

EDITORIAL

City Council needs to act on fire dept.

There's little time left to prevent the Baker City Fire Department from being gutted, and the Baker City Council needs to act.

The seven councilors are the bosses. They — not City Manager Jon Cannon — set the city's policies, and they represent citizens. Councilors, who meet Tuesday, May 10, at 7 p.m. at City Hall, 1655 First St., need to recognize that the city can continue to operate ambulances for at least the next fiscal year, starting July 1, without plundering other departments within the city's general fund. The city's financial records show this to be the case.

But if councilors continue to accede to Cannon's plans, they will preside over a dismantling of the city's fire department without precedent, at least in modern times.

This is neither necessary nor acceptable.

It's also not likely to be reversible. If the city drops ambulance service and cuts its fire department staff, even a new, sustainable revenue source probably would be a moot point, arriving too late to restore the level of public safety service that city residents have paid for, and have reasonably come to expect, over the decades.

The issue directly involves Baker County as well as Baker City, and city councilors and county commissioners share a responsibility for working together to craft a solution.

Baker County is responsible, under state law, for providing ambulance service in the county. If the city follows through on the current plan, which calls for the fire department to cease operating ambulances Sept. 30, 2022, the county would need to find a different ambulance provider, likely a private company. To that end, the county recently released a request for proposals for ambulance service in the Baker Ambulance Service Area, which includes Baker City and about two-thirds of the rest of the county. The deadline to respond is June 3.

If Baker City fails to submit a proposal by that date, then it might become a foregone conclusion that the city will not only shut down ambulance service but also — due to the loss of about \$1 million annually in ambulance revenue and because most of the department's service calls are for ambulances rather than for fires — lay off six firefighter/paramedics, half the number who work regular 24-hour shifts now.

The City Council seems to be plodding meekly toward that dismal outcome. On Tuesday, May 3, the city's budget board, which includes the seven city councilors and seven city residents, approved a proposed budget that includes the fire department layoffs. The City Council, which has the final authority on the budget, must adopt the spending plan by June 30.

During budget board meetings earlier this week, Cannon described a mounting financial problem that has reached a crisis point. "We just don't have the money for it," he said, referring to the ambulance service.

But the city's budgets over the past several years don't justify an action so dramatic as slashing the fire department.

Ambulance billing is hardly a new issue — Cannon is right about that.

And although Baker City probably will never come close to recouping its full costs for operating ambulances — not in an aged community where about 80% of patients transported are covered by Medicare or Medicaid, which pay about 20% of typical bills, and who don't have the means to make up the difference from their own coffers — the city can, and has, boosted its collection

rates and its overall ambulance revenue.

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

In calendar year 2021, the collection rate rose to 50.8% — the city collected \$1,124,000 from billings of \$2.21 million.

The city has botched ambulance billing in the past, to be sure.

In 2016 the city hired a private company that promised to boost ambulance collection rates. The opposite happened. The city collected about \$88,000 less than the previous fiscal year, while projecting that it would get about \$200,000 more.

But that was a one-year mistake, several years ago. And more to the point, even with that lost revenue the city has collected enough from ambulance bills over the past several years to operate a full-service fire department, one that responds to all manner of emergency calls, without having to significantly subsidize the department from elsewhere in the general fund.

And, as the recent increase in collection rates shows, the situation is improving.

The city will need a new revenue source in the future to accommodate increasing costs and, likely, the need to hire more firefighter/paramedics to handle increasing call volume.

That source must include money from residents who live outside the city limits who benefit from the city's ambulances. The city is in effect subsidizing ambulance service for much of the rest of the county.

The city's costs will continue to grow. The last time the city hired three new firefighter/paramedics to handle increased call volumes — and avoid a big boost in overtime cost, which is the inevitable result when demand for a service rises but the staffing stays the same — the city had a three-year federal grant that paid about two-thirds of the cost. That money is gone, and if the city needs to hire more firefighters, there might not be any federal dollars to help. The union representing firefighters wants higher salaries, as well.

But all that lies in the future.

The City Council's chance to preserve the fire department might end in less than a month.

Of course it would have been preferable to have the city and county during the past few years agree on a proposal to take to voters in the Baker Ambulance Service Area, asking them to increase property taxes, or possibly institute a household fee, to ensure that the Baker City Fire Department has enough revenue to operate ambulances and maintain its firefighting capacity.

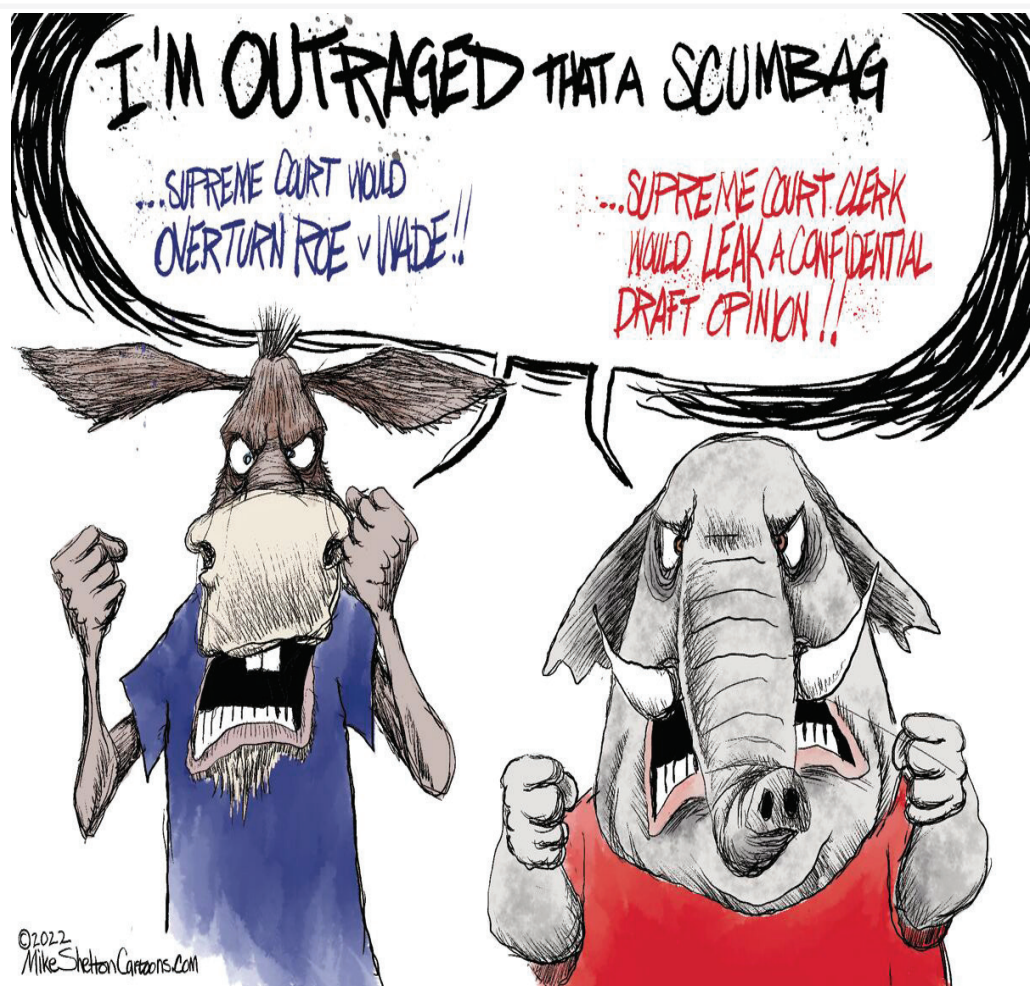
But even though this situation has festered, that doesn't mean the city has been slashing other departments in its general fund to feed a voracious fire department over years of neglect. The city's budgets show otherwise.

Blaming county officials, and previous city councilors and city staff members, for this situation is not leadership by current councilors. It's true that councilors can't solve this problem, for the long term, on their own — voters, within the city and outside, will need to decide how much they value the current Baker City Fire Department.

But only city councilors can give voters that chance.

And due to councilors' failure to strongly question Cannon's contentions about the city's financial situation, time is very short indeed.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



YOUR VIEWS

I'm supporting Witham, Garrick for commission

The Baker County Commission position races, what will be our choice to fill the two upcoming vacancies?

Position No. 2, Christina Witham has my full support for many reasons. First, but not the only reason for supporting Christy is her unfailing support the past 15 plus years to preserve our historical open forests. The desire to once again see our economy thrive and hopefully benefit from the abundant natural resources we are blessed with. It was very apparent at the commission forum she will meet the imminent challenge of the ambulance debacle facing the county. Christy has developed a very successful business in Baker City, building it from the bottom. She will have this knowledge to utilize and draw upon. Christy is an all around great choice for the challenges the county will be facing.

Dan Garrick will get our vote for position No. 3. I found his responses at the forum most in line with our concerns.

Wanda Ballard
Baker City

Oregon needs Kerry McQuisten's leadership

I completely support Kerry McQuisten as Oregon's next governor. These days, I am much more diligent in investigating and researching those who wish to serve in an elected capacity. I think the key to this is to learn what it is that they are supposed to know, and to then ask well-positioned questions. The office of governor must be held by someone who is familiar with both our federal and state constitutions. They must understand, defend, and comply without exception.

The position of governor is a leadership position. As such, the person in this position must know how to work honorably and lawfully with those from both the Oregon House and Senate and with those who represent a multitude of ideologies beyond. A governor must set a standard that is above reproach.

This, I see in Kerry McQuisten. This candidate is not a newcomer to Oregon. She has deep roots and understands, well beyond her roots in Eastern Oregon, the whole of the state. She has also piqued the interests of many in leadership across the

country, which she did early on. This is a good thing.

Speaking for myself, I want a governor with grit, courage, stamina, intelligence, and broad insight. I want a governor who will research the issues and then show fearless resolve to debate those issues when necessary. I want a governor who will inspire conversational engagement. I want a proactive, working governor — not simply a placeholder. Again, I see this in Kerry McQuisten.

Just as she has taken Baker City to unprecedented heights as mayor, I believe she will do the very same, and more, for our beautiful State of Oregon. Oregon deserves much better than what we have had over the past several decades. Oregon deserves much better representation. The whole of Oregon deserves better. That said, the burden is on each of us to ensure such an improvement. That improvement is Kerry McQuisten, and we are fortunate to have her as a candidate in this race.

Please join me in casting your ballot in the Republican primary for Kerry McQuisten for governor.

Elizabeth Boudreaux
Baker City

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; 202-224-5244; 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

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

Oregon State Treasurer Tobias Read: oregon.treasurer@ost.state.or.us; 350 Winter St. NE, Suite 100, Salem OR 97301-3896; 503-378-4000.

Oregon Attorney General Ellen F. Rosenblum: Justice Building, Salem, OR 97301-4096; 503-378-4400.

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

COLUMN

Digging into Baker City's heated climate history

Anyone who endured Oregon's record-breaking heatwave in late June 2021 probably wouldn't be shocked that the year was one of the hotter ones on record.

Although we in Baker County, in a somewhat rare reversal of typical temperature trends, didn't swelter nearly so terribly as residents west of the Cascades did.

Salem reached 117 degrees on June 28, beating its previous all-time record by nine degrees.

Portland topped out at 116 degrees that day, also nine degrees hotter than its former record.

Both the temperatures — more typical of Death Valley than of the temperate inland Pacific Northwest — and those nine-degree margins are stunning.

Of course records, as the saying goes, are made to be broken. And quite often during any year at least one day will bring a record high or low. This is hardly surprising, what with 730 chances to set a new standard.

But typically the new record bests the old by at most four or five degrees, and not rarely by only one.

Baker City, meanwhile, could muster no more than 103 degrees, on June 29.

That was downright modest compared with what happened not only in Western Oregon but also in the Co-

lumbia Basin of Oregon, where Pendleton got to 117, and Hermiston to 118.

That 103-degree high was, however, the hottest temperature ever recorded during June at the Baker City Airport, where records date to 1943.

Based on temperatures collected across the state, 2021 was Oregon's fifth-warmest (records dating to 1895, although obviously not including every measuring station around today, including the Baker City Airport).

The statewide average temperature for the year — a calculation that includes each day's high and low temperatures at all recording sites — was 49.2 degrees. That's 2.5 degrees warmer than average.

Temperature trends also clearly illustrate the effects of a warming climate.

Of Oregon's 12 hottest years since 1895, eight have happened since 2000, and six since 2010.

"What's most concerning is that this was a La Nina year, when we'd traditionally expect colder or at least historically normal temperatures," Oregon state climatologist Larry O'Neill told the Salem Statesman-Journal, referring to 2021. "Instead, we got extreme heat in the summer. We did have somewhat cooler weather in the winter, which is why this year didn't end up as the hottest."

Statewide statistics are interesting, to be sure.



Jayson Jacoby

So are national and, indeed, global temperature records, the latter frequently cited in stories about climate change.

But weather and climate, like politics, are also local phenomena. And being a provincial sort I like to nose around in Baker City's numbers occasionally and see how they compare with Oregon as a whole.

It happens that our numbers bear some similarities with Oregon's. But they also show what strike me as interesting differences.

The concentration of hotter years, for instance, is not so acute in Baker City as in Oregon.

Unlike the state as a whole, with eight of the 12 hottest years coming in the past two decades, Baker City's noteworthy heat is somewhat more evenly distributed over time.

Of the dozen hottest years at the Baker City Airport, four have happened since 2000 — half as many as the Oregon total in that category.

Six of the hottest years at the airport happened before 1992. And most of those are quite a bit older, including the fourth-hottest year (1973, average temperature of

47.68 degrees), sixth-hottest (1981, 47.56), seventh-hottest (1986, 47.51), eighth-hottest (1958, 47.3), and 10th-hottest (1967, 47.15).

Yet Baker City's heat hall of fame, like Oregon's, also is well represented among years of recent vintage.

Of the four most recent years, three rank among the 12 hottest, including both the hottest year on record — 2020, 48.27 degrees — and the runner up — 2018, 47.99.

Gauging climate change naturally requires more than the snapshot of a year or two — climate, after all, is a long-term concept quite different from weather. (This is why anyone who makes claims of any sort about climate change based on a single year or season or, at the extreme end of the ludicrous scale, a single day, is engaging in propaganda, not thoughtful discussion.)

Looking at longer term trends shows that Baker City's average temperature has warmed by about a degree over the past half century or so.

For the first 25 years of record-keeping at the airport, 1944-68 (1943 records aren't complete), the average temperature was 44.93 degrees.

Over the next quarter century — 1969-93 — the average temperature rose almost 1 degree, to 45.80.

Since then, a period of 28 years, the average temperature has continued

to rise, albeit at a negligible pace. The average temperature from 1994-2021 was 45.83 degrees.

Another way to track long-term temperatures is to look not at the annual average temperature — which takes into account the apex of July heatwaves as well as the depths of January arctic outbreaks — but to focus specifically on average high temperatures. This, of course, is what we usually mean when we talk about heat — are daytime temperatures, by and large, getting higher?

In Baker City the answer is yes. A useful dividing line here is an average annual high temperature of 60 degrees (the average high is derived by adding the high temperature for each day of the year and dividing by 365).

The average annual high has exceeded 60 degrees on 37 of the 77 years since 1944 at the Baker City Airport. Of those 37 years, 19 have happened in the past 30 years, while just 12 of the previous 46 years surpassed that threshold.

To put it another way, since 1991 it's been more than twice as likely to have a "warm" year around here — based on that 60-degree line — than it was in the preceding nearly half a century.

Which doesn't, sadly, keep your hands warm when you're out in the latest May snowstorm.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.