

Union

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posal to Baker County for the city to continue operating ambulances.

"I don't understand — it's insane," Casey Johnson, a firefighter/paramedic, said on Wednesday morning, May 25. "They pulled the rug out from under us, not only the fire department but the citizens. The City Council is gambling with the safety of their citizens."

Johnson said he was stunned when the Council approved by a 4-2 vote a motion from Councilor Dean Guyer to not send a proposal to the county by the June 3 deadline.

Guyer said his proposal doesn't preclude the city fire department from potentially continuing to operate ambulances beyond the Sept. 30, 2022, date the Council set in late March.

If the city discontinues its ambulance service, the county, under Oregon law, would be required to find a replacement provider.

After the Council sent a notice to the county March 22, setting the Sept. 30 date, county commissioners prepared a request for proposals for running ambulances within Baker City and about two-thirds of the rest of the county.

Johnson described the Council's approval of Guyer's motion as a "complete 180," noting that on May 10 the City Council voted 7-0 to have City Manager Jonathan Cannon prepare a proposal that the city would send to the county by the June 3 deadline.

Johnson said Guyer's statement that the city could potentially enter into discussions with the county after June 3 "doesn't make any sense."

"If you don't come to the table you can't negotiate," Johnson said. "They're hoping they can get invited back to the table afterwards. This is infuriating."

Johnson said the more than 50 residents who crammed into council chambers at City Hall during the May 10 meeting, including 18 who urged councilors to retain ambu-

lance service, should be angry that councilors two weeks later reversed their decision about submitting a proposal to the county.

Johnson said he wishes councilors would look at the ambulance service not as a money-losing operation — the city collected about 50% of the bills it sent in 2021 — but as a source of revenue that makes it possible to employ the number of firefighters it has now.

That ambulance revenue "is the only way we are able to provide that fire protection," he said.

If the city does end ambulance service Sept. 30, the fire department's staffing would drop from the 16.25 full-time equivalents in the budget for the current fiscal year, which ends June 30, to 10.5 in the coming fiscal year.

Cannon has told councilors that that staffing level is sufficient based on the number of fire calls that the department handles.

But Johnson contends that the layoffs would significantly reduce the department's firefighting capacity, particularly in structure fires, where a two-person crew would not be able to enter a building unless there were at least two backup firefighters.

He took umbrage at Cannon's contention that because other departments in cities of similar size to Baker City operate with a similar number of employees as is in the proposed budget for the coming fiscal year, that Baker City can do so as well.

"I would invite him to put on turnout and an air pack and drag a hose line into a burning building with only one other firefighter, and afterwards look the homeowner in the eye and tell them they were 'effective,'" Johnson said.

Johnson believes the city can afford to continue operating ambulances for at least the next fiscal year, although he thinks the county needs to contribute more than the \$150,000 it has offered the city.

He agrees with other city and county officials who have said that the long-term solution to the situation is a voter-approved tax levy or new ambulance district. Currently, city property owners contribute taxes to the

city's general fund, which includes the fire department, but property owners outside the city, but who are in the ambulance service area the city covers, do not.

Johnson believes the City Council's goal should be to avoid layoffs in the fire department until voters have a chance to decide on the tax measure, which could happen in May 2023.

If the city follows through on ending its ambulance service Sept. 30, the 2023 tax measure would be a moot point, he said, at least as it applies to the city fire department.

"It's just easier to maintain something you have than to try to rebuild it," Johnson said.

He acknowledges that operating ambulances is a tougher task today for the fire department than it was in March, when the City Council set the Sept. 30 deadline.

Two firefighter/paramedics have left since then, and a third position had been vacant for several months.

One of the two who left, Brian Johnson, said in early April that he took a job with a fire department in Washington state because he feared he would be among the Baker City employees laid off if the city discontinues ambulance service Sept. 30. Johnson was hired in January 2018, and had little seniority.

Johnson concedes it would likely be difficult for the city to hire new firefighter/paramedics given the uncertainty.

"Who's going to come work here?" he said. "There's a lack of job security."

Johnson said the city could partially alleviate the staffing shortage by reassigning three department's three division chiefs to the 24-hour shifts that other firefighter/paramedics work. Two of the three chiefs were moved in July 2021 to a 40-hour weekly schedule.

Johnson blames that schedule change for much of the increase in the fire department's overtime bill since July 2021.

According to city records, the fire department's overtime bill for the nine-month period July 2021 through March 2022 was \$135,600 — an increase of \$69,900, or 94%, from the same period the previous year.



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Baker City firefighter/paramedic Casey Johnson, left, president of the local union chapter that represents Baker City firefighters, and Ron Morgan, a district vice president for the Oregon State Firefighters Council, went door to door in Baker City May 3, 2022, to urge residents to oppose a city proposal to end ambulance service Sept. 30, 2022, forcing Baker County to find a different provider.

Ambulance

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city still has the possibility of stepping back into "the ambulance service issue depending on what county commissioners decide after reviewing any proposals they receive.

If the city did end up sending a proposal to the county, Guyer said he believes that should be contingent on the county agreeing to ask voters in the ambulance service area in May 2023 to approve a property tax levy or create a new ambulance district, which would also impose a new property tax assessment.

"The city doesn't have a long-term solution to pay for the ambulance service," Guyer said.

City and county officials have generally agreed that a new, stable revenue source would be required to have the city continue to operate ambulances.

Guyer and Councilors Joanna Dixon, Johnny Waggoner Sr. and Kenyon Damschen voted in favor of Guyer's motion to not respond to the county by June 3.

Mayor Kerry McQuisten and Councilor Shane Alderson voted no.

Councilor Jason Spriet was absent. Alderson said on Wednesday morning, May 25, that he thinks the city, after telling Cannon to put together a proposal, should have followed through on the plan set during the May 10 meeting.

"Now we've lost a seat at the table," Alderson said.

After Guyer's motion was approved, councilors canceled both the work session and special meeting, since the purpose of both was to review a proposal the city now won't send before June 3.

Discussion of financial challenges

Although the Council decided not to continue discussing Cannon's draft proposal to the county, Cannon said he and other staff wanted to give councilors information about ambulance service and the fire department budget.

Cannon described the current situation as a "pivot point," and he said he concluded, after reviewing many documents and projections, that the city can't afford to continue operating the fire department, as a dual-role agency that responds to fires and ambulance calls, with the current revenue.

"I'm doing this because I have to for the financial solvency of the city," Cannon told councilors. "We have put a lot of blood, sweat and tears into this issue. It's not something you do as a city manager for fun because it makes for months and months of difficult, stressful, emotional days and nights."

Cannon emphasized that the city will continue to have an ambulance service regard-



Guyer



Dixon



Waggoner



Damschen



Alderson



McQuisten

less, given that the county is required by state law to ensure that happens.

"It may not have our name on it, but that's not necessarily a bad thing," Cannon said. "I think the best thing we can do is cheerlead the county."

He lauded the county's efforts, through its request for proposals, to have an ambulance provider ready to replace the city fire department if necessary.

"The county is responsible and they are working hard on this," Cannon said.

Kent Bailey, a Baker City native and 40-year CPA who audited the city's financial records for much of that time, told councilors that the city's budget situation, were the city to continue operating ambulances without a new revenue source, is "not a pretty picture."

Bailey said the city likely would need \$600,000 to \$700,000 from the county to continue operating ambulances.

The county has offered \$150,000 for the fiscal year that starts July 1. The county has pledged to give the city \$100,000 for the current fiscal year.

But Bailey said the city would need a larger county contribution to cover rising costs, including the city's share of Oregon's Public Employees Retirement System (PERS). The city's PERS liability is likely to rise considerably, Bailey said.

He also estimated that the new two-year labor contract the Council approved with the fire department union would add \$77,000 to \$100,000 to the fire department's costs.

Bailey said the Council could look at other revenue sources, mentioning as one example a \$100 fee added to each of the city's approximately 4,000 water service connections. That would raise \$400,000, but he said the county would still need to contribute about the same amount for the city to continue its current fire department staffing.

Bailey noted with a chuckle that he's considered a senior citizen, and he said he'll eventually need ambulance services.

He said the city fire department has done an "excellent job" providing that service.

"I don't ever want anybody to say that I made any derogatory comments about how the ambulance service has been provided. They've done an excellent job. This is purely money," Bailey said.

City contacted by possible bidders for ambulance service

Jennifer Spencer, the city's administrative services manager, told councilors that she has been contacted by representatives from companies

considering responding to the county's request for proposals.

Spencer said she has been "gladly" supplying data about the city's ambulance operations to those who have asked for it.

She said that although the city has tried to maximize its ambulance revenue, including submitting \$2.1 million in unpaid bills to collection agencies, the city, as a municipal provider, isn't reimbursed by Medicare or Medicaid at a rate as high as a private ambulance company would get.

Spencer said city property taxes are intended to help pay for public safety, including the fire and police departments.

"We will have a fire department," Spencer said. "We have an excellent fire department, we have an excellent police department. And that's what the property taxes are supposed to go for, not to subsidize people's medical bills and that's what the city's been doing for a very long time."

Yet with the city collecting only a portion of the amount it bills for ambulance runs — about 50% during the current fiscal year, an increase over

the past several years — that subsidy is happening, Spencer said.

"That's what the city has been doing for a very long time," she said.

Spencer told councilors that under Oregon law, a private ambulance service would have to give priority in hiring employees to current city employees.

The city's proposed budget for the fiscal year starting July 1 is based on the fire department curtailing ambulance service Sept. 30. The budget would reduce staffing in the fire department from the 16.25 full-time equivalents in the current budget — although two slots are vacant and a third soon will be — to 10.5.

Cannon said he has looked at fire departments all over the state, and he believes the staffing level in the proposed budget would work in Baker City based on call volumes.

He said there is no evidence to suggest that fire insurance costs in the city would increase if the city reduces the fire department workforce as proposed.



Jerry Lloyd Franke

April 16, 1941 - May 18, 2022



Jerry Lloyd Franke of Nampa, Idaho, (formerly of Irrigon), was born April 16, 1941, in Bemidji, Minnesota, the son of Lloyd and Helen (Reinartz) Franke. He entered into his final rest on May 18, 2022, at the age of 81 in Nampa, Idaho, where he has resided in 2017.

Jerry attended several elementary schools in Minnesota, Michigan, Oklahoma, Washington and Oregon. He attended high school in Irrigon, Oregon, graduating in 1959. He then enlisted in the U.S. Air Force.

Jerry's Air Force career lasted 20 years and he retired in 1980. He was stationed in several locations around the world, including Japan, the Philippines, England, Turkey and several bases in the United States.

Jerry married Patricia Fyvie in San Antonio, Texas, on July 2, 1964, where they were both stationed with the U.S. Air Force.

They were blessed with two children, Curtis Lloyd and Ramona Lynn, both currently reside in Nampa, Idaho.

After retirement Jerry worked for several years for the West Extension Irrigation District in Irrigon. He later worked for the Burnt River Irrigation District in Unity, Oregon.

Jerry was preceded in death by his wife, Patricia, in 2013; parents, Lloyd and Helen; and his siblings, Joanne, David and Judy.

He is survived by his children, Curtis and Ramona; brother, Richard (Karen) of Hartville, Missouri; sister, Sharon (Jim) of Nampa, Idaho; and granddaughter, Trisha of Nampa, and many nieces and nephews.

A funeral service will be held at 1 p.m. Friday, May 27, 2022, at the Burns Mortuary Chapel, 685 W. Hermiston Ave., Hermiston, Oregon, 97838. Burial with military honors will follow in Desert Lawn Memorial Cemetery in Irrigon. Burns Mortuary, of Hermiston, is in care of arrangements.

To leave an online condolence for the family please go to www.burnsmortuaryhermiston.com.



Charles Richard "Dick" Kirby

June 22, 1940 - May 2, 2022

Charles Richard "Dick" Kirby, age 81, of Baker City died peacefully at his home while surrounded by his family on May 2, 2022. A celebration of his life will be held at 1 p.m. on Wednesday, June 8, 2022, at the Baker City Christian Church, 675 Highway 7, with a reception following. Pastor Jesse Whitford will officiate. A private family urn burial at Mount Hope Cemetery will take place following the reception.

He was born to Skinner and LaVaughn (Glen) Kirby in Baker on June 22, 1940. He grew up ranching in Durkee with his family. It was in Durkee that he and his first wife, Gayle, decided they would start their family and would welcome their three children: Stacey, Angela and Rich.

In the early 1970s, Dick left full-time ranching to work for Grizzly Bear Pizza and would spend the next several years managing pizza parlors until he became a licensed real estate agent. He spent a few years selling real estate until he went to work as a property appraiser for the Baker County Assessor's Office, from which he would retire in 2008.

Dick married the love of his life, Lana, in December of 1991. They spent many happy years together until her death in April of 2018.

Throughout Dick's years, he took much pride in serving. He served six years in the Army National Guard of Oregon. He and his family had large involvement in the Durkee Steak Feed, making their famous pan bread over the open pit. He was a member of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association. He served on Baker County Search and Rescue, Baker County Election Board and spent many years within the Masonic Lodge as a Shriner. Of all of the things he served in, nothing gave him as much pride as being a Shriner and the work he did as such. Most notably, Dick was instrumental in getting the East-West Shrine Football Game to Baker City and was the game coordinator for many years.

Dick was survived by his children: Stacey (Kevin) Tatlock, Angie Mawhinney, Rich (Stefanie) Kirby, stepson; Richard (Beth) Garrett, sister; Cheryl Corbett, 14 grandchildren; seven great-grandchildren; and four nieces and their families.

Dick was preceded in death by his parents; Skinner and LaVaughn Kirby, brother; Robert Kirby, brother in law; Marshall Cornett, granddaughter; Ashley Colton, and late wife; Lana Kirby.

In lieu of flowers, please make donations to Shriners Hospitals for Children through Gray's West & Co. Pioneer Chapel, 1500 Dewey Ave., Baker City, Oregon 97814. To light a candle in Dick's honor or to offer online condolences to his family, please visit www.grayswestco.com.

