

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

City should seek quiet zone

There is no legitimate reason for Baker City, with the aid of a citizens group that has been working on the project for about two years, not to continue pursuing a railroad quiet zone designation.

Yet three members of the City Council — Mayor Kerry McQuisten, Joanna Dixon and Johnny Waggoner Sr. — voted against a motion to do just that on Tuesday evening, Oct. 12.

The motion failed by a 3-3 vote. Councilors Jason Spriet, Heather Sells and Shane Alderson voted in favor of the motion.

The conflict is over whether the city should continue the process of seeking a quiet zone through the Federal Railroad Administration, or whether the city should put the matter on the ballot in May 2022.

McQuisten, in a recent post on her Facebook page, wrote “I truly don’t see any way to decide this controversial issue other than a ballot vote.” McQuisten also wrote: “Going by past elections, straw polls, and what I hear out in public, my general perception is that roughly 1500 people are in favor of the quiet zone and roughly 8500 people are not.”

That’s hardly a credible public survey.

Moreover, the level of opposition to a quiet zone that McQuisten cites seems improbably high were city residents to understand how different the current proposal is from what

happened before.

The past election McQuisten cited took place almost 20 years ago, in May 2002. In that election city voters soundly rejected a proposal for the city to seek a quiet zone, with 82% opposed and 18% in favor.

But there’s a key difference between then and now. The 2002 measure noted that the city would have to build dividers at railroad crossings to prevent vehicles from reaching the tracks when a train is passing, at an estimated cost of \$40,000 to \$60,000.

In other words, voters in 2002 were not asked whether they supported a quiet zone, per se, but whether they were willing to devote city dollars to the project.

Money, as the saying goes, changes everything.

The situation now is different.

The citizens group promoting the quiet zone has vowed that it will raise the money needed to build dividers or make other changes to railroad crossings that make them safer. Those changes are required for a quiet zone designation, so it can’t happen unless the group actually raises the money.

When the quiet zone issue involved the possible spending of public money that hadn’t already been budgeted, it was reasonable for the city to take the matter to voters, as happened in 2002.

But with no city money on the table, it’s no longer necessary to do so, any more than it would be if the city, for instance, were to install a new stop sign or build a wheelchair cut in a curb.

So long as there is no cost to taxpayers, there is no downside to the city qualifying for a quiet zone.

With the construction of dividers, it would be much more difficult, if not physically impossible, for a driver to get to the tracks when a train is passing and the crossing arms are down. An October 2017 report from the Government Accountability Office — the official auditor of federal programs — concluded that analyses in 2011 and 2013 by the Federal Railroad Administration “showed that there was generally no statistically significant difference in the number of accidents that occurred before and after quiet zones were established.” The FRA studied 359 quiet zones in 2011, and 203 more in 2013.

In any case, train engineers can still sound their horns in a quiet zone at their discretion — if a person is walking on or near the tracks, for instance.

Eliminating most train horns would improve the quality of life — a benefit our neighbors in La Grande, which earned quiet zone designation at the end of 2019, and Pendleton, which has had a quiet zone since the 1970s, already enjoy.

Regardless of whether the blaring horns bother you a lot or a little or even not at all, the noise is particularly obnoxious at South Baker Intermediate School, which is very near the tracks.

Given that the quiet zone can be accomplished at no expense to taxpayers, and without sacrificing safety, the only plausible reason to oppose the designation is on the decidedly subjective grounds of ambience — that the echoing horns, perhaps by invoking nostalgia, add more to the city than they take away.

It’s easy to understand why a lot of city voters in 2002 didn’t think the city should spend money to silence most train horns. Many no doubt feel the same now.

But it’s much more difficult to believe that a significant number of residents are so enamored of that particular noise that they would feel bereft in the comparative tranquility of its absence.

Besides which, the 20 or so trains that roll through town daily wouldn’t become silent. Their steel wheels would still squeak and clatter, sounds evocative of the railroad and its history here dating to 1884, but also much gentler sounds, ones less likely to interrupt a teacher in the classroom or awaken someone in the dark.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City
Herald editor

Your views

Local businesses are vital to Baker City, County

Not only are small local businesses the backbone of the American economy, a successful small business provides many unsung services. I learned this lesson in Homer, Alaska, where I worked as a pianist for AJ’s Old Town Steak House. AJ’s employed me all summer, and then to my surprise continued the job through the winter when tourism and restaurant receipts went down. AJ’s employed me for six years (until COVID). Such loyalty to employees helps keep the local economy prosperous; for AJ’s the bottom line is more than money. Their bottom line includes loyal and grateful employees, maintaining a place of free speech and assembly for people to gather, dine and celebrate, and preventing poverty in the local economy by providing steady jobs.

Here in Baker City many small local businesses similarly provide unsung services, for example: Elkhorn Custom Meats & Deli. I consider this business, at 2970 H Street, to be a treasure of our local economy. Elkhorn Custom Meats processes local grass-fed beef (the most healthy beef there is) and pork in a spotless, odorless facility. Elkhorn is an old-fashioned butcher shop. They know the names of their customers, appreciate everyone who comes through their door, and go out of their way to make sure every customer is satisfied. Their prices are reasonable. They take food stamps. Their smoked meats are excellent. They employ and train local people — and are always looking for honest hardworking people to become part of their family business. Our family thrives on their healthy beef. Your trade will help keep this business open and provide an important market for local ranchers.

I urge the people of Baker County to visit and support this business and other like-minded small local businesses in Baker City. Such local businesses help make Baker County and Baker City a great place to live.

Lindianne Sarno
Baker City

Computer spurs nostalgia for the mixed tape

I was muttering curses at my computer the other evening and it occurred to me that life was slower, but rather less annoying, when the word “megabyte” meant as much to me as the Cyrillic alphabet.

The computer, obstinate as only a machine (or a teenager) can be, repulsed my efforts to dislodge whatever was clogging its clever little circuits.

Among the myriad ways in which digital devices differ from analog, perhaps the most frustrating, it seems to me, is that the latter generally fail to respond to the sort of forcible repair techniques that hamfisted people (me, for instance) resort to when more sophisticated tactics fail.

A carburetor, for instance, is a crude way to introduce the fuel-air mixture to an internal combustion engine, at least compared with modern fuel injection systems, which have as much computing power as an Apollo capsule.

But sometimes you can wrestle a carburetor into submission simply by giving it a hearty whack with a hammer in just the right spot.

Start thumping around with a blunt instrument under the hood of a new car, by contrast, and you’re apt to end up with a hefty repair bill.

And perhaps a hand wound from a shard of plastic, which is the predominant material visible under most hoods these days, the greasy bits being mostly concealed.

The problem that prompted my softly uttered profanity involved not cars but music.

These two things go together

nicely, of course.

Who among us hasn’t had a long and otherwise boring road trip suddenly enlivened by a particular song blaring from the speakers?

(We all have our favorites, of course. Mine are too numerous to list here, but a couple that never fail to rouse me from a freeway-induced stupor are U2’s “Where The Streets Have No Name” and Eddie Rabbitt’s “I Love A Rainy Night.”)

Indeed, the portability of music is to me one of its greater attributes.

For more than half a century, since the advent of the affordable, handheld transistor radio, we’ve been able to bring music pretty much wherever we go.

But not whatever music you wanted to hear.

With a radio you’re limited, of course, to the stations the antenna can pull in, and further, by whatever songs those stations choose to play.

Turntables put you in control, but they’re hard to balance when you’re walking — and downright dangerous to try to bring along on a bicycle, what with the extension cords — so it was hardly feasible to bring along your personal collection once you left home.

Until the cassette tape arrived in the 1970s.

This milestone, and the subsequent debut of Sony’s Walkman and its many imitators, marked a true milestone.

Now people could not only buy their favorite albums in a truly portable format, they could use blank tapes to create their own unique concerts.

Thus was born the mix tape, the



JAYSON JACOBY

analog version of what we know today as a playlist.

This flexibility made it possible to compile eclectic collections of songs that not even the wizards at K-Tel would deign to put together.

Have an affinity for Iron Maiden as well as The Carpenters?

No problem.

You can follow Bruce Dickinson’s feral yowling on “The Number of the Beast” with Karen Carpenter’s syrupy smooth tones on “Superstar.”

Or inject a dollop of Air Supply between helpings of The Ramones and The Clash.

The possibilities, as the saying goes, are truly endless.

But the digital wave has inundated music just as surely as it did internal combustion, and today the cassette tape is as dated as shag carpet.

We measure music in megabytes rather than in minutes.

For sheer convenience, this progress is miraculous.

Most cassette tapes had the capacity to store 60 or 90 minutes of music. A digital music player the size of a pack of matches can hold several thousand songs.

But even those players have been supplanted, to a considerable degree, by the immense capabilities of the smartphone.

Which brings me back around to my tussle with a computer.

I was trying, and in the main

failing, to transfer the thousand songs or so stored on a player to my phone.

This task, as with so much else these days, is accomplished by manipulating a mouse and dragging various folders across a virtual desktop.

In theory.

What struck me, as I clicked and dragged and cursed — mostly the latter — is how impersonal the procedure is, how utterly lacking in tactile sensation compared with the way I used to make tapes for remote listening.

When I was a teenager in the 1980s, the apex of the cassette tape’s reign before it gave way to the compact disc in the ‘90s, I recorded music onto those cunning little plastic cases from multiple sources — my dad’s LPs, other cassettes, even the radio.

(For the latter, this mostly involved waiting for the awesome block party weekends on KGON, the great classic rock station at 92.3 on the FM dial in Portland. There was no easier, or cheaper, way to amass a collection of Zeppelin and Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd classics than to wait for rock blocks with three straight songs from the same artist.)

The recording process was laborious but I don’t recall, even though impatience tends to be a hallmark of the teenage personality, that it ever felt like toil.

I would get annoyed occasionally when I missed a cue, as it were. I mainly used my boombox — with detachable speakers, naturally — to record from radio to cassette, and you had to simultaneously

deploy both the “play” and “record” keys. These were not, in the sort of egregious ergonomic gaffe that makes you wonder what the designers were thinking about, next to each other.

This process was the antithesis of the immediate gratification we’re accustomed to today.

There was no way to speed the recording — “Stairway to Heaven,” which runs a tad over eight minutes, had to play in its full and complete glory to transfer onto the cassette.

I got frustrated with my computer because, whenever I tried to move more than 100 songs in a single swipe from player to phone, the microprocessors balked.

But the computer would transfer 75 songs or so without a glitch, and do the job — I kept track — in less than 90 seconds.

For comparison, that’s enough music to fill about three 90-minute cassette tapes. In the distant, pre-digital days, moving that many songs would have been the work of about five hours.

And that’s presuming I didn’t have to ride my bike to Radio Shack to buy another tape.

I preferred TDK even though Memorex had cooler commercials. And also that iconic poster of the guy sitting in a chair in front of stereo speakers, his hair and necktie blown back as though the necktie — thanks to the crystalline quality of music on a Memorex tape — was so powerful that it created its own artificial gusts.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.