

GO!
EASTERN OREGON

African animal parade in Baker City
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GO! Magazine
Your weekly guide to arts and entertainment events around Northeast Oregon

Baker City Herald

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QUICK HITS

Good Day Wish To A Subscriber

A special good day to Herald subscriber Mike Murray of Baker City.

BRIEFING

Baker City ends burning restriction

Due to recent rain and cooler temperatures, outdoor burning, including debris piles and burn barrels, is allowed again in Baker City after being prohibited for most of the summer due to high fire danger.

Free permits that allow outdoor burning of untreated wood, paper and yard debris are available at the front office of the Baker City Fire Department, 1616 Second St. Permits are valid through Dec. 31, 2021.

Oregon FFA's annual Drive Away Hunger event runs all of October

Oregon FFA chapters are collecting nonperishable food during October for the annual Drive Away Hunger project.

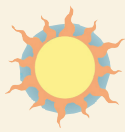
People can drop off donations at any Oregon Les Schwab Tire Center during October. The food drive is set for October to help local food banks stock up for the holiday season.

FFA, formerly known as Future Farmers of America, is a national youth organization with more than 760,113 members, including in Baker City. Lew Brothers Les Schwab Tires in Baker City is at 210 Bridge St.

WEATHER

Today

71 / 36
Sunny



Friday

68 / 31
Mostly sunny



The space below is for a postage label for issues that are mailed.



Deon Strommer/Contributed Photo

Deon Strommer stands next to a portable morgue set up in New York City during the spring of 2020.

Inside the COVID crisis

■ Deon Strommer of Baker City was helping in New York City during the height of the pandemic in the spring of 2020

By JAYSON JACOBY

jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

While Baker County had yet to report its first COVID-19 case in the spring of 2020, Deon Strommer was seeing the bodies of virus victims stacked atop one another in New York City.

It was an experience Strommer, who lives near Baker City, will never forget.

And it was an experience that continues, more than a year and a half later, to influence his attitude about the pandemic.

Having seen firsthand some of the worst effects of COVID-19 anywhere in America, Strommer is a staunch advocate of vaccination and of face masks.

"I try to understand both sides, but I think if people could see what I have seen ..." Strommer, 63, said in an interview on Tuesday, Sept. 28. "I have a high sensitivity about COVID. I saw a whole different facet of it."

Strommer's work in New York City, and in other places in the early stages of the pandemic in 2020, stem from his profession as a funeral director.

He moved to Baker City in 1987 and has been in the mortuary business for nearly 40 years. He and his wife, Amy, moved to Portland about 12 years ago, where he owned a mortuary service that included conducting cremations and helping funeral homes.

But the couple kept their home near Baker City and visited frequently.

"We always intended to retire in Baker City," Strommer said. "It's great to be back in the community and to reconnect with people I haven't seen in a long time."

"I was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers. I've been doing this 40 years and one day I had to take a knee. It's a shock to your system. It's just not natural."

— Deon Strommer, talking about the number of COVID-19 deaths in New York City during the spring of 2020

Although most funeral directors devote most of their time to helping grieving families, some also fulfill a different role — helping to process, care for and in some cases identify the bodies of victims of natural disasters and other events involving large numbers of deaths.

Strommer said he was contacted by an official from the Federal Emergency Management Agency after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Although he was on a list of mortuary professionals, he was never called to New York City to assist in that disaster.

But the next spring, while attending a conference of the Oregon Funerals Directors, Strommer learned about the Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams.

These are groups of experts, including morticians, who travel across the nation, and sometimes abroad, when a large number of deaths in a short period overwhelms the capacity of local mortuaries.

Strommer joined one of these teams in 2002 and he's been a member since.

He likened the teams to the National Guard, as members are temporary federal employees who are dispatched as needed.

In the past 19 years Strommer has deployed to places devastated by hurricanes, including New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and in Puerto Rico and Haiti.

Helping with COVID

On Jan. 31, 2020, while he and Amy were in Portland, preparing for their retirement and return to Baker City, Strommer got a call to fly to Travis Air Force Base north of San Francisco.

His team's task was to help U.S. citizens who were returning from Wuhan, China, and thus potentially infected with a virus few people outside the research community had then heard of.

Strommer said the team was dispatched not because officials expected a large number of deaths, but because team members were trained both in wearing personal protective equipment and in helping people in emotionally difficult situations.

During his two weeks or so at Travis, Strommer said his chief job was to help people get off the planes that brought them from China, and to assist them while they quarantined in housing on the Air Force base.

See, **Crisis** / Page A5

Chamber, Anthony Lakes again vie for visitor center contract

By JAYSON JACOBY

jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

Baker County's often-delayed plan to pick a contractor to operate a visitors center in Baker City has yielded two proposals, and the applicants are the same two that sought the contract almost two years ago.

The deadline to submit proposals for the visitor services contract was Sept. 24, and the county received proposals from the Baker County Chamber of Commerce (under the umbrella of Baker County Unlimited) and Anthony Lakes Outdoor Recreation Association (previous Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort).

The Chamber of Commerce had the previous contract, for about \$77,000 per year. The Chamber runs a visitors center at 490 Campbell St., near Interstate 84.

That contract, which Baker County Commissioners extended several times in 2020 and earlier this year, expired Aug. 31.

The Chamber has continued to operate the visitors center since the contract expired, executive director Shelly Cutler said.

County commissioners are tentatively set to meet Oct. 14 and choose between the two proposals. The new contract would run through Jan. 1, 2024. Money for the contract comes from the tax that guests pay at motels, bed and breakfasts, vacation rental homes and other lodging businesses.

Baker County officials declined to give copies of the two proposals to the Baker City Herald.

In an email, county counsel Kim Mosier wrote that the county, in the Request for Proposals (RFP) that

county commissioners approved Sept. 8, "made assurances to potential proposers that their responses would be kept confidential until they are discussed in a public meeting by the (Transient Lodging Tax) Committee and a recommendation is sent to the Board of Commissioners."

"The intent of this provision is to allow the TLT Committee to ask questions, seek clarification and potentially negotiate with each proposer, without disclosing the contents of the proposal to the competing proposers," Mosier wrote.

The lodging tax committee is scheduled to meet Oct. 7 to review the two proposals. The committee will then make a recommendation to the county commissioners, who have the final say in awarding the contract.

See, **Contract** / Page A5

COVID cases drop

■ But fewer people are being tested

By JAYSON JACOBY

jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

Oregon health officials said Tuesday, Sept. 28 that the summer surge in COVID-19 cases appears to have peaked in the state, and Baker County's numbers show a similar trend.

But the drop in the county's new cases might reflect, in part, a decrease in the number of residents being tested.

After reporting a weekly record of 139 new cases from Sept. 12-18, the county's total dipped to 86 cases from Sept. 19-25, a 38.2% decline.

The number of COVID-19 tests in the county went down by 34.1% for the same period, from 580 tests the week of Sept. 12-18, to 382 tests from Sept. 19-25.

The county's test positivity rate had a much smaller drop, from 23.8% from Sept. 12-18, to 22.2% the following week. The latter figure was the third-highest positivity rate among Oregon's 36 counties for that week, behind Lake County (25.9%) and Harney County (25.0%).

The statewide test positivity rate for Sept. 19-25 was 8.9%.

Five county residents have died during September after testing positive, the most in any month. The county's death toll during the pandemic is 24.

September has also set a record for total cases.

Through Sept. 28, the monthly total was 443. The previous record was set in August of this year, with 300 cases. September's total exceeded that figure after 17 days.

See, **COVID** / Page A3

City Council wants resolution opposing vaccine mandate

By SAMANTHA O'CONNOR

soconnor@bakercityherald.com

The Baker City Council will seek to express opposition to Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's vaccine and mask mandates through a resolution rather than a lawsuit, at least for now.

The Council voted unanimously on Tuesday, Sept. 28 to instruct City Manager Jon Cannon to draft a resolution similar to what some other cities and counties have approved regarding the mandates.

Councilors have recently heard, through conference calls, from two attorneys, Kevin Mannix and Tyler Smith, about the legal situation.

Mayor Kerry McQuisten said she took away from those sessions that there are 50 to 100 other lawsuits already in the works that would

See, **Council** / Page A3



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SATURDAY — NEW CHILD CARE CENTER SET TO OPEN IN BAKER CITY