

EDITORIAL

School district's
in tough spot

The Baker School District faces quite a quandary.

Less than 16 months after voters in the district decided to raise their property taxes for capital improvements — the first such tax levy approved since 1948 — the district's ability to deliver what it proposed to do with those tax dollars is in jeopardy.

The culprits are familiar factors in the COVID-19 world, including inflation and supply chain issues that have driven up the cost of construction.

The bottom line is that the biggest project the district plans to undertake thanks to the \$4 million tax levy — constructing a 5,000-square-foot cafeteria/multipurpose building at Baker Middle School, which lacks a cafeteria — would as conceived cost considerably more than the district estimated. The lone bid the district received last month was \$9.1 million, about twice the amount the district had budgeted.

(The total budget for improvements across the district is \$14.5 million, and includes, besides the \$4 million tax levy, a \$4 million state grant, \$2 million from another state program, \$2 million from the district's capital budget and \$1.5 million in federal COVID aid, among other sources.)

The Baker School Board had no plausible option other than to reject the \$9.1 million bid. To accept it would have left the district unable to do many of the other projects that it touted when it put the levy on the May 2021 ballot.

That list includes improving the security systems and heating, air conditioning and ventilation at all district schools.

Unfortunately, it appears that some of the other work will also cost more than the district initially projected. Work at South Baker, including a new roof, is now estimated at \$3 million; the district budgeted \$1.8 million.

The district has awarded contracts for improvements at Brooklyn Primary and the HVAC system at the middle school.

Board chair Julie Huntington and superintendent Erin Lair said the plan now, with the middle school cafeteria and security and HVAC projects at other schools, is to try to find a construction manager/general contractor that can work with district officials to try to figure out a way to do work that meets the district's needs and is within its budget. Based on the difference between the lone bid for the cafeteria and the district's budget, that looks to be a daunting challenge.

But board members and district officials have little choice but to try a different approach. As Huntington noted, they understand the responsibility they have to voters who made the historic decision last year to approve the levy.

The board will talk about the new strategy during a special board meeting at noon on Sept. 12 in the district office, 2090 Fourth St. That meeting will include a public hearing for the board to potentially exempt the bond-related projects from competitive bidding, allowing the district to hire a construction manager/general contractor. That firm would be picked "through a competitive negotiation process in accordance with the cost and qualification-based process authorized by the District's Board of Directors," according to a district document.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor

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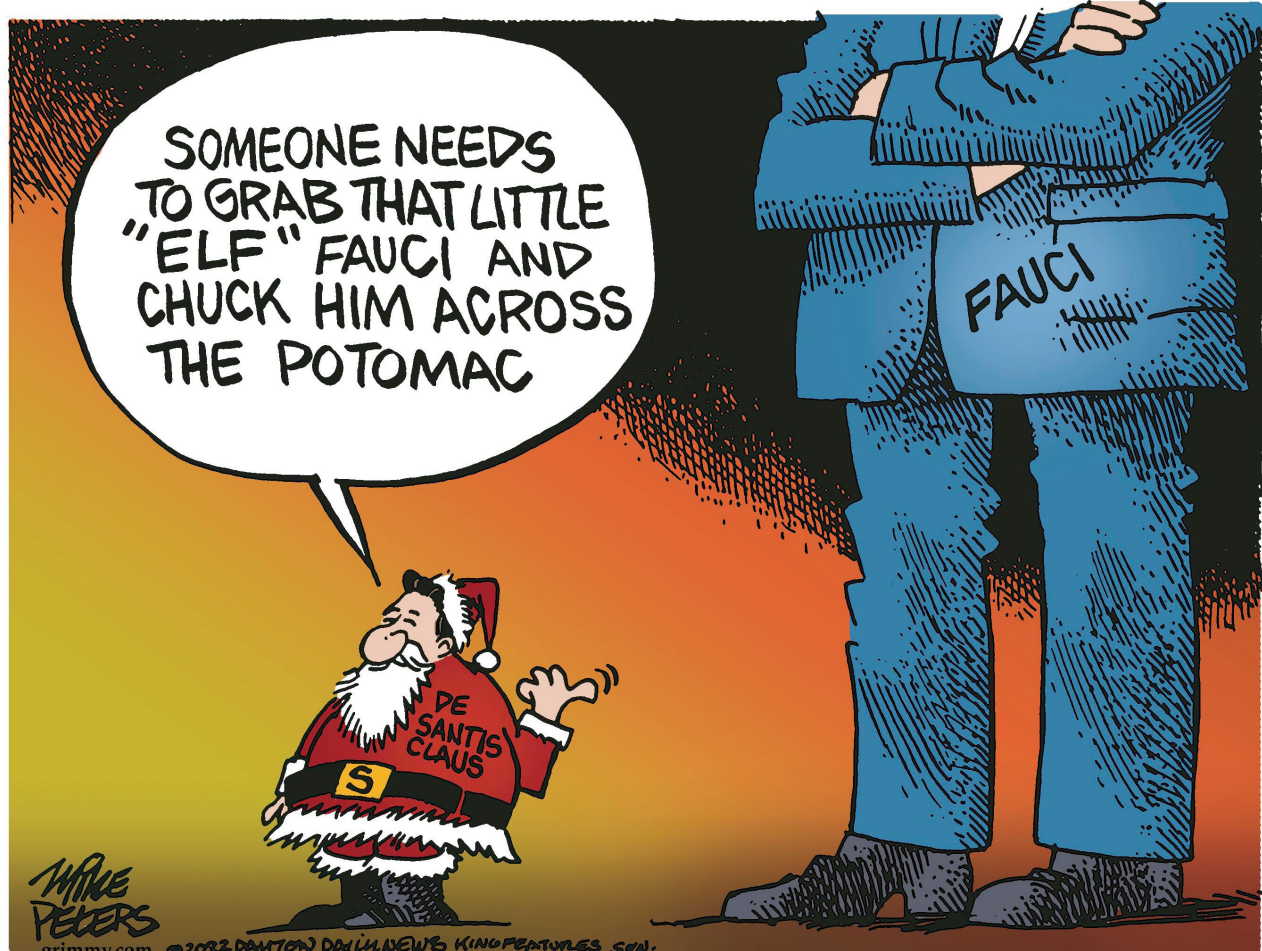
Oregon Attorney General Ellen F. Rosenblum: Justice Building, Salem, OR 97301-4096; 503-378-4400.

Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

State Sen. Lynn Findley (R-Ontario): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., S-403, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1730. Email: Sen.LynnFindley@oregonlegislature.gov

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Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Jonathan Cannon, city manager; Ty Duby, police chief; Sean Lee, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.



OTHER VIEWS

Biden buying votes, not solving problems

BY SAL RODRIGUEZ

In my global travels over the last year, I've heard my share of vote-buying stories.

In Armenia and Colombia, I've spoken with people who claim to have personally been offered cash in exchange for their votes. In the nation of Georgia, I learned of an instance where distributions of potatoes and onions were used to buy votes.

But these are things that just happen in Latin America or former Soviet Republics, right?

Well, no. We have our own vote buying in America, it's just slightly more sophisticated.

President Joe Biden's magic wand order wiping \$10,000 to \$20,000 in student loan debt off the books for certain Americans is self-evidently the actions of a failing president desperate to boost his party's prospects in the upcoming elections.

"That's 20 million people who can start getting on with their lives," Biden said.

What he really means is that's 20 million people who

might be slightly more likely to return the favor for the Democrats.

These people, on average, it must be said, mostly don't deserve a federal bailout. People who go to college earn far more over their lifetimes on average than people who don't.

All this order does is help a population that doesn't need help at the expense of everyone else and all the potential iterations of Americans who could've benefited from the many billions of dollars this entails.

It also doesn't get to the root of the problem, which is the absurdly high cost of a college degree. That would require actual leadership, which Biden is incapable of.

But Biden, looking at probably losing the House and maybe (but maybe not because the GOP fields buffoons like Dr. Oz) the Senate, needed to pump his low approval numbers up. Hence, this is what we got.

It reminds me of the vote buying Gov. Gavin Newsom did last year ahead of the recall election. Newsom sent out

\$600 checks to Californians earning up to \$75,000 per year just before the recall election.

He's doing the same this year in the form of \$350 to \$1,050 checks set to go out starting October. He's not doing it for himself, per se. He is going to cruise to re-election, after all, but no doubt he's aware this sort of thing will help Democratic candidates generally.

Now, I can already hear the liberal screeching. Yes, Republicans buy votes, too. That's what their tax breaks — which are never followed by cuts to government spending — are for. Yes, of course President Donald Trump wanted to make sure his name was tied to the often frivolous COVID-era checks that went out under his administration.

This all makes sense. Politics is, after all, the game by which people steal from and try to control others through the government. And everyone basically knows that, right?

Sure, some of us who follow politics have genuine principles in mind and grand, in-

tricate narratives about the nature of government and society and blah, blah, blah. At the end of the day, politics and government are about gaming the system to focus the thugery of the state in service of whatever the team in charge wants.

Biden is a fool, but he still has his tricks. According to an aggregate of polling by FiveThirtyEight, just 41.5% of Americans approve of the job he's doing, which is actually lower than where Trump's approval rating was at this point in his presidency.

However, he also knows most people aren't political addicts who follow every single policy fight. By pulling this Hail Mary vote-buying scheme, he might soften the hit Democrats could take in the midterms.

It's bad policy, it's a waste of money. But it's not supposed to be good policy or an optimal use of money. It's just vote buying. That's all.

■ Sal Rodriguez is the opinion editor for the Southern California News Group.

COLUMN

Exhausted, and inspired, by a hike with Scouts

I might well have been bored except for the half dozen Cub Scouts I shared the trail with.

It is, I submit, impossible to be bored in the presence of a bunch of kids who can still tally their ages by showing their own fingers.

It is, by contrast, easy to be exhausted in the presence of their apparently boundless energy.

And envious of their flexible limbs and accommodating joints, which seem oblivious to the sorts of contortions and jarring that would leave more aged anatomies writhing in pain.

Mine, for instance. I had the privilege recently to accompany some Scouts from the Keating area on a hike to Indian Rock, the modest mound of stones just north of Highway 7 near Union Creek campground.

Leader Patti Pickard asked me to give a quick tutorial on using a map and compass to navigate. I'm not sure the Scouts were exactly entranced by my description of magnetic declination. I know I wouldn't have been when I was 7, 8 or 9.

But they were quite interested in getting on the trail.

And, occasionally, off it when they noticed a potentially interesting rock or stump.

I'm inclined to write that the Scouts scampered up the path. That verb, at any rate, has always seemed to me ideal for describing the gait that carries us through early childhood but that we all seem to lose about the time we become teenagers.

Scamper, which is often associated with squirrels and other small animals with an abundance of fast-twitch muscle fibers, also captures the carefree wandering that distinguishes how kids get around on foot. Children walk much as they talk, it seems to me — in short and slightly hysterical bursts of activity. They are, to shift briefly into automotive analogy, drag racers, capable of accelerating from motionless to full speed almost instantly. We adults, meanwhile, are stolid sedans, puttering along at or just below the speed limit.

I find it safer to stay out of their lane, so to speak, to avoid potential collisions. This isn't feasible, though, on a trail scarcely wider than a curb. I tried to main-



Jayson Jacoby

tain a reasonable gap, a buffer I thought prudent in part because some of the Scouts were carrying walking sticks. Very stout walking sticks. And they were deployed not only for their usual purpose, which of course keeps one end close to the ground, but for a variety of other uses. Considering the great difference between my reflexes and the Scouts' — I'm thinking here of tortoises and hares — I tried to stay out of range. Especially my head.

Notwithstanding the slight risk of a concussion, rarely have I more enjoyed a hike.

The Indian Rock trail, as I implied, is ordinary. The terrain is moderate. The forest, mainly young ponderosa pines with scattered junipers and a few Douglas-firs, lacks grandeur. It passes no streams. No water at all, come to that.

I have hiked the trail at least a few dozen times, and I find it more inviting either during the spring, when the grass is lush and green and the lupine blooming purple, or in snow, which lends its inimitable grace to the scene.

In late summer, though, the grass has cured and the bitterbrush, which crowds the path in many places, is dry and scratchy, the shrub version of psoriasis.

But as I watched the Scouts gambol along I wasn't thinking about how uninspiring the scene was.

Moreover, I wasn't thinking about how long the trip was going to take, or the tasks that awaited when I was finished, or any of the other trifling matters that tend to intrude on what's supposed to be a leisure activity. I just walked. And watched. I remembered, at least to the extent that a person beginning his second half century can remember days so distant, what it was like to see every outing through eyes unclouded by experience.

When we came to a ponderosa snag that had toppled across the trail, I didn't have a chance to mutter to myself about annoying obstacles.

Instead I watched the Scouts delight in clambering onto and over the log, walking on its thick scaly bark, exclaiming over the carpenter ants scurrying along the trunk.

The kids instinctively reacted to this interruption not by hiking faster, as I might have done, as though I were engaged in a race, but by doffing their little packs and extracting snacks.

The whole of the hike was like that.

The Scouts approached the endeavor in an unpredictable and utterly uncontrived way that I found irresistible.

They spread out at times in small groups, separated by a few hundred feet.

For a while they marched together, chanting in unison and singing bits of songs, only one of which I recognized — Europe's "The Final Countdown," which came out when I was not much older than the Scouts are today.

They stumbled over rocks and kicked pine cones and swung their sticks at old decaying logs beside the trail.

And everything they did was with good humor — not the contrived version that adults and even teenagers can muster, but the genuine article.

I was a trifle jealous. Jealous of their energy and their innocence and their capacity to react to the events of the day with enthusiasm.

But I was also refreshed.

Or at least I hope I was. I'm going to try to remember what I felt during those two hours among the pines, to remember that it is possible, at any age, to go for a walk in the woods and while you're there to ignore every thought that tries to bludgeon its way in, to focus on the path and the trees and the ants.

To focus on the now.

■ Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.