

EDITORIAL

City Council has responsibility to save ambulance service

There were multiple disappointing moments during the Baker City Council meeting Tuesday, May 24. Here's two of the more distressing examples:

First, when Jennifer Spencer, the city's administrative services manager, told councilors that she had been "gladly" providing data about the city's ambulance service to firms that might respond to Baker County's request for proposals.

And second, when City Manager Jonathan Cannon said "I think the best thing we can do is cheerlead the county" — meaning supporting the county's effort to find an ambulance operator to replace the city's fire department if it ends that service on Sept. 30, 2022, as the Council proposed.

Both statements sound innocuous. It's reasonable for Spencer to supply statistics about the ambulance service to anyone who asks. Those are public records, after all.

And certainly no one ought to root against the county in its endeavor, as required by state law, to ensure that residents have a competent ambulance service, regardless of who runs it.

But here's the disturbing thing about both statements — who, to belabor the sports analogy, is the home team?

Rather than helping the county replace the city fire department as ambulance provider, city councilors and city officials need to keep the fire department intact for at least the fiscal year that starts July 1. That can happen, and it can happen without plundering the city's budget.

But it's less likely to happen due to the Council's 4-2 vote to approve Councilor Dean Guyer's motion to not submit a proposal to the county by the June 3 deadline. This reversed the Council's May 10 decision to respond to the county's solicitation. When the May 24 meeting started, Cannon was preparing to hand out drafts of the proposal, and councilors initially scheduled both a work session and a special meeting with the intention of finalizing that proposal prior to June 3.

Cannon described the situation as a "pivot point." He said the city can't afford to continue to operate ambulances because the gap between what the city spends (and bills) and what it collects will continue to widen.

The city's projections, which take into account rising costs for employees' retirement, salaries and other inflationary factors, as well as an increasing trend in the number of ambulance calls, show that's the case.

But there's something far more vital at stake here — the dual-role fire department that multiple generations of Baker City residents have depended on. And that pivot point, to borrow Cannon's metaphor, does not hinge on what happens two years from now, or five.

Time is very much shorter than that.

The City Council made sure of that when it notified the county on March 22 that the city planned to discontinue ambulance service on Sept. 30. That prompted the county — which, again, is legally responsible — to send out the request for proposals for ambulance service. And now, two weeks after the Council decided to make an offer to the county, it has botched that chance on the specious premise that,

as both Guyer and Councilor Joanna Dixon said on May 24, the city can get back into the contest some time after June 3.

The Council's seeming lack of urgency is perplexing.

Particularly so considering that on May 10 the council chambers in City Hall was packed with residents who urged councilors to preserve the fire department as it is.

Councilors should demand an incredibly high level of proof before taking such a drastic step as ending ambulance service and trimming nearly six positions from the fire department, a step unprecedented in the city's modern history.

The case that Cannon has assembled doesn't meet that threshold.

There's no doubt that the financial projections for ambulance service, and the fire department, are troubling. But if the situation were as dire as Cannon suggests, there ought to be irrefutable evidence that the ambulance albatross over the past several years has forced the city to divert significant dollars from elsewhere in the general fund to stanch the financial bleeding.

Yet Cannon's response is that the city, due to the ambulance service costs, has had to forego some projects. This is not the same as cutting other services, such as police, that residents pay for and expect to be there when needed. The examples Cannon listed in the May 24 meeting include a roof for the fire hall, software for the finance department, new fire trucks, oxygen bottles for firefighters, foundation repairs and a fire escape for City Hall, and a cash register.

It's unlikely that residents will pack into City Hall to advocate for financial software and a cash register. Cannon said something else during the May 24 meeting that was striking. He pointed out, correctly, that there will be an ambulance service in the city after Sept. 30. No reasonable person ever believed otherwise. But Cannon also said this, referring to the ambulance service: "It may not have our name on it, but that's not necessarily a bad thing."

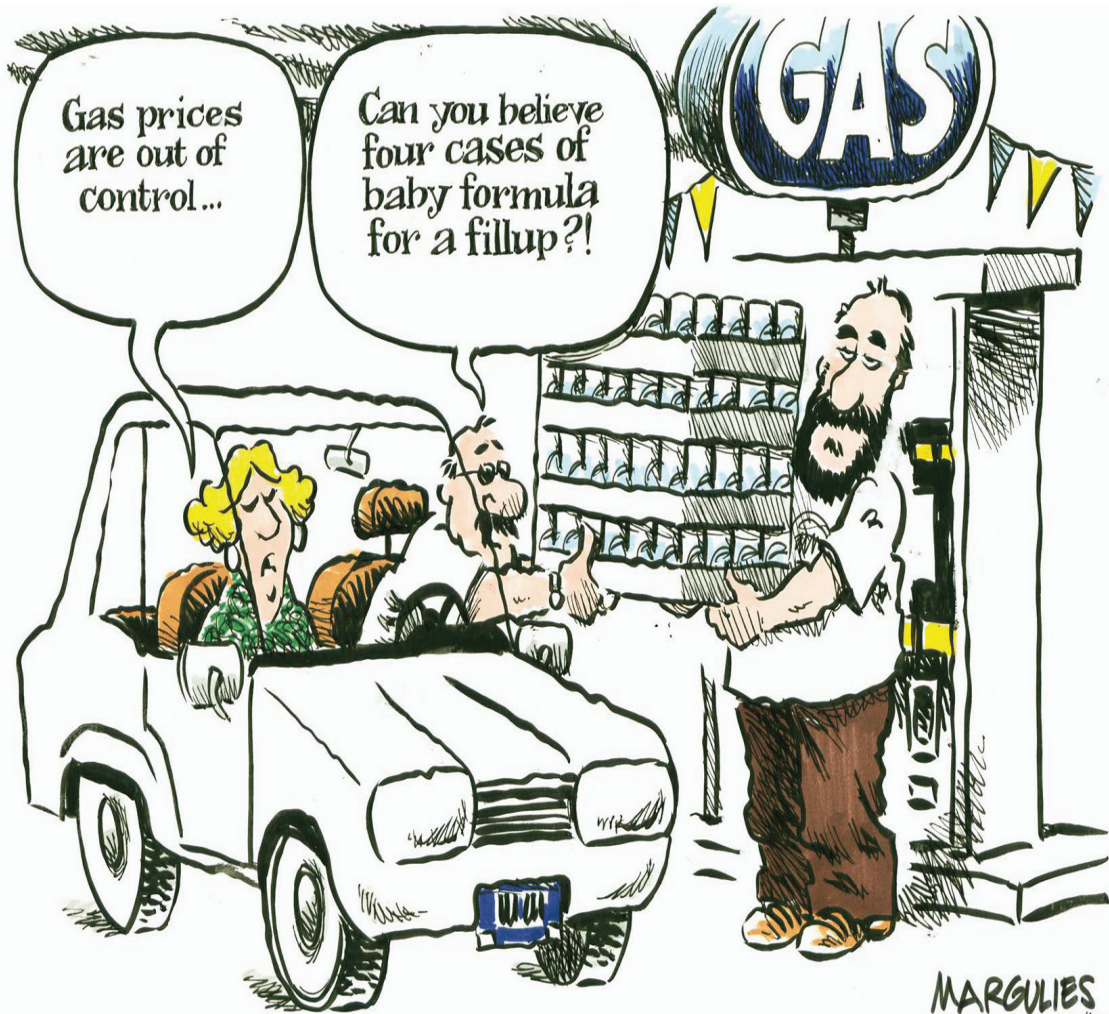
It is a bad thing. Worse, it's a bad thing that needn't happen.

Whether the city can afford to continue operating ambulances, and maintaining the level of firefighter staffing that ambulance revenue makes possible, far into the future is very much uncertain. The city needs a new revenue source. Most everyone seems to agree that the most plausible solution is to ask voters within the Baker Ambulance Service Area — the city and most of the rest of the county — in the May 2023 election to boost their property taxes.

But such a measure would be in effect a moot point if the city parks its ambulances at the end of September and lays off firefighters.

If the current dual-role fire department is to continue well into the future, it must first be saved now. That should be the City Council's top priority. But after the May 24 meeting, the city seems more inclined to help whoever steps in to replace the fire department.

— Jayson Jacoby,
Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

After Uvalde, will Americans finally take action on guns?

Editorial from The Dallas Morning News:

The feeling is too familiar now. It hits like a shock and then twists into emotions of horror, anger, sadness and fear until it settles in the mind as a sickening numbness that we don't know what to do with.

The place this time is Texas. Uvalde. The deaths for now include 19 children and two adults.

Schoolchildren. Teachers. Executed on their own campus. Murdered in the place where they should be safe, where they should be growing and becoming.

As a nation, we lack the capacity — morally, intellectually, politically — to seriously grapple with the evil sickness that has set in, manifested in the incomprehensible nihilism of a murderer who would destroy the lives of the most innocent among us. But the rage spreads through all of us as we spin in the powerless frustration that nothing is done, that nothing will be done and that we will simply await the next slaughter.

Politically and legally, this country refuses to accept or act upon the obvious connection between the easy availability of powerful weapons designed to kill humans

and the way they get into the hands of young men, even boys, with histories of disturbing behavior.

Our political conscience as a nation is so stunted now that we cannot even enforce laws that are on the books to stop these shootings. We cannot seriously discuss, much less legislate, common-sense laws that could get broad agreement that might stop the next shooter. We cannot even agree that we should use the resources of the federal government to study gun violence.

We believe in the right to bear arms. But every human right is balanced with human responsibility. No right is unlimited. Every leading Republican in this state has made more permissive gun access a political cause while doing precious little or actively undermining efforts to enforce existing regulation.

We do not know, at this writing, the details of how the Uvalde murderer got his hands on the weapon or weapons he used. We do not know his motive. We do not know much beyond the fact that he was 18, he wanted to kill children and he had the means to do it.

It is time to re-enact the restrictions in the Federal Assault Weapon

Ban that were so foolishly permitted to expire. It is time to limit high-capacity magazines. It is time to ensure that background checks and red flag laws have the most serious and uniform enforcement.

And it is time to open broad debate about other measures.

Saying this law or that law would not have prevented what happened in Uvalde is not enough. We must demand from our elected officials that they study, propose and enact legislation that has an effect. If you are in elected office, this is your job. It is urgent — a moral imperative.

There will be calls for addressing mental illness. Those are valid. But if one thing is clear from mass shooting after mass shooting, it is that killers generally acted with careful planning and clear intent. They understood the depravity and evil of their actions. They did these things because they knew they had the ready means to do them.

After so much blood of so many children has been spent, after so many mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers have been left with lives of agony and mourning and loss, after all of this horror and pain, are we still unable to act?

YOUR VIEWS

Security at schools should be highest priority

In view of the tragic school massacre in Texas I ask everyone to call members of the school board and School District 5J Superintendent Mark Witty and demand that every Baker school be fitted with double locking doors at the front of the school requiring people to identify themselves prior to gaining access to our precious children.

All exit doors on hallways should be locked from the outside. I spoke with Mark Witty at the District 5J office and learned that only the Baker Early Learning Center has such protection. He told me two other elementary schools will have these doors installed this summer and one next summer. He said it would require "millions of dollars to retrofit the junior high and high school due to the architectural layouts of those schools." This should

be the highest priority for our school board. Don't kid yourselves into thinking it won't happen in Baker. It has happened everywhere.

There have been 117 school shootings in the last year. Please protect our children and join me in letting the Baker School Board and Mr. Witty know that we need to find the money NOW to add this extra layer of protection to our children's schools!

Harvey Haskell
Baker City

COLUMN

Sight of a thunderhead serves as summer preview

The juvenile thunderhead seemed to rest on the shoulder of Black Mountain, a temporary appendage that at a cursory glance might have been mistaken for stone rather than ephemeral water vapor.

For me, though, the vantage point from Bowen Valley, just south of Baker City, is a familiar one.

I was not fooled by the illusion.

I'm no geologist but I know, from perusing various books and maps, that Black Mountain is not a volcano. This makes the peak, which rises above the southeast corner of Phillips Reservoir, an unlikely candidate to suddenly sprout topographic features.

The sight of that cloud, slate gray in the center with fringes of white around its fluffy top, thrust me suddenly from spring into the summer storm season.

Thunderstorms are perfectly plausible in May, to be sure.

But for me the classic thunderhead is the sort that forms on hot afternoons in July or August, when broiling air becomes buoyant and ascends until it can no longer hold all its latent moisture.

The physical processes that conspire to transform an innocuous cumulus cloud into a malevolent cumulonimbus, with its potential to spawn crop-smashing hail and tree-cracking gusts and lightning bolts that set fire to vulnerable forests, are far beyond my ability to comprehend.

I was fortunate to get through high school chemistry without burning down the laboratory after mishandling a Bunsen burner.

But I needn't grasp the scientific principles to relish the return of this atmospheric concoction, as reliable as the January blizzard that graces every streetlight with a halo, or the October dawn when the froly air seems so bright and sharp that it ought to ping, like fine crystal, when you snap it with a finger.

The distinctness of the seasons is one of Baker County's most fetching attributes, it seems to me.

I don't mean only that we can expect the snow squall to give way to



Jayson Jacoby

the lilac blossom, or know that the harsh yellow of the rabbitbrush will yield, come autumn, to the softer shade of the tamarack.

I anticipate with at least as much affinity the less tangible sensations as the seasons wane and wax.

The July thunderstorm and its May counterpart might be closer to siblings than to cousins, in a meteorological sense. But they feel quite different to me.

I rather expect rain, or hail, during May. It is, after all, on average the wettest month hereabouts.

A midsummer storm, by contrast, often marks the only deviation amid a long spell of the hot, dry weather that is the default in our arid climate, sheltered as we are by the twin rain shadows of the Cascades and the Elkhorns.

The sense of anticipation is much

more palpable to me when I see clouds amassing in the southwest, and feel the heat intensify as it so often does in those strange still moments before a storm breaks and the willow boughs begin to thrash about.

It is, appropriately enough, an electric feeling, one that can make the fillings in my teeth seem to vibrate, and the fine hairs on my arms to quiver.

I have in recent years sadly supplemented skywatching, a trait I undoubtedly share with my ancestors dating back dozens of millennia, with the ersatz, if effective, digital version. Which is to say that in addition to glancing up at the sky I also look down at my cellphone and its cunning displays of Doppler radar. This is interesting, as technology can be. But the yellow and red digital blobs that denote a storm — which remind me of nothing so much as the rudimentary graphics from an Atari 2600 game — can't convey the acrid smell of ozone from lightning, can't make your organs feel as though they've been jumbled the way a cannonade of

thunder, seeming to explode directly overhead, can do.

The sheer power of nature can't be captured in pixels.

And although I recognize the wisdom of seeking shelter when a storm approaches and would never suggest otherwise, I also look forward, among the many experiences that summer promises and usually delivers, to those moments when I stand in my yard, awaiting the coming of the tempest.

No other season can replicate those interludes between the predictable heat of the afternoon and the brief downpour, when the sweat on my neck seems to turn to ice.

No air conditioner can produce a draft of air so refreshing.

And then the steaming aftermath as the sun rapidly regains its strength, leaving only the puddles as evidence that the storm, on its way to dampen places far beyond the horizon, was ever here.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.