

## Ambulance

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As of press time Friday, March 25, the Herald had not received from the city a breakdown of how many ambulance calls are from inside the city limits versus how many are from outside.

In 2019, when the county released a request for proposals for ambulance providers in a service area that includes Baker City and about half of the rest of the county, two private companies, along with the Baker City Fire Department, submitted proposals.

One of the private ambulance firms is Med Transport Inc. of North Powder.

Commissioners tabled the issue, and the Baker City Fire Department has continued as the ambulance provider in the service area, but without a long-term contract.

In January of this year, Cannon gave the county a proposed three-year contract under which the city fire department would continue as the ambulance service provider.

County Commissioner Bruce Nichols said on Wednesday, March 23, the day after the City Council meeting, that the county had prepared a response to Cannon's proposal, suggesting a one-year contract.

But Nichols said the county failed to send that proposal to the city.

The county's proposal — which Cannon said he received Thursday, although not directly from the county — includes a county contribution of \$130,000 to the fire department for the fiscal year that starts July 1, 2022.

That's \$7,000 less than the amount Cannon projected the city would have sought from the county.

County Commissioner Mark Bennett said on Wednesday morning that he was "shocked" by the City Council's notice about the intention to cease ambulance service on Sept. 30.

Bennett said county and city officials will continue to discuss the matter, and he said his goal is to have the Baker City Fire Department maintain its ambulance operation.

### City councilors weigh in

City Councilor Shane Alderson said he spoke on Thursday, March 24, with Nichols and with Bill Harvey, chairman of the Baker County Board of Commissioners, about the county's proposed contract.

"I haven't talked to our city manager yet, but I am going to try to get a work session put together for our next meeting and then I think that we can come to an agreement if council thinks that agreement is something we can work with and that will try to extend it out for a year and then city and county will work together to try to come up with a plan for either a transition or to be able to afford continuing ambulance service," Alderson said.

After speaking with Nichols and Harvey, Alderson said he feels the "consensus is that we would like to keep it going for at least another year and then it would give everybody time to work on a plan of action going forward."

Councilor Joanna Dixon said the county's proposal is not acceptable to her as written.

"The biggest issue as far as I'm concerned is the compensation from the county," Dixon said. "We're not getting anywhere near enough from them to cover the costs of the county runs. The city just cannot financially continue to operate the ambulance service with the losses we've been incurring."

In his report to councilors on Tuesday, Cannon wrote that "we are anticipating shortfalls between the cost of service and the revenues collected from the service which could approach a million dollars a year in the very near future."

Councilor Dean Guyer said that even with the county offering \$130,000 for the next fiscal year, eventually the city will need to find a new source of revenue if it is going to try to continue operating ambulances.

"My biggest concern is that we're looking at a major shortfall," Guyer said. "Somebody eventually has to make that decision and come to the conclusion that you can't continue to subsidize at the level that we are without having consequence."

Guyer compared the city's



Baker City Fire Department/Contributed Photo

**Baker City firefighters used a ladder truck while fighting a house fire at 1249 Fifth St. on Monday night, Jan. 31, 2022.**

*"The biggest issue as far as I'm concerned is the compensation from the county. We're not getting anywhere near enough from them to cover the costs of the county runs. The city just cannot financially continue to operate the ambulance service with the losses we've been incurring."*

— Joanna Dixon, Baker City councilor



Dixon

situation with that of hospitals, which have to treat patients even if they're incapable of paying.

"And that's what we're up against now, is trying to figure out in the overall scheme of things, who's paying for the costs," he said.

Like Alderson, Guyer said he believes that city and county officials need to have a joint meeting to seek a possible solution to the ambulance dilemma.

Cannon said he understands that many local residents likely agree with Bennett that the ideal solution is to have the Baker City Fire Department continue to operate ambulances.

"Baker City does a good job with it, and we have a very skilled and capable staff," Cannon said. "It is something that I think our citizens have come to appreciate and respect and value."

But Cannon said the financial challenges for the city are daunting.

cludes "fire" and not "ambulance," but calls for ambulances are much more common.

Over the past four years, ambulance calls have accounted for about 84% of the department's total calls, Cannon said.

And that percentage probably would have been a bit higher, he said, except the department in 2021 ceased transporting patients from Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Baker City to other hospitals, usually in Boise, because insurance doesn't pay for those transfers, and when an ambulance crew is en route to Boise, it puts additional pressure on the remaining fire department staff.

But it's not just the volume of ambulance calls that poses a financial challenge for the department, Cannon said.

He told city councilors on Tuesday that 80% to 85% of the people who are treated or transported are covered by either Medicare or Medicaid. Yet those federal insurance programs generally pay only about 20% of what the city bills, he said.

For the fiscal years 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20, ambulance calls involving patients

covered by Medicare or Medicaid, even though they accounted for a large majority of billing, produced from 49% to 58% of the department's ambulance revenue, according to city budgets.

Most of the rest of the fire department's revenue comes from property taxes paid by owners of property within the city limits.

Although the department's ambulances also respond to calls in much of Baker Valley and other parts of the county, the city doesn't receive property taxes from those areas.

Changing that, possibly through a new property tax levy for ambulance services that would include properties outside the city limits, is one possible way to alleviate the city's financial concerns, Cannon said.

Cannon said the city has improved its billing and collection procedures. Based on a recent projection, the city could collect about \$1 million from ambulance billing for the current fiscal year, which ends June 30.

Revenue totaled about \$820,000 in the previous fiscal year, \$953,233 in 2019-20, \$818,361 in 2018-19, and \$788,870 in 2017-18, according to city budgets.

Boosting revenue to \$1 million would be "huge for us, but it's still not enough," Cannon said.

The improvement in collection rates actually started in 2019.

(The following numbers are from calendar years, not fiscal years, so they don't match with numbers in previous paragraphs.)

In calendar year 2019, the city billed \$2.45 million for ambulance services and collected \$801,000 — 32.7%.

In 2020 the collection rate rose to 35.8%, although the amount collected dropped a bit, to \$771,000, because the city billed less, about \$2.15 million.

The biggest change, though, happened in 2021, when the city billed \$2.21 million and collected \$1,124,000 — 50.8%.

### Staffing cuts inevitable if ambulance service ends

If the city ceases ambulance operations Sept. 30, Cannon said it would be necessary to reduce staffing, from the cur-

rent 16.25 full-time equivalents, to compensate for the loss of ambulance revenue and the significant drop in service calls.

He said he doesn't have any specific projections, but he conceded that reducing the staff by as much as half is possible.

Personnel costs, as with most government operations, account for the bulk of the fire department's expenses. The budget for the current fiscal year includes slightly more than \$2 million in personnel costs — 87% of the total fire department budget of \$2,326,000.

Cannon said he "hates" the prospect of laying off fire department staff.

"It's a miserable thing to have to do," he said. "This is not something anyone takes lightly."

Cannon said that although city officials, despite the lackluster ambulance billing collections, have managed to avoid cuts in other city departments that operate on general fund dollars, the city has had to delay some projects.

The list includes replacing the roof on the fire department, replacing the irrigation system at the city-owned Quail Ridge Golf Course, and, a longer-term need, a new foundation for the 119-year-old City Hall.

Voter-approved laws limit the annual growth in property taxes, so the city can't rely on that source to cover fire department ambulance revenue shortfalls.

Property tax revenue in the general fund rose by about 4% from 2019-20 to 2020-21, to about \$2.95 million in the latter fiscal year.

Besides the fire department, the other major expense in the general fund is the police department. Unlike the fire department, which collects significant revenue from ambulance operations, the police department has no comparable source, relying more heavily on property taxes.

The police department's budget for the current fiscal year is \$2,564,000. The police budget has increased by almost 27% since the 2018-19 fiscal year.

*Celebration of the Wonderful Life of Adriene Kay Oster*

We will be gathering to share our favorite memories, our stories, to laugh, to cry and remember a wonderful person who is greatly missed.

April 2 – 2 p.m.  
First Presbyterian Church  
1995 4<sup>th</sup> St. • Baker City

Gifts in her memory may be made to the Adriene Oster Memorial Scholarship Fund at the Baker City branch of Banner Bank

- Livestream –
- YouTube FPC Baker City
- Tribute Wall –

taminspinevalleyfuneralhome.com

### Ambulance runs much more common than fires

The department's name in-

### Steven Warren McKern

February 20, 1952 - January 6, 2022

Steve McKern, age 69, of Sumpter, Oregon, passed away suddenly at his home on January 6, 2022. A celebration of life will be held on Friday, May 27, 2022 starting at 1 p.m. at the grange in Mt. Vernon (across from Holliday Park). Courtesy of the Snaffle Bit, food and coffee will be provided. Come join us and share some stories.



Steve was born February 20, 1952, to Melvin (Shorty) and Marilyn McKern in Canyon City, Oregon. Steve grew up in Mt. Vernon along with his brother, Duane. After graduating from Mt. Vernon High School, he joined the National Guard and alongside his parents, built and opened the Arco gas station. Which went on to become McKern's Texaco. This was known as the hub of Mt. Vernon, where you would go to get the morning gossip, drink some coffee and share hunting stories!

Steve was an avid hunter with not only a full curl ram's head to show for it, but countless elk and deer stories.

He had many passions, but he was at greatest peace in the mountains, just sitting on a mountain ridge gazing into open mountain space. He loved jumping on the 4-wheeler and going for a ride just to cut a load of firewood or build fence. In the spring you could always find him out looking for mores!!

He loved to go fishing with his buddy, Doug, or his brother. Although his granddaughter, Raychelle, would always outfish them, he would always want to go again.

Steve was a jack of all trades, and could fix anything from big rigs, lawnmowers, and chain saws, to fishing reels; nothing was too complicated for him. His greatest accomplishment was building houses and he would always make his home so warm and inviting, which is exactly what he wanted.

Steve loved to yard sale, rummage sale, estate sale. Anything sale-related, he was there! He loved to make a deal. He would buy the strangest things and get the biggest kick out of it...

Steve was an excellent mechanic and a fantastic log truck driver. He loved every aspect of logging. Especially the slash piles he could burn come spring!!!!

Steve and his ex-wife, Denise, raised 2 children, which has given him 5 granddaughters and 3 great-granddaughters.

He is survived by his brother, Duane (Lilliana) McKern, Redmond, Oregon, daughter Mindy (Ray) Ross, North Pole, Alaska, Son Dusty (Ellen) McKern, Hamilton, Montana, 5 beautiful granddaughters, Alyssa, Raychelle, Haylee, Ashlynn and Kassidee, 3 great-granddaughters, Nephews, Seth, Luke and Gabriel McKern and 2 great-nephews.

He was a great man, father and friend, he is greatly missed.

For those who would like to make a memorial donation in memory of Steve, may do so to either the Mt. Vernon (Grant County) or Sumpter Quick Response Units through Tami's Pine Valley Funeral Home, P.O. Box 543, Halfway, Oregon, 97834. Online condolences may be shared at [www.taminspinevalleyfuneralhome.com](http://www.taminspinevalleyfuneralhome.com).

### John Walter Dima

August 14, 1962 - February 3, 2022

John Walter Dima, 59, of Pendleton OR passed away at his home February 3, 2022. John was born to Donald Dima and Wanda Colton Larson on August 14, 1962. Born in Baker City, he grew up in Baker County and spent many years in Weston and Athena, Oregon, lastly making his home in Pendleton.



John served in the U.S. National Guard and worked with his uncle, John E. Dima, learning the building construction trade in Alaska. He then returned to the mainland where he met Rhonda Hasbrouk. They married and they four children: Dennis, Amber, Ashley and Britney.

John was in his element when he was fishing or hunting and taking pictures of wildlife and nature. He was very proud of his new camera! He loved his family very much, and loved spending time with his grandchildren.

He was preceded in death by his father, Don Dima, and his stepdad, Joe Larson, and his grandparents, Bud and Doris Colton, and John N. Dima and Eunice Dima.

He is survived by his life partner and love, Rhonda Hasbrouk, son Dennis Dima, and daughters Amber Dima, Ashley Dima and Britney Breneman. His granddaughters, Kadence and Allia, and grandsons Skylar, Landon and Mason. His mother Wanda Larson, sisters Linda Larson (Dave), and Sherry Laber (Randy). As well as many aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins.

A Celebration of Life is to be held at McKay Community Park, 1531 S.W. 44th St., in Pendleton, April 9 at 1 p.m.

### Joyce Walter

December 3, 1928 - March 19, 2021

Evelyn Joyce Walter was born on December 3, 1928, to Modest Belle Bennet Allen and Thomas Dayton Allen in Brownsville, Texas. The family moved to Lancaster, California, shortly thereafter where she was active in 4-H Club elementary through high school. Joyce attended the University of California-Santa Barbara where she belonged to and was a leader in several clubs. Joyce graduated with a BA in Education and Music with a minor in Art. Upon graduation Joyce married William Robert Walter of Baker City, Oregon, in Lancaster, California, on August 4, 1950. She and Bill moved to Portland, Oregon, where Joyce taught school for the first year after her marriage until three children were born in quick succession; Joy Lyn Walter Kendall; Patricia Gaylene Golden; Thomas Vern Walter. During the early days of her children's lives Joyce served as a pastor's wife in Mulino, Oregon, 1952 to 1955 until the family moved to Lancaster, California. When the children reached school age, Joyce resumed classroom teaching K-6. When the family relocated to San Diego from 1960 to 1972 Joyce served as reading specialist and curriculum writer for San Diego City School District. Joyce did post-graduate work at UCSD, San Diego State, San Fernando Valley State and UCLA during this time and later pursued more post graduate work at Portland State University, George Fox College and Eastern Oregon State College. When the family moved to West Covina in 1972 Joyce served as principal and preschool director of Baldwin Park Christian School until 1983 when they moved to Baker City, Oregon, where she resumed classroom teaching 5th and 6th grades. She retired in 1991.



Joyce was an accomplished classical pianist. She served as a volunteer throughout her life as Sunday School teacher, church pianist and later as treasurer for a nonprofit organization that brought high quality music artists to Baker City. Joyce was a member of Beta Epsilon, Chapter of the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International. Joyce and her husband Bill were always providing service to their community. For instance, they provided rides to senior citizens to the Senior Center for meals and on Sunday to church. After more than 60 years of marriage, Joyce's husband, Bill, died on June 12, 2012. Joyce moved into Settlers Park assisted living in 2015 and then moved in with her daughter, Joy Kendall, in Santa Rosa, California. She moved to Lincoln City to be near her daughter, Gaylene, in October 2020. Joyce passed into the presence of her Lord March 19, 2021, after suffering a stroke. She is survived by her children: Joy, Gaylene and Thomas; her grandchildren, Kendall: Andrea Marie Kendall, Justin Daniel Kendall, Sonya Ranae Kendall Heisters; Jonathan Michael Kendall, Krista Joy Kendall Martinez; Golden: Taryn Rose Golden Lopez, Nylah Gwendolyn Golden Hazard, Evelyn Cait Golden Quinn and Walter: Laverne Olivia Walter, Aaron William Walter. Joyce had 16 great-grandchildren.

A family memorial was held at the Sutton Creek Ranch in Baker City on July 31, 2021. A community celebration of Joyce's life is slated to be held at Calvary Baptist Church summer of 2022. Date and time TBA.