

CONTRACT

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Then, on March 3, 2021, commissioners voted 3-0 to extend the contract with the Chamber through Aug. 31, 2021, and to propose a six-member work group, with three members appointed by commissioners and three by the Baker City Council, to review both the contract and the other uses for the lodging tax revenue.

That work group was formed, and it has been meeting regularly over the past two months.

The work group had a meeting Wednesday evening, May 12, with county commissioners, who themselves had a sometimes heated discussion about the matter during a work session earlier in the day.

The county's representatives on the work group are commission chairman Bill Harvey, Martin Arritola, chairman of the county's Economic Development Committee, and Tyler Brown, chairman of the county's Transient Lodging Tax Committee.

The city's representatives are city manager Jon Cannon, mayor Kerry McQuisten and councilor Joanna Dixon.

During the meeting Wednesday evening, Dixon suggested that commissioners again extend the visitor services contract with the Chamber, this time to March 2022. That's also when the county's contract for tourism marketing, with Timothy Bishop, expires.

"That gives us more time to do what you want to do, but we're also funding visitors services until March of next year," Dixon said.

Commissioners will ask county attorney Drew Martin about any legal issues with extending the contract, and potentially make a decision at their regular meeting on May 19.

Dixon's reference to having time "to do what you want to do" is at the heart of the disagreement that started during commissioners' work session Wednesday morning.

The main issue is the scope of the work group's task.

When commissioners voted on March 3 to create the work group, its objectives included reviewing the overall lodging tax system, as well as create a draft request for proposals (RFP) for the visitor center contract specifically.

During the work group's April 14 meeting, Harvey said its goal was to have a draft RFP by early July, the timing in recognition of the contract with the Chamber ending Aug. 31.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

The Baker County visitors center is at the right side of the Baker County Chamber of Commerce building at 490 Campbell St.

The work group has a draft RFP available now, ahead of its earlier estimate (a copy of the draft is available on the Herald's website, www.bakercityherald.com).

But on Wednesday, commissioner Mark Bennett said he believes the work group's draft RFP is "premature" because the county has not gathered input from the community, and in particular businesses that depend on visitors.

"We're spending over half a million dollars a year on all of these various programs and we need to assure the entire community and especially the visitors services industry, that we're doing it in the best interest," Bennett said. "And so while I appreciate the work, and I understand that a lot of work went into (the draft RFP), it's premature because we don't have the background data, we don't have trending, we don't have where we're going with this whole thing."

Commissioner Bruce Nichols agreed with Bennett.

Nichols said he expected that the work group would survey the hospitality industry before an RFP went out for operating the visitors center.

"Is it going to benefit the community like it's supposed to? We really don't know that unless we do a study and that includes visiting with people, the players in this, and the (Economic Development Committee), business hospitality industry, all those things," Nichols said.

Bennett said he doesn't want the county to be locked into an artificial timeline.

"This body of work is important but we need the foundation behind it," he said.

Harvey, who is the commission's representative on the work group that's been working on the draft RFP, disputed Bennett's and Nichols' assessment of what the work group's task is.

Harvey also argued that the

county needs to stay with the previous goal of putting out an RFP and approving a new contract before the current contract's extension ends Aug. 31.

"We have not got the time to do everything that you're asking for and come up with an RFP," Harvey said to Bennett during the commissioners' meeting Wednesday morning.

Bennett's response: "How can you build an RFP without getting the data?"

Harvey: "We did get the data. It's not that difficult to just do one RFP (for operating the visitors center). You just list what you want done."

Harvey, in response to Bennett's statement that the work group did not schedule "listening sessions" for the public, pointed out that the work group's meetings were public but just a few people attended.

Harvey contended that the work group, which has been advised by Jason Brandt, president of the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association, has done the job it was assigned in early March.

"We worked our butts off trying to get to that point (with a draft RFP) and now everything is wrong so we're going to just start all over," Harvey said. "I really don't care. We were tasked with a job. We did our best to do it. So, when we come into the next session, I want a motion on this table that says what direction you want and I need a second to continue that."

Bennett responded: "I would appreciate that you quit demanding anything, you have no right, Bill, that's rude and out of order."

Harvey said it wasn't possible for the work group to write a draft RFP in time to meet the Aug. 31 deadline, when the current contract extension ends, and conduct the sort of public survey and other tasks that both Bennett and Nichols mentioned.

"I'm telling you, you tasked us with something and a deadline," Harvey said. "We couldn't do both."

"We promised the community we were going to have a new RFP by that date so we would continue the services as we have been doing," Harvey said.

"It is a bigger task than it appeared," Bennett said.

Baker City Mayor Kerry McQuisten, one of the city's three representatives on the work group, attended the commissioners' Wednesday morning meeting by Zoom. McQuisten said she found the discussion "horrifying, to tell you the truth."

"I don't recall in the county commissioners' meeting any mention in that motion of hiring a consultant," McQuisten said. "We're looking now at months or years delay. We didn't want to continue kicking the can down the road with financing on this. What I'm hearing is the motivation behind it is because a couple of people have complained loudly to the commissioners?"

Bennett said that he "started getting phone calls that things weren't going right" with the work group.

McQuisten said her understanding is that once the work group has a draft RFP, the document then would go to the City Council and county commissioners for their review and approval during a public meeting.

Bennett emphasized that he doesn't want to interfere with the continued operation of the visitors center.

His goal, he said, is to review the entire lodging tax system, and to ensure the tax money, which amounted to about \$440,000 in the most recent fiscal year, is spent wisely.

An ordinance requires that 70% of the money be spent for tourism marketing and promotion, and 25% for economic development. Baker County, which administers the program, can keep up to 5% for administrative costs.

McQuisten pointed out that the visitor center contract has been in limbo since early 2020.

Commissioners meet with lodging tax work group

The discussion, and at times the dispute, continued several hours later on Wednesday evening when commissioners met with the work group.

Harvey reiterated his concern about timing, saying that the tasks Bennett had mentioned, such as public listening sessions and potentially hiring a consultant to help with the process, would take six months to a year, long after the contract extension with the Chamber ends Aug. 31.

Commissioners did discuss last fall hiring a consultant to guide the RFP process, but that idea wasn't part of the commissioners' vote on March 3 to propose creating a city-

county work group.

"The promise at the beginning of this was that we were not going to continue to drag this out because it puts us at a legal liability," McQuisten said.

Peter Johnson, general manager of Anthony Lakes, which submitted a proposal to operate a visitors center in late 2019, has repeatedly urged commissioners to award the contract rather in a timely manner.

An attorney representing Anthony Lakes sent a letter on Feb. 1 to Drew Martin, the county's attorney, regarding the visitor center contract.

Former Baker City Mayor Loran Joseph, who was the city's representative on the county lodging tax committee, attended Wednesday evening's meeting and pointed out that commissioners could simply award a new visitor center contract to the Chamber.

"That seems like that would avoid a lot of the headaches that we're running into," Joseph said. "Is that not on the table anymore?"

Although that contract was the main topic during Wednesday evening's meeting between commissioners and the work group, officials also briefly talked about changing the lodging tax ordinance to give Baker City a bigger role in the lodging tax committee, which serves as an advisor to county commissioners.

The city has one member on the seven-person committee now — city councilor Shane Alderson.

One idea is to have the city appoint three members to the committee rather than one.

"I fully support that and still do to this day," Harvey said. "I think that's a good maneuver that we can allow the city to become full partnership with the TLT. And I think that's a good direction."

In February, McQuisten proposed a more dramatic change — having the city withdraw from the agreement under which the county administers the lodging tax, and instead have the city collect lodging taxes from businesses within the city limits. Guests at lodging establishments inside the city pay about 70% of the total lodging tax in the county.

The City Council rejected McQuisten's proposal by a 4-3 vote on Feb. 23.

During Wednesday evening's meeting, Arritola, one of the county's representatives on the work group, asked whether the group has been dissolved.

"Temporarily, or permanently, I don't know," Harvey said. "We're going to have to make a decision at one of our meetings that says this is what we're going to do regardless of how much time it takes and regardless of what the consequences are currently, then that's what we will do."

CDC: Fully vaccinated people don't need masks in most places

By Zeke Miller and Michael Balsamo
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In a major step toward returning to pre-pandemic life, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention eased mask-wearing guidance for fully vaccinated people on Thursday, May 13, allowing them to stop wearing masks outdoors in crowds and in most indoor settings.

The new guidance still calls for wearing masks in crowded

"We have all longed for this moment — when we can get back to some sense of normalcy."

— Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

indoor settings like buses, planes, hospitals, prisons and homeless shelters but it will help clear the way for reopening workplaces, schools, and other venues — even removing

the need for social distancing for those who are fully vaccinated.

"We have all longed for this moment — when we can get back to some sense of normalcy," said Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the director of the CDC.

The CDC and the Biden administration have faced pressure to ease restrictions on fully vaccinated people — those who are two weeks past their last required COVID-19 vaccine dose — in part to highlight the

benefits of getting the shot.

The country's aggressive vaccination campaign has paid off: U.S. virus cases are at their lowest rate since September, deaths are at their lowest point since last April and the test positivity rate is at the lowest point since the pandemic began.

Walensky announced the new guidance on Thursday afternoon at a White House briefing, saying the long-awaited change is thanks to millions of

people getting vaccinated and is based on the latest science about how well those shots are working.

"Anyone who is fully vaccinated can participate in indoor and outdoor activities — large or small — without wearing a mask or physically distancing," Walensky said. "If you are fully vaccinated, you can start doing the things that you had stopped doing because of the pandemic."

The new guidance is likely

to open the door to confusion, since there is no surefire way for businesses or others to distinguish between those who are fully vaccinated and those who are not. Walensky said those who are not fully vaccinated should continue to wear masks indoors.

President Joe Biden was set to highlight the new guidance Thursday afternoon in a speech from the White House.

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