City Councilors react to county's ambulance decision

BY SAMANTHA O'CONNER

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Baker County Commissioners approved at their special meeting Wednesday morning to go with the Ambulance Service Area (ASA) Request for Proposal (RFP) committee's recommendation to pursue a contract with Metro West out of Hillsboro for ambulance services.

This follows the Baker City Council's decision in March to end their ambulance services citing financial issues.

City Councilors offered their thoughts and reactions to the decision.

Joanna Dixon

"After reviewing the two proposals the county received, I think Metro West will do an outstanding job of serving the citizens of Baker City and Baker County. I don't believe the city will end ambulance service any sooner than Sept. 30, with Metro West planning to take over October 1.



"I am very confident that the staffing recommendations from Chief Lee will be adequate for city residents. It has been based on staffing examples from other fire departments with populations similar to Baker City."

Johnny Waggoner Sr.

"Well it's bittersweet to me. I loved having local EMT's because it was more personal in my opinion. I'm glad the county got a experienced provider. I'm hopeful it will save the county taxpayers some tax money as well. I will not vote to suspend any ambulance service unless we don't have staff to do so, or the county has a contractor in place."



Waggoner Sr.

Shane Alderson

"MetroWest, I think they have been in business for a long time. I think they are an adequate EMS company. I think the way we operate in the field will change. And our firefighters will have to get used to a non-dual role application in the field. But I think they are adequate for our needs here. I do have staffing concerns with the fire de-



partment, not so much the idea of the staffing but if we have more people leave or we get too many people out sick at one time, I think we could have a shortfall in an event like that. So that has me concerned.

"As far as the September 30 date, I would assume the county commissioners would allow us to run to that but maybe not, I'm not privy to that. I think there's another meeting coming up on the county's side. So, I don't know. We might be out of it sooner. And then as we have firefighter paramedics leave, that might speed up the end date."

Contract

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Nichols said Metro West had an advantage of about 30 points, in the committee's rat-

ing, over Capstone. Several details remain uncertain, including where Metro West will garage its ambulances, and when the company will fully replace the Baker City Fire Department, which has operated ambulances for more than half a century.

Nichols said those issues will be part of the county's contract negotiations with Metro West.

Erin Miller, chief business development officer for Metro West, had not returned a phone call by the deadline for this story.

City notice in March kicked off county's search for replacement

The county hadn't been looking for a new ambulance provider until the Baker City Council voted on March 22 of this year to notify the county that the city intended to curtail ambulance service Sept. 30, 2022.

Under Oregon law, the county, not the city, is responsible for picking an ambulance provider.

After talks between city and county officials during the spring failed to yield an agreement for the city to continue operating ambulances, commissioners approved a request for proposals.

Metro West and Capstone sent formal proposals, although Bennett said some other companies had inquired with the county.

Bennett said he talked with several members of the advisory committee, and all were disappointed that Baker City didn't submit a proposal.

The City Council voted 7-0 on May 10 to direct City Manager Jonathan Cannon to write a proposal for the city fire department to remain the ambulance provider.

But during their May 24 meeting, at which Cannon was preparing to distribute a draft of the proposal, councilors voted 4-2 to not submit a pro-

posal to the county by the June 3 deadline.

Ambulance bill comparison The Baker City Fire Depart-

ment charges these amounts for ambulance transports:

- Basic life support: \$1,079 Advanced life support: \$1,550
- Non-resident, basic life support: \$2,144
- Non-resident, advanced life support: \$2,550

• Mileage: \$22 per mile Most of the patients transported in city ambulances are covered by federal Medicare or Medicaid, which pay only about 20% of the amount the city bills.

That low reimbursement rate is one reason that Baker City Manager Jonathan Cannon has cited for why he believes the city couldn't afford to continue operating ambulances.

It's not clear how much private companies, such as Metro West, will receive from Medicare and Medicaid patients.

Metro West is proposing a flat rate of \$1,500 for both basic and advance life support transports, regardless of whether the patient is a local

The proposal also includes a fee of \$21 per mile.

"These are our initial rates," the Metro West proposal states. "We understand that these rates will be in effect for the entire first year of the contract. After the first year, rate increases will not occur more than twice in any (12) twelve month period. We will complete rate reviews to determine need for increase based on Medicare fee schedule and cost of doing business. We agree to furnish a thirty (30) day notice to the Commissioners of any rate increase."

Possible job opportunities for laid off city firefighter/ paramedics

Baker City's proposed budget for the fiscal year that starts July 1 reduces the fire department staffing from 16.25 full-time equivalents to 10.5.

Three firefighter/paramedic positions are vacant, and the city is not recruiting to

Phillips, which last fall

In loving memory of my mother and best friend, Carol Thom. Born Carolyn Louise Reedy in Mantoo, IL, on Sept. 6, 1943. She was raised in Myrtle Creek and Portland, Oregon. She passed Feb. 4, 2022, at the

She brought four children into the world, had five grandchildren and and seven great-grandchildren. Carol lived life to its fullest and touched many people along the way. She always helped those around her who needed a hand up in life. She enjoyed being outdoors, hunting, fishing, camping. She also enjoyed motorcycle riding, pool and bingo. Her passion was music, as she had a beautiful voice of a soprano and she would share

Carol worked most of her life. She would often say she was a jack of most labor trades and master of none. She retired at about age 70. Even though Carol has passed, her spirit lives through those she loved and touched. A celebration of her life will take place in September 2022, the place yet to be announced. All people are welcome. Come share your story or respect

Rain

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Up to an inch of rain is possible, with higher amounts in the mountains, according to the National Weather Service.

Thunderstorms are also forecast, and, as always, they could boost rainfall totals in localized areas.

If the weekend storm proves as potent as predicted, June could become the third straight month with above average rainfall at the Baker City Airport. That hasn't happened in more than a decade.

The last such period was April through June of 2010. Rainfall in April 2010 totaled 1.83 inches (average is .80), 1.76 inches in May (average 1.42), and 2.19 inches in June

(average 1.26). This year had an exceedingly dry start, with just .67 of an inch of precipitation (rain and melted snow) from January through March. That's 30% of

average for that period. But the situation reversed

starting in early April. April's rain total at the airport was 1.26 inches, and

May's was 2.05 inches. June is also on pace to surpass its rainfall average, with .43 of an inch through the first

nine days of the month. The major shift in the weather pattern this spring has started to ease the drought that has plagued the county, and the rest of Eastern Oregon, for

more than a year. In Baker County as of May 31, the U.S. Drought Monitor rated 62% of the county, including Baker Valley, as being in extreme drought, the second-worst in the five-category rating system (abnormally dry, followed by four levels of drought — moderate, severe, extreme and exceptional). The rest of the county (except a tiny sliver in the Elkhorn Moun-

tains) was in severe drought. But a week later, on June 7, the percentage of the county in extreme drought had dropped

from 62% to 44%. The biggest change was in Baker Valley, which moved from extreme to severe drought.



county in severe drought went from 38% to 54%. The remaining 2% — in the Elkhorns and a sliver at the northeast corner in Hells Canyon — was rated as modest drought. Conditions have improved

Overall, the portion of the

even more in Union and Umatilla counties.

No part of Umatilla County is in drought, and only a tiny fraction of the county is rated

as abnormally dry. Most of Union County, including the Grande Ronde Valley, is rated as abnormally dry, with smaller sections of moderate and severe drought in the southern part of the county, including the North Powder Valley.

Unlike Baker County, no part of Union County is rated as severe or extreme drought.

Recent rain, along with melting snow from the mountains, has swollen streams and replenished many reservoirs.

Thief Valley Reservoir east of North Powder, and Unity Reservoir in southern Baker County, are both full.

A notable exception is Phillips Reservoir southwest of Baker City, a vital source of irrigation water for Baker Valley.

reached its lowest level since it first filled in 1968, was at 19% of its capacity on June 9.

Carol Thom September 6, 1943 – February 4, 2022

her gift, singing karaoke. for a spirit who is deeply missed.

Ralph H. Holcomb **Christian Church Minister** February 21, 1923 - April 23, 2022

peacefully in Battle Ground, WA, at the Pine, OR, (High Lakes Christian Church). age of 99. The eldest of three children of He held week-long evangelistic meetings

Pleasant Ralph Holcomb and Florence Irene Johnston, he grew up in New Bridge and Baker City, OR, with sisters Doris (Baum) and Velora (Morton).

He was a graduate of Baker High School (1940), and Northwest Christian College (1947) where he married fellow student Velma E. Webb of Sunnyside, WA, in 1945, and he received an MDiv

degree from Butler School of Religion (1961). He and Velma had three daughters while serving in pastoral ministry at North Plains, OR, Central Christian Church, Portland OR, and First Christian Church at Windfall, Indiana. Ralph was a professor of New Testament and Homiletics at San Jose Bible College, San Jose, CA, for five vears. He returned to pastoral ministry at First Christian Church in Caldwell, ID; Concord Christian Church in Milwaukie, OR; First Christian Church of Lakewood, CA; First Christian Church of Madras, OR; and Baker City Christian Church, his home church, where he was when he retired in 1988. He helped start two

new churches, one at Reedsport, OR,

Rev. Ralph H. Holcomb passed away (Reedsport Christian Church), and at La

in 50 congregations in eight states, including Hawaii. He also served on the boards of several church associations.

During retirement he took interim ministries at Mountlake Terrace, WA; Enterprise Christian Church, Enterprise, OR; Kern Park Christian Church in Portland, OR; and Richland Christian Church, Richland, OR.

Survivors include daughters; Bonnie

Holcomb (husband, William Silverman) of Bethesda, MD, Shirley Holcomb Duncan (husband, Greg Duncan) of LaCenter, WA, and Renee Holcomb Wurgler (husband, Joel Wurgler) of Berwyn, IL; grandchildren, Darcy Adams, Kristin Wurgler, Rachel Schafer, Erica Pollock, Sean Duncan, Emily Wurgler, Braden Silverman, Erin Relova, Jeana Duncan; sister, Nancv Smith; nephew, Craig Morton; nieces, Gail Reynolds, and Karen Baum Tricomo, and thirteen great-grandchildren.

Services will be held at Baker City Christian Church on Saturday June 18 at 2 p.m. All are welcome. Memorial contributions: Baker City Christian Church, 675 OR-7, Baker City, OR 97814.

fill those openings due to the

planned staffing cuts. Nichols said state law, which is reflected in the county's request for proposals, requires that for six months after a new ambulance provider starts, the provider has to give hiring preference to qualified employees from the previous provider — the Baker City Fire Department, in this case.

Nichols said he hopes Metro West can hire current Baker City Fire Department workers who will lose their jobs when the city discontinues ambulance operation.

The Metro West proposal addresses that issue, stating: "As part of our staffing and experience model, we want to

start off by proposing to offer shared staffing with Baker City Fire Department. We would be willing to contract with Baker City for Firefighter EMTs and Paramedics to help staff our primary or back up units reimbursing the City for their time spent on units. We would also offer to hire any fire Paramedics or EMT's that lose employment with Baker City. Additionally we would be willing to lease space for our units and staff at Baker City Fire stations. As part of this partnership, we will offer training and classes at no charge to the Baker City Fire Department to further solidify our relationship with this important agency.

Tammy Rae Blanchard October 4, 1961 - May 13, 2022

Tammy Rae Blanchard passed away on May 13, 2022, of natural causes in her home at Nyssa, OR.

She was born on October 4, 1961, in Colfax, WA, and was one of three children born to Patty and Ed Nelson. After years in the Colfax area they moved to Baker City, OR, where Tammy excelled in sports such as basketball, volleyball and tennis. Tammy was



also gifted in academics, social aspects, and leadership

Growing up she enjoyed being on the family wheat farm, raising horses and taking care of her animals. After graduating from high school, she received her bachelor's in education from Eastern Oregon University and later received her master's in education from Northwest Nazarene University.

During her extensive education, Tammy excelled in school and focused on literature and writing. Over the past 25 years she has taught at the high school level in multiple districts in the Malheur area.

While at Eastern Oregon University she met the love of her life, Kent Blanchard. Tammy and Kent married in 1984 in Baker City, OR. Together they had three children, Patrick, Alec and Camryn, whom they raised in Nyssa, OR. Throughout the children's high school careers, both Tammy and Kent were highly supportive of their sons' activities - always attending sports and other extracurricular events.

Tammy was family oriented and loved cooking meals for her loved ones and hosting family gatherings. One of her greatest passions was the yearly summer vacation trip to the family cabin at Twin Lakes in Washington. Tammy would spend time at the lake, fishing, boating, playing cards, and cracking jokes. During her free time, Tammy's hobbies included reading, writing, collecting Cheshire cat figurines, playing card games, hanging with her two dogs, attending music events, and spending time with Aurora, her granddaughter.

Tammy is survived by her husband, Kent; her sons, Patrick, Alec and Camryn; her mother, Patty; her siblings, Denise and Randy; her granddaughter, Aurora; and other extended family.

There will be a blessing at Saint Bridget of Kildare Catholic Church in Nyssa, OR on July, 9, 2022, at 10

Virgil Ridenour September 18, 1935 - May 26, 2022

Virgil Marion Ridenour, 86, died at his home in Baker City, Oregon, on May 26, 2022. A celebration of his life will be held at a future date.

Virgil (Mert to his family and friends in Texas and Oklahoma) was born in Spanish Fort, Texas, on Sept. 18, 1935. His father was Jacob Allen Ridenour from Grady, Oklahoma, and his mother was



Ona Rich of Spanish Fort, Texas. He had three older brothers and two younger sisters. The family lived in Roland, Texas, and moved to Henrietta, Texas, where he started school. They moved to Stanfield, Texas, then to Humphreys, Oklahoma, where he graduated high

school in 1954. Virgil joined the U.S. Navy in July 1954. He was trained as an aviation technician, served with Fighter Squadron 84, went to Cuba twice and to the Mediterranean and England. He received an honorable discharge in July 1962. Virgil went to Cameron Jr. College in Lawton and Oklahoma State University in Stillwater and earned a bachelor of science degree in Electronic Engineering. In Sept. 1963, he started working for the Bonneville Power Administration in Portland, Oregon, then North Bend, Oregon, assigned to Power System Control.

While he was in Portland he met Judy Hawley and they married July 12, 1964. They have a son, Hayden Scott, and a daughter, Bethany Corinne. The family lived in North Bend/Coos Bay, then Eugene, Dexter and Pleasant Hill. They traveled to Texas and Oklahoma frequently to visit family and friends. When Virgil retired from BPA in 1990, after 32 years, he and Judy moved to Terrebonne in Central Oregon and raised Angus and longhorn cattle for several years. They retired again and moved to Baker City in 2019.

Virgil enjoyed fishing, gardening, working with his property, playing cribbage, and his pet cats and dogs. Special highlights of his life included when he and Judy traveled to Hawaii for their 25th wedding anniversary, when he went to Australia in 1996 to visit Hayden, and when Virgil and Judy enjoyed a cruise to Alaska with Hayden and his wife Bala, granddaughter Maya, and

Bala's parents in 2004. He will be greatly missed by his family and friends,

Virgil is survived by his wife, Judy, his son, Hayden, his daughter, Bethany, and granddaughter, Maya and grandson, Rohan, one brother, Jacob Theophilas Ridenour, and one sister, Nona Nadine Smith.

For those who would like to make a memorial donation in honor of Virgil the family suggests either the Baker City Christian Church, Heart n' Home Hospice or the Baker County Ambulance Dept. through Tami's Pine Valley Funeral Home, P.O. Box 543, Halfway, Oregon 97834. Online condolences can be shared at www.tamispinevalleyfuneralhome.com.