

## EDITORIAL

## Windfall for the fairgrounds

The peeling green paint and protruding nails on the perimeter fence at the Baker County Fairgrounds rodeo grounds tell the tale.

The 17.7-acre property in Baker City is due for maintenance and other upgrades.

But that's no easy task.

Not when the Baker County Fair Board has an annual budget of about \$155,000.

But that problem, at least temporarily, is not so pressing.

The Oregon Legislature, before it adjourned its short session earlier this month, approved House Bill 5202. That bill, among its tens of millions of dollars of allocations for projects statewide, includes \$2 million for the Baker County Fair.

Little wonder that Ron Rowan, chairman of the Baker County Fair Board, used the adjective "exciting" a couple times in an interview about this unprecedented one-time allocation from the state's general fund.

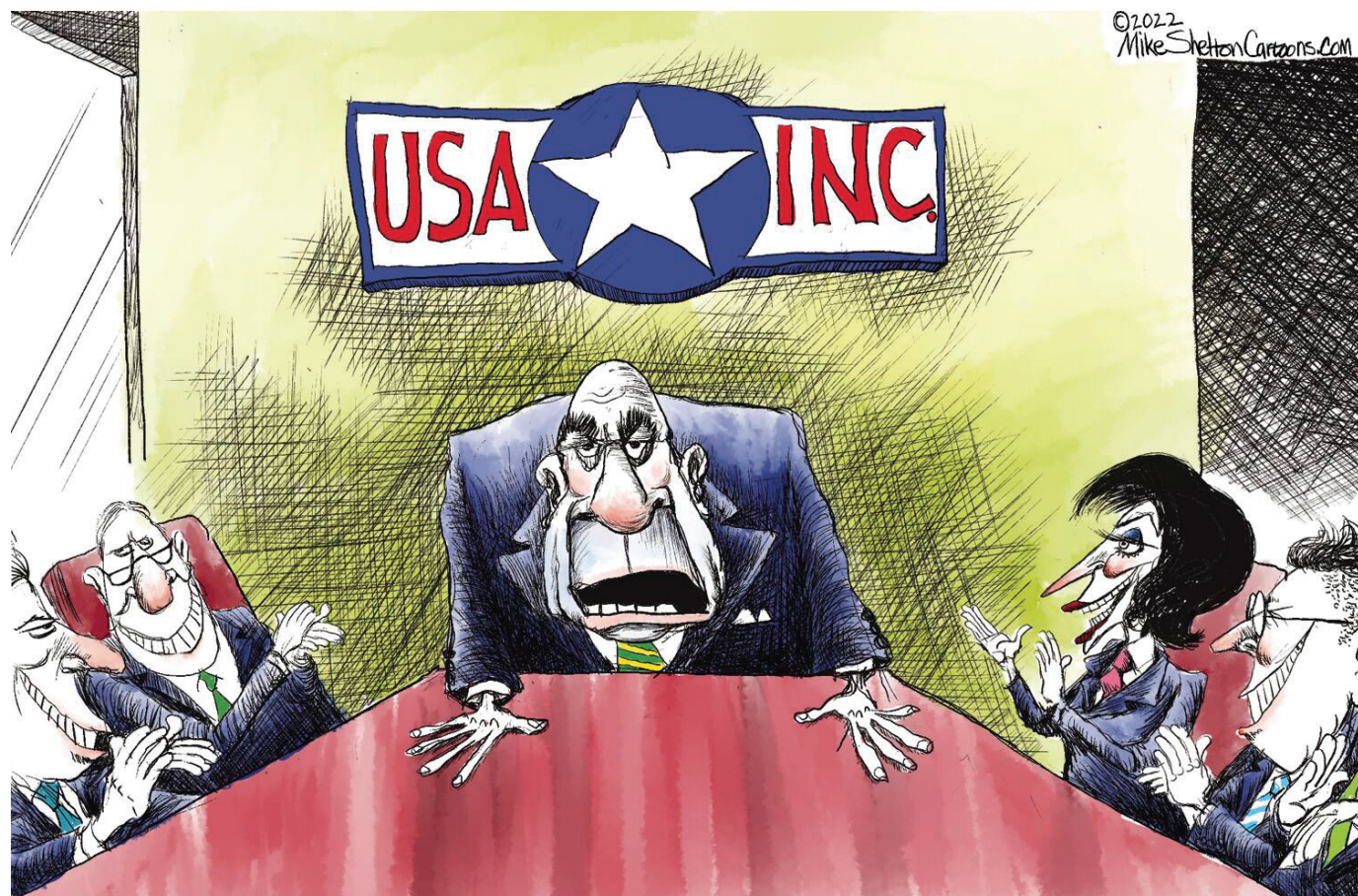
The influx of money will help the Fair Board make great progress on the projects outlined in the 5-year master plan for the fairgrounds, adopted in 2021.

The list of work is long, and includes replacing the aforementioned fence, making other improvements to the rodeo grounds including potentially adding permanent seating, incorporating the former Leo Adler Field into the fairgrounds, and building another barn for small animals.

The fairgrounds are an important asset for Baker County. The property has great potential as a venue for events beyond mainstays such as, of course, the Baker County Fair in early August, and, for nearly 30 years now, the Baker City Bull and Bronc riding competition during Miners Jubilee.

It's gratifying to find out from Rowan that in addition to the projects in the master plan, the Fair Board has discussed moving the painted sign, in centerfield at Leo Adler Field, that honors Adler, the great Baker City philanthropist who died in 1993. The Baker Sports Complex, which also has an Adler Field, would be the ideal place for the sign.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



## COLUMN

## Continued vigilance for COVID-19

For two years, we have all eagerly awaited a time when the worry about COVID-19 was in our rearview mirror. We have longed for things to return to the way they were in the pre-pandemic times. When families and friends could gather to celebrate milestones and events, large and small, without having to heavily weigh the risks and benefits. When a trip to the grocery store wasn't complicated by a face mask. When trips, events, conferences, and school didn't have to be canceled on short notice. When the most vulnerable of our community didn't have to worry about whether they could safely leave home out of fear of catching the COVID-19 virus.

In the last several weeks, there has seemed to be a glimmer of hope on the horizon that we could be entering a new phase of the pandemic.

Infection rates from the most recent omicron variant have eased, the number of hospitalizations and COVID-19 patients in our intensive care units have gone down, and many COVID-19 restrictions are being eased, including here in Oregon.

COVID-19 is not over, and we continue to see patients who are becoming very ill from COVID in our community.

Mask mandates in our state will end Saturday, March 12, per direction from Gov. Kate Brown and the Oregon Health Authority. But the coronavirus is still



Dr. Lily Wittich

present in our community and will continue to spread and infect people. And while fewer people are needing hospital care, COVID-19 is still a threat to a large number of Oregonians with underlying health issues. Those who are immunocompromised, have chronic lung diseases like asthma or COPD, diabetes, heart conditions or people who are overweight and obese all run a higher risk of getting severely ill from COVID-19. Many of those folks have been vaccinated and may have received their booster shots, which will help protect them. They may still get sick, but thanks to the vaccines, there is less of a chance they will need to be hospitalized or will die from COVID.

We can all still do our part to keep these family members, friends, and neighbors safe. The steps you can take to help protect our community include continuing to wear a mask when you're gathering with someone in these vulnerable groups, staying home if you have any signs of illness (even if you don't think it's COVID), and getting vaccinated including with a booster if you are eligible. The vaccines available are safe and effective. Some people may choose to continue to wear masks at all times when they are out in public.

While the end of the mask mandate means we may no longer need to wear a mask when going to the store, to a movie or out to dinner, the OHA and governor's order continues to require masks be worn in healthcare settings. This includes hospitals, doctor offices, dentist offices and nursing homes. We will continue to screen patients and visitors when they enter our facilities and require wearing of medical-grade masks. Cloth masks are less effective at preventing spread of the virus. If you don't have a mask, we will provide one. If our doctors, nurses, or medical support colleagues get sick or exposed, they will be forced to miss work. That will impact the care you may receive when coming to our hospitals or clinics. It may take longer to see a provider, and scheduled appointments may be delayed or canceled. We're trying our best to avoid impacting patient care, but if our people are out sick or are in quarantine, they can't be caring for patients.

We applaud our state's leaders and the OHA, for taking swift and decisive action over the past two years to slow the spread of COVID-19 and utilizing the best medical and scientific advice when setting public policy. These measures have protected vulnerable populations and have helped to minimize the toll of the pandemic.

Dr. Lily Wittich is the medical staff liaison at Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-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

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• Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.

• The writer must 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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## COLUMN

## Watching the Stang Gang celebrate a milestone

The Stang Gang was nearly 200 miles from home, but for one night they made the Baker High School gym their own.

Their enthusiasm was the contagious sort that makes you want to join in, to bask in the reflected glee, even if you have no connection with what's going on.

The Stang Gang, though, had a lot to celebrate.

And there were a lot of them to do the celebrating.

More than I might have expected considering what I know of Crane and its high school, whose fans comprise the Stang Gang.

The unincorporated community is in Harney County, about 30 miles southeast of Burns. Crane's population is around 150.

But the high school draws its students — and thus its fans — from an area bigger than Connecticut, Delaware and Rhode Island.

Combined, Crane Union High School is unique in Oregon. It's the state's only public boarding high school.

(Several Oregon schools, including Burnt River and Huntington, have welcomed multiple foreign exchange students, in part to bolster their declining enrollments, but Crane's boarding students are homegrown, so to speak.)

About half the 88 high school students at Crane live during the school week in a dormitory (there are two — one for girls, one for boys). It's the only feasible way to run a school in

Harney County, where some students live on ranches 100 miles away.

Students from kindergarten through eighth grade, by contrast, attend one of eight schools scattered across the vast expanses of sagebrush and rimrock that stretch across the county to the Nevada border. Those who don't live in the neighborhood — in Harney County, where the concept of a neighborhood is rather malleable, your nearest neighbor might be as distant as, say, Baker City is from Haines — move into the dorm when they get into high school.

(The threshold is 20 miles, but exceptions can be made for students who play sports, lest they or their parents have to make too frequent dark drives through some of the most remote country in the lower 48 states.)

It was basketball that brought the Stang Gang, several hundred strong, to BHS on Saturday, March 5.

Both the Crane girls and boys teams were playing for the Class 1A state championship.

The girls were seeking their third state title under longtime coach Stub Travis, and their second in a row. The Mustangs won the 2020 title, also in the Baker gym. The 2021 tournament was canceled due to the pandemic, although Crane went undefeated during its abbreviated schedule in June 2021 and won the championship in a 16-team unofficial state tourney.

(Also played at BHS; the Mustangs, suffice it to say, do not lose of-



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ten anywhere, but their record over the past three years in Baker is unblemished. And that includes upsetting the Class 4A Baker Bulldogs in December 2021.)

The Crane boys, meanwhile, were hoping to make history of a different sort, completing a perfect season at 31-0 with the school's first boys basketball state championship. The boys coach is Eric Nichols, a 1995 Baker High School graduate, and one of the assistants, Dave Toney, is a 1980 BHS grad.

Both Crane teams — the boys playing first, the girls finishing around 10 p.m. — achieved their goal.

Which explains not only the prodigious decibel levels the Stang Gang produced, but also why, even half an hour after the girls game ended, dozens of fans, most clad in Crane's blue and white, were still congregated on the polished floor, forming the scattered groups typical in such circumstances.

Players still clad in their uniforms posed, with varying levels of apparent patience, for photos with parents and friends.

There were hugs.

Laughter.

Not a few tears.

It was for me the quintessential high school sports tableau.

Every age class was represented.

I saw babies who surely haven't yet smeared their face with the frosting of their first birthday cake.

And I saw beaming visages of grandparents, perhaps even great-grandparents.

They were sharing an experience that I'm certain will become part of the lore not only for the school and the community, but for the whole sprawling district, which extends from the bird-luring marshes of Malheur Lake across the glacier-gouged ramparts of Steens Mountain and the strange blankness of the Alvord Desert.

I have no doubt that decades from now, maybe during spring branding a dozen miles from the nearest patch of pavement, maybe during a Christmas gathering in a ranch house that is the only source of light in the great high desert blackness, they will reminisce about that night in the Baker gym.

They'll talk about the key baskets.

About the teenagers, now grey-haired grandparents themselves, who cut down the nets on that March night in the waning days of the great pandemic.

About the dozens of Stang Gang members who gathered on the court during halftime to line dance — something you're not likely to see at any other state tournament in Oregon.



I woke up, rolled over and looked at the red numbers on the clock radio. Tried to look, anyway.

Eyes bleary with sleep don't focus quickly.

And my eyes, afflicted as well with extreme astigmatism, don't really focus at all without the aid of lenses.

Which I was not wearing.

But I got close enough that, by squinting, I could make out 2:51.

This disappointed me.

I generally rise a bit before 5:30, and although two and a half hours might seem a considerable span of slumber when you're fatigued in the middle of the afternoon and pinning for even a catnap, it is a less substantial interval in the ebb of night.

For some reason I wasn't satisfied. I fumbled my glasses off the bedside table and put them on.

The truth was instantly revealed in brilliant glowing LED numerals. 12:51.

My feeble vision hadn't picked up on that slender "1."

I felt that that instant the sort of triumph that is all out of proportion to the situation.

I wasn't, of course, actually getting two extra hours of sleep.

But that cold reality couldn't dissipate the glorious warmth of the moment, the sense that I had in fact received a wondrous gift.

I rolled back over, flipped the pillow to its cool side, and relished one of those minor thrills that nobody, it seems to me, can ever have too many of.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.