

NEIGHBORS

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The Justice Project decided to try something similar by sharing stories of people who live in Baker County.

The website Neighbors of Baker (neighborsofbaker.org) is now live, and new stories will be uploaded each week.

"We have enough for five weeks out," Stadler said.

In the early phases of planning Neighbors of Baker, Stadler reached out to local coalitions for help. The Neighbors of Baker team includes Stadler, Aubrey Henshaw, Haley Hueckman, and Meghan Chancey.

Hueckman, who works as a prevention supervisor at New Directions Northwest, hopes Neighbors of Baker can build connections between people of all different backgrounds.

"Our country is not in a great place in terms of divisiveness," she said. "There's a spotlight of what we disagree on, and how different we are."

Neighbors of Baker, she said, can provide a different approach.

"We have far more in common than we don't," she said. "Maybe it can start a conversation."

Henshaw, who also works for New Directions and is chair of the Baker County Safe Communities Coalition,

"Everyone has something to give. We have so much to learn from each other. Neighbors of Baker opens that door for a more healthy network. Something like this makes us slow down, and remember that each of us has value."

— **Aubrey Henshaw, member of Neighbors of Baker**

also points to the goal of building human connections.

"Everyone has something to give. We have so much to learn from each other," Henshaw said. "Neighbors of Baker opens that door for a more healthy network. Something like this makes us slow down, and remember that each of us has value."

Chancey sees the website story-sharing platform as a way to meet new people.

She moved to Baker City 18 months ago to be the program coordinator for Eastern Oregon Healthy Alliance.

"I was hoping in the spring to meet more people. Then the pandemic happened," she said.

She joined the Justice Project, and then the team for Neighbors of Baker. She helps interview people to compile stories for the website.

"It seemed like a great opportunity to learn more about people in the town," she said. "That's been fun."

People don't have to share their entire



Chancey

life story — and it's not required to list their full name, either.

Residents interested in sharing their story can go on to the website and click on "Be a Neighbor."

This section emphasizes the goal of the project: "We want to hear from everyone — young and old, loud and quiet, funny and serious. No story or message is too long or too short. There is room for everyone here."

Participants can either type their story into the form, or request to meet for an interview.

The interview process includes masks and social distancing.

"For me, it's so heartwarming to get to talk to people," Stadler said.

When stories are posted, the updates are shared on the website, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

The team encourages everyone to like, follow, and share Neighbors of Baker on the various social media platforms.

"We want everyone to be a part of this," Stadler said. "There is good stuff going on — let's remember that, and share with one another."



COUNCIL

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Awarding a bid for construction is the next major step in a project that dates back several years.

Since the early 1960s the city has piped its wastewater to a complex of four lagoons about a mile north of town. The city adds chlorine to the wastewater to kill bacteria, then uses sulfur dioxide to remove the chlorine before the wastewater is released into the nearby Powder River.

But several years ago the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) told city officials that the agency would eventually prohibit the city from piping wastewater into the river because the water could promote algae blooms and otherwise pollute the river.

City officials considered several alternatives but settled on the current plan that includes building a new pipeline and lagoon. In 2017, the city entered into a Mutual Agreement and

Order (MAO) with DEQ that required the city to pursue a modification to the wastewater treatment process.

The new pipeline will extend about 7 miles, boring beneath both the Powder River and Interstate 84. The lagoon will be built near Sunnyslope Road and Lee Lane, northeast of the Baker City Airport.

The lagoon will be built on a 51-acre property the city bought in 2019 for \$123,000.

The city also paid \$37,900 for an easement across another property that the pipeline will cross.

In November 2020 the City Council agreed to have the city borrow as much as \$7.5 million from the state to pay for the wastewater project. The city will repay the loan over 30 years with a 1.36% annual interest rate. Annual payments would be about \$300,000.

The loan agreement is for up to \$8 million, but Owen said the program includes a loan forgiveness of \$500,000, so the maximum the city would actually borrow and

finance is \$7.5 million.

Based on the bid amount from Gyllenberg Construction, the city likely won't need to borrow the full amount.

The nine other bids ranged from \$5.68 million to \$7.82 million. The project was advertised in December, and bids were opened Jan. 19.

Previous City Councils increased wastewater rates in 2017 and 2018 to boost the city's reserves in preparation for repaying the loan, which city officials knew would be necessary to pay for the project.

The city's wastewater bill collections rose from \$1.22 million in the 2017-18 fiscal year to \$1.49 million in 2018-19 and to \$1.67 million in 2019-20. The wastewater fund's working capital has increased from \$1.16 million to \$2.4 million.

In her report to councilors for this evening's meeting, Owen wrote that the city will propose another rate hike to start July 1, 2021.

The contractor will have

about one year to do the work, according to Owen's report.

In other business on the agenda for this evening's meeting, councilors will:

- consider a request from residents of Fairway Drive, in south Baker City near the Quail Ridge Golf Course, to accept the private street as a public street.

In a report to councilors, Owen recommends they reject the request, citing, among other factors, that the street, built in 1999 to access the Fairway Heights subdivision, was not built to city standards. The street, although in good shape, is narrower than city standards, Owen wrote.

If the city accepted the street as a public right of way, the city would need to install one or two streetlights, at an estimated cost of \$2,000 to \$5,000, and repair a section of a stormwater drain pipe for an estimated \$1,500.

The U-shaped street, which connects to Indiana Avenue, accesses about 13 homes.

TRUCKS

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The course, which costs \$5,900 per student, will include a driving simulator that allows students to practice a variety of scenarios.

"It trains people in efficiency with shifting, we can change the climate, we can put the driver in this virtual reality simulator in a windstorm or we can put them on snowy or icy roads," Mitchell said. "So their responses are registered and calculated on the computer system and it feeds back what they could've done, what they should've done and it allows a level of training that you just can't get by getting behind the wheel."

Students will have 101 hours of classroom lab time, where they work with instructors and spend time in the simulator.

"We strive to do hands-on learning, so whatever we do we want to be in the classroom with the student, present an element of training, then take that element out to a truck that is actually what we call a land lab, identify the part, how it works," Mitchell said. "So it's not sitting in a classroom learning, it is actually learning a practical application and going and

"Our goal here is to have people walk away with a Class A CDL without restrictions, with quality drivers that are confident, competent and capable to operate as a commercial driver."

— **Sandy Mitchell, marketing and program coordinator, Baker Technical Institute**

doing it on the truck."

Along with the class time, students will complete 44 hours of individual driving time, working one-on-one in a truck with an instructor.

The course will total about 160 hours of training.

Prospective students who already have a learner's permit will start March 15.

Those who don't have a permit can start March 8 and, for an additional \$500, obtain the permit needed to take the course.

"We will walk them through the process to get their learner permit, the knowledge they need to pass their written test and be ready to go on the land lab and drive truck," Mitchell said.

Space is limited, but BTI will add future courses based on demand.

"It's important to us that we provide one-on-one training, and customized training to each person to meet them where they are, and what their learning needs are," Mitchell said. "Our goal here is to have people walk away with a Class A CDL without restrictions, with quality drivers that are confident, competent and capable to operate as a commercial driver."

Though the BTI course is hands-on, it will also address COVID-19 precautions, with health and temperature checks, face masks and 6-foot spacing.

"We monitor heavily, and we maintain all the required protocols for COVID-19, and that goes down with disinfecting and sanitizing all surfaces between people," Mitchell said. "That is why our class sizes are smaller, they are more one-on-one because the cohort of people that are going to come are going to be

together, and there won't be a whole lot of interactions with others."

Once they receive their permit and complete the course, students will be able to pursue their basic Class A CDL, with an ability to pick up different endorsements such as hauling hazardous materials.

In common with BTI's other training programs, such as welding and heavy equipment operation, the truck driving school is designed to give students skills they need to qualify for a variety of jobs.

"We can certainly share information with industry if we are contacted and help guide people to apply for jobs," Mitchell said.

Courses will run Monday through Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

More information will be available soon on BTI's website, <https://bakerti.org/school-of-trucking-and-logistics/>

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Man accused of bomb threat

By Chris Collins
 ccollins@bakercityherald.com

A Baker City man who apparently regretted the story he told police that landed his fiancée in jail Friday afternoon, Jan. 22, on a domestic violence charge later called 9-1-1 allegedly threatening to blow up a building if he also wasn't arrested.

Baker City Police Chief Ray Duman said the incident started when officers arrested Kellie Marrae Neary, 50, at the couple's home at 1791 Valley Ave., Apartment 2, at 12:24 p.m. after responding to a report of a disturbance.

Neary was charged with fourth-degree assault constituting domestic violence. She was lodged at the Baker County Jail and released at 7:30 p.m. Friday after posting 10% (\$750) of the total \$7,500 bail.

Duman said about 2 1/2 hours after Neary was arrested, David Allen Lyle, 49, called dispatch making threats.

"He said he was going to build a bomb and blow up a building if he was not arrested," Duman said.

Lyle said he should be arrested because he had lied to police when they

arrested Neary on the domestic violence charge, Duman said.

Because of the seriousness of Lyle's threats, police took him to the jail where he was held on charges of first-degree disorderly conduct and harassment. Under Oregon law, those charges allege that Lyle "initiated or circulated a report, concerning an alleged or impending fire, explosion, crime, catastrophe or other emergency ..." and that the threat "reasonably would be expected to cause alarm."

Lyle, who police said was intoxicated when officers arrested him at 2:48 p.m. Friday, was held at the jail for a time and later granted a conditional release with a date and time to appear in court.

Although Lyle, who has a prior background with explosives, made no specific reference to which building he planned to blow up, Duman said officers believed it was prudent to take him into custody.

"Anytime anybody is making a threat of that nature, we have to take them seriously," Duman said.

RISK LEVEL

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The risk level for medium-size counties is based on two statistics. Those are the number of new cases over a two-week period, and the test positivity rate during that period. If Baker County has either 60 or more new cases during the most recent measuring period — Jan. 10-23 — or a test positivity rate of 10% or higher, it will remain at extreme risk. That category includes the most stringent restrictions on businesses, including a ban on indoor dining at restaurants, and the closure of fitness centers and gyms, theaters and museums.

County Commissioner Mark Bennett said Monday afternoon, Jan. 25, that the state's preliminary figures for Baker County are 66 new cases and a positivity rate of 14.6%.

Either would keep the county in the extreme category. But Bennett said the county's tally for new cases is 54, including 15 between Jan. 16-24. That's the slowest rate of new cases in the county since October 2020. He suspects the discrepancy is due to state officials failing to deduct from the county's total any cases involving inmates at the Powder River Correctional Facility in Baker City. That's what happened in December, when state officials initially announced that Baker County would stay in the extreme category, but the next day corrected that decision, saying they had failed to deduct infections among Powder River inmates.

But even if the state for the second time failed to account for COVID-19 cases at the prison, the county's positivity rate would keep the county in the extreme category from Jan. 29 through Feb. 11.

Bennett said he has also asked state officials to explain what he sees as discrepancies in the county's test positivity rate. As of Monday afternoon, Bennett said, state officials had not responded.

Bennett cited statistics from the Oregon Health Authority that show both the county's test positivity rate, and its number of positive tests.

As an example, the OHA website lists the county as having 125 positive tests for the period Jan. 10-21. Yet the county reported 65 new COVID-19 cases — including at least nine Powder River inmates — during that period.

"We do not understand it," Bennett said of the discrepancy between numbers. "Something is skewed."

Bennett said he has also pointed out to state officials that the county's positivity rate almost certainly would have been lower had OHA not canceled a free testing clinic scheduled for Jan. 20. Bennett said state officials told him testing clinics were canceled across the state that day, Inauguration Day, due to security concerns about potential protests. During two previous clinics in Baker City, the positivity rate was 1.8%.

Baker County Veteran Services

Until further notice Veterans will not be seen in person. If you need assistance, call Rick's work number 541-523-8223 and he will call you back to help you over the phone. This is a measure that is being implemented to minimize the spread of COVID-19.