, the streets will continue to worsen without an influx of money. The Council needs to keep this issue at the forefront, and to invite public comment, because whatever option councilors prefer they should let voters decide.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Competitive cornhole? Anything goes on TV

I have gazed into America’s future and what I saw was grown men tossing bean bags at a small hole drilled in a tilted plank of polished wood.

Except what I looked into wasn’t some Nitzschean abyss. It was my TV. (Some, no doubt, would argue



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that there is no discernible difference between the two.)

Just 16 years after the movie “Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story” lampooned ESPN’s endless quest for new programming by creating a fictional ESPN 8: The Ocho, a channel that televised fringe sports such as dodgeball, reality has overtaken make believe.

There is indeed a professional league for cornhole, and you can watch it on certain ESPN networks.

(But not The Ocho; that remains a cinematic invention. For now.)

Cornhole is most typically played in backyards, the competitors having a beer within reach, and the savory aroma of barbecued meat wafting about.

(It cannot be a coincidence that the sponsor for the professional cornhole league is Johnsonville, the big bratwurst outfit.)

I suspect that if not for a few well-publicized impalement incidents some years back, viewers would instead be watching lawn dart championships on ESPN.

Which at least would potentially enliven disputes between competitors in ways not possible with cornhole and its soft and generally benign bags. Ours is a litigious society, alas.

I had previously seen cornhole events listed on the channel guide, but the other evening was the first time I actually watched a competition for more than a minute or two.

I was transfixed. My wife, Lisa, was both amused and incredulous that the game was being treated not just as a serious competition but with a palpable deference.

I watch televised sports fairly often so I’m familiar with the standard elements of the format — a pair of announcers to describe the action and add an occasional anecdote about a player or coach, perhaps a third crew member to do halftime and post-game

interviews, plus all sorts of on-screen graphics to tell us things about the competitors we probably don’t care to know.

(And lots of commercials, many of them showing disturbingly fit and attractive young people cavorting in the sunshine, and sometimes in the sea or other body of water, while managing to maintain both a solid grasp on a malt beverage and the sort of exaggerated smile that has always struck me as indicative not of bliss but of incipient psychopathy.)

It was more than a little strange, then, to see this predictable approach applied to cornhole — a game typically interrupted not by commercials for hard seltzer but because your cousin’s 3-year-old fell and skinned her knee or because Rusty, your uncle’s obnoxious cocker spaniel, grabbed somebody’s burger and then peed on your mom’s begonias.

But apparently if you put up enough sausage profits you can portray even cornhole as a competition nearly as dramatic as the Super Bowl or the Final Four.

ESPN, always clever with its graphics, divides the screen so viewers see the throwers on the left side, with a close-up camera on the cornhole board on the right so you can simultaneously see where the bags land.

The announcers have mastered the verbal art of alternating drama, as when a key throw is about to be made, with awestruck admiration when a competitor pulls off a particularly difficult feat.

You might think it reasonable to wonder what such feats might be, in a game with the straightforward goal of tossing a bag into a hole, and with no large, agile people trying to stop you from doing this as in, say, football or basketball.

This is because you don’t understand how complicated cornhole is.

Turns out the game — at least when played at the highest level, as on ESPN, with literally thousands of dollars and, presumably, free brats at stake — involves strategic decisions that would confound a Major League Baseball manager.

Should you go for an air mail or a blocker?

And if you can pull off a four-bagger in the next round is it possible to white wash, if not actually shuck, your opponent?

The cornhole lexicon is at least as extensive — and to my ears, more piquant — than for most mainstream sports.

(I am not, to be clear, suggesting that cornhole is an actual sport. I’m merely trying to get into the spirit of the thing.)

I watched long enough to see the start of the second of two semifinals matches. The competitors — two teams, each with two members — actually warmed up. I presume this gave them a feel for how the room’s humidity and artificial wind currents would affect the flight of the bags, although I’m just guessing.

ESPN showed bio boxes for the players, including — and I only wish I were joking about this — the brand of bag each uses.

I learned, among much else, that one competitor, apparently dissatisfied with the popular Killshots bags, designed his own, sold under the name Game Changer. Although he and his partner were losing to a Killshots-wielding duo when I turned off the TV and went to sleep, so perhaps his engineering skills aren’t especially prodigious.

(Cornhole bags, at least those used in high-stakes televised events, no longer contain corn, the origin of (half of) the game’s name. Plastic resins now predominate — proprietary mixtures, no doubt, guarded as zealously as nuclear launch codes or breakfast cereal color dyes.)

I suppose I ought to be at least a little annoyed that America’s affinity for sports is such that we have elevated games such as cornhole to televised spectacles.

But I can’t muster even a tepid disdain for what I watched the other evening.

There is plenty to be anxious about these days, with coronavirus spreading and an inevitably nasty presidential campaign looming.

It seems to me that treating a silly game as serious is harmless fun — a diversion from troubling events, a function for which TV, notwithstanding its myriad faults, is well-suited.

And if you can suppress your laughter well enough you might even glean something profound from watching a cornhole tournament.

After a competitor failed on a risky throw, the announcer, in the sober tone reserved for landmark moments, intoned: “You live and die by your aggression.”

Indeed. But at least we understand he was speaking figuratively.

This was cornhole, after all. Not lawn darts. Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.

OTHER VIEWS

Coronavirus concerns highlight need for national paid sick leave

Editorial from The Baltimore Sun:

There may be no “magic bullet” yet devised that could turn back the coronavirus let alone spare the world the growing economic harm associated with it, but there is something President Donald Trump and Congress could do right now that would surely help. It is simple. It is effective. And, if anything, it is overdue.

What the U.S. needs as soon as possible is a paid sick leave mandate that allows workers or members of their families with symptoms of illness to stay home and take the day off to care for themselves or a loved one. This commonsense practice would not only hamper the spread of COVID-19, but it would potentially put money in the pockets of average Americans and boost confidence that the consumer economy is not facing collapse.

Here in Maryland, we know a thing or two about paid sick leave. Two years ago, the General Assembly approved the Maryland Healthy Working Families Act (overriding a veto by the state’s Republican governor in the process) that requires companies with 15 employees or more to offer at least 40 hours of paid sick leave per year. The policy was criticized by Gov. Larry Hogan at the time as “job killing,” but in the two years since it became law, there’s little evidence of that.

Not only is Maryland’s unemployment rate below the nation average (ranking 21st among the states as of December), the Free State’s median household income of \$81,868 is top among states, according to the U.S. Census, including nearby Virginia (\$71,564) where the state legislature

seriously considered a paid sick leave mandate during its 2020 session only to see the measure fail as time ran out this week.

The benefit of paid sick leave is obvious. The last thing Americans should want to think about is how the line cook at their favorite restaurant, the taxi driver giving them a ride, the clerk restocking the grocery store produce and so on and so on are still at their posts despite a cough or fever. And that’s especially true given that the coronavirus is far from the only disease the can be transmitted through casual contact.

The sad reality is that too many families live paycheck to paycheck to sacrifice a day of work if they don’t have paid sick leave. And that’s a common experience. An estimated one in four U.S. workers does not have that benefit. Even more simply

don’t qualify for the benefit because they are too new to their jobs.

Staying home when feeling unwell is strongly recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Vice President Mike Pence even listed it in his briefing with reporters on Monday. It is reportedly among the ideas that his coronavirus task force is recommending.

Maryland is hardly alone in its sick leave mandate. Eleven other states have some version of it: Arizona, California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine (effective next year), Michigan, Nevada, New Jersey, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington. And that’s not even counting major cities with their own mandates from Washington, D.C., to Los Angeles.

Would suddenly having to provide sick leave to employees that weren’t provided this benefit in

the past pose a hardship to some employers? That’s quite possible, but in most cases one imagines a worsening outbreak would harm these companies far worse. Just look at the record drops in the stock markets in recent days. Full-fledged recessions have been caused by lesser events.

This much is certain: Paid sick leave policies reduce the spread of disease. Studies have shown this. Indeed, it is believed that African American and Latino workers are more apt to contract the flu, in part because they are less likely to have a sick leave benefit.

And while government-mandated paid sick leave is generally seen as a Democratic initiative, there is surely no political harm to President Trump and Republicans in Congress if they belatedly climb on board a policy one-quarter of the nation already practices.