

# Council

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Husk questioned the city's contention that the difference between the amount the city bills for ambulance services, and the amount it collects, represents a financial crisis.

He contends that the city exaggerates the percentage of the fire department's costs that result from operating ambulances.

Husk argues that the city's ambulance revenue — which increased from \$771,000 during calendar year 2020 to \$1,124,000 in calendar 2021, according to city records — has been and is sufficient to keep the fire department at current staffing levels.

"Overall, the financial health of this city and the fire department is good," Husk said. "We're not hemorrhaging money. It's a made up construct."

The budgets for both the fire and police departments have increased over the past several years. The police department budget has risen by almost 27% since the 2018-19 fiscal year. The fire department budget has risen by almost 15% during that period.

"It's up to you guys to be good politicians and make deals," Husk said. "We need you to protect this community."

Husk said that although he doesn't blame city councilors for what happened in the past, "we will blame you if you continue this charade."

## Speakers urge City Council to preserve fire department

Robbie Langrell urged councilors to avoid layoffs in the fire department.

"If we cut the department now, we're never going to get these people back," Langrell said.

Julie Gentry asked councilors to "find a way to retain our Baker City Fire Department

and our ambulance service under one roof."

She also asked "what does our city manager have to lose," saying that Cannon, who started work in January 2021, has not bought a home in Baker City.

According to Baker County Assessor's Office records, Cannon does not own property in Baker City or Baker County.

"He will not have to live with the consequences of this decision," Gentry said.

Todd Sidway contends the city's proposal to layoff fire staff "is going to cost lives."

Robert Hall, a retired veterinarian who's 74, said he believes the fire department's ambulance service is better than what a private company could provide.

Hall, who lives outside the city limits, said he is "very willing to pay more taxes to provide the quality of care in our emergency services."

Camille Hearn, who has seven children, four of whom have "severe medical needs," said she moved to Baker City from Richland four years ago in part to be closer to medical services.

The prospect of the city fire department no longer operating ambulances is "terrifying," Hearn told councilors.

Mike Davis urged councilors to "put together a reasonable bid" to send to the county.

"The ball's in your court," Davis said. "Will you show the EMS services, like the rest of us are doing, that you want them here?"

Vanessa Tachenko, whose husband, Ryan, is a city firefighter/paramedic, said that although her husband probably would not be laid off due to his seniority, he has had nightmares recently worrying about how cuts in the fire department would affect firefighters' safety when responding to blazes.

Brian Watt said the city's proposed firefighting staffing,

following layoffs, of having two people on duty at all times rather than the current three, is "unconscionable."

"You're about to make a high risk, high consequence decision," he said.

John Clark, who served as Baker City fire chief from November 2018 to April 2020, submitted a letter to the City Council urging councilors to reach an agreement with the county to have the fire department continue to operate ambulances.

"In terms of public safety — Fire, Rescue and EMS, it is in the city and county residents' best interest for the manager/council to sit down with the county commissioners and do the hard work to finalize an intergovernmental agreement!" Clark wrote.

## Councilor comments

Following the statements from residents, Alderson said he had talked with a lobbyist from the League of Oregon Cities who was skeptical that any private ambulance companies would respond to the county's request for proposals due to a lack of paramedics.

Alderson said he believes the long-term solution to the situation is to form an ambulance service district that would include a tax levy, which voters in the district would need to approve. The district would include both the city and areas outside the city.

But Alderson said such a levy probably wouldn't go on the ballot until May 2023, and in the meantime the city needs to figure out how to continue operating ambulances for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

Alderson said he talked with Baker County Commissioner Bruce Nichols, who told him the county is "willing to negotiate" and that the county might offer more than the \$150,000 it has proposed.

Nichols, in an interview on Wednesday morning, May 11, confirmed that he had spoken multiple times with Alderson and that he had conversations with other city councilors.

Nichols said he wants the city to submit a proposal to the county for continuing to operate ambulances, and that he prefers that the city propose a five-year contract, which is what the county is asking for in its request for proposals.



Alderson



Nichols

Nichols also said he is willing to support the county offering a larger financial contribution to the city — potentially in the range of \$250,000 to \$300,000 for the coming fiscal year.

Nichols said his goal is to "buy us that time that we need to get a special district in place."

"I'm pleased that the city is willing to look at doing something," he said.

Councilor Joanna Dixon, in comments toward the end of Tuesday's meeting, said, speak-

ing to the audience: "Regardless of your demands, we are not firing Mr. Cannon."

Dixon also referred to one of the main issues that limits the city's ability to collect ambulance revenues — that Medicaid and Medicare, which cover about 80% of the patients that city ambulances transport, pay only about 20% of the amount the city bills.

Dixon asked business owners to consider a situation where they charged \$1 for a product, but customers only paid 20 cents.

"How long do you think you'd stay in business?" she said.

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