



S. John Collins/Baker City Herald, File

Cattle in Baker Valley.

Cattle

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“The more processing you have the more opportunities we have for different markets for the cow-calf producer,” he said. “That gives producers more options and it gives consumers more options.”

Now, only about 5% of the beef cattle born in Oregon are actually butchered here, McElligott said.

Both he and Martin pointed out that building a processing plant is no small undertaking.

“To say it’s complex is an understatement for sure,” Martin said.

Complying with federal food safety rules and other regulations is neither simple nor inexpensive, and Martin said he hopes the Biden administration’s \$1 billion campaign will also include resources to help potential entrepreneurs negotiate the regulatory labyrinth.

Among other things, he advocates for the federal government to eliminate or streamline regulations that deter people from pursuing regional or local processing plants, and to assign a coordinator to work with prospective owners to help them with all aspects of the endeavor, including financing. McElligott said a significant obstacle in the industry for ranchers who want to sell beef directly to local customers is that packaged products must be inspected by someone certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

He said he can sell a half of beef “on the hoof” to a neighbor, but not a single pound of packaged hamburger unless it’s been inspected.

McElligott said he’s encouraged that a draft plan for spending the \$1 billion includes \$100 million to pay overtime to USDA-certified inspectors, which could expand independent processing markets.

Truth in beef labeling

Mark Bennett, a Baker County commissioner who also owns a cattle ranch in the southern part of the county near Unity, agrees with Martin and McElligott that the Biden administration’s announcement is promising.

“I think it’s a worthy undertaking,” Bennett said. “Any time you have concentration it limits competition and the opportunity for innovation. This whole discussion is really crucial.”



McElligott



Martin



Bennett

Bennett said one of the most common topics that come up in his conversations with other ranchers is mandatory country of origin labeling.

Although some meat sold in the U.S., including chicken, is required to be labeled to show where the animal was raised, that’s not the case with beef.

Beef can be labeled as a product of the U.S. even if the cattle were raised in another country but were butchered in the U.S.

(Retailers can also include details about where animals were born and raised; they’re just not required to do so.)

Ranchers and industry groups have been pushing for beef, which has not been subject to mandatory country of origin labeling since 2016, to be reinserted into the labeling law along with chicken and other meats.

“American consumers want to know where their beef comes from,” Bennett said.

There has been some interest in Congress in reinstating mandatory labeling for beef. It ended after officials from Mexico and Canada vowed to impose tariffs on American beef if the mandatory labeling continued.

A group of U.S. senators introduced legislation in September 2021 calling for the U.S. Trade Representative and U.S. Department of Agriculture to come up with a plan to improve beef labeling transparency.

McElligott said country of origin labeling “really needs to be addressed.”

He pointed out that Americans’ demand for beef has continued to grow even with rising retail prices.

He considers this evidence that people recognize the value of beef.

“If you look at everything beef gives you from a nutritional standpoint, it’s still an economical part of your plate,” McElligott said.

COVID

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That’s the highest daily average since September, which set a record with 15.5 cases per day (465 for the month).

January’s count through 11 days exceeds the monthly totals for December (106) and November (143) and is close to October’s total of 168.

The percentage of tests in the county that are positive rose to 20.6% for the most recent week measured, Jan. 2-8. The positivity rate for the previous three weeks ranged from 10.1% to 10.5%.

Baker County’s rate for Jan. 2-8 was slightly below the Oregon average, at 21.6%.

Baker County’s test positivity rate was also below that of most other counties in the region.

Umatilla County had a rate of 26.9%, Union County 21.6%, Wallowa County 22.1%, Malheur County 23.8%, Morrow County 37.3% and Grant County 11.8%.

The Oregon Health Authority on Jan. 11 reported Baker County’s 38th COVID-19-related death. A 65-year-old woman who tested positive on Sept. 3 died Dec. 31 at her residence. The presence of underlying conditions is being confirmed, according to OHA.

As case counts are rising, scientists studying the trends see evidence that omicron, because it’s so easily spread, likely will have a much shorter surge than previous, less infectious variants.

“It’s going to come down as fast as it went up,” Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle, told The Associated Press this week.

The University of Washington’s model projects that the number of daily reported cases in the U.S. will crest at 1.2 million by Jan. 19 and will then fall sharply “simply because everybody

“We are getting through what we hope is a quick surge.”

— Priscilla Lynn, Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Baker City

who could be infected will be infected,” according to Mokdad.

In fact, he said, by the university’s complex calculations, the true number of new daily infections in the U.S. — an estimate that includes people who were never tested — has already peaked, hitting 6 million on Jan. 6.

In South Africa, where omicron was identified, and in Britain, cases have declined significantly after the same major increase that has happened in the U.S. the past couple weeks.

The Associated Press reported that in Britain, new COVID-19 cases dropped to about 140,000 a day in the past week, after skyrocketing to more than 200,000 a day earlier this month, according to government data.

Numbers from the U.K.’s National Health Service this week show coronavirus hospital admissions for adults have begun to fall, with infections dropping in all age groups.

Baker schools

Although absentee rates among students have been well above average this week, schools have continued to operate despite staffing shortages in some areas, Superintendent Mark Witty said Wednesday afternoon, Jan. 12.

“It’s certainly not business as usual,” he said.

The absentee rates for Jan. 12:

- Baker Middle School, South Baker Intermediate and Keating Elementary: 21%
 - Baker High School: 19%
 - Brooklyn Primary: 13%
 - Haines: 12%
- Those are high percentages, Witty said, but he also sees the numbers as poten-

tially positive. They suggest that students and parents are heeding the district’s advice to stay home if they feel ill — regardless of whether the symptoms are consistent with COVID-19 or whether or not they have been tested.

“We just can’t have students and staff at school at this time if they’re sick,” Witty said.

As for staffing, the number of employees who were not working on Jan. 12:

- Brooklyn Primary: 6
- South Baker Intermediate: 4
- Baker Early Learning Center: 4
- Baker High School: 3
- Baker Middle School: 3
- Haines Elementary: 2

In classrooms, Witty said the district has been able to fill in for missing teachers with either substitutes or, in some cases, principals.

The bigger concern now, he said, is with the cafeteria staff.

If the district temporarily loses one or more additional staff in that area, Witty said it might be necessary to make changes, such as potentially doing all the cooking at one site.

No bus drivers were out as of Jan. 11, but Witty pointed out that the district has few substitute drivers, and filling vacancies on bus routes is difficult because drivers are required to have a commercial driver’s license and a certain level of training.

Witty said the omicron surge poses a challenge to the district, but the goal remains to keep students in classrooms.

He lauded district employees who have filled in as needed since classes resumed Jan. 3 following Christmas break.

“I’ve got to take my hat off to all the employees who

have stepped up and taken on different roles so we can stay with in-person school,” Witty said.

Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Baker City

Baker County’s large increase in test positivity rates for the virus — from 10.5% for the week Dec. 26-Jan. 1, to 20.6% the following week — has thus far not resulted in a similarly large increase in the number of COVID-19 patients at the Baker City hospital, said Priscilla Lynn, president and chief nursing officer for the Baker City hospital.

“We’re still managing care for the patients who are here,” Lynn said on Wednesday, Jan. 12.

As was the case during the delta surge in September, the Baker City hospital is transferring COVID-19 patients who need critical care to Saint Alphonsus hospitals in Boise or Nampa, Lynn said.

She said that so far during the current surge, the Baker City hospital has admitted fewer patients for COVID-19 treatment than during the September surge. She didn’t have specific numbers.

Lynn said there have been more people recently, however, coming to the hospital to be tested.

She said the hospital has had staff out due to COVID-19, but so far other employees have been able to cover those absences.

With a small hospital, however, losing even a few workers can potentially affect its ability to continue operating normally, she said.

Lynn said she’s optimistic that trends seen in other countries where omicron started spreading earlier — a relatively short, but significant, surge in infections but with generally milder symptoms on average — will repeat in Oregon and in Baker County.

“We are getting through what we hope is a quick surge,” she said.

County

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our own rights but also the rights of others as well.”

Although the work session was scheduled to continue the discussion, and to take public comments about, the proposed “constitutional county” resolution, several residents who spoke referenced both the mask and vaccine mandates, as well as how the pandemic has harmed the local economy and had effects on local residents, including students.

Curtis Martin of North Powder called the mandates “totally unconstitutional” and urged commissioners to approve the resolution.

Doing so, Martin said, would “make a bold state-

ment” that the county will “not be silent” and will not comply with the state mandates.

Martin disputed Nichols on the legality of Brown’s executive orders.

“We’re rolling over for illegality being exhibited at the highest levels of state government,” Martin said.

Harvey called the mandates “stupid” and said the county is not complying with all of them, including requiring audience members to wear masks.

“We don’t jump at everything she tells us to do,” Harvey said. “We won’t force anyone to get a shot that isn’t even a vaccination.”

Penny Rienks of Baker City said that if commissioners don’t approve the “constitutional county” ordinance, “obviously you guys are not

standing up for the constitution of Oregon or the constitution of the United States.”

Bennett said he has worked as a public servant for 50 years and that he takes his oath of office, to uphold both the state and federal constitutions, seriously.

But Bennett said the U.S. Supreme Court, not local elected officials, decides what is unconstitutional.

“I promise you that I will uphold the constitution and I will uphold my oath office,” Bennett said. “We can’t have all of us randomly interpreting the constitution. We’re a legislative body, we’re not a judicial body. If you feel that your constitutional rights are being violated, there is a path, and that’s the Supreme Court.”

Bennett pointed out that the High Court is expected

to rule soon on a legal challenge to the vaccine mandate that the Biden administration has issued for businesses with more than 100 employees, and for health care workers.

Carrie Matthews of Baker City, who supports the “constitutional county” resolution, told commissioners that by approving the resolution the county has the power to refuse to comply with mandates, including, in reference to masks and vaccines, “what to wear and what to ingest into our bodies.”

“What’s happening right now is not working,” Matthews said. “It’s going to get worse.”

See more from the Jan. 12 work session in the Saturday, Jan. 15 issue of the Baker City Herald.

Council

Continued from A1

Customers have waited for hours in line, and in some cases their prescriptions weren’t available when they made it to the counter.

Guyer said he has talked with Bi-Mart, Safeway and Rite Aid, but not with Baker City’s other pharmacy, in the Albertsons store.

He said he was asked to not quote anyone directly.

“I’m really familiar with the pharmacy issue because my wife actually works for a doctor locally that uses all pharmacies in the community,” Guyer said. “I’ve been hearing about the slowness that’s happening at fulfilling pharmaceuticals in the community.”

Guyer said he has experienced the same thing, waiting in line and finding his prescriptions had not been filled.

He said Bi-Mart closed the pharmacy in its Baker City store, and at other Oregon stores, due in part to the cost of prescription drugs.

“What happened with Bi-

Mart is that the cost of them buying the drugs themselves was outpacing what the market was willing to pay,” Guyer said.

Helen Loennig, the former longtime pharmacy manager at Bi-Mart, also cited, in an earlier interview, factors such as limited reimbursements from insurance companies, and Oregon’s corporate activity tax, which took effect in 2020.

“So, as a result of that, in a business setting and a business planning, look at your profit centers and if your profit center doesn’t work, you get rid of those areas,” Guyer said. “So, that’s what happened at Bi-Mart.”

The closure of the pharmacy there, which Loennig said had been processing about 1,500 prescriptions per week, caused a sudden influx of new customers at Baker City’s three remaining pharmacies, inside the Safeway, Albertsons and Rite Aid stores.

“They had this huge paper issue as well because, when you’re switching pharmacies,

you have to do all this new input into your system to engage new patients,” Guyer said. “So that was the initial problem.”

He said he learned that a pharmacist at Rite Aid had left the job, exacerbating the challenge created by the addition of dozens of new customers.

“They’re looking. These folks are looking for replacements for techs but the problem, again, resides in, OK, how do you entice people to come to Baker,” Guyer said. “That process takes time and that’s what we’re seeing.”

“They are doing as much as they possibly can in the timeframe that they have available to them,” Guyer said of the pharmacies.

Councilor Johnny Waggoner Sr. suggested people look into auto refills for prescriptions if their pharmacy offers that service.

“It makes it easier on them because they can see it coming up,” Waggoner said.

Councilor Joanna Dixon said it takes almost as long to become a pharmacist as it does to become a doctor.

“I have a cousin’s wife that just received her pharmaceutical license this past summer and she was at it for a long time,” Dixon said.

Councilors Heather Sells and Shane Alderson were absent from the Jan. 11 meeting.

In other business, councilors:

- unanimously appointed Doni Bruland to the Public Works Advisory Committee.
- heard from City Manager Jon Cannon, who discussed a concern raised during the previous meeting about how DoorDash, a restaurant meal delivery service, could harm the city’s existing licensed taxi business, Elkhorn Taxi, which also delivers meals.

Cannon said he reviewed state statutes and Baker Municipal Code with the city attorney, who indicated he does not believe either would regulate DoorDash or similar services.

“At this time, I don’t see where we would regulate DoorDash as they’re not a taxi cab, they’re not a limousine, it’s not a delivery guy,” Cannon said.

Dixon said she had seen the only places using DoorDash are McDonald’s and Subway.

“In the spirit of supporting local businesses, if you don’t want to go out and pick it up

yourself, you can call a taxi and they will deliver it. Pizza Hut, they’re charging five, six, seven dollars for delivery. Taxi, I think they said they are six dollars,” Dixon said.

VOTE! May 2022 Primary Election

CHRISTINA WITHAM
Baker County Commissioner
Position 2

I am a native of Baker City, wife of 33 years to Russ who is currently the ODOT Coordinator at the Baker Facility.
Our son is USMC Sergeant Elijah Witham. He resides in Caldwell, ID with his wife Paige.

I have owned businesses in Baker City for the past three decades, currently, Oregon Sign Company, LLC.

Because I am passionate about all things Baker County and all of the opportunities and history that it has to offer, I am running for the Commissioner’s seat that is being vacated by Mark Bennett in 2022. I ask for your vote.

I stand for the use of our natural resources, recreation and access to our public lands.

I support the hardworking ranchers, farmers, miners and timber workers who are vital to our economy.

Your Voice • Your County

I will stand for You, for Our American Flag, and for Our Constitution.

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