

# HOOPS

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But the pandemic, though scarcely begun, had an effect. Portable handwashing stations were set up outside the BHS gym.

The Baker School District used a misting system to disinfect the gym and other parts of the high school each day. Yet the tournaments happened.

Crane nipped St. Paul, 45-41, to capture the girls state title the night of March 7.

On the boys side, Triad beat Damascus Christian 58-56 for the boys championship a few hours later in the usual raucous atmosphere in the BHS gym.

"It seems like ages ago," Taylor said of the 2020 tournaments. "We were fortunate. The community came together really well to make it happen."

Less than a week later, high school sports in Oregon were postponed.

Later they were canceled for the rest of the spring.

The Baker girls basketball team was unable to defend its 2019 Class 4A state title.

And now, almost a year later, the pandemic continues to thwart traditions across the state.

Taylor said the absence of the tournaments affects Baker City in multiple ways.

The economic losses are the most obvious.

Taylor said the 2020 tournaments drew about 9,500 spectators over the four days. As always, a significant percentage of those fans were visiting Baker City, staying in local motels, dining at local restaurants and shopping at local stores (see related story at right).

But as a longtime volunteer, and now co-director, Taylor said she also feels a personal sense of loss.

She will miss seeing some of the people, from across Oregon, that she has come to know over the years and decades, the fans and coaches and parents.

"There are relationships that have been built," Taylor said. "You've watched these kids grow up, it's like family when they come back (for the tournaments). That personal connection has been lost."

Taylor likens the situation to one that so many people have faced over the past year.

"It's like losing contact with your grandchildren," she said. "It's like a big family reunion, and it didn't happen this year."

The cancellation of this year's tournament won't have a major financial effect on Baker County Tournaments, Taylor said, because the OSAA makes an annual



S. John Collins/Baker City Herald File

Powder Valley's Belle Blair, in blue, during the 2018 Class 1A state basketball tournament at Baker High School.

# BUSINESS

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Cutler pointed out that many of the teams that play in the state tournaments hail from towns much smaller than Baker City. For some visitors, then, the trip to the "big city" offers shopping opportunities they don't have close to home.

"That's a big deal," Cutler said. "I get calls from families weeks in advance, when they think they might qualify (for the tournament), asking where they can stay, eat, what they can do. People are excited to be here. That's a cultural piece that we miss too."

Among the schools that competed in the 2020 tournaments are teams from Crane, an unincorporated town in Harney County with about 100 residents, St. Paul, population 440, Prairie City, 915, Joseph, 1,120, and Drain, 1,165.

Cutler said the loss of the tournament this year is especially painful because it affects businesses that have already suffered as a result of pandemic restrictions over the past 12 months.

"It's hitting us at a bad time," she said. "We will feel the impact."

Carla Smith, who owns the Baker City Motel and RV Park, said the tournaments are "a big deal to us."

"That's a lot of rooms that we will miss having rented," Smith said. "That's a huge bummer: Our community will really suffer from that. That's a nice money making

weekend for small, rural America for sure."

LeVenja Wilson-Tuilau at the Eldorado Inn in Baker City said the tournament week is a "huge event for all the hotels in the area because it's one of the major events for the year for us. And by it being canceled, it does hurt our business."

Jennifer Bobo, office manager at Ryder Brothers Stationery, which also sells toys and handmade chocolates, said the tournaments are important to the business.

"There's quite a few people that come in and visit from the ball tournaments, buy toys and stuff like that," Bobo said. "So, it'll impact us. I didn't know they were canceled. It's heartbreaking because it's for the kids. I would have liked to have seen it happen. But what can we do?"

Beverly Calder, who owns BELLA Main Street Market, said that although she doesn't see the tournaments as crucial for her business, she knows they are important for the city's economy overall.

"It's beneficial to the whole town and that's what's beneficial," Calder said. "So, we always see a lot of people in the store during those tournaments and we're really missed them. Any time a group that large comes into town and supports restaurants and supports all the lodging associations and it supports all of the other retailers, then it benefits the community and all of those people end up shopping with me. I look at it as, it's part of the whole circle of our healthy economy."

payment to cover the tournament costs.

All the workers, with the exception of scorekeepers, are volunteers, Taylor said.

She's optimistic that the 2022 tournaments not only will happen, but that they will attract larger crowds than usual because spectators are

so excited to be able to watch high school basketball again.

"I think there will be so much enthusiasm to follow the kids," Taylor said.

# DEATHS

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As with other COVID-19-related deaths, state officials did not release the names of the two residents.

In a Tuesday press release, Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett said: "Even though the County's risk level has improved, the virus continues to spread in our community. These reports weigh heavily on everyone. I want their friends and family to know how saddened we are for their loss, and we offer our condolences to everyone who is grieving."

The two deaths were the first attributed to the virus in the county in a month.

A 59-year-old Baker County man died on Feb. 2, and an 86-year-old man died on Jan. 30.

COVID-19-related deaths in the county in 2020 were:

- 85-year-old man who died on Dec. 21
- 95-year-old man who died on Nov. 26
- 83-year-old man who died on Oct. 18
- 90-year-old man who died on Aug. 21
- 82-year-old woman who

died on Aug. 16.

Of the nine people who have died in the county, all had underlying medical conditions except the 86-year-old man who died on Jan. 30, according to OHA.

## County could move from low to moderate risk

Based on an increase in COVID-19 cases over the past 10 days, Baker County is on pace to move from the lowest of the state's four risk levels to moderate, which is the second-lowest level.

That change would take effect Friday, March 12.

Baker County has been at the lowest risk level, which has the least-stringent limits on businesses and activities, since Feb. 12.

To stay at the lowest level, the county has to have fewer than 30 cases, and a positive test rate below 5%, for the most recent two-week measuring period.

The current measuring period is Feb. 21 through March 6. That period will determine each county's risk level from March 12-25.

From Feb. 21 through March 2, the county had 32 new cases. That would move

the county into the moderate category starting March 12.

The county qualifies for that category if it has from 30 to 44 cases during the measuring period.

Differences in restrictions between the low and moderate categories include:

### Restaurants and bars

- Lowest risk: Indoor dining up to 50% of capacity; up to eight diners per table; midnight closing time
- Moderate risk: Indoor dining up to 50% of capacity or 100 total people, including staff, whichever is fewer; up to six diners per table; 11 p.m. closing time

### Gyms, fitness centers, indoor pools, indoor school sports

- Lowest risk: Maximum of

50% of capacity

- Moderate risk: Maximum of 50% of capacity or 100 people, whichever is fewer

### Theaters, museums, other indoor entertainment

- Lowest risk: Maximum of 50% of capacity; midnight closing time
- Moderate risk: Maximum of 50% of capacity or 100 people, whichever is fewer; 11 p.m. closing time

### Churches, funeral homes and mortuaries

- Lowest risk: Indoors, up to 75% of capacity; outdoors up to 300 people
- Moderate risk: Indoors, up to 50% of capacity or 150 people, whichever is fewer; outdoors up to 250 people

# Man accused of burglarizing his mother's home

By Chris Collins  
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Baker City Police arrested a man Tuesday morning, March 2, on charges that he burglarized his mother's home and violated a restraining order she had filed against him.



Rust

Police were called to Carla Koplein's home in the 3100 block of Grove Street about 8 a.m. Tuesday, Police Chief Ray Duman stated in a press release.

Koplein told officers that her son, Raleigh David Rust, 46, of Baker City, had kicked in her front door and was attempting to gain access to her bedroom where she had taken refuge, Duman stated.

Police entered the home and arrested Rust without incident. He is being held at the Baker County Jail on charges of first-degree bur-

glary, a Class A felony; and the Class A misdemeanor charges of first-degree criminal trespassing, violation of a restraining order, violation of a release agreement, two counts of second-degree criminal mischief and one count of harassment.

Damage to the front door and bedroom door of Koplein's home was estimated at about \$700, Duman said.

Rust also is accused of entering, through a window, the property at 3115 Grove St., owned by Nelson Real Estate, and kicking over a metal sign. Damage was estimated at \$600, Duman said.

Rust was prohibited from being on the Nelson Real Estate property as part of a Baker County Jail release agreement, Sgt. Wayne Chastain wrote in a court document.

Rust was arrested Feb. 6 on an earlier charge of trespassing on that property.

# CONTRACT

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Because the county's contract requires that it notify the Chamber at least 30 days in advance if the contract is canceled, Commission Chairman Bill Harvey gave Cutler that notice last week.

The reason, Bennett said Wednesday, is that commissioners were not scheduled to meet until that day.

He emphasized that commissioners did not intend to cancel the contract. They voted unanimously on Jan. 6 to extend the contract through April 30. It was the second time commissioners have extended the contract since March 2020.

"At no point, I want everybody to clearly understand it, at no point had we discussed (canceling the contract)," Bennett said. "We were doing a procedural step (the 30-day notice) not a result of an action step. We were just doing that because if, not knowing how the action of today would turn out, if we didn't do it we were in a real quandary."

Bennett said the Chamber of Commerce is a critical element to the community and to the county.

Commissioner Bruce Nichols said Wednesday that he hopes the extension of the contract, in addition to giving a level of certainty to the Chamber of Commerce, will help to "dial back some of the rhetoric."

"The Commission has never said that the county was canceling events or shutting down the Chamber of Commerce," Nichols said. "We have never said that. Not one commissioner has said that. It's dividing our county and it's not necessary. We need to try to work this out and move forward and get the problem solved."

Nichols said he wants Miners Jubilee and other events, most of which were canceled in 2020 due to the pandemic, to return, saying they help to drive the county's economy.

## Creating a work group

Commissioners also voted 3-0 Wednesday to propose to Baker City officials that the city and county work together to create a work group that will review not only the visitor services contract but the entire lodging tax system.

Bennett, who proposed the group, said he envisions a six-member board, three appointed by the city, along with three from the county, including the county representatives on the transient lodging tax and economic development committees.

Bennett said the work group would gather community input as to how the lodging tax revenue is spent, including from owners of motels, restaurants and other businesses that cater to visitors.

"We're moving forward," Harvey said. "I want the citizens of Baker County to understand; we're not sitting still, we're not waiting for the governor to tell us to do something, to close this down, open that up. No, we're moving forward."

Commissioners have been wrestling with the visitor services contract for more than a year. In February 2020 commissioners decided not to award a new contract, although both the lodging tax and economic development committee recommended that Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort, which along with the Chamber of Commerce submitted a proposal, receive the contract.

Anthony Lakes general manager Peter Johnson has urged commissioners to make a decision on the contract.

Commissioners, based on the advice of county counsel Andrew Martin, decided last fall to restart the process because the request for proposals that yielded bids from the Chamber and from Anthony Lakes lacked details about how a visitors center should be operated.

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