Ambulance

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Under state law, the county has the authority to designate ambulance service providers.

Nichols said that contract was ready to be sent to the city on Tuesday, March 22,

but that didn't happen. Cannon said the timing is "a real shame."

"I was unaware they had a response prepared," he said. Nichols said he recognizes

that the city needs additional financial assistance to operate the ambulance service, as well as a written contract designating the city as the ambulance provider.

"I understand where they're coming from, I really do," Nichols said. "Baker City is in a difficult position. The ambulance service has been a money loser for them for a long time."

The proposed contract the county prepared, but didn't send to the city, was a response to a proposal the city submitted to the county on Jan. 11, 2022, Nichols said.

The city proposed a threeyear contract. Although the proposal didn't include a specific dollar amount for the county's contribution, Cannon said that based on a formula the city suggested, the county's payment to the city to support the ambulance service would have been about \$137,000 for the first year — \$7,000 less than the amount the county offered in its proposed contract.

In a report to councilors on Tuesday, Cannon mentioned the proposed contract that Nichols cited — the document that the county failed to send prior to the City Council meeting — noting that the county was "working on a response" but without knowing the response had been finished but not yet sent.

Cannon also noted that the county has committed to paying the city \$100,000 for ambulance service for the current fiscal year, which ends June 30.

The city has received \$25,000 so far, Cannon wrote in his report, "and we have been told that an additional \$50K is coming. We greatly appreciate those funds."

Nichols said he understands the financial burden that the city is under in providing ambulance services, given that revenue from ambulance billing doesn't cover the costs. Cannon in his letter noted that those costs are rising due both to inflation and to higher call volumes.

In his report to councilors, Cannon wrote that the difference between the cost of the ambulance service, and ambulance billing revenues, "could approach a million dollars a year in the very near future."

Ambulance billing is a significant source of revenue for the city's fire department, amounting to around 38% of the budget.

Most of the rest of the department's approximately \$2.3 million annual budget comes from the city's general fund.

Nichols said he was optimistic that the county's proposed \$130,000 contribution to the city for the next fiscal year would be sufficient to keep the ambulance service going for at least the coming fiscal year.

Cannon said that although he can't say for certain whether the city would have set a Sept. 30 date for ceasing ambulance service had the county sent its proposed contract prior to Tuesday's meeting, it would have altered his conversation with councilors.

"If the county has a proposal obviously we will look

at that," he said. But even with the county's proposed \$130,000 contribution, Cannon said that without a "larger, more sustainable funding source" for ambulance service, the city will at some point reach a threshold where it's no longer possible to continue that service.

County has authority to choose ambulance provider

The Council's notification to commissioners about the possible cessation of ambulance service is the latest move in a city-county conundrum that dates back several years.

At the center of the matter are the state law that gives the county the sole authority to choose the ambulance service, as well as the city's costs to provide the ambulance service, which makes up the majority of the fire department's calls.

The Baker City Fire Department is the longtime provider for a "ambulance service area"

that includes the city as well as much of Baker Valley and other parts of the county, covering about 1,600 square miles, or slightly more than half of Baker County's area.

During a Jan. 19, 2022, meeting of the county commissioners, Cannon told commissioners that the city wants to continue to provide ambulances within the city and the rest of the ambulance service area. This was formalized in the proposed contract the city had sent to the county on Jan. 11.

Although that proposal was for a three-year pact, Cannon suggested that city and county officials negotiate a new 10year agreement.

Commissioners started the process in 2019 when they issued a request for proposals for ambulance service. Baker City and two private companies submitted bids.

In early 2020, commissioners tabled the matter.

Baker City continues to provide ambulance service in what Cannon described in his March 22 letter as a "handshake agreement."

Both the city's Jan. 11 threeyear contract proposal, and the county's one-year proposal, are designed to formalize that agreement.

The root of the problem, as councilors discussed Tuesday, is that the city's cost to operate ambulances continues to rise.

"Currently there is not a significant and stable funding source available to Baker City which fully covers the cost of the Ambulance Service without city taxpayers heavily subsidizing the service for Baker County," Cannon wrote in his letter to commissioners. "The city taxpayers, City Council, and the Baker City budget cannot continue in this fashion."

Starting in 2018, the city received a three-year federal grant that allowed the city to hire three new firefighter/ paramedics.

The grant was for about \$462,000, and the city spent about \$265,000 over the three years.

Baker County, meanwhile, gave the city \$33,000 per year over the three-year grant period, an acknowledgement that the expanded fire department staff continued to respond to ambulance calls

outside the city limits as well as inside.

Cannon notes that the city "appreciates" the county's contributions in his letter to commissioners.

'The city recognizes the county was not required by a contract to provide funds but chose to do so regardless," he wrote. "Unfortunately, the contributions do not cover the budget shortfalls for operating such an expensive service."

The federal grant ended in 2021, leaving the city solely responsible for paying the salaries and benefits of the three firefighter/paramedics that the city hired after accepting the grant.

Financial challenge has been

mounting for many years In his report to councilors, Cannon outlined the history of the city's fire department and in particular the financial burden of providing ambulance services even though the federal Medicare and Medicaid programs, as well as private insurance, don't pay the full amount that the city bills for ambulance runs.

"When the city bills insurance, Medicaid, and Medicare for a call, we do not recover enough revenue to cover the financial break-even point," Cannon said.

In response to a question from Councilor Joanna Dixon, Cannon said about 80% to 85% of ambulance calls are for patients who have Medicare or Medicaid.

Those sources typically pay only about 20% of the amount the city bills.

Meanwhile, the city's labor and materials costs are rising.

"The City anticipates significant increases in the personnel costs necessary to provide ambulance services," Cannon wrote in the March 22 letter to commissioners. "The cost of medical supplies, ambulance equipment, and fuel is also increasing significantly every year."

County officials have discussed in the past asking voters within the ambulance service area to approve a tax levy that would raise money for ambulance services. The idea is that a levy would be a more sustainable source than ambulance billing and yearly contributions from the county to supplement the city's general fund.

Talking totem BY BENNETT HALL

Blue Mountain Eagle The years have not been kind

to the John Day totem pole. A quarter-century of wind and rain, sun and snow have taken a toll on the local landmark, leaving its once-bright wood darkened, weathered

and cracked. That doesn't sit well with Margot Heiniger-White, the widow of Ralph White, the Canyon City chainsaw artist who carved the pole.

"I would like that totem pole cleaned up," she said.

And she's not crazy about the location, either, tucked between a telephone pole and a two-story building just off the city's main drag.

"It's not a very good place for it because nobody can see it," she said. "It's in a bad spot."

Location, location

Truth be told, it really is an odd place for a totem pole. Standing 50 feet tall and weighing in at 18,000 pounds, the towering tamarack spar is topped by an eagle with a 20foot wingspan. Below the eagle are three more carved figures: a salmon, a turtle and

a beaver. It's perched atop a concrete footing at the intersection of Main and Dayton streets, at the east end of downtown John Day.

Yet despite its imposing size and central location, the totem pole is surprisingly easy to overlook.

Driving down Main Street from the east, the totem pole is hidden behind the imposing bulk of the Grant County Ranch and Rodeo Museum. Coming from the west, the view is partially obscured by a telephone pole.

And why is there a totem pole in John Day at all?

Grant County doesn't have much of a Native American presence these days — according to the 2020 census, only 1.7% of the county's residents identify as Native



The John Day totem pole is showing its age, but the city has plans to clean it up and refinish it this spring. There are also discussions about possibly moving it to a more prominent location.

American or Alaska Native. Perhaps more to the point, Oregon tribes didn't carve totem poles. That was something the coastal tribes of what is now Washington, British Columbia and Southeast Alaska were known for.

So what's it doing here? The answer to that question comes back to Ralph White.

Mountain Man

Ralph White died on Jan. 28, 2018, at the age of 79. In life, by all accounts, he was a colorful character.

He wore a bushy beard and a bearclaw necklace, and he called himself the Mountain Man.

According to an article by C.J. Gish in the July 20, 1995, edition of the Blue Mountain Eagle, he made his living for many years as a chainsaw artist. White had a love for the Old West and Native American art forms — and a knack for turning tree trunks into animal figures.

See, Totem/Page A5





Clarene Powell Rohner June 3, 1924 - March 18, 2022

Clarene Powell Rohner, 97, quietly passed away at home, March 18, 2022. Clarene was the corner stone of a prosperous Baker County farm since 1942.

Her graveside service will be held at Mount Hope Cemetery, Saturday, March 26 at 11:00 a m Reverend Suresh Telagani of St. Francis de Sales Cathedral Baker City officiating. A reception will be held afterward, for family and friends, at the Baker Elks Club, 1896 Second Street, in Baker City.

Mrs. Rohner was born in Durkee, June 3, 1924 to Authur Powell and Anna

Silvers. She lived in Durkee on the family cattle ranch until 1932 when the family moved to Bowen Valley. Clarene graduated from Baker High School in 1942.

Clarene grew up in an era that was without cell phones, social media, jet planes, indoor plumbing or refrigeration. Cooking was done on wood stoves and the main source of transportation was the horse. She rode to school on a horse, traveled to work on a horse and farmed with a team of horses. She sewed her own clothes, processed meat and dairy products by hand and canned vegetables and fruit from crops her family raised.

Some would say that she lived a tough and primitive life style. She lost her mother when she was 11 to pneumonia and helped raise her brother Bryce who was 10 and sister Jeanine 5. In 1938 her horse rolled on her and shattered her ankle to a degree that she had bones protruding through her boot and spent 6- weeks in the hospital. Over the years she had both her hips and both knees replaced. With all this you would never notice her limp, never hear her complain and she never failed to accomplish the necessary tasks that farm life demands.

One day in 1939 her father hired a young man to help work the ranch. "He came through on horse back and asked about a job," she said. "He had the biggest, blackest beard. I asked Dad where he found that bum." That man's name was Orville Rohner. Clarene and Orville married on June 6, 1942. They moved into a house adjacent to Orville's father's dairy farm off Pocahontas road and began a partnership with him in the dairy business. That business grew and expanded over the next 66 years and became a "Dairy of Honor"

Clarene's achievements in life and community involvement are long and impressive. 1994 Legacy Woman of the Year, 1999 Diamond Pioneer Agriculture Career Achievement Award from OSU, President of Soroptimist International, Board member and treasurer of the Soil and Water Conservation District, Dairy Heard Improvement treasurer and member of three different Granges. She was a 4-H leader when she was 17 and taught 4-H sewing and home economics for over

60 years. She judged at the county and state level and was a member of the state and local 4-H Leaders Association and the Home Extension Club. The number of people whose lives Clarene touched in creative and positive ways spans generations.

Clarene especially enjoyed sewing. She was a very accomplished seamstress, making everything from tailored suits to ma-

chine embroidery crafts. She often wore clothes she created. She spent many years traveling to La Grande to take machine embroidery classes with her good friend Marie Savage. Her keen eye for fabrics, color, and attention to detail were evident in the beautiful quilts she made for her children and grandchildren.

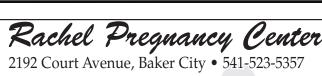
As accomplished as she was, she considered her family the most precious to her. She raised four children; Anna, Norma, Jean, and John. Over the years the family increased to include 12 Grand Children, 22 Great Grand-children and 5 Great-Great-Grand Children. Their love and devotion to her tells a story greater than volumes of words could achieve. Grandma never forgot a birthday or Christmas present and she never forgot to smile or hug, but most importantly she always managed to give guidance when necessary and love in abundance.

Survivors include her son and daughterin-law, John and Kate Rohner; daughters and sons-in-law, Norma and Leonard Nemec and Jean and Dave Justus, all of Baker City and Anna and Jerry Hortsch of Sun City West, Arizona. Grand Children, Josh Rohner and Cindy, Kyra Rohner, John Taylor Rohner and Alysia, Joel Rohner and Whitney, Mike and Nita Troupe, Don and Cathi Bigspring, Brian Troupe, Kathy and Mike Colton, Barry and Anne Nemec, Jesse and Jaime Justus and Daniel and Erin Justus, 27 Great and Great-Great Grand Children, sister Jeanine Culver and many nieces and nephews.

She is preceded in death by her Father and Mother, Husband Orville, Brother Bryce and Grandson Christopher.

Those wishing to make memorial contributions in memory of Clarene may direct them to the Baker County 4-H Association, this maybe done through the Coles Tribute Center 1950 Place St. Baker City, OR 97814.

If one wishes to light a candle in memory of Clarene, please visit www. colestributecenter.com



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