

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Trail Center's long closure

The announcement this winter that the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, one of Baker County's most popular visitor attractions, would be closed for about two and a half years for renovations no doubt surprised some people.

But it turns out that was only half of the story.

Approximately.

In reality the Center, operated by the Bureau of Land Management on Flagstaff Hill about five miles east of Baker City, is in the midst of a closure that likely will extend for close to four years.

And although the BLM has been offering a variety of programs outside the Center, and its network of trails has remained open, the veritable loss of a building that has attracted close to 2.4 million visitors since it opened on May 23, 1992, and for such an extended period, is disappointing.

The pandemic, as with so many other things, is partly to blame.

The Center closed on Nov. 17, 2020, due to a surge in COVID-19 cases.

And it's understandable that the Center needs to be closed in advance of the renovations — the goal is make the facility more energy-efficient, at an estimated cost of at least \$3 million — to allow the many exhibits, some of them fragile, to be properly packaged.

But the renovations aren't scheduled to start until March 1, 2022.

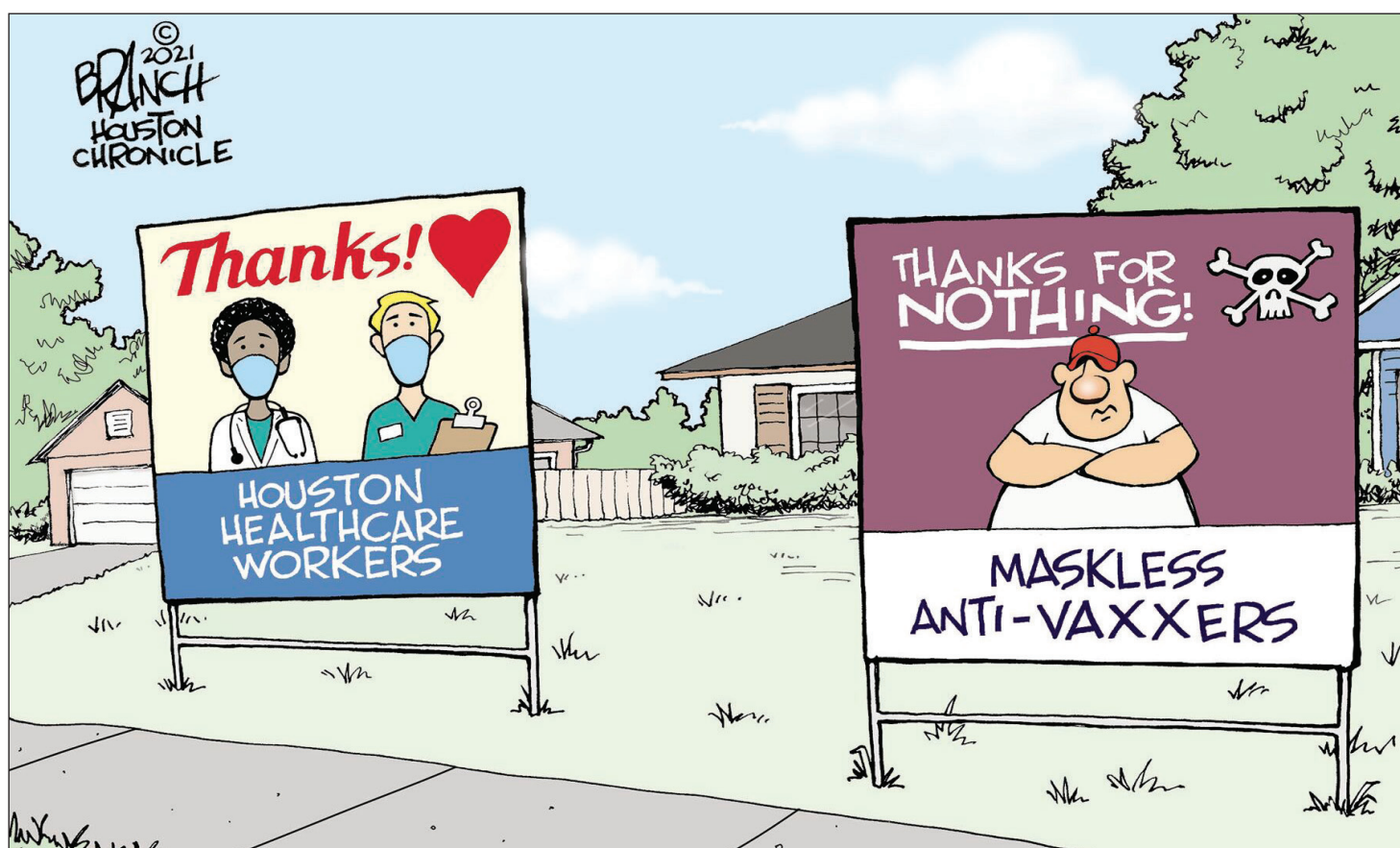
And although the pandemic, due to the prevalence of the delta variant, is running rampant again, for much of the past spring and early summer the situation was relatively tranquil. People started traveling more frequently, and the Interpretive Center would have been on many vacationers' itineraries.

Fortunately the BLM will have an "Oregon Trail Experience" in Baker City during the renovations, likely in the Baker Heritage Museum.

But with the renovations expected to take about two and a half years, the Center itself isn't likely to reopen until late summer of 2024 at the earliest.

That's a bitter pill to swallow for the county's tourism industry, which has already suffered severely due to the pandemic.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

Train quiet zone would make Baker City even better

I'm a retired police officer and a retired counselor at the Powder River Correctional Facility. I share this fact because I'm sensitive to the safety and security of citizens. I also have an educated awareness of mental health issues and some of the stressors which can aggravate sensitive populations.

Extreme noise levels are an added element to an already stressful environment. Stress can reduce productivity, increase blood pressure, cause anxiety, sleeplessness, and even propel people into violence.

There are not many times in this old man's life that I've been as supportive of a cause as I am now. To reduce stressful noise, I fully support Baker City adopting a railroad quiet zone as more than 700 other U.S. cities have.

According to Federal Department of Transportation studies, railroad quiet zones have caused zero increase in railroad-auto accidents. That's why I support this from the law enforcement perspective.

From a mental health professional perspective, this is a "no brainer" (pun intended). The sound of a trickling creek, or the quiet sound of a small fan is found to be soothing and refreshing. Now consider the opposite — a loud horn breaking up our concentration and sleeping patterns multiple times per day and night.

The impacts on sensitive populations include our children: Persistent loud noises can cause them to be more irritable, have behavior issues at school and

home, get poorer grades, and sleep less, which makes everything harder.

A close friend and fellow mental health professional literally sold her house near the train tracks for a low price recently because of the trains. The stress just wasn't worth it.

I value this great place, Baker City. Many of us appreciate just what a wonderful place it really is. Let's make it a little more wonderful. I simply do not see this as a controversial issue. Please join me in supporting a cause that will reduce our stress and enrich our lives.

P.S. I'm signing the petition going around town. If you are like-minded, maybe you will too?

Layne Frambes
Baker City

OTHER VIEWS

Biden steps up on eviction crisis

Editorial from New York Daily News:

When the national freeze on residential evictions, in place since the start of COVID last March, lapsed on Aug. 1, it wasn't just at-risk tenants who panicked. Democrats in Congress and the White House were furiously fingerpointing for the other to act immediately, fearful of families being put on the street and them catching blame.

Congress needed to pass a new law, claimed the Biden team, pointing to a U.S. Supreme Court majority that said that the CDC did not have the authority to impose a nationwide moratorium. And the states were to blame as well for only handing out 7% of the \$46.55 billion the feds set aside for rental aid.

No, said Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the administration needed to extend the moratorium because there wasn't time for a new law since GOP members had blocked last-minute legislation. That left unanswered why the House and Senate hadn't moved when the high court ruling came down on June 29. Some states, like New York, still have their own eviction freezes in places, but unpaid landlords retain their rights to their own property, and with the House away until Sept. 20, something bad was going to happen.

Just then, on Tuesday, some clever people at the Centers for Disease Control crafted a new temporary freeze on evictions that may pass court muster. Citing

the rapidly growing delta variant, the order imposes a moratorium until Oct. 3 on those counties "experiencing substantial and high levels of community transmission levels of SARS-CoV-2."

The CDC uses a four-level color-coded COVID scale on its maps: High (red) and substantial (orange) areas would have the moratorium, as opposed to moderate (yellow) and low (blue) counties. Numerically, almost 83% of U.S. counties are now covered. This is not the nationwide ban that the court opposed, but wisely targeted to where the disease is the worst. The goal is to buy time to send out the financial aid and bring down the virus. Just what the doctor ordered.

Rabbitbrush gets an early start on late summer

The rabbitbrush seems confused about which month it is, and it happens that I feel a trifle uncertain myself about precisely where we are on the calendar.

I noticed the rabbitbrush on Saturday, the 17th of July, while driving to the mountains in search of relief from the heat.

Specifically I noticed the bright-yellow blossoms that distinguish this species of shrub which, along with sagebrush, is a ubiquitous flora of the dry steppes.

Which is not to say that rabbitbrush is confined to the desert country.

The plant is also common in parts of Baker Valley that haven't been converted to agriculture and thus aren't regularly irrigated. The clumps of rabbitbrush that attracted my eyes grow profusely on the east side of Highway 30 between Baker City and Haines.

What gave me pause is that date — July 17.

Rabbitbrush for much of the year is, like the sage, a rather drab shrub of dull green or gray.

(One of my essential sources on such matters, Ronald J. Taylor's lavishly illustrated "Sagebrush Country:



JAYSON JACOBY

A Wildflower Sanctuary," tells me there are two predominant types of rabbitbrush, the gray and the green, and that they often intermingle.)

But each year, along about the middle of August, rabbitbrush, like a formerly reclusive person who suddenly discovers a sense of style, turns flamboyant.

For me — and I suspect for many people who live east of the Cascades — rabbitbrush is a bellwether of summer's waning as reliable as the dwindling hours of daylight and the first morning when the temperature dips into the 30s.

(Two of my other favorites in that category are the astringent scent of peppermint, blowing in on the north-west wind from the Ward Farms distillery, and the thin craft football shoulder pads colliding.)

Taylor's book also notes the seasonal nature of blooming rabbitbrush, referring to its "late summer" arrival.

July 17, of course, is not late summer.

Technically it's early summer, being less than a month past the solstice.

But when I saw the rabbitbrush blooms, conspicuous against the backdrop of brown, desiccated grass, I was instantly thrust ahead into August, to a time when certain seasonal firsts — day of school, football game, scrim of morning frost on the windshield — begin to feel plausible.

I suspect the drought and the heat have conspired to convince the rabbitbrush to defy the calendar.

It occurred to me, as I drove past those surprisingly bright patches beside the highway, that rabbitbrush isn't the only symbol of this strangely fast-moving summer.

That evening, as I reclined in a chair in my yard to read, the pungent aroma of woodsmoke settled in, and the westerling sun blazed with the color of erupting lava, a shade of incandescent orange normally seen only at Hawaiian volcanoes and on garish late 1960s muscle cars.

The next evening the smoke — an unfortunate byproduct of the Bootleg fire burning more than 100 miles away, in Klamath and Lake counties — slunk in even thicker yet. This

thin white pall suggested the possibility of a refreshing rain shower but this was of course a lie — this was a cloud made not of water vapor but of soot and other particulates that irritate the nostrils rather than soothe the fevered brow.

Like the blooms of rabbitbrush, I associate wildfire smoke, with its heavily scented evenings and blood-red sunsets, with the end of summer rather than its middle.

Yet events come ever earlier, it seems to me — a trend that afflicts the natural, such as the maturing of shrubs and of wildfires, as well as the solely manmade. Halloween candy, for instance, begins to burden store shelves (and adolescent enamel) before the autumnal equinox, and the stuffed turkey and the jack-o-lantern seem to share a season rather than one giving way to the next in the beloved sequence as it once was.

This summer is something of an outlier, to be sure, what with the absence of rainfall and the record-setting heat wave.

Yet we are no longer surprised when the woods or the rangelands are ablaze in June or in early July.

I remember, though, that the first wildfire I ever worked on during my career as a summer employee on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest — I can't rightly say I "fought" the fire since it didn't put up much of a resistance — was in the third week of July 1989.

And I also recall that, among the veteran smokeeaters I met that summer, this was considered a rather early time for a blaze, and particularly for one ignited by lightning.

We have in our living room a digital picture frame — a cunning little device that displays, for an interval of several seconds, the photographs on a thumb drive. I happened to walk past this the other day and the scene, looking into our yard, was in winter, and a heavy snow was falling.

I don't recall that winter, with its skin-tightening temperatures and snow that squeaks underfoot, ever seemed so distant, so indistinct and so improbable, as that moment while I stood there, the air-conditioner rumbling behind me, battling the summer that arrived early and seems disinclined to leave.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.