

SCHOOLS

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Once back on track, the Board voted unanimously to place the \$4 million bond on the May 18 ballot.

If approved by voters, the district would couple the \$4 million bond with a matching \$4 million state grant and add another \$4 million from the district's Capital Projects and Student Investment Account funds to pay for school improvements.

The bond would be repaid over five years and would cost property owners about 66 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value. That amounts to about \$66 more per year on a home assessed at \$100,000.

The summary of the ballot measure explains that the money will help pay to:

- Replace/upgrade mechanical and electrical systems at all schools to provide heating, cooling and ventilation.
 - Construct an approximately 5,000-square-foot multipurpose building at Baker Middle School for use as a cafeteria/kitchen.
 - Replace the roof at South Baker Intermediate.
 - Upgrade security and access systems at all schools, including key cards, door sensors, security cameras, fire alarms and public address systems.
 - Add secure entry vestibules at Brooklyn Primary and South Baker Intermediate schools.
 - Make site improvements and provide furnishings, equipment and cover bond issuance costs.
- The ballot title also states that a citizen oversight committee would be formed "to ensure that proceeds are used as intended."

Promise Students

As Thursday's meeting got under way, the Board honored its Promise Students of the month.

Doug Dalton, Baker Technical Institute president, was joined by Ma'Lena Wirth to honor Marco Rosales, a junior at Baker High School.

Wirth, who works with the District's English as a second language program and serves as an interpreter and translator, was on hand to help Marco's parents, Filiberto and Alba Rosales, follow the presentation.

Dalton told the Board that Marco's parents came to the United States to find opportunity for their children. (In addition to Marco, they have a fifth-grade son, Brandon, and a daughter, Naomi, who is in first grade, Wirth said.)

Dalton told the story of how Marco's education got off to a rough start.

He said Wirth had been called to Marco's school when he was just a kindergarten to find him sitting outside alone and visibly upset.

Dalton said the young Marco told her, "Miss Wirth, I have decided I don't need school and I am not learning English."

Although school continued to be hard for him, he didn't give up and he did learn English, Dalton said.

Wirth gave Marco's mother credit for helping her son persevere through his difficult early years of education.

"In second grade he was still not doing well," Wirth said.

That's when Marco's mother came to her seeking advice about what she could do to help her son.

"She never gave up on

Marco," Wirth said.

It was at BTI that Marco really found his place, Dalton told the audience.

"He has become a fabulous welder and fabricator," Dalton said.

And he said Marco plans to pursue additional training to become certified as a professional welder at BTI after graduation from high school.

Ryan Butler, BTI welding instructor, said he has worked with Marco since he was a sophomore. He praised his student's accomplishments in the classroom and in his relationships with his peers.

"You have come a long way," Butler told Marco and his parents via the Zoom computer app that linked the Board and audience to the presentations.

"I'm proud of you," Butler said.

Marco's father smiled proudly, and his mother wiped tears from her eyes as they watched the presentation from their home.

Director Kevin Cassidy later received word from Dalton — and reported to the Board — that Marco gave his mother flowers after being honored himself, to thank her.

The Board next watched an endearing video tribute from the kindergarten classmates of Khaleesi Currie, the daughter of Cassandra and Allen Currie. Students and teachers emphasized the kindness and helpfulness Khaleesi displays as a student at the Baker Early Learning Center.

"She is always looking out for others before herself," her teacher Sharon Paine told the audience.

In other business Thursday night, the Board:

- Voted to dissolve the District's pay-to-participate policy that has been in place to help fund student programs over the past several years.

Superintendent Mark Witty said money from the state Student Investment Account will be used instead for that purpose.

Cassidy said he was happy to see the proposal come to the Board.

"I think it's a great move and it has been a long time coming," Cassidy said.

Witty added that even though scholarships are available to students who can't afford the participation fee, it still can remain a barrier that prevents some students from engaging in programs.

"I do believe it is a barrier and at the end of the day it is an equity issue," Cassidy said.

- Accepted the retirement of Jill Nelson, BHS/BTI art teacher.

- Accepted the resignation of Adriene Oster, Future Center Facilitator/Workforce Development coordinator and Oregon Teacher Pathway instructor at BHS and BTI. Witty said Oster has accepted a position at Baker Web Academy.

- Approved the hiring of Kira Reoch as a certified registered nurse instructor at BTI, and Lindsey Bennington-McDowell, as a confidential employee in the District Office, who will work as a public information and communications coordinator.

- Learned that Lynn Schmitt is retiring from her job as a paraprofessional at BHS and that Kevin Lee has been hired as a temporary paraprofessional at Brooklyn Primary School.

SPORTS

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The season for spring sports — baseball, softball, tennis, track and field and golf — is set for April 5 through May 23.

The season for traditional winter sports — basketball, wrestling and swimming — is May 10 through June 27.

Cross-Country

Longtime coach Suzy Cole said she was glad that BHS students returned to in-person classes two days per week on Jan. 25. Now, less than a month later, they'll also start regular practices for an abbreviated sports season.

"It's huge academically, socially and emotionally," Cole said. "Kids just need to be able to be around one another and have those relationships outside of just the house."

Challenges remain, however.

The OSAA recommends that during cross-country meets, runners from no more than two schools be on the course at the same time to prevent potential crowds of runners.

Cole, who serves on an OSAA steering committee, said she believes that restriction is feasible, although she hoped OSAA would be more flexible considering that teams from smaller schools in Eastern Oregon and other rural areas have far fewer runners than bigger schools, making the two-school restriction less necessary in this region.

"Some schools like in Portland, the 6A schools, they are going to have a hundred on their team," Cole said. "A dual (meet) for them will look different than a dual for us. We were really hoping we could say, can we have a hundred on the course, between the boys and girls team. Right now that doesn't seem like it would quite fly yet."

Cole said she expects to have about half as many runners as she did in the fall of 2019, the last regular season (the 2020 cross-country schedule was canceled). Cole said she has talked with other cross-country coaches in the region, and they reported a similar drop in numbers.

With the OSAA limitation of two teams on a course, rather than the usual meets that involve six or more schools, events will be pretty sparse.

"That's kind of frustrating, because our dual meets are going to be really, really small," Cole said. "I feel very comfortable that we could easily have a four-(school) meet and still meet all the safety protocols. I am not getting that feeling right now that we will be able to go in that direction yet but we are still hoping to push for that."

Baker's tentative schedule calls for the Bulldogs to compete in five meets, the first on March 3, but that plan was based on having more than two schools competing at the same event.

Trying to figure out a competition schedule is a top priority, Cole said.



Corey Kirk/Baker City Herald

Hudson Spike, freshman wide receiver.

She has tempered her expectations for Baker's first practice Feb. 22.

"We will just treat it as a workout, getting them out there, being able to do something, we just know the times will be all over the board for a while," Cole said.

Although the cross-country season won't culminate as usual with the state championship meet at Lane Community College in Eugene, Cole said she hopes it's possible to arrange a multi-school competition of some sort.

Cole said that besides being happy to coach again, she's excited that parents will be able to root on their kids.

"That's a huge part of them and their journey of their kids going through high school," she said.

Football

Coaches for volleyball, cross-country and soccer knew that practices could start Feb. 22, but until Feb. 10, football was still the big question mark.

That afternoon, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown announced that high school and middle school football could also start.

Baker varsity head coach Jason Ramos breathed a sigh of relief when he heard that news.

"Our kids are happy, I feel like a weight has been lifted off their shoulders, they've been in limbo all this time since the fall," Ramos said. "We had guys texting us, and we felt like we needed to celebrate because our guys are all in."

Ramos, who also teaches math at BHS, said that as excited as he is to return to the football field, he's more happy that students are back in the classroom two days per week.

"Sports are extracurricular or co-curricular, that means they go hand-in-hand with school," he said. "Obviously school comes first, and we want our kids back in the classroom."

Football players had a four-week mini-season last fall, but there were no games.

The prospect of donning pads and having real practices, in preparation for a possible five-game schedule starting March 5, is a major achievement, Ramos said.

"What our kids really need right now is that connection, back to school, connection with their peers, the social aspect of that is usually important," Ramos said. "We had that fall mini-season, and we were wanting a little bit more."

Although a regular playoff schedule, with a state championship game, won't happen, Ramos said he hopes there will be something to conclude the season, similar to a bowl game, so players have something to look forward to at the end of the season, which concludes the second week of April.

"I think that would be a great idea, let's get some maybe regional matchups between league champions, and make it worth something," Ramos said. "That's kind of what kids are motivated for, is what is that at the end of the season that's driving us."

Boys Soccer

Boys varsity coach Victor Benites is excited for practice to start Feb. 22, but he also feels the pressure of trying to get his players ready for their first match, tentatively set for March 2 against Ontario.

"We only got like one week of practice, I want to be ready for the first game," Benites said. "It's going to be tough, you have to get conditioning right away. I don't know how the kids have been doing — it's going to be hard but we are going to have to go day-by-day."

Though he knows his players are raring to return to the field, Benites is even more excited to see them spending more time in their classrooms.

"Your education comes first, then you do the sport

second, it's really important to be back in school, in-person," Benites said.

Girls Soccer

Girls varsity coach Eric Layton is confident his players, after practicing and playing a couple of matches against La Grande during last fall's mini-season, won't need to adjust to wearing masks.

Like Benites, Layton acknowledges the challenge of having only a week of practice to prepare for the Bulldogs' first match, tentatively set for March 2 against Ontario.

"I'd like to just hit the ground running, on the day we practice and just do two-hour practices," Layton said. "Start easy and work our way up to a more rigorous practice."

Layton said he hopes his team will have something to shoot for during their regular-season matches.

"I would still love to see some sort of culminating, league championship," Layton said. "I think we are going to get enough games in, that you could see teams and have some sort of tournament. You need to have some sort of goal at the end of the season."

He also hopes parents will be able to watch their kids play, given the ample space on the sidelines for social distancing. That wasn't possible during the unofficial matches against La Grande last fall.

"I still think there's a better way to do that, we could space out families somehow. That was kind of hard for the families to not see the few games that their kids had," Layton said.

Volleyball

Baker varsity coach Ali Abrego said that although the Bulldogs were limited to the abbreviated mini-season last fall, she thinks the team made progress then, and she's ready to return to the court Feb. 22.

"I don't plan to revisit things that we covered in the fall, I plan on building off of that," Abrego said.

She's excited about the potential for Baker to compete against regional schools, starting with a home match against Burns on March 2.

"In our region we have a lot of talent, that in a normal year we wouldn't get to come up against because of the different classifications," Abrego said. "I think it will be beneficial to our kids to get to see different programs throughout our local areas."

Abrego, a special education teacher at Baker Middle School, said she was pleased that students at that school, as at the high school, returned to in-person classes two days per week on Jan. 25.

"I fully believe that student-athletes are students first, they need to be putting the work in the classroom and getting a good education, and viewing athletics as a privilege," Abrego said.

"Hopefully we will have a productive season, and I am very anxious after seeing the talent that I had in the fall. I am super hungry for it."

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