

## EDITORIAL

## Trains and city voters

The Baker City Council didn't make a final decision Tuesday, June 8, but councilors discussed asking voters in the future what they think about the city applying for a "quiet zone" within the city limits, in which freight trains wouldn't sound their horns except in emergencies.

That's a reasonable idea. Certainly our elected representatives would be wise to try to find out, to the extent possible, what their constituents think about the matter.

If the city puts the issue on the May 2022 ballot, it would avoid having to spend money for the election, as would be the case this November, as no other local issues are slated for that election.

A ballot measure is also an efficient way to gauge public sentiment about the issue, one that's likely to reach far more residents than other survey methods, some of which would entail costs. An online survey the Baker City Police Department conducted in March, for instance, attracted about 575 respondents. There are around 6,000 registered voters in the city.

Councilor Lynette Perry suggested the city have a town hall to gather opinions on the issue prior to an election. That's also a worthwhile proposal.

If the quiet zone topic ends up on the ballot next May, the council needs to explain the situation as thoroughly as possible to avoid misleading voters.

For instance, although some people might assume that eliminating most train whistles would pose a danger to drivers and pedestrians, federal studies that included more than 560 quiet zones in 2011 and 2013 showed no statistically significant difference in accidents after quiet zones were established. The obvious reason is that federal officials don't approve quiet zones unless the affected crossings have more robust gates, medians or other equipment installed to prevent vehicles from reaching the tracks while a train is near. Quiet zones don't merely eliminate most whistles — they also make it less likely that a vehicle will be on the tracks when a train is passing.

Voters also need to understand that a local group promoting the quiet zone intends to raise money to pay for the crossing improvements Baker City would need to qualify for a quiet zone. The city council should invite members of the group to a future meeting to give an update about the group's efforts, which include, in 2019, gathering signatures from 230 local residents who support the quiet zone. The potential for the city to have a quiet zone without spending public dollars would undoubtedly be an important factor for some voters.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor

FROM THE PEOPLE WHO BROUGHT THE WORLD COVID-19, FAULTY TEST KITS, DEFECTIVE VENTILATORS AND CRAPPY MASKS...



## Your views

## Lack of consistency in reporting of COVID data

This letter is regarding an article I read recently about COVID data. The Government Executive article, "America's Entire Understanding of the Pandemic Was Shaped by Messy Data," is authored by Kara Schechtman and Sara Simon if you want to look it up. They are part of The COVID Tracking Project.

Data were compiled from the 50 states and territories for a total of 56 systems reporting to the national database. There were no consistent methods or approaches among the 56 so data are definitely "apples and oranges" and no one knows how different any of the data are within the five metrics — tests, cases, deaths, hospitalizations, and recoveries — each state or territory had its own methods. How data were reported within each state was not identified but each agency/organization had their own approach. It took a while for any federal guidance so the early months of 2020 are even more suspect.

- Tests: Variances included the number of tests (a person could be tested several times) vs. number of persons tested. Therefore, states only reporting persons tested appeared to be testing far less than other states even if not so. Race and ethnicity data were "... highly incomplete and unstandardized, impeding efforts to understand the pandemic's disproportionate effect on Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities." Even though nightly news was reporting minorities were more affected than whites, reality is no one really knows. The report says each state had different weak points in their equipment so reported differ-

## Letters to the editor

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ently, e.g. electronic vs. faxed (yes, some systems were that old) transmission and ignored what wasn't easy to report. Some states reported only certain types of tests while some reported none. Some states reported only clinic authorized tests while others included all tests.

- Cases: Some states included clinic determined cases, some only if tested positive, others included probable cases (a person with symptoms), and some included all possibilities. As another variable, testing means changed over the pandemic period.
- Deaths: Reporting differences included those dying from COVID vs. those dying with COVID. Regarding timing, some reported deaths as they occurred, some reported only after death certificates were issued.
- Hospitalizations: Variances included current vs. cumulative and the same variances as listed above under cases.
- Recoveries: It was extremely difficult to define if, or when, someone was recovered. Was just not dying enough? Was someone recovered if they lived but had long-term effects? This metric was so difficult that they stopped

reporting it except for the eight states that report hospital discharges.

My conclusion is that very significant state and national decisions were made that affected all our lives, our families, our activities, our mental health, our economy, and political operations. These decisions were made, and are still being made, on flawed data.

Jim Carnahan  
Baker City

## Bill eliminating graduation requirements is absurd

Every time I look at the news I realize just how absurd things have become. Yet I can still be surprised by our state legislature. For example, we now see a proposal that students will not be required to know anything of substance in order to graduate from school. While I admit there are many loony ideas being advanced as legislation, this one in particular is tantamount to criminal on two fronts.

First, we have child abuse and endangerment. Children are being brainwashed to believe they are the wisest segment of the population. Simultaneously, they know little of history but are pounded with corrupt ideology which they are expected to parrot on command.

Secondly, a fraud. The parents are being betrayed by an educational system for which they pay a significant amount annually. The local school board needs people who value proper education for all the children. I would hope parents across the state will raise an outcry against this particular bill and keep a closer eye on their local curriculum.

Rick Rienks  
Baker City

## The genius behind such delicacies as the Frito

I am fascinated by the reality that anyone, in contemplating a pile of plain old cornmeal, could conceive of something as magical, as truly life-changing, as the Frito.

I am equally entranced by the genius that is required to turn sugar, water and a tropical nut into Coca-Cola, Pepsi, or some other refreshing elixir; or to transform the humble cacao bean into a decadent candy bar.

I have for some years harbored an obsession with people who figured out how to convert the simplest foodstuffs into cultural icons that generate billions of dollars in revenue every year.

It is, I suppose, an unhealthy interest.

Studying the history of popular processed foods is neither the highest of intellectual pursuits, nor is it a topic likely to appear on any syllabus at the finest universities.

Moreover, most of the products that have attained iconic status would cause a nutritionist to shudder (and, perhaps, to nibble on some fresh kale for solace).

Certainly that trio I cited above



JAYSON JACOBY

— deep-fried corn chips, sugar-laden sodas, and chocolate — is the caloric wrecking ball to the responsible food pyramid, a barrage of empty calories that lays waste to tooth enamel and to arteries with equal aplomb.

But each is also indubitably tasty.

The oily crunch of a Frito, the chilly and fizzy swallow of cola, the creamy texture of milk chocolate — these gratify our souls in a way kale never could.

But I find comfort in these foods not only in the traditional sense of that word, but also because they have endured for so many decades, an edible thread connecting generations of American gullets.

By comparison, so many other things integral to society have changed so dramatically that today we scarcely recognize their

ancestral equivalents.

We still drive cars, most of us, but the vehicles that emerge from factories in 2021 have little in common with a Model T, save the basic elements of an engine, four tires and a steering wheel.

We've been chatting on phones for more than a century, but as recently as 20 years ago few of us would have expected that these previously umbilical devices would become so indispensable and so capable.

But a Hershey chocolate bar is still the same luscious treat that it was during the Roaring Twenties.

And a Lay's potato chip is just as satisfying as ever it was.

Given my affinity for these items, both for their flavors and for their historical authenticity, I wasn't even slightly surprised by how much I enjoy the History Channel's series, "The Food That Built America."

But in common with any competent documentary, this one has educated me even while it was entertaining.

I wasn't utterly ignorant of the topic, to be sure.

As I suspect is true for most people who are powerless against the lure of chocolate and soda, I had a passing familiarity with the stories of Milton Hershey and John Pemberton.

But I didn't know that HB Reese — the man who figured out that the combination of chocolate and peanut butter can wobble the Earth slightly on its axis — himself toiled for Hershey before setting out on his own sweet and decadent path in business.

Nor was I aware that behind both of the pizza titans, Domino's and Pizza Hut, stands a pair of brothers.

I was equally fascinated, if not more so, to learn that Pabst, the brewing behemoth with its famous blue ribbon, survived Prohibition in part by producing a spreadable cheese, and that in so doing the company ran afoul of a certain Mr. Kraft, who wasn't keen on having his years of oily, smelly work in the kitchen foiled by a big beer outfit.

"The Food That Built America" isn't perfect.

I find the dramatic reenactments occasionally cloying. These are necessary, certainly, given the lack of archival film and photographs from episodes that in some cases happened more than a century ago, and that wouldn't have seemed historic at the time.

But the actors' exaggerated facial expressions distracted me from such epochal scenes as the first meeting between Herman Lay and Charles Elmer Doolin.

The first name is of course instantly recognizable to potato chip aficionados.

The latter is not — I'd never heard of the man — but should be.

Doolin created the Frito, a level of accomplishment that Lay, even though his name still graces those shiny bags filled with deliciousness, can't claim for potato chips.

Doolin ought to have something majestic named for him.

Thousands have been honored for doing nothing nearly as consequential.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.