CONTRACT

Continued from A1

In denying the Herald's request for copies of the two proposals, Mosier cited a section of Oregon's Public Records Law that allows public agencies (but does not require) to withhold records when, according to the law, the "information submitted to a public body in confidence and not otherwise required by law to be submitted, where such information should reasonably be considered confidential, the public body has obliged itself in good faith not to disclose the information, and when the public interest would suffer by the disclosure."

Mosier wrote in her email to the Herald that "The public interest would suffer by disclosing the proposals prior to the public meeting. Allowing the competing proposers to see the contents of the proposals gives them the opportunity to modify their responses to questions, clarifications and negotiations in a way that could undermine the public benefit of the competitive process."

However, both Cutler and Peter Johnson, general manager of Anthony Lakes Outdoor Recreation Association, supplied copies of their proposals to the Herald.

Those two organizations were also the only to submit proposals at the end of 2019.

In early 2020 both the lodging tax committee and the Baker County Economic Development Committee, after reviewing the proposals, recommended commissioners award the contract to Anthony Lakes.

But commissioners decided in February to postpone a decision, and the process was delayed several times subsequently.

The proposed location for the visitors center is the same in the current proposals as in the 2019 versions.

The Chamber would keep the center in its current location at 490 Campbell St.

"The Baker County Visitor Center's location is uniquely optimal for this particular city and county," the Chamber's proposal states. "While some destinations have chosen to locate their visitor centers next to or within a major attraction or in a downtown location, the Baker County Visitor Center has long been situated at the busiest entrance to Baker City, in a highly visible spot beside the freeway exit onto Campbell Street."

Anthony Lakes proposes to operate a visitors center at 1830 Main St., beside its bike, hiking and outdoor shop, The Trailhead, on the east side of Main Street between Valley and Court avenues.

"1830 Main Street could not be more ideal for a Visitor Center," Anthony Lakes' proposal states. "Located in the heart of downtown historic Baker City, this location brings visitors to beautiful downtown Baker City and proximate small businesses. In addition, the amount of already existing foot traffic of visitors in the downtown area will provide for substantially higher visitation rates to the physical Visitor Center than have been seen or documented in the past."

Parking, particularly for RVs and trailers, is an issue that one lodging tax committee member raised in early 2020 regarding Anthony Lakes' proposal.

The concern was that the downtown location lacked parking, especially for larger vehicles.

In its new proposal, Anthony Lakes notes that over a two-month period earlier this year, workers counted "over 43 RVs, trailers, and/or other large vehicles parking at or within a two-block radius of the proposed Visitor Center location" and that "there are currently 55 parking spaces, 40 of these allow for oversize vehicles," within a one-block radius of the proposed visitors center.

The proposal also notes that Baker City is looking to pave a parking area it owns just east of Resort Street, near Central Park.

The Chamber's proposal also references parking, nothing that the Campbell Street location has "ample parking for personal vehicles, RVs and motor coaches..."

The Anthony Lakes proposal counters that the Chamber doesn't own the parking lot adjacent to the current visitors center.

Cutler said there has never been a conflict between parking for guests at the Sunridge Inn, on the north side of the parking lot, and parking used by people coming to the visitors center.

The Chamber proposes an operating schedule from May 1 through Oct. 31 or Monday through Saturday from 8:30~a.m. to 5:30~p.m., and Sundays from 8:30~a.m. to 2:30~p.m. From Nov. 1 through April 30, the schedule would be Monday through Friday from 8:30~a.m. to 4:30~p.m.

Anthony Lakes proposes a schedule from May through September, of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day, and from Oct. 1 through April 30 a minimum of five days a week, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Cost

Anthony Lakes proposes an annual budget of \$69,574 if it is required to create a new website, or \$59,574 if it can use the current Travel Baker County website.

The Chamber's proposed annual budget is \$87,575. Cutler said that includes \$7,600 in payroll expenses that in the previous contract the Chamber paid alone.

CRISIS

Continued from A1

He said he carried about 70 children younger than four down the portable stairs that were used for deplaning — not being an airport, there were none of the movable tunnels that commercial airline passengers are accustomed to navigating.

Although COVID-19 was not yet a major story in the U.S., the citizens who were returning from Wuhan understood the risk, Strommer said.

"We didn't know much about the virus in those first few days," he said. "They were scared."

But they were also ecstatic to be back in the U.S.

"Many people when they deplaned kissed the tarmac," Strommer said.

Later in February 2020, Strommer was deployed to Dobbins Air Force Base in Georgia. That base and three others were the temporary homes for hundreds of passengers from cruise ships that had been quarantined when they reached American docks.

Strommer said about 400 of the 1,500 former passengers at Dobbins during his stint there became sick, and eight died.

He returned to Oregon on March 30. In the meantime Amy had returned to their home near Baker City.

"We were moving back anyway, and we felt like she was safer here," Strommer said.

Baker County's first confirmed case was reported on May 6, 2020.

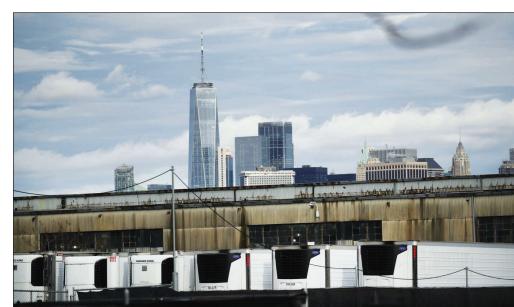
One day after returning, March 31, 2020, Strommer's team was sent to New York City, and specifically Manhattan.

The Big Apple was the unfortunate epicenter of the pandemic in those early weeks, with comparatively high death rates.

A week after Strommer arrived, on April 7, 2020, a total of 815 New York City residents died from the virus, the

city's highest one-day total. For the week of April 5-11, the city's death toll was 5,319. Another 10,000 or so were

hospitalized.



Deon Strommer/Contributed Phot

The Manhattan skyline, including One WorldTrade Center at left, with a row of refrigerated trailers used to store the bodies of COVID-19 victims in NewYork City during the spring of 2020.

"They were overwhelmed" Strommer said of the city's mortuary services.

And Strommer, who was designated as morgue operations manager for his group, felt the same.

"I was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers," he said. "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."

Although most of the victims were 65 or older, Strommer said he also saw children, as young as 3 and 6, die from COVID-19.

As officials struggled just to find places to keep bodies, Strommer saw things that were beyond his experience, including after natural disasters.

He saw body bags stacked atop one another because there had been no time to build shelves.

He saw arms and legs dangling from body bags.

"It was amazing how quickly the system became overwhelmed," Strommer said. "Dignity for decedents goes out the door."

New York officials instituted a "super catastrophic fatality management plan" — a term Strommer said he had never heard.

Officials buried hundreds of people — not all of them COVID victims — in mass graves on Hart Island, just off the coast of the Bronx.

Strommer said some funeral homes simply stopped answering their phones because they had no capacity.



Deon Strommer/Contributed Photo

Bodies of COVID-19 victims in a makeshift morgue in New York City during the spring of 2020.

He praises the National Guard soldiers he worked with who were charged with removing bodies from homes and from apartment buildings, some of the latter lacking elevators despite being 10 or more stories tall.

Strommer said the soldiers actually rigged up pulley systems to lower body bags from buildings.

"Moving bodies is physical work," he said. "I give all the credit to these young men and women, who had never seen anything like this."

Coping with traumatic scenes

During the worst days of the pandemic, Strommer said he depended heavily on frequent phone conversations with his wife.

He said he can cope with emotionally trying circumstances only by talking about his feelings.

"Those became very important conversations at night, just to allow me to talk about it," he said. "Amy's always been good at that."

The worst phase of the crisis had ended before Strommer left New York City on June 6, 2020, and returned to Baker City.

Although he stayed busy with household chores — building fences, chopping fire-wood — he struggled to cope eployed to NewYork with the things he had seen.

Strommer observed au-

topsies of COVID-19 victims. He was struck by how the disease ravaged lungs in particular. "It took me several weeks,

if not months, to get over it," he said. But Strommer's memories

aren't all horrific.

He recalls the couple from Brooklyn whom he met at Dobbins Air Force Base, where they were quarantined after disembarking from a cruise ship.

When the couple learned later in the spring of 2020 that Strommer was working in New York City, they insisted on bringing him boxes of food and pre-prepared meals.

"You took care of us, and we want to take care of you," the couple told him.

Strommer hasn't been dispatched to any COVID-related emergencies since returning from New York City in June 2020.

He did work in Western Oregon during the historic fires in September 2020.

And although he will never forget the terrible things he saw in America's biggest city, he will also continue to cherish the relationships he made, and the selflessness he saw in so many people.

"Most of all I would say it

is an honor to serve people in this unique way during the worst of times in their lives," he said.

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Deon Strommer just before he deployed to New York

City in late March 2020.

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