



OUTDOORS B1
Assessing the danger of avalanches



SPORTS A5
Baker wrestlers dominate Tigers, 49-18

Baker City Herald

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QUICK HITS

Good Day Wish To A Subscriber
A special good day to Herald subscriber Gary Smith of Baker City.

BRIEFING

Local students earn academic honors at Gonzaga

SPOKANE, Wash. — Three Baker City students earned academic honors during the fall 2021 semester at Gonzaga University. Jazmine Labonte was named to the president's list. To be eligible, students must earn a GPA of at least 3.85. Gabriel Gambleton and Jacob Jackson were named to the dean's list. To be eligible, students must earn a GPA between 3.5 and 3.84.

Public hearing set on North Baker transportation plan

The Baker City Planning Commission will have a public hearing on Feb. 16, to discuss proposed revisions to the city's comprehensive plan related to the Northern Baker Transportation Improvement Plan. That plan covers proposed changes to Cedar Street, Hughes Lane, 10th Street and Pocahontas Road. The public hearing is scheduled for 6 p.m. at City Hall, 1655 First St. Materials that will be used in the hearing will be available by Feb. 9 at the Courthouse, 1995 Third St., and copies can be emailed for free by emailing t Andrews@bakercity.org.

WEATHER

Today
35/15
Mostly sunny

Sunday
35/18
Mostly sunny

Monday
33/16
Mostly sunny

Full forecast on the back of the B section.

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



Sean Lee, chief of the Baker Rural Fire Protection District, is excited about the amount of space inside the District's new fire station on 23rd Street in the Elkhorn View Industrial Park in northwest Baker City.

Baker Rural Fire Protection District excited about its new fire station

BY LISA BRITTON
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Sean Lee stands in the cavernous space, and all he can think about is fire trucks. Specifically, how many trucks can fit in the new station for the Baker Rural Fire Protection District. "We could park two trucks side by side," says Lee, who is chief of both Baker Rural and the Baker City Fire Department. The bathrooms are a bonus, too. "We have four bathrooms," Lee says. None of the three current Baker Rural fire stations has plumbing, much less a bathroom. Thanks to a partnership with Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative, Baker Rural has purchased a building on 23rd Street in Baker City, in the Elkhorn View Industrial Park. The property formerly housed Cut-



"This is going to be a huge recruitment and retention benefit for us."
— Sean Lee, chief, Baker Rural Fire Protection District

ter's Edge, which manufactures fire rescue saws. The district's history Baker Rural Fire Protection District formed in 1983. It has three stations in Baker Valley: Lindley Lane, Pine Creek and Pocahontas Road. The district owns the station on Lindley Lane. The other two are on leased ground. The fire district covers a swath of Baker Valley from the foot of the Elkhorn Mountains to Sunnyslope Road east of Interstate 84. The district's volunteer firefighters also assist other rural and city fire departments through mutual aid agreements, as well as the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, and Oregon Department of Forestry for wildland blazes. In 2021, Baker Rural learned that their lease

building, which would suit their needs. "We started scrambling to find funding sources," Lee said. "We had a large anonymous donor, which helped greatly." The property, which includes three acres, the building and all the contents, was priced at \$690,000. OTEC's involvement Then word of the project got back to OTEC. As a nonprofit cooperative, OTEC qualifies for the USDA's Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant program (REDLG), which provides funding for rural projects through local utilities. "They're really for economic development in rural counties," said Heidi Dalton, OTEC's chief financial officer. In a whirlwind of paperwork, Dalton and Lea Hoover, OTEC's director of administration and strategic services, submitted the application. It offered two options: a loan and a grant. OTEC applied for both.

Resident calls on Nichols to apologize

Curtis Martin objects to Nichols' request for deputy's presence during Feb. 2 meeting

BY SAMANTHA O'CONNOR
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Curtis Martin of North Powder is asking for an apology from Baker County Commissioner Bruce Nichols after Nichols requested that a sheriff's deputy at the Courthouse be present during a contentious discussion between Martin and the two other commissioners at their Wednesday, Feb. 2, meeting. Martin chastised commissioners for failing to reject Gov. Kate Brown's executive orders requiring some employees to be vaccinated and mandating face masks in indoor public spaces, including the Courthouse.



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COVID cases continue trending downward

BY JAYSON JACOBY
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New COVID-19 cases in Baker County are on pace to drop for the second straight week, following five consecutive weekly increases. For the first five days of the Jan. 30-Feb. 5 measuring week, the county reported 96 cases. That compares with 134 cases in the first five days of the previous week, which ended up with a total of 165.

See, COVID/Page A3

County to pay fine for asbestos violation

Agreement reduces fine from \$7,400 to \$1,480

BY SAMANTHA O'CONNOR AND JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald
Baker County is not contesting a state finding that county workers failed to do an asbestos survey before demolishing a mobile home in Halfway in December 2020 and then disposed of material containing asbestos in an unlicensed pit. The county has agreed to a settlement with the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) that reduces the fine for the violation from \$7,400 to \$1,480. In exchange, the county has agreed to spend the difference — \$5,920 — on local projects, what DEQ calls "Supplemental Environmental Projects."

DEQ sometimes agrees to such projects so that money that would otherwise be paid in fines to the agency instead is used for work that benefits the local environment. The county will use the money to help clean up private property whose owners have violated or are suspected of violating the county's nuisance ordinance, said Laura Gleim, public affairs specialist for DEQ's Eastern Region. If the county fails to submit required documentation by Dec. 31, 2022, for how it used the \$5,920, the county would have to pay that amount by Jan. 15, 2023. However, Kim Mosier, the county's attorney, told county commissioners during their meeting Wednesday, Feb. 2, that if the Supplemental Environmental Projects don't happen this year because, for instance, the property owners choose not to participate, DEQ will allow the city to propose other projects in lieu of paying the \$5,920.

Commission Chairman Bill Harvey signed the agreement with DEQ. The DEQ initially notified the county of the violation in a Nov. 24 letter to Mosier. Kieran O'Donnell, the DEQ's office of compliance and enforcement manager, wrote in the letter that the violations happened in December 2020 when county workers, using heavy equipment, dismantled the 1970s mobile home at 267 W. Church St. in Halfway. The home's wallboard material was 60% chrysotile asbestos, according to O'Donnell's letter. The county disposed of that material, as well as fiberglass insulation and treated and painted wood, in an open pit on Orr Road near Halfway, where the materials were burned, according to the letter. Oregon law prohibits those materials from being burned. Asbestos, a known carcinogen, was used in many building materials in past decades.

The debris remained in the pit until May 2021, when the county "properly packaged and disposed of the material as asbestos-containing waste material," O'Donnell wrote. Gleim, the DEQ public affairs specialist, wrote in an email to the Baker City Herald in November that the agency learned about the incident several months after the demolition when "a county employee contacted DEQ to ask if they should have followed asbestos rules. The answer is yes. The county then hired an asbestos contractor to survey and properly dispose of the remaining ash and debris." In addition to the county's fine, the DEQ has notified Rodney Tarter, who owns the property where the material was disposed of, that the agency is fining him \$3,300 for maintaining an illegal solid waste disposal site. According to DEQ documents, on April 19, 2021, an accredited inspector collected samples from the material in the pit on Tarter's property.

A subsequent analysis showed the 60% chrysotile asbestos concentration in the wallboard. On May 5, 2021, a licensed asbestos abatement contractor removed about 10 cubic yards of material from the pit and disposed of it. The original \$7,400 penalty includes three separate violations: \$3,200 for failing to have an accredited inspector examine the mobile home before demolition. \$2,400 for performing an asbestos abatement project (the demolition qualifies as such) without a license. \$1,800 for disposing of material in a non-permitted site. In her email to the Herald, Gleim wrote: "DEQ understands the county's goal in demolishing the mobile home was to eliminate the safety hazard it posed to the public. But in doing so, the county put the public, as well as its employees, at risk of exposure to asbestos and other harmful chemicals."

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