

EDITORIAL

Preparing
for tourists

Baker County commissioners made it clear on Wednesday, March 3 that the Baker County Chamber of Commerce will continue to operate the visitors center in Baker City through at least Aug. 31, 2021.

Commissioners' 3-0 vote to extend the contract was the right call. Indeed, it was necessary.

With the prospect of a 2021 tourism season that won't be hamstrung by pandemic restrictions as the 2020 version was, it's vital that the county have a functioning visitors center. The Chamber of Commerce is well-equipped to handle that task.

Commissioners emphasized Wednesday that they never intended to cancel the contract with the Chamber.

Because the contract requires the county to notify the Chamber at least 30 days in advance of ending the contract, Commission Chairman Bill Harvey gave Chamber director Shelly Cutler that notice last week. Commissioner Mark Bennett described that as a "procedural step," taken because commissioners wouldn't be meeting until March 3 to take action.

The notification wasn't technically required. On Jan. 6 commissioners voted to extend the Chamber's contract through April 30, almost 60 days after Wednesday's meeting. Commissioner Bruce Nichols said the premature notification to the Chamber resulted from an oversight.

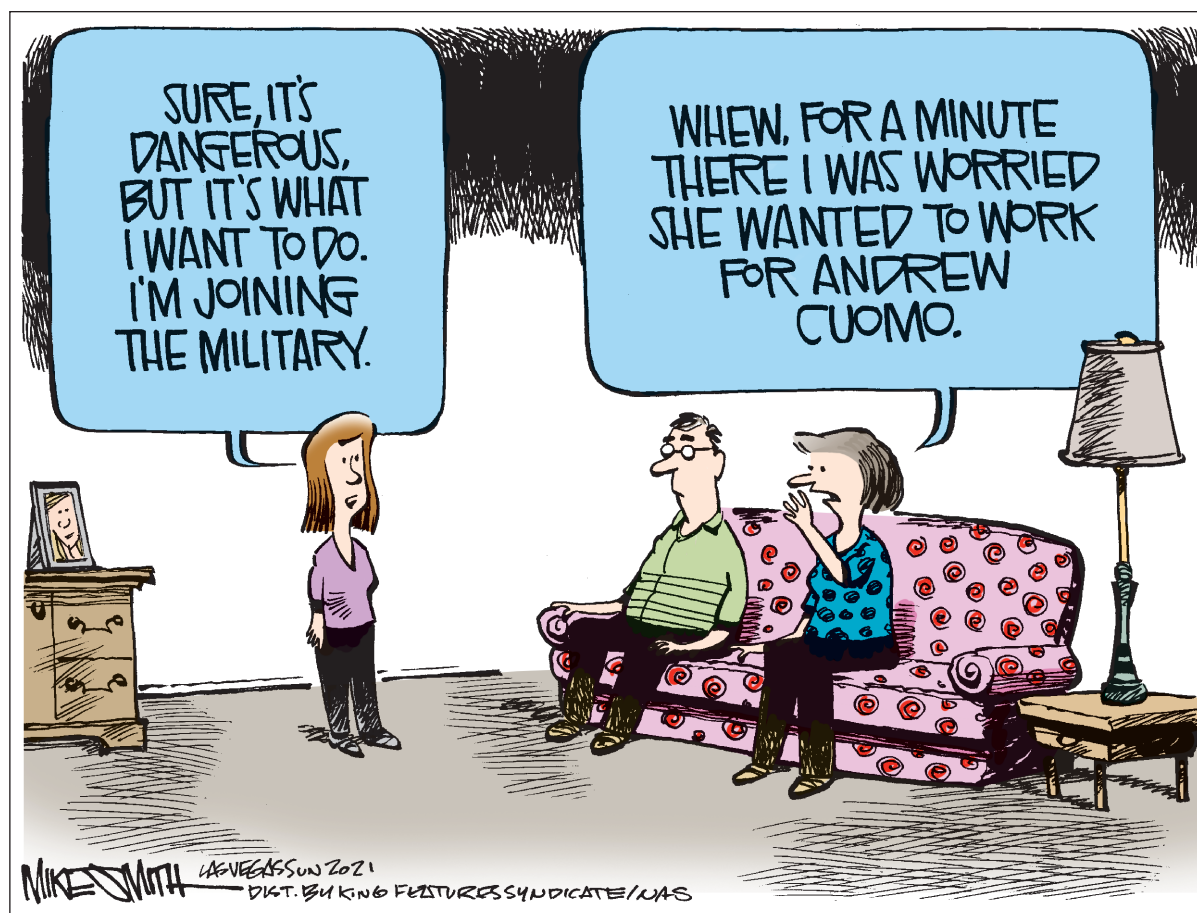
The notification led Cutler to express concern about the Chamber losing the contract, and the effect that could have, including potentially threatening this year's Miners Jubilee.

Baker City Mayor Kerry McQuisten mentioned the situation on her new Facebook page. The Facebook page for the Baker County Republican Central Committee had a Feb. 24 post claiming that "Baker County will be closing Baker County Unlimited, tourism in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce by April 3rd."

Nichols said he hopes Wednesday's decision to extend the contract through Aug. 31 will help to "dial back some of the rhetoric."

It was illogical to think commissioners would close the visitors center on the cusp of the tourism season, with no replacement. But now that that matter is settled, both county and Baker City officials can get together — in a work group that commissioners also endorsed Wednesday — to undertake a review of the lodging tax, which guests at motels and other lodging establishments pay. It's a worthwhile exercise. Under the current system, dating to 2006, the county administers the tax, with 70% of revenue going to tourism promotion (including the visitors center) and 25% to economic development. At a minimum, the county and city need a detailed list of what's required from the visitors center, an update that the county's attorney has recommended. Tourism is a vital part of the county's economy. We need to ensure that the tax lodging guests pay is spent wisely, with the ultimate goal of attracting more visitors.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



GOP can do better than Trump

By Jay Ambrose

He walked out on the stage and the crowd was cheering, the music was blasting "I'm proud to be an American," and former President Donald Trump did look proud, very proud. This was despite a lost election he says he won, a Capitol riot he says he did not start and a furious but failed impeachment attempt to keep him from ever seeking the presidency again.

The song ended with the words, "I love this land, God bless the USA," and 74-year-old Trump, looking as energetic as ever, later made clear he loved his country now disdained by so many rewriting its noble history and not caring about the flag. Those attending the Conservative Political Action Conference chanted, "We love you. We love you. We love you."

They were representing literally millions who, according to polls, do think Trump should maintain his Republican leadership and White House aspirations he said he just might act on. In contrast to other millions who think the opposite, they no doubt see charisma in the man, like what he did as president, what he advocates and salute a larger vision.

The vision is important because it does speak to something real. I get it, for instance, that he detests "cancel culture" that looks to ruin the lives of those whose words are casually defined as offensive. He said he fears the lapse of cherished principles that used to guide us, and the left right now is superb at this venture.

He is afraid of radicalized politics that embrace socialistic ambitions when capitalism has erased material misery all over the planet. To him, America is "an exceptional nation blessed by God," but is abandoned when public schools, for example, do not teach patriotism. He said he believes in free thought, thinks the Constitution means what it says and that the rule of law must be maintained.

We should all recognize the crushing sin of slavery, Jim Crow and racism, but that hardly means that accompanying greatness has failed to fight back. Trump talked about "a historic struggle for America's future" when "our very identity as Americans is at stake." There is a lot to that at a time of increasing encroachments on free speech, talk of packing the Supreme Court, regulatory overkill and shrugging at race riots as nothing much, just \$1 billion worth of property damage and a relatively few dead people.

Mangling facts while still making solid points, Trump got specific about fumbles by President Joe Biden, such as reawakening an immigration crisis and fighting climate change ineffectively by moves that will cost jobs and strip away energy resources at huge economic and national security

costs. In the COVID-19 emergency, Biden has pummeled students by failing to pressure states sufficiently to open safe schools, Trump said before listing his own accomplishments as president, pretty impressive.

He then addressed the future, with, for instance, the idea of making the Republican Party into a unified party of love, bringing together people of varied races and creeds. That sounds splendid but is not in tune with his striking out at fellow Republicans who have failed to kneel before him. His self-centered disposition is contrary to the goal. What especially came to mind was the riot in the Capitol. Yes, the impeachment proceedings were more show than substance, but here is a president who sat for hours in the White House calmly watching the mayhem on TV while doing nothing to stop it, a dereliction of duty.

He turned off his phone, made no move to call the National Guard, ignored concerned aides, seemed undaunted by any threat to lives or a peaceful transition of power, a cherished principle. Even given a long list of inanities, I have defended Trump frequently, have seen the progressives as often worse than he was and was myself disturbed by media bias. But here was someone without any signal of character whatsoever. There are a number of Republicans who would be acceptable presidential candidates. He is not one of them.

Jay Ambrose is an op-ed columnist for Tribune News Service. Readers may email him at speaktojay@aol.com

Letters to the editor

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Grateful for all who help keep schools open

When I got home from work the other day my son Max, who's almost 10, rushed into the kitchen with the sort of exuberance, and agility, that I haven't been able to muster for many years.

Decades, even, if I'm to be honest. "I had the best day ever at school," Max exclaimed.

Max, as is typical of kids his age, hasn't quite figured out the nuances of the superlative.

He sometimes proclaims he has experienced the best of one thing, and the worst of another, in the same day.

(Or hour.)

But his enthusiasm, exaggerated though it might have been, pleased me greatly.

That moment reminded me how grateful I am for everyone who has made it possible for Max, and other students in the Baker School District's elementary schools, to have a school year that is closer to normal than most things have been over the past 12 months.

Since Oct. 14, Max and his classmates have been learning in their classrooms four days per week.



JAYSON JACOBY

Sometimes, while I'm sitting at my desk at work, I smile when I remind myself that, unlike his old man, Max is not staring at a computer monitor.

He is instead sitting in a classroom festooned with brightly colored posters. I think of him there, clutching a pencil and working on some problem, or listening to his teacher, or laughing with the other fourth-graders about some joke that I probably wouldn't understand.

He is where he should be. Max's sister isn't quite so lucky. Olivia, who's an eighth-grader, went back to Baker Middle School one day per week on Nov. 9. Since Jan. 25 she's been in the classroom two of the four days each week.

Mark Witty, the Baker School District superintendent, said this week that he's been talking with

state officials about the possibility of Baker's middle school and high school students returning to a regular, four-day in-person schedule in early April.

I appreciate Witty's lobbying on behalf of students. I hope he succeeds.

Yet even with the current limited schedule (I bristle at using the word "hybrid" to describe anything other than certain cars and animals; it's among the unpleasant intrusions the virus has inflicted on our lexicon), Olivia and other local junior high and high schoolers are lucky compared with thousands of students elsewhere in Oregon.

At least Baker kids — my kids, your kids — get to see their teachers in a form that doesn't involve pixels.

They can walk into a school in the morning and walk out in the afternoon.

Such a simple thing, the matter of a few steps.

Until those steps are instead the ones between a kid's bedroom and the rest of the house.

I have friends and family whose

children haven't been in a classroom for almost a year.

Some are seniors whose last year in high school, what's supposed to be a particularly memorable period in the first stage of a person's life, has been so ersatz, so hollow, that calling it a cruel facade is to indulge in awful understatement.

Theirs is a terrible loss. Irreplaceable, as only time can be.

I understand, of course, that Baker County has fared better, medically speaking, than many of Oregon's 36 counties during the pandemic.

But this doesn't diminish my gratitude for the teachers, principals, bus drivers, custodians and everyone else who has made our schools beacons of consistency, stability and normality during a year distinguished by uncertainty, upheaval and soul-crushing fear.

All children have lost much over these troubling months.

They've lost time with their friends, lost the sleepovers and birthday parties and myriad other

activities they — and we, as adults — took for granted.

But those deprived of any time in classrooms have lost much more.

Every time I drive or walk past a Baker school, and I see kids on the playground, or walking to the car that's waiting for them at the curb, I feel the comfort that comes from an encounter with anything that is familiar.

Even these scenes are a trifle jarring, to be sure.

I'm still not quite accustomed to seeing students wearing masks on any day other than Halloween.

Or to seeing masks hanging from the dowel above the washer and dryer in our laundry room, come to that.

But those are details of the most minor sort. And masks have contributed to opening our schools, and keeping them open.

A scrap of fabric is nothing compared with the joy of a child, home from school and boasting of a day better than all the rest.

Until the next best day arrives.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.