

EDITORIAL

More than just ambulance service is on the line

The more we learn about the effects of Baker City ceasing its ambulance service, the worse it sounds. To be clear, the question is not whether ambulances will operate within the city and in more than half the county that's part of the same ambulance service area. The issue is who will run the ambulance service in that area.

Under Oregon law, Baker County, not Baker City, is responsible for ambulance service in that area and has the sole authority to pick the provider.

So if the Baker City Fire Department, which has operated ambulances for many decades, ends that service on Sept. 30, 2022, as stated in a notice to the county that the City Council approved March 22, the county would need to find a replacement. That likely would be a private company.

There is, then, no reason for residents to panic that, as of midnight on Oct. 1, six months from now, an ambulance won't be en route if they have an emergency.

But this is a serious crisis just the same.

Because the issue isn't limited to ambulances.

If the city does end its ambulance service, the loss of revenue from billing — about \$1.1 million in calendar 2021, according to the city — would force the city to lay off about half the fire department staff.

And that could significantly reduce the department's abilities when called to fight structure fires.

Casey Johnson, president of the local union chapter that represents firefighter/paramedics, said this week that the layoffs would leave the fire department with a standard shift of two firefighters on duty at a time. Johnson said that according to department policy, firefighters can enter a home or other burning structure only if at least two other firefighters are on hand for back up.

That would likely be possible in some cases, as the department, during large fires, has to call in off-duty staff.

But firefighters also take vacations. And they get sick. And with six full-time firefighters available rather than the current 11 (the department is budgeted for 12, and the city has been trying for several months to fill a vacancy), it's all but certain that the department's firefighting capabilities would be diminished if the city curtails its ambulance service.

This is not to deny the city's dire financial straits resulting from operating ambulances. About 80% of the patients the city bills for ambulance service are covered by federal insurance that pays around 20% of the actual cost. The city has offset this shortfall for decades with its general fund — which includes property taxes — but the situation has become more pressing in the past two years, after a federal grant, which the city used to hire three new firefighter/paramedics in 2018, ended. That left the city solely responsible for the higher personnel costs, which have increased from \$1.6 million in the 2017-18 fiscal year to slightly more than \$2 million for the current fiscal year.

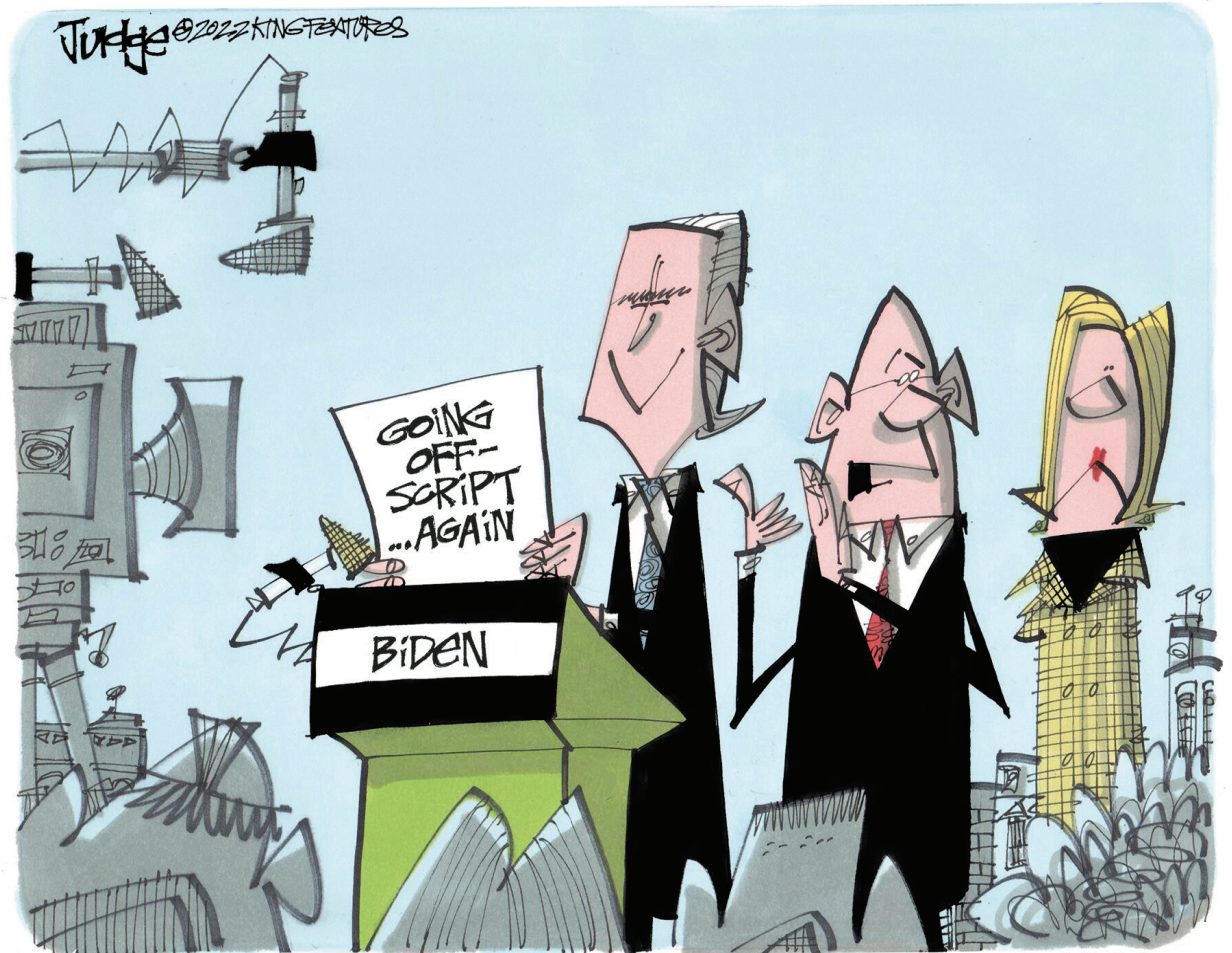
Among the possible solutions to this fiscal dilemma, a levy that increases property taxes both within the city and in the portions of the ambulance service area outside the city limits, is an obvious option. It's the most stable, long-term strategy, since voters could be asked to approve a permanent tax levy — one that, unlike levies for such services as mosquito and noxious weed control, doesn't go to voters for reapproval every three or five years.

But there's probably not enough time to create a new taxing district and take a levy to voters before Sept. 30, the deadline the city set.

Which makes it all the more imperative for city and county officials to figure out how to keep the city in the ambulance business for at least the next fiscal year, which starts July 1. The point here is not to, as the cliché goes, kick the can farther down the road. City and county officials have an obligation to give citizens a chance to decide whether they are willing to pay more to retain a vital service that truly is, at times, a matter of life or death. The city and county can afford to maintain the status quo for another year. The county is receiving \$3.1 million and the city \$2 million from the federal 2021 American Rescue Plan act. Much of that money should go to businesses and organizations that suffered due to the pandemic, of course. But officials should make every effort to navigate the red tape and use some of those dollars to keep a reliable and trusted ambulance service going, and prevent dramatic cuts in firefighting capacity.

If voters decide they can't afford to keep that service in the future, then it's probably inevitable that the city will end ambulance service. But we're not to that point yet.

—Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



"FOR GOD'S SAKE, THIS MAN CANNOT REMAIN IN POWER."

COLUMN

Oregonians don't just want a party hack in governor's office

For some Oregonians, the race for governor isn't about who can raise the most money.

And these voters aren't interested in who can parrot party platforms without flaw.

Instead, they seek a new governor who is somewhat blind to party affiliation.

Such a governor, they think, can unite the state. That governor would energize more Oregonians.

Beneath those feelings is a sense that Oregon can do better.

In recent weeks, I gathered by Zoom with voters from around the state. Our partners were Rural Development Initiatives and the Agora Journalism Center.

I was eager for voters — they were from all parts of the state — to share two points. One was to share what they wanted to learn about those running for governor. The other was to learn how the Oregon press can more effectively serve up information about the candidates.

This wasn't a scientific poll. I'm not going to suggest the views of three dozen people perfectly mirror Oregon attitudes.

But the messages they delivered are well worth considering. That's especially true for the 30 or so people running to succeed Gov. Kate Brown. She is in her final year and by law can't run again.

Let's take what they want in the next governor. An earlier column described the hope for a governor who blurs the urban-rural line in Oregon.

But equally important to the people I talked with was the idea that party politics must be tamed.

These citizens are worn out by the focus on party over performance. They recognize the impact — in Oregon and across the U.S. — of Republicans and Democrats treating each other like the enemy. For these voters, those party affiliations seem to be more about who has power, not who is doing best for Oregon.

There's no getting away from party dominance, at least in the primary election. Candidates with a "D" or an "R" as part of their credentials campaign through the spring to their political tribes.



Les Zaitz

But the two main political parties are watching a deep erosion in voter ranks. That's influenced in part by automatic voter registration and the "non-affiliated voter" who doesn't pick a party.

But the declining party representation may reflect what these voters had to say. They are hungry for a governor who can lead all of Oregon. They don't want someone who comes into office waving their party banner.

"Bipartisanship is hugely important, especially considering how much rural communities, low-income communities and communities of color have in common," Angela Uherbelau said in an email after one session. "A governor who brings Democrats and Republicans together to solve our literacy and math crisis in Oregon would transform the state for years to come."

"It's important for the next governor to act in apolitical, inclusive and constructive manner," wrote Daniel Bachhuber. "These days, it seems like there is very little working across the aisle. Instead, it's mostly attacks across the aisle."

Ginger Savage wrote, "The last two years have shown us that no one party has the right answers to everything. Through the process of discussion and compromise, Oregonians' lives will be better. The governor must rebuild so much trust, communication, compromise."

"My hope for a bipartisan leader is that they will emphasize entertaining solutions and ideas representing all sides and viewpoints," said Claire Conklin, noting that "our state and our country continue to move farther apart."

Charlie Mitchell has a similar view. "We are at a pivotal time in our state, when we can either continue to see further division or begin to realize some unity," Mitchell wrote. "This is a deep and wide divide and will not be resolved quickly or easily ... I have little faith in the major parties as they are currently structured. I don't believe the two major parties are serving us well at the state or national level."

And these voters generally recognized that the governor is not just a political animal. They want a governor who has some record of managing large enterprises. They don't want a greenhorn attempting to manage multibillion-dollar budgets and a work force in the thousands. Too much is at stake in Oregon, they believe, to turn the keys over to a management rookie.

Along that line, a couple of the voters said it'd be helpful to know what kind of team the next governor will take to Salem. Governors set the tone for state government in large measure by the people named to direct state agencies, from the massive Department of Human Services to the Corrections Department to the Oregon Health Authority. That's an interesting idea, for most governors wait until they are elected to start naming names.

And one voter had another idea to make the next governor more effective — remote office hours. This rural resident thought the next governor could learn a great deal by setting up shop and working for two weeks at a stretch from someplace other than Salem. Imagine a governor working from Pendleton or Klamath Falls or Astoria. That could provide a useful and real world perspective that a factory tour just can't provide.

No matter the details, the voters I listened to are hoping the next governor will moderate the political tensions in the state. They hope the next governor will be — and be perceived as — a generalist interested in helping the entire state.

No doubt, Kate Brown or John Kitzhaber or Ted Kulongoski would push back on some aspects. They did travel the state. They didn't remain creatures of Portland. Yet they also know better than most that how the governor is perceived is as essential as how they work.

These voters are giving candidates valuable clues about how to weld a coalition of Oregonians. They should heed the message — and demonstrate they are listening.

Les Zaitz is a veteran editor and investigative reporter, serving Oregon for more than 45 years.

OTHER VIEWS

Time to end airport mask mandate

Editorial from The Dallas Morning News:

In most places in the United States, we have almost fully returned to a pre-COVID-19 state of normalcy where people aren't required to wear masks.

But in a place millions of Americans must use, the federal government still holds sway, and it isn't letting go.

It is past time to remove the masking requirement in airports and on airlines.

Americans who were told to "follow the science" are fairly asking now why the Biden administration is hanging on to an unscientific requirement in a space that it controls.

In a letter dated March 23, the leaders of 11 major airlines, including American Airlines and Southwest, asked for the mask mandate in airports and on planes be lifted.

"Our industry has leaned into science at every turn. At the outset, we voluntarily implemented policies and procedures — mandating face coverings; requiring passenger health acknowledgements and contact tracing information; and enhancing cleaning protocols — to form a multi-layered approach to mitigate risk and prioritize the wellbeing of passengers and employees," the letter reads.

But now, the administration is turning its back on the science that shows the vast majority of the country, 99%, does not need to wear masks indoors.

For nearly two years, flight attendants and other front-line airline workers have faced enormous hostility from passengers as they have done their duty in enforcing mandates that no longer make sense.

The highly filtered, forced air on airplanes is cleaner than most indoor air, despite the close quarters. Meanwhile, the best quality masks are now widely available for passengers who still desire to wear a mask.

So why is the federal government still forcing everyone who has to enter an airport and get on a plane to wear a mask? It isn't about following the science; that much is clear.

The failure to dial back these restrictions on individual choice stokes resentment and will make it that much harder to convince people to mask up the next time we need to — and that time will come.

If the president and his advisers are serious about the facts, they will lift this mandate now, and let us edge that much closer to normal life.