

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Too many secrets

It's a perverse irony that while technology lavishes society with more information than has ever been available, government officials use specious reasons to deprive the public of data.

A recent example is the number of employees in the Baker City Fire Department who have been vaccinated against COVID-19, and how many have medical or religious exceptions.

The Herald posed that question to City Manager Jon Cannon on Monday, Oct. 18, the deadline for health care workers, including city firefighters, who also operate the city's ambulances, to comply with Gov. Kate Brown's vaccination mandate.

Cannon responded that the city has vaccination cards, or exception forms, for each of the department's 16 full-time employees, so the mandate has not resulted in any staffing shortage.

That's a good thing, obviously.

But when the Herald asked Cannon how many of the employees are vaccinated, and how many received exceptions, he declined, citing, in part, a federal law that protects individuals' medical records.

"I'm hesitant to give numbers because there are HIPPA laws and personnel laws and if I give an exact ratio, then it starts to give information on what arguably should be private," Cannon said.

But we're talking about numbers, not names.

If the public knew, hypothetically, that 10 fire department employees were vaccinated and six had exceptions, that information would in no way identify, or even imply, which workers were part of which group.

They're all still working, after all.

The Herald posed the same question to Mark Witty, superintendent of the Baker 5J School District. Witty told us that 208 of the district's 263 employees are vaccinated, and that 55 have received exceptions.

The Oregon Department of Corrections supplied similar statistics.

For the past several months, anyone with internet access has had access to updates each weekday on the vaccination rate for each of the Oregon's 36 counties, including the rate for several age groups. One of those groups is quite specific, ages 18 and 19. In Baker County there are an estimated 269 residents who are either 18 or 19, and as of Monday, Oct. 18, 123 of those teenagers were vaccinated, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

The state agency publishes these statistics not only because the public deserves to know about the pandemic, but because numerical measures in no way identify individuals.

Another example of the government's unfortunate propensity for suppressing factual information is House Bill 3273, which the Oregon Legislature passed this spring and Brown signed into law. House Bill 3273 significantly limits the publication of photos of criminal suspects when they're booked into a jail. The Baker County Sheriff's Office recently ceased posting booking photos of inmates at the county jail, citing the new law.

Among the arguments proffered by proponents is that booking photos, which are taken before the suspect has been convicted, can unfairly stigmatize suspects, making it harder for them to get jobs in the future even if they end up being acquitted or the charges are dropped. The implication seems to be that publishing booking photos diminishes the presumption of innocence on which our justice system is based.

But this argument doesn't hold up. The law, after all, applies only to photos. Other information, including the name of the person arrested and the charges, are still publicly available, as they should be. The law also allows agencies to release booking photos after the person is convicted. This is clearly inconsistent. It's nonsensical to argue that publishing a suspect's name and list of charges prior to conviction is fine, but including a photograph of the suspect is not.

We don't allow defendants to go to trial with bags over their heads, yet we trust juries to decide whether the prosecution has proved the person's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. If jurors are allowed to see a defendant's face prior to conviction, so should the public.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

City councilors should have endorsed quiet zone plan

Last week's city council meeting was a bizarre experience. Quiet zone committee members did an excellent job detailing the many health, safety, and economic benefits of establishing a train horn quiet zone. Their proposal has so many pluses with absolutely no negative impact for anyone in the city. The committee even plans to raise the funds to construct the necessary railroad crossing mitigation elements. With the written support of over 50 businesses and a petition signed by more than 400 community members the proposal seemed destined for unanimous approval.

The bizarre thing was that the mayor and two council members voted against the quiet zone. They expressed no objection to any part of the proposal. They never said that it would be bad for anyone. Their sole objection was that they believe that the majority of people in Baker City are against the quiet zone. This stance is both ridiculous and hypocritical.

The city council routinely approves projects that the majority might not support. We would be in a sorry mess if they didn't. Need, health, and safety should outweigh popularity. And as several council members pointed out, need usually is enough to get a project passed. McQuisten, Dixon, and Waggoner showed a lack of integrity by requesting a majority vote on a ballot measure for the quiet zone project, but not for any other city project.

McQuisten and Dixon went deeper into the ridiculous by suggesting that a 20-year old vote and a Facebook straw poll are valid indicators of anything at all.

These voters were not given a clear explanation of what a quiet zone is and how it will be funded before being asked to respond yea or nay.

Of course the majority argument isn't even relevant. Not everyone is equally affected by the train horns. To say that a person living close to the tracks should suffer just because others don't want to change anything is pure selfishness. To suggest that school children should continue to be blasted by horns throughout the day when there is a fairly easy solution shows an inconceivable level of disregard for the well-being of others.

I can't say what is in the hearts of the mayor and council members Dixon and Waggoner but they came off as mean-spirited. Council members are elected to make thoughtful, sometimes difficult, decisions that help make Baker City a healthier, safer, and more prosperous community. These councilors did a great disservice to the people they were elected to represent and thwarted a valuable project when they voted against the quiet zone.

Cynthia Roberts
Baker City

Train whistles help keep children, others safe

I am responding to those who wish to "quiet the train horns" (whistles). When my husband and I bought our home, we chose a neighborhood close enough to the train tracks to enjoy their sound in the evenings. This town and its residents have survived with the train whistles for 147 years. We don't need to quiet them now.

Yes, the whistles may be loud, but don't most of us block them out unless we are driving? If they waken us at night, my husband and I find them comforting and we just go back to sleep.

You keep bringing up "safety for the children." How would quieting the train horns be safer for the children of Baker City? It sounds as if you are using fear for children's safety in order to manipulate us to get your way. The train horns alert our children (and others) to stay away from the track because a train is passing.

What's wrong with letting the residents of Baker City vote on the issue? Let us speak for ourselves.

The train whistles are part of the town's history. Let's not allow a vocal group with money to destroy this charming feature of our town.

If you have a problem with the train whistles, get over it. Or relocate to another city without this feature. Not everything is about you.

Lori Shirley
Baker City

Railroad quiet zone should be a simple, easy choice

Did you hear about the 400 citizens and 51 businesses? They presented their city council with an "all expenses paid" health and safety upgrade to their city. At "no cost to the city" they would protect children, seniors, everyone from hearing loss. They'd "pay" to fix a dysfunctional interrupted education for all students. They would "with no city dollars" make every railroad crossing safer than they'd ever been. They'd also pay (no taxpayer money) to make it easier for people to sleep at night ... a critical health requirement. They want local tourism and businesses to thrive. A simple "quiet zone," something that hundreds of cities have embraced with no downside, only benefits. Many towns paid for this upgrade with taxpayer dollars, and would do it again, for the proven increase in health, safety, business interest, tourism and livability.

Three logical city councilors saw it for what it was, a no brainer! An offer to improve their city, no cost to the city! Who would say no to that? Well, the mayor, her yes woman and a silent observer, whose hand goes up automatically when the other two raise theirs, decided to be the only three in the universe that could say no! No to "free" protection of their fellow citizens and small children, no to 51 of their city's

most prolific businesses, no to the safest railroad crossings you could possibly have, no to all the proven health, safety, tourism benefits ... and no to, in my humble opinion, the most mind blowing of all ... quiet?

Watching the faces of these three excuses for community leaders, you could see they were not happy people. It was a total politicization of a simple, no drawbacks, slam dunk decision. It was nothing more than an angry bitter lashing out by the politically disgruntled. That these people represent anyone, in any kind of authoritarian position, is a crime. Historically no surprise ... try to name something positive any of these three have done to improve your city?

Nothing but accolades should befall the three councilors that saw this for what it was ... a simple yes.

Mike Meyer
Baker City

City missing an opportunity with railroad quiet zone

I was in attendance at the City Council meeting where they discussed and voted on the quiet zone proposal. I have never seen such a biased meeting. Mayor McQuisten and her two puppets, or those on her side, had already made up their minds on their votes before listening to the presentation made by the Baker City Quiet Zone representative. Also there to speak and answer questions were the Mayor and the Public Works Director of La Grande, who have already implemented a quiet zone there. There were between 40 and 50 people there to show support for the quiet zone, 10 of whom also spoke. Even though the Mayor quoted that 85% of the people (in Baker City) were against it, not one was present at the meeting. This meeting was advertised on the front page of the newspaper Tuesday stating the agenda, yet no opposition was present. I would like to personally thank the three councilors at the meeting that listened and asked questions with an open mind. As for the other three, shame on you! This truly is about the safety of our town, pure and simple.

As for having a seventh member on the Council, this won't happen until Mayor McQuisten finds another puppet. Randy Daugherty has been a councilman and is willing to give more time to the city he grew up in. He will fill the vacancy and sit through a presentation, do a little research and vote either for or against without having to lobby for votes.

Thanks to all of the people who attended the meeting and are behind this quiet zone movement. Also, thanks to Jayson Jacoby for his excellent editorial. As for Mayor McQuisten and those on her side, no city money sounds like a win-win to me. "Never look a gift horse in the mouth!"

Larry Smith
Baker City

Letters to the editor

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the

accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.

- Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- The writer must sign the letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be

published.

- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.

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