

EDITORIAL

Voters can sound off on why a train quiet zone is wise

The balance of power in the Baker City Council has tipped against the plan to establish a railroad quiet zone in the city, at least temporarily.

This is a pity.

But it's also an opportunity for city voters to flip that balance back, to state with their ballots this fall that there is no legitimate reason not to pursue a quiet zone.

On Jan. 25 of this year, the City Council voted 4-3 to apply with the Federal Railroad Administration for a quiet zone designation. The agency has approved more than 900 of those in the past 15 years or so, including 13 in Oregon. Quiet zones aren't completely quiet — train engineers can sound their blaring whistles at their discretion, such as if they see a person or vehicle on the tracks. But otherwise they wouldn't sound the whistle as they approach each public crossing, as is the case now, even though in almost every situation there is no danger.

But several weeks later, Heather Sells, who cast one of the four votes in favor of the quiet zone, resigned from the Council because she was moving out of the city limits and was no longer eligible.

On April 12 Sells' successor, Kenyon Damschen, appointed by councilors in late March, joined Mayor Kerry McQuisten and Councilors Johnny Waggoner Sr. and Joanna Dixon to pass Dixon's motion to have city staff prepare a measure for the Nov. 8, 2022, election asking voters whether or not they support a quiet zone.

There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong about taking a matter of public interest to voters.

But there is also a reason we elect people — including city councilors — to represent us and to make decisions on our behalf. Indeed, we entrust city councilors to decide on many matters more consequential than train whistles — spending several million dollars from property taxes and water and sewer bills each year, for instance.

In the case of train whistles, the four councilors who voted to pursue a quiet zone made the logical choice, and one that, based on a considerable amount of evidence, would benefit Baker City.

Train whistles, obviously, are a safety measure, to warn people that a fast-moving mass of hundreds of tons is approaching.

Yet based on expansive studies by the Government Accountability Office in 2011 and 2013, which surveyed 562 quiet zones across the nation, there is no "statistically significant difference" in the number of accidents at train crossings before and after quiet zones were established.

This is not a coincidence. To qualify for a quiet zone, a city must make physical upgrades to each crossing, such as concrete medians that make it much more difficult for a vehicle to get to the tracks when a train is passing.

Those improvements in Baker City won't cost the city budget anything. A private group has offered to raise the estimated \$150,000 needed, and in less than three months since the Council's Jan. 25 vote, the group has collected commitments for nearly half the amount.

It remains to be seen whether the Council's vote last week to override that decision, and put the issue on the ballot, will hamstring the fundraising efforts while it's uncertain, over the next six months, whether the city will proceed with its application.

That, too, would be a pity.

To be optimistic, that's also a period when voters can contemplate the realities and, ideally, recognize that Baker City would be better off if train whistles are blown only when they could possibly be beneficial.

Because right now, almost every one of those noises serves no tangible purpose.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor


YOUR VIEWS
Lots of questions about city ambulance service issue

As I follow the articles reporting on the concerns for the Baker City ambulance service elimination and the Baker City Fire Department staff reduction outcomes, I have some questions and requests:

1. Who or what City department processes the actual billing for each individual ambulance transport request?
2. What is the basic ambulance fee for transport to St. Alphonsus/BC-ER Dept. from a city home address vs. from a county home address?
3. What is the actual payment pay-back to the actual billing dept. via

Medicare, Medicaid, and private medigap coverage?

4. It has been stated that "Medicare or Medicaid federal programs" only pay 20% of what the city totally bills! My Medicare Part B coverage is 80% of the Medicare approved amount after my Part B personal deductible is paid first by me, then my secondary medigap coverage will pay the remaining 20% of the Medicare approved amount. So: what is the actual ambulance basic service fee amount for transportation only? Of course, there will be additional charges for individual emergent requirements added to the basic service/transport fee.

5. Knowing that Medicaid coverage requirements differ in billing requirements

to my knowledge; I am curious as to that actual billing process.

6. I find myself wondering why this serious situation has erupted after several years of the same process for budgeting/billing has been followed. Maybe it is time for a sample budget and audit statement to be provided for the affected taxpayer citizen to fully grasp the entire situational conflict between the two governmental agencies; causing the considerable concerns for the city and county safety services with impending loss of the ambulance service and the 50% decrease in the Fire Department staffing by September 30, 2022. This is not acceptable.

Cheryl Gushman
Baker City

COLUMN

In the U.S., every day is Tax Day

BY PRESTON BRASHERS

The deadline for filing federal income taxes is later than usual this year. Tax Day has been pushed back to April 18 to avoid coinciding with the District of Columbia's Emancipation Day holiday.

However, Americans don't just pay taxes one day out of the year. Taxes are a part of our everyday lives, whether we're conscious of it or not. Many politicians prefer that we don't notice how much we're taxed. And, so, taxes are often buried in the cost of products or subtly taken from our paychecks.

The largest and most recognized U.S. tax is the personal income tax. It's the reason for Tax Day. Federal tax rates on personal income range from 10% to 37%. Forty-one states layer on additional income taxes. In places like New York City, the top combined federal, state and local income tax rate exceeds 50%.

For young adults entering the job market, the first tax they may notice is the payroll tax. Looking at their pay stubs, they are often shocked to see 6.2% was taken out for Social Security and 1.45% for Medicare.

What they may not realize, though, is that their employers also paid that same amount in Social Security and Medicare taxes. Since that's part of the cost of hiring someone, that amount is also built into the paycheck — in the form of lower wages. Effectively, the federal government takes a 15.3% cut of most workers' wages just to fund entitlements, double what shows up on their pay stubs.

When workers go to spend that paycheck, they may have to pay a sales tax of 9% or more, depending on the state. And

while states' general sales taxes are usually visible, other taxes are better camouflaged.

At the gas pump, for example, we'll pay combined state and federal gasoline taxes of about 31 cents per gallon in most states. In California, it's about 67 cents per gallon. When buying diesel in California, taxes will cost drivers 93 cents per gallon, in addition to the state's 9.25% sales tax. Even if you don't buy diesel, those taxes will still take a bite out of your wallet; they increase the price of most consumer products because they are transported by diesel trucks.

Federal taxes also drive up the cost of vehicles themselves with, for example, a 25% tariff on imported steel and a 10 percent tariff on imported aluminum. Americans paid about \$87 billion in tariffs on imported products in 2021.

How about renters? Many don't realize they're paying property taxes, since the landlords write those checks. But those checks are funded by the rent. Moreover, property taxes reduce the supply of housing on the rental market, thereby leading to higher rents.

After paying all these taxes, some folks may still have some savings to invest. Suppose you buy stock in a U.S. corporation. The company will put those funds to use, and whatever profit it earns will face corporate taxes at a 21% federal rate and a 5% rate in a typical state.

But for the government, why tax something once, when it can tax it two or three times?

After taxing corporate profits — not to mention the wages that went into the investment — the government will take a cut of the same profits when they're distributed to shareholders. When the corpora-

tion pays a dividend, the shareholder may be subject to an additional 15% or 20% federal tax, not to mention state capital gains taxes, which typically add about 5%.

Ultimately, these taxes don't just hit investors, though. Corporate taxes notoriously drive down workers' real wages.

Maybe the most damaging hidden tax in the government's arsenal, though, is inflation.

Compared to the same time last year, consumer prices are up 8.5%.

Between the Federal Reserve, Congress and the White House, the government's strategy for the last two years has been to print money and dump it into the economy. Spending with reckless abandon, the federal government has racked up more than \$6 trillion of new debt in that time. The Federal Reserve holds most of that new debt. After flooding the economy with dollars, little wonder that each dollar is worth less.

Inflation hits everyone and everything. Food prices are up 8.8% from last year, new vehicles 12.5%, electricity and gas utilities 13.5%, used vehicles 35.3%, and gasoline 48%.

Whether it's funded by taxes or deficits, American workers — past and present — ultimately pay a steep price for unbridled government spending. And we're paying it every day. Elected officials at all levels should be more prudent with taxpayer dollars. They should also be more honest and should stop pretending spending won't cost us.

Preston Brashers is a senior policy analyst in The Heritage Foundation's Hermann Center for the Federal Budget.

CONTACT YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

President Joe Biden: The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20500; 202-456-1111; to send comments, go to www.whitehouse.gov.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley: D.C. office: 313 Hart Senate Office Building, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-3753; fax 202-228-3997. Portland office: One World Trade Center, 121 S.W. Salmon St. Suite 1250, Portland, OR 97204; 503-326-3386; fax 503-326-2900. Baker City office, 1705 Main St., Suite 504, 541-278-1129; merkley.senate.gov.

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden: D.C. office: 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510; fax 202-228-2717. La Grande office: 105 Fir St., No. 210, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-7691; fax, 541-963-0885; wyden.senate.gov.

U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz (2nd District): D.C. office: 1239 Longworth House Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20515, 202-225-6730; fax 202-225-5774. Medford office: 14 N. Central Avenue Suite 112, Medford, OR 97850; Phone: 541-776-4646; fax: 541-779-0204; Ontario office: 2430 S.W. Fourth Ave., No. 2, Ontario, OR

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Oregon Gov. Kate Brown: 254 State Capitol, Salem, OR 97310; 503-378-3111; www.governor.oregon.gov.

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Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

State Sen. Lynn Findley (R-Ontario): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., S-403, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1730. Email: Sen.LynnFindley@oregonlegislature.gov

State Rep. Mark Owens (R-Crane): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., H-475, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1460. Email: Rep.MarkOwens@oregonlegislature.gov

Baker City Hall: 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m.

in Council Chambers. Councilors Jason Spriet, Kerry McQuisten, Shane Alderson, Joanna Dixon, Kenyon Damschen, Johnny Waggoner Sr. and Dean Guyer.

Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Jonathan Cannon, city manager; Ty Duby, police chief; Sean Lee, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Noodle Perkins, roadmaster; Greg Baxter, district attorney; Alice Durringer, county treasurer; Stefanie Kirby, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.

Baker School District: 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Witty. Board meets the third Tuesday of the month at 6 p.m. Council Chambers, Baker City Hall, 1655 First St.; Chris Hawkins, Andrew Bryan, Travis Cook, Jessica Dougherty, Julie Huntington.