

EDITORIAL

City slouches toward a dismal future

Baker City's Fire Department is slouching into an unfortunate and dismal future, and the City Council seems unwilling to prevent this ignominious fate.

Baker County, which, as City Manager Jonathan Cannon has emphasized, is legally responsible for ensuring there is ambulance service within the city, is trying to fulfill that obligation.

Two private ambulance companies — Metro West Ambulance of Hillsboro, and Victory EMS of Boise — responded to the county's request for proposals by the June 3 deadline. On Wednesday morning, June 8, commissioners approved the recommendation from an advisory committee to accept Metro West's proposal.

The sad reality, however, is that county commissioners didn't of their own volition start courting private firms interested in replacing the Baker City Fire Department as ambulance provider within the city and for about two-thirds of the rest of the county.

The City Council, prompted by Cannon, left commissioners with no alternative but to solicit a successor. The Council on March 22 notified the county that the city intended to curtail ambulance service Sept. 30, 2022.

Councilors have shown little interest in the ensuing two and a half months in trying to preserve the dual-role fire department that has served city residents, and many who live outside the city limits, for the better part of a century.

There was a brief period of optimism when, on May 10, councilors voted 7-0 to direct Cannon to prepare a response to the county's solicitation. That vote came after 18 residents, among a capacity crowd at City Hall, implored councilors to have the fire department retain its ambulance service and, in so doing, avoid cutting the department from 16.25 full-time equivalent positions to 10.5.

But councilors wasted that opportunity two weeks later, voting 4-2 to reverse the decision and not submit a proposal by June 3. Both Councilor Dean Guyer, who suggested the city not submit a proposal, and Joanna Dixon, who voted for the motion, suggested the city could still potentially negotiate a deal with the county after the June 3 deadline.

This made little sense then, and it's even less plausible now that the county has two proposals from private ambulance companies.

We don't know the details of either proposal — Oregon's Public Records Law allows the county to withhold those details until commissioners approve a notice of intent to award a contract. And although Commissioner Bruce Nichols said the county isn't legally obligated to contract with either firm, the city, and the future of its fire department, are in an extremely tenuous position. Given Cannon's and the City Council's distinct lack of enthusiasm for continuing a local ambulance service, commissioners have little reason to be confident that if they reject both private proposals they could then rely on city officials to step in.

Sadly, city officials' apathy is already accomplishing through attrition the fire department staffing cuts that will be necessary unless the City Council changes course and approves a revised budget, for the fiscal year that starts July 1, before June 30.

Three firefighter/paramedic positions are vacant. Two of those people left their jobs this spring. One, Brian Johnson, cited uncertainty about his future with the department due to looming layoffs.

Casey Johnson, a firefighter/paramedic and president of the union chapter that represents firefighters, said two other of his co-workers had interviews with other fire departments on Tuesday, June 7.

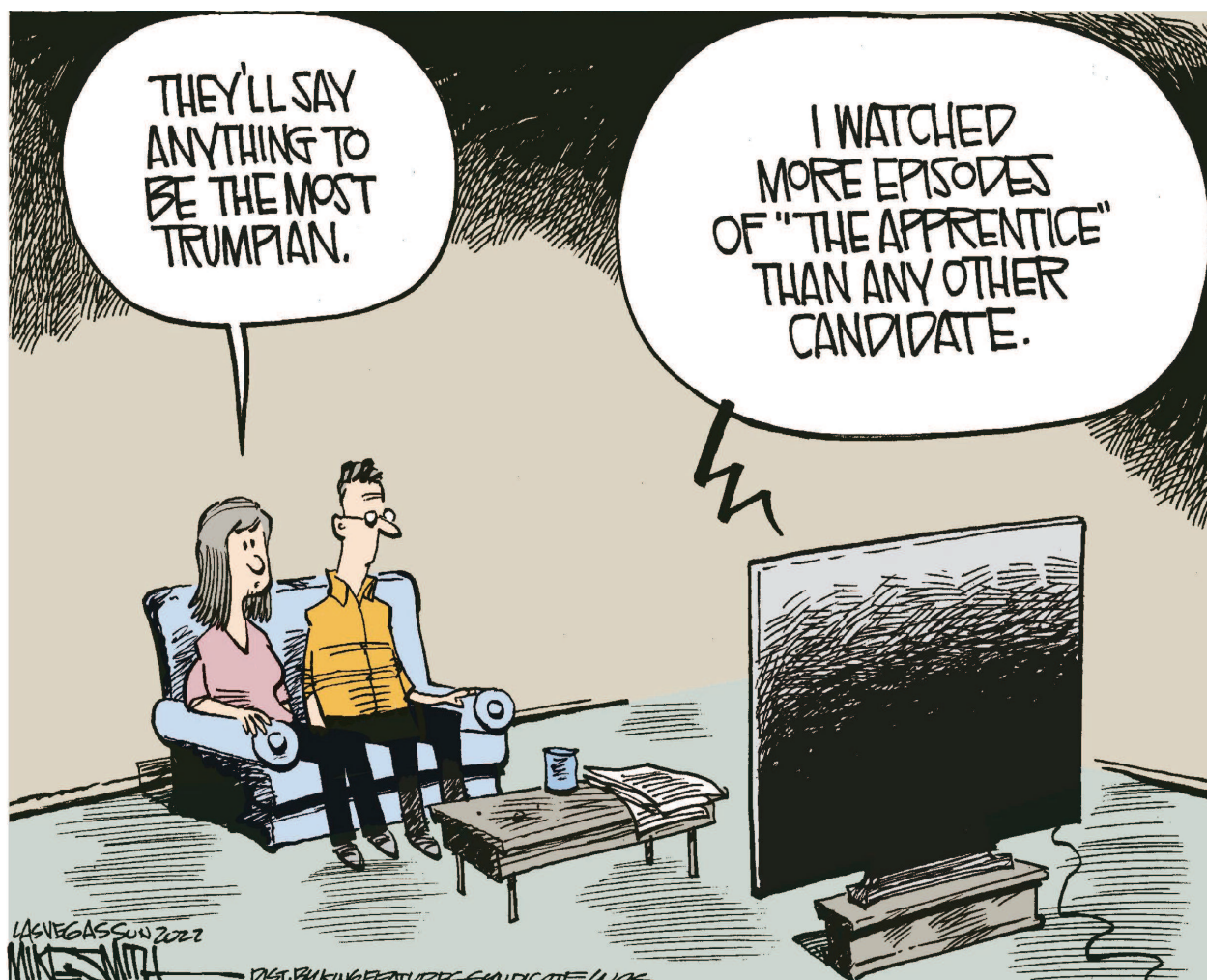
The staffing situation — exacerbated by city officials' decision in July 2021 to move two of the three fire division chiefs out of 24-hour shifts — prompted Fire Chief Sean Lee to notify the county May 17 about the department's struggles to respond to simultaneous calls. That prompted the county to temporarily hire American Medical Response to staff an ambulance in Baker City at least through June 10.

When city residents exercised their collective voice during the City Council's May 10 meeting, their message seemed to resonate, albeit only temporarily.

It looks as though only passionate pleas can save the fire department in the form that we have come to expect, and to rely on.

And given the commissioners' decision Wednesday, even that looks unlikely.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



COLUMN

COVID-19: Hope, but not complacency

BY DR. CORY FRANKLIN AND DR. ROBERT A. WEINSTEIN

The famous Robert Frost poem "The Road Not Taken" begins: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, / And sorry I could not travel both." The United States and the rest of the world faced a fork in the road with two possible options at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic: Attempt to control the spread of the virus through social measures and lockdowns or let the virus run its course naturally ("let it rip," as some have referred to it) in the hope of inducing herd immunity in the populace.

Countries selected one path or the other, and neither strategy was completely successful. The "flatten the curve" approach in the U.S. failed to prevent virus spread and resulted in large numbers of COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 deaths while simultaneously damaging the economy and harming childhood education. The "let it rip" approach, employed by Sweden, produced marginally better results — roughly the same number of cases per capita as the U.S., less economic downturn and fewer excess deaths — but was hardly an unqualified success. (Deaths per capita are higher in Sweden than in the other Scandinavian countries.)

So, facing our next crossroad, as the sixth wave in the U.S. may be starting to wind down, how best to return to a "normal life"?

The COVID-19 virus has shown it is nimble in mutating, spreading and circumventing vaccine and acquired immunity. This makes the cost of attempting to suppress infections by once again closing schools and instituting lockdowns unacceptably high. Children have already suffered immeasurably, and lockdowns would further cripple the business sector. Nor would this likely work; even the draconian

zero-COVID-19 measures of Communist China and North Korea have proved futile in the face of the current, extremely contagious variants.

Alternately, as new variants become more communicable but less severe (current COVID-19 mortality is 90% lower than it was in early 2020), we can hope this unprecedented rapid viral evolution results in a version of COVID-19 that resembles the common cold. Adapting to it would mean living with an illness we can treat and against which we can vaccinate and employ protective measures to help the immunocompromised, elderly and very young.

But this approach, while more practical, must not encourage individual complacency. A majority of the population may contract some form of the virus, but it is not a prospect to cheerfully anticipate. Besides the diminishing but still-present morbidity and mortality, the unresolved future repercussions of even trivial infections — long COVID-19 — remain a concern for those who become infected. We should still be careful how we live.

Right now, this makes decisions as routine as attending the theater or eating in crowded restaurants fraught with uncertainty. The government, which once advised the public on what to do and how to live, appears to have washed its hands of most responsibility and now seems to be leaving decisions largely to the public. But expert input would still be of immeasurable benefit in helping us live our lives.

In what venues should we mask? When should we test at home? What is the risk of attending a concert at Soldier Field? Granted, there is no consensus, and the recommendations will change over time, but we could still use some advice from the medical community about the COVID-19 risks of everyday life.

Meanwhile, there is certainly reason for optimism. Antiviral drugs will get only better, and new vaccines are being developed. A "universal" coronavirus vaccine could provide protection against the constantly changing COVID-19 variants. A nasal spray vaccine that induces high levels of antibodies at the nose, the main portal of viral entry into the body, might theoretically be safer and more effective than the current vaccine booster regimen.

While we await those advances, there is no role for complacency by the public. Those officials charged with COVID-19 management must improve case tracking to include the results of home testing, coordinate national and global surveillance of COVID-19 variants, and facilitate wastewater surveillance of the virus, which can be an early indicator of a COVID-19 variant or a generalized outbreak.

At the same time, the government should encourage home testing, optimize the path from testing to delivery of oral COVID-19 medications, fund the development of more comfortable and durable protective masks, and push for better ventilation in residential buildings, businesses and schools.

As we continue the battle against COVID-19 into the third year, recall the eloquence of Winston Churchill as the tide was turning in World War II: "This is no time for boasts or glowing prophecies, but there is this — a year ago our position looked forlorn, and well-nigh desperate, to all eyes but our own. Today we may say aloud before an awe-struck world, 'We are still masters of our fate. We still are captain of our souls.'"

■ Dr. Cory Franklin is a retired intensive care physician. Dr. Robert A. Weinstein is an infectious disease specialist at Rush University Medical Center.

OTHER VIEWS

Uvalde police let down parents, community

Editorial from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch:

A CNN reporter correctly confronted the Uvalde, Texas, school district chief of police on June 1, refusing to take no for an answer when Chief Pedro Arredondo repeatedly tried to sidestep the reporter and avoid answering crucial questions about last month's school massacre. Arredondo escaped through a door, after which the school district announced that it would arrest any reporter found on school district property.

These aren't the actions of administrators and officers interested in an honest assessment of what went wrong in a school shooting that left 19 children and two educators dead. These are the actions of officials doing their best to evade accountability for the apparent hand-wringing cowardice of a commander who restrained law enforcers from taking action to save precious lives.

The threat to arrest reporters applies not just to Robb Elementary, the scene of the massacre, but any school district property where reporters wait to speak

with officials. A video posted on Twitter June 1 showed four school district officers informing reporters that they were regarded as trespassers and subject to arrest.

The pathetic story of Arredondo's inaction, which may have cost the lives of wounded children, seems to get more pathetic by the day. At first, Uvalde law enforcers looked like heroes when stories circulated of alleged heroism in the first minutes of the school attack. But on closer inspection, it became clear that Arredondo behaved like a bumbling, indecisive coward.

U.S. Border Patrol officers, a police SWAT team and others waited anxiously for the order to go in as the shooter continued his rampage. Parents pleaded with officers to stop standing around and take action. One mother broke through a cordon to rescue her child. They handcuffed her. In the shooter's presence, children were texting their parents, pleading for help.

But for 80 minutes, Arredondo — the incident commander in charge — held back. Some parents have good

reason to believe that their wounded children might have bled out during that waiting period. It's unclear whether additional victims were shot while Arredondo was holding back. Uvalde's mayor, expressing outrage, asked the Justice Department to investigate.

CNN reporter Shimon Prokopenko confronted Arredondo directly at his office — not on school grounds — to ask why Texas Department of Public Safety officials are saying Arredondo wasn't cooperating with their investigation. Arredondo claimed his office was in contact with them, then fell back on the excuse that families are burying their loved ones and, "out of respect," he would wait for them to finish grieving before answering questions.

Those families will never stop grieving. They deserve answers. It's too bad that they, like the families whose children were slaughtered in the 2019 Parkland, Florida, school massacre, had to put their trust in a law enforcer who seemed to have lost his nerve when the ability to summon courage might have saved lives.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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