

## EDITORIAL

## Solve the pressing ambulance challenge

Baker City and Baker County officials have no higher priority than solving the ambulance service crisis, at least temporarily.

Fortunately, there is time to do so.

The challenge is a daunting one, to be sure. The Baker City Fire Department, which for decades has provided ambulance service within the city limits and for much of the time in a significant portion of Baker County as well, doesn't collect nearly enough from ambulance bills to cover its costs. The vast majority of ambulance calls are for patients who have either Medicare, Medicaid or another type of government insurance that pays much less than half of what the city actually bills.

This isn't a new problem. But the budget gap in the fire department has grown in the past several years, in part because the city, using a three-year federal grant, hired three new firefighter/paramedics in 2018 to handle an increase in ambulance calls. The federal dollars, which paid more than half the cost of the new employees, are no longer available. As the gap grows, the city needs to spend more from its general fund — which includes property tax revenue from city residents — to cover the shortfall.

Since 2018, when the city accepted the three-year federal grant, Baker County has sent money to the city for ambulance services. The county paid \$33,000 per year during the grant period, and has allocated \$100,000 in its budget for the current fiscal year, which continues through June 30, 2022.

Under Oregon law, the county is responsible for ensuring there is ambulance service and has the authority to choose ambulance service providers.

In January of this year, Baker City Manager Jon Cannon sent to the county a proposed three-year contract that would maintain the city fire department as the ambulance provider for an area that includes the city and more than half the county, including much of Baker Valley.

County officials, meanwhile, worked on a response to the city's proposed contract.

Unfortunately, a bureaucratic blunder and a lack of communication between city and county officials contributed to the City Council approving what amounts to an ultimatum. During their meeting on Tuesday, March 22, councilors, after hearing a report from Cannon on the ambulance conundrum, voted to have Cannon notify the county that the city, as of Sept. 30, 2022, intends to cease its ambulance service, including within the city limits.

In his report to councilors, Cannon notes that he believed the county was "working on a response" to the city's proposed three-year contract.

That response was supposed to be sent to the city prior to Tuesday's Council meeting, County Commissioner Bruce Nichols said on Wednesday, March 23. But it wasn't sent.

Cannon said it was a "shame" that the county didn't get its proposal to the city prior to the meeting. That it was.

Yet if he had called the commissioners' office before the meeting he would have learned that the county's proposal was ready. Moreover, Cannon would have learned that the county, although it suggested a one-year contract for ambulance services rather than three years, was offering to contribute \$130,000 for that year, just \$7,000 less than what city officials projected the city would need for the next fiscal year to continue operating ambulances.

In other words, if commissioners had ensured their proposal had been sent to the city, or if Cannon or city councilors had checked on the status of that proposal, councilors might not have needed to threaten to end ambulance service six months from now. This ultimatum inevitably has worried some city residents, even though the county is legally obligated to find a replacement ambulance service so the issue at stake is not whether we will have ambulances available, but rather who will operate those vital vehicles.

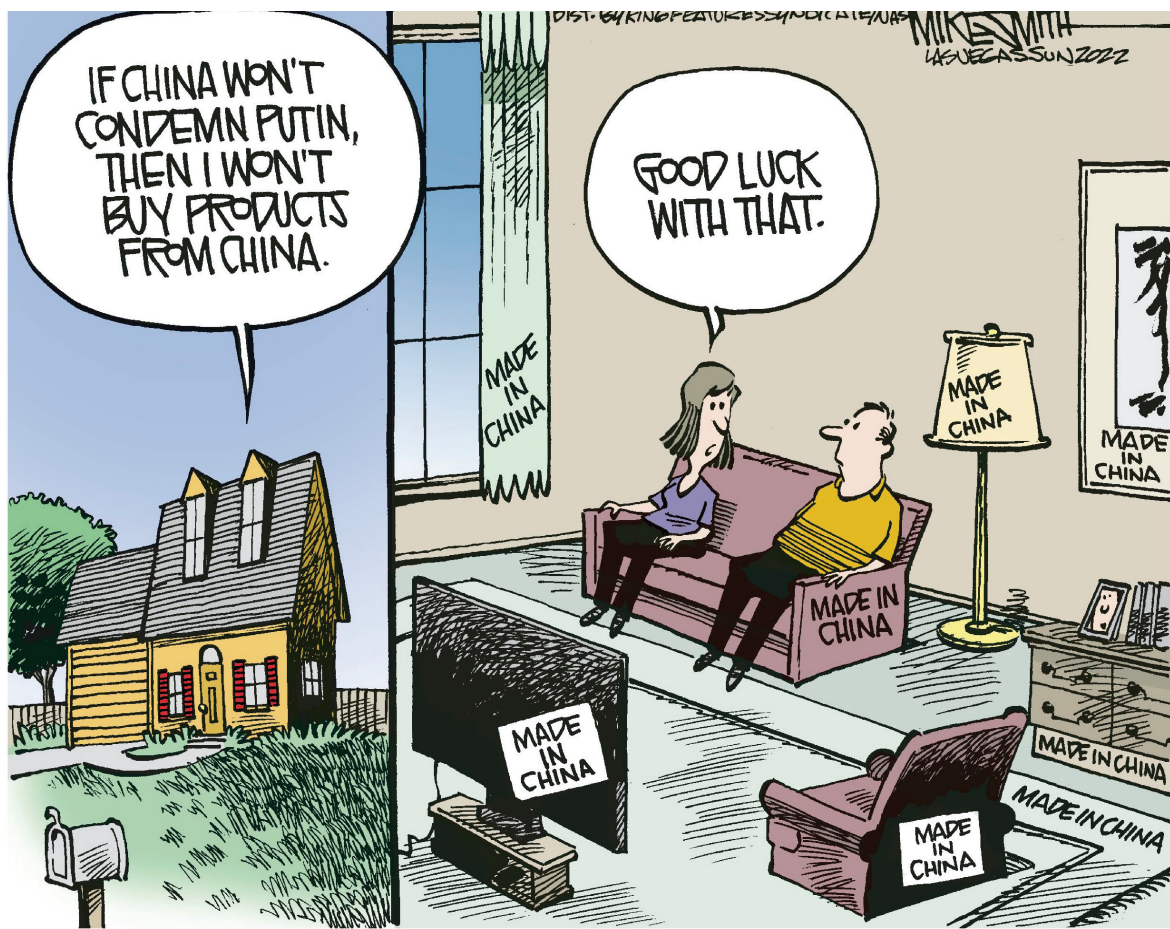
Cannon contends that a long-term solution to the ambulance issue requires a more stable source of revenue. The statistics seem to bear this out, as the city is not collecting enough from ambulance billing to cover its escalating costs. In his report to the city councilors for Tuesday's meeting, Cannon noted that there is no reason at this point to believe that Congress will boost payments from Medicare and other federal programs enough to solve the problem. That might leave a new local property tax levy as a logical option. Unlike the current situation, in which the only property tax revenue that goes to the city fire department is paid by owners of property within the city limits, a new levy would need to include properties outside the city but inside the ambulance service area that the city fire department covers.

In the meantime, though, the county's proposed one-year contract appears to be a short-term solution that maintains the city fire department as the ambulance provider.

Financial challenges notwithstanding, that is the best option. Although Baker City will have ambulance service regardless, removing that function from the fire department would force the city to lay off employees in that department, something the city should strive to avoid if possible.

For decades, the city has operated a fire department that responds to all manner of emergencies, from fires to medical issues, with highly trained professionals. That must continue to be a top priority.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



## OTHER VIEWS

## Is betting on college sports worth the gamble?

## Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

People already bet on college sports in Oregon. It's unregulated and maybe that's what Oregonians want.

But there was a proposal in the Oregon Legislature to change it. The Oregon Lottery would be allowed to host games so people could gamble on college sports,

just like people can on other sports.

Anti-gambling organizations were against it. Tribal representatives opposed it as well, perhaps fearing it would eat into their casino revenues.

The idea was to channel the profits from state gambling revenue on college sports into Oregon's Opportunity Grant Program. That's the state's

largest grant program for college students. It is based on need. The estimate was that some 3,000 more students could get financial help based on the revenues from gambling.

Do you think that benefit is worth it or not? Tell your state legislator. Tell the candidates running for state office. They may bring back the idea in the 2023 legislative session.

## COLUMN

## Trans athletes and the challenge of playing fair

Lia Thomas is an accomplished athlete.

She's also a brave woman.

But her achievements in the swimming pool this year raise legitimate questions about equality in sports.

And although it's unfortunate that Thomas has become a symbol for the much broader social and political divides that define America these days — and much worse, that she's become a focus for bigots — this ought not deflect from the reality that she and other transgender athletes can potentially tilt what we've come to think of as a level playing field that affords women the same opportunities that men have had for much longer.

This is an appropriate discussion, and one which does not deserve to be branded as bigotry — not, at least, when the conversations are between reasonable people who accept fundamental physiological truths rather than indulge in euphemism lest the overly sensitive take offense.

Thomas was born a male.

After undergoing hormone replacement therapy, she now identifies as a woman.

Thomas, who attends the University of Pennsylvania, competed against men in swim meets for her first three collegiate years. She was the runner up in three events in the 2019 Ivy League men's championships.

During her senior year, starting in the fall of 2021, and more than two years after starting hormone replacement therapy, Thomas competed as a woman.

Although she swam slower than she had before hormone therapy, Thomas was faster than most of the women she competed against.

As an example, before hormone therapy, when Thomas competed as a man, her best time in the 500-yard freestyle race was almost seven seconds faster than seven-time Olympic gold medalist Katie Ledecky's NCAA record. While competing as a woman, and in winning that event at the NCAA Division I championships earlier this month, Thomas' time was almost nine seconds slower than Ledecky's record. A group of researchers found that Thomas' best times when competing against other women are about 5% slower on average than when she swam against men, and before hormone therapy suppressed her testosterone production.



Jayson Jacoby

Thomas broke two Penn school records and won three races in a November 2021 meet. In the 500 freestyle race, Thomas touched the wall almost 13 seconds ahead of the runner-up.

Thomas was not so dominant, though, against higher-level competition.

At the NCAA championships, in addition to her national title in the women's 500, she finished fifth in the 200 freestyle and eighth in the 100 freestyle.

This hardly qualifies as ruining competitive sports for women, as some hysterical commentators have suggested.

Thomas won only one race.

And although the feats of top-level swimmers are impressive, the sport rarely gains much attention in the U.S. except during the Summer Olympics.

The notion that hordes of biological males, enticed by Thomas, will subject themselves to the effects of hormone therapy and the inevitable tide of nasty comments, just so they can excel in a more popular sport such as basketball, seems farfetched, if not downright farcical.

Still and all, it would be unfair, it seems to me, to consider this matter exclusively from the standpoint of trans athletes such as Thomas.

Her decision to compete as a woman affects all of her fellow swimmers. Ensuring equal opportunities for women to compete was the purpose of Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments, the federal law that prohibits gender discrimination, in academics and athletics, in institutions that receive federal financial aid.

To suggest that Thomas' being born a male had nothing to do with her recent success in the pool is as silly as ignoring that her genome contains a Y chromosome.

Politics frequently aims to interfere with biology, but the former can't actually change the latter.

That said, I see no clean, easy answer to this dilemma.

I respect Thomas' decision. I don't condone telling her she has to compete against men solely because of that aforementioned chromosome.

But neither can I blithely pretend that this single biological fact

doesn't afford Thomas an advantage that some — and probably many, based on her race results this past season — of her fellow female competitors, no matter how prodigious their natural talent and no matter how diligently they toil in the pool and the weight room, can offset.

This seems to me wrong.

Yet I can't think of how to make it right.

The voters who choose inductees to the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame — professional athletes, of course, not amateurs like Thomas — have in effect punished several of the sport's greatest performers who were either accused of or confirmed to have used performance-enhancing substances. The punishment was refusing to vote for them, and thus excluding many, so far, from induction.

That list includes Barry Bonds, who has hit more home runs than any other major leaguer.

But denying an honor to athletes who cheated, and doing so after they retire, is no solution to the conundrum of transgender athletes competing now and in the future.

Thomas didn't cheat. Or lie.

Indeed, telling the truth was perhaps her bravest act.

Creating a separate competitive category for trans athletes, as some have suggested, is similarly unsatisfying. Whether the roster of such athletes would be sufficient to create true competition is questionable at present, for one thing. Worse still, the concept of a separate category perpetuates the notion that Thomas and other trans athletes ought to be segregated.

Another compromise feels to me like a copout — continuing to allow Thomas to compete against women but affixing to her results an asterisk. This strikes me as merely a diluted form of the segregation I mentioned in the previous paragraph.

I have no idea whether Lia Thomas will turn out to be an outlier, or whether her experience as a college swimmer is the vanguard of a major change, and challenge, for sports in general.

But it seems likely that preserving the notion of fairness in the pools and fields and courts of the future, while also respecting athletes' gender choices, will be a more complicated task than it has been up til now.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.