

EDITORIAL

Ambulance proposal likely was doomed

Even if the Baker City Council had decided to send a proposal to Baker County, outlining how the city fire department could continue operating ambulances, it likely would have been a fool's errand, doomed to failure.

This was probably to be expected, considering City Manager Jonathan Cannon's dogged insistence that the city can't afford to continue operating ambulances for even one more fiscal year without a major cash infusion from the county. This despite a lack of compelling evidence that running ambulances, as the city has done since the 1930s, has been siphoning great amounts of dollars from other departments in the city's general fund over the past several years.

The City Council voted 7-0 on May 10 to have Cannon prepare a proposal to meet the county's June 3 deadline. Two weeks later councilors voted 4-2 to reverse that decision. The deadline came and went, and on June 8, county commissioners voted to contract with Metro West Ambulance of Hillsboro to replace the Baker City Fire Department.

Thus ended one of the more disappointing, and inexplicable, City Council actions in the past few decades.

The city initially refused to release the draft proposal Cannon was working on. The Baker City Herald appealed that decision to District Attorney Greg Baxter under Oregon's Public Records Law. Baxter concluded that the draft was not exempt from public disclosure. It's available on the city's website, bakercity.com.

Although county commissioners Bruce Nichols and Mark Bennett have said publicly that they had hoped the city would submit a proposal, it's difficult to imagine how commissioners could have picked the city over Metro West, based on the document Cannon was working on.

Most notably, the city's draft proposal, which actually includes two scenarios, states that "Baker City will require the following non-negotiable amounts from Baker County for each year of the contract."

Those amounts range from \$850,000 to \$1,600,000 per year.

Baker County contributed \$100,000 to the city for ambulance service in the current fiscal year. It defies belief that county commissioners would — or, indeed, could — have agreed to the city's "non-negotiable" request for such larger sums.

Metro West, which has the advantage of being able to collect a larger percentage of its costs, compared with the city, from the Medicare and Medicaid patients who make up a majority of local ambulance patients, did not request any financial subsidy for the duration of the five-year contract.

The other private company that sent a proposal, Capstone Transportation, which operates as Victory EMS in the Boise area, proposed a county subsidy of \$1,280,000 the first year, with expected 3% annual increases thereafter.

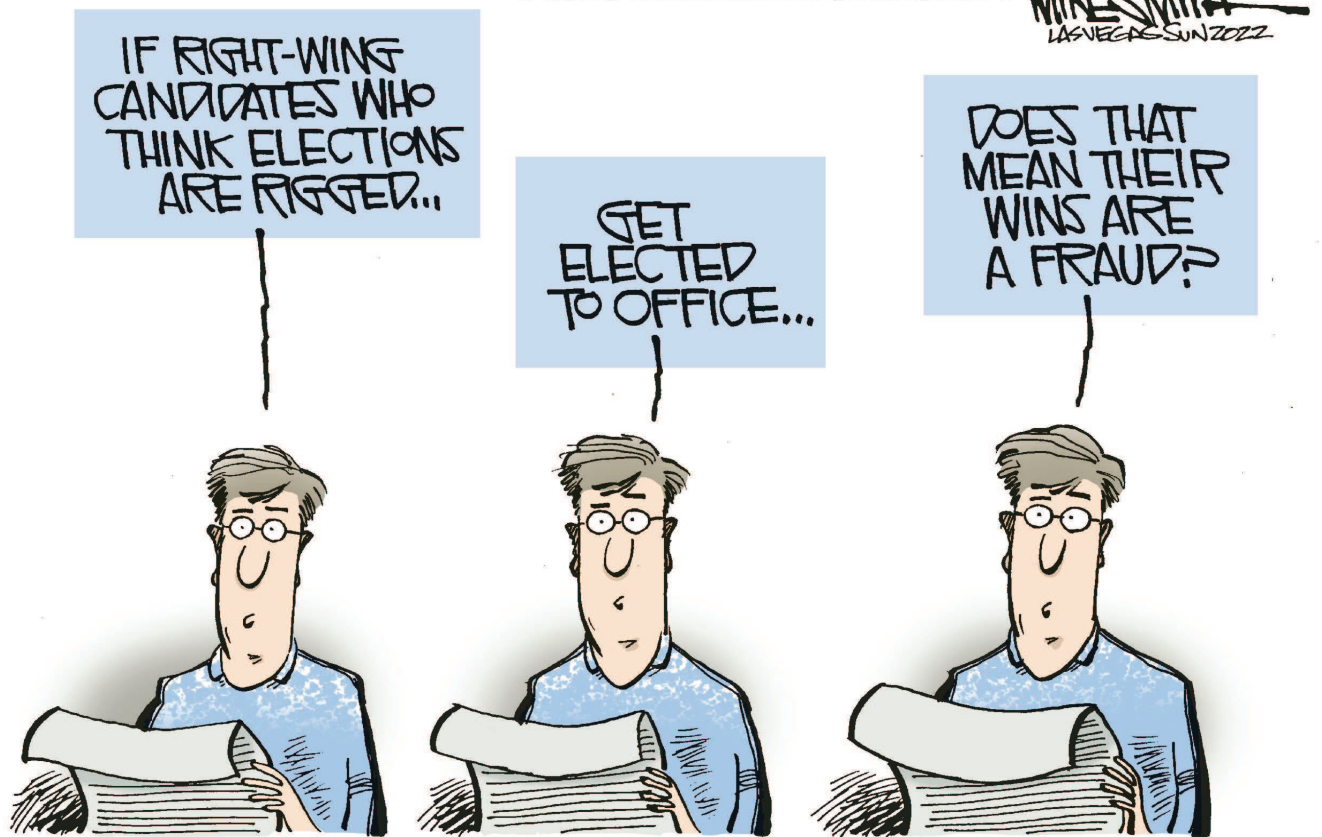
The vast difference in the monetary terms between the Metro West and Victory EMS proposals is one reason that choosing the former firm was "basically an easy pick," Nichols said.

Given that Baker City's draft proposal called for a county contribution similar to Victory EMS; it seems likely that the city would have been as distant a runner-up to Metro West.

Ultimately, it looks as though the city's ambulance service — and the larger firefighting workforce it made possible but which the city is now losing — was all but doomed from the council's March 22 vote to send the ultimatum to the county. The city's budget for the fiscal year that starts July 1 includes 10.5 full-time equivalent positions, compared with 16.25 in the current budget.

Whether or not the city submitted the proposal, with its outlandish dollar demands, probably was a moot point.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

The tragedy in Uvalde, and why police body camera footage should be released

EDITORIAL FROM THE FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM:

One really disturbing crime is sometimes all it takes to enact change at any level. The Uvalde shooting has done that, encouraging new federal gun legislation and school safety provisions.

It has also revealed the limitations police hope to place on public release of body camera footage. The Texas Department of Public Safety has asked Attorney General Ken Paxton to prevent the public release of footage from cameras that law enforcement officers wore during the shooting at Robb Elementary School, citing one of the many legal loopholes available to them.

In this case, DPS officials argue, the footage could be used by other criminals to find "weaknesses" in how police respond to crimes.

No offense to the Uvalde ISD police and others on the scene for more than an hour while the attack was active, but that ship has sailed.

Motherboard, a tech publication, filed public records requests with DPS, Uvalde city police, the school district, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Customs and Border Protection agency. It seeks body camera footage, audio recordings, and other relevant information from that day in order to understand what went wrong.

It does not take the eye of a criminal investigator to see that Uvalde police failed to follow protocol and lacked the tools and courage necessary to confront an active

shooter and usher dying children to nearby hospitals so that their lives may have been saved, even as they prevented parents from going inside the school themselves.

Over the two weeks following the shooting, the story law enforcement shared to the media changed several times. From whether there was a security guard at the school to whether a door was propped open and whether the first responding officer carried a radio, law enforcement involved in the response have shown they're good at one thing: obfuscation.

Body camera footage of active law enforcement officers that day wouldn't tell the whole story, of course. And it wouldn't have to include awful footage of dead or dying victims. But it would provide answers that law enforcement can't quite get straight.

There are legal provisions to prevent release of the footage, but they should be sparsely applied on a case-by-case basis. The loopholes are vast and expansive and completely thwart the reason for body cameras in the first place: to promote transparency and accountability.

Body camera footage often clarifies for law enforcement and perpetrator what might seem hazy in the heat of an intense moment.

According to the Texas Public Information Act, "A video of a use of deadly force by an officer or the investigation of an officer can not be released to the public until all criminal and administrative processes have been completed. A law enforcement

agency may release a video if the agency determines that release of the video advances a law enforcement purpose." Under these two vague circumstances, both left up to the powers that be, it's a miracle anyone wondering about the fate of their loved ones in the hands of police officers has seen body cam footage.

Texas law has provisions about what footage and other police documents police departments can withhold. Each city has its own policies, too. Together, they form a laundry list of subjective reasons. Here are some in Fort Worth: in cases in which no one is charged or convicted, in cases where footage shows the inside of a residence, when an investigation is ongoing or the release could compromise the investigation, when the footage might violate someone's privacy, if the subject is a juvenile, if the footage identifies officers' names or adversely affects future operations, or when there is a "dead suspect."

These, particularly that last reason, allows police the option to withhold video or documents in far too many cases. Too many departments are quick to release it when it proves an officer's use of force was justified, but they fight it when it can hold police accountable.

In light of Uvalde — and future, horrific crimes — it's time for the Legislature to increase police transparency when it comes to body camera footage. Close some of the loopholes that obfuscate tragedies like this one.

COLUMN

How we're betraying many Afghans

BY TRUDY RUBIN

It has been almost one year since the ugly U.S. departure from Kabul. Yet tens of thousands of Afghans who were promised special immigrant visas (SIVs) — meant for those who worked for U.S. soldiers and civilians — remain trapped under terrifying Taliban rule.

Even for those eligible for SIVs, it could take years — if ever — to be issued one, given the glacial pace of the process. Hunted by name by the Taliban, many applicants may be dead or imprisoned long before their number comes up.

As the United States (rightly) rolls back bureaucratic red tape to welcome Ukrainians as temporary refugees, it is shameful to abandon those Afghans to whom we made promises.

"We left far too many behind," I was told by Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass., a veteran of the Iraq War, who has been at the forefront of pushing for legislation to speed up the process. "It is taking far too long to save people who are depending on us."

Contrary to popular belief, many of the roughly 120,000 Afghans evacuated from Kabul Airport during the chaotic U.S. exit were not those who were promised SIVs. Large numbers of them were people who managed to push their way into the airport or had connections with the U.S. or Afghan military inside the airport.

Other lucky Afghans were rescued by impromptu operations organized by networks of U.S. humanitarian organizations, journalists and U.S. military veterans, working to get staff or translators through Taliban and U.S. military checkpoints and into the airport.

To recall those desperate days in August, I highly recommend the forthcoming book "The Fifth Act: America's End in Afghanistan," due out Aug. 9. Its author, Elliot Ackerman, a decorated veteran of five tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, was drawn into one of those rescue networks. He brilliantly describes the harrowing rescue efforts, which he ties into the larger tragedy of the Afghan War.

"Everyone scrambled to get out people

they knew," Ackerman told me last week, referring to operations by U.S. veterans.

"The people who got out had the right contact list on their cellphone," he added. "U.S. military veterans were being asked to play a Schindler's List game, deciding who gets help and who gets left behind."

Betraying the SIV applicants, says Ackerman, is a "betrayal of our values. We could expedite the visa process. But the administration just wants the SIVs to go away, allowing infinitesimal numbers in." The numbers certainly support that conclusion.

The State Department estimates as many as 160,000 Afghan allies along with immediate family members are eligible for SIVs, according to a Politico report. The eligible group — including military translators, left-behind embassy staff, staff for USAID projects and techies who helped U.S. contractors — doesn't even include the many thousands more judges, prosecutors, women's rights activists, and journalists who worked on U.S.-funded projects but aren't eligible for SIVs.

Yet State Department flights — which the Taliban still allow to depart from Kabul Airport — evacuate only around 350 Afghans weekly; all evacuees must have SIV applications that are in the final stages of processing. They are flown to Doha in Qatar for final processing before admission to the U.S.

That leaves untold thousands of Afghans under severe Taliban threat because they were closely associated with Americans; their names are often on electronic employment lists that the Taliban retrieved.

One example: a family I've been trying to help who is headed by a leading Afghan judge with stellar credentials and a recommendation by a U.S. general he worked with. The general's support has not accelerated his case.

The Taliban is searching for the jurist, so he and his family are living in hiding, the children unable to go to school, and the family fearful even to go outside to shop for food. Their money is running out. Three family members are SIV-eligible, including a women's rights activist, yet

they are all only at the beginning of the visa process. The family is in such danger that I cannot use their names.

Another option that should be available to the jurist's family — which is now being used to expedite the arrival of Ukrainian refugees — is humanitarian parole status, which waives normal visa requirements and allows a temporary stay in the United States. Under this option, Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion can remain in the U.S. for two years if sponsored by relatives or other U.S. citizens.

"In the Ukrainian case," I was told by Adam Bates, a lawyer with the International Refugees Assistance Program, "the administration did workarounds to let previously unknown Ukrainians enter in weeks. Why not let known Afghans in?" If sponsors were needed, many U.S. veterans could be found to host their former Afghan translators while they waited for SIV approvals.

Yet according to Moulton, of around 45,000 Afghan applications for humanitarian parole, 2,500 have been considered and denied, and only around 270 conditionally approved.

The different treatment of Ukrainians and Afghans can't be attributed simply to red tape in processing the latter.

True, there is a pressing need to simplify the overly complex SIV process, and to increase the number of processing personnel, but nothing will truly change without specific direction from the White House.

"When you look at how fast the Ukrainian situation was put in operation," said Bates, "I don't know how you can justify the Afghan situation. There is a lack of will to get this done coming from the White House."

"The Ukrainian situation shows what happens when the administration is truly committed to processing admissions," Bates said. "Where there is a will, there is a way."

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