

# 911 measure well worth minimal cost

Grant County is in danger of losing its 911 dispatch center, but residents can save it.

Ballot measure 12-69 would create a temporary tax, providing funds to keep the local dispatch center open, that would cost taxpayers about \$38 per year per \$100,000 of assessed property value. If the measure fails, the local dispatch center will likely close and dispatch services for the entire county will be outsourced.

The need for funding stems from the fact the state 911 tax collected through a monthly 75-cent fee on phone bills has not changed since 1995, providing the same amount of funding as 20 years ago, despite increasing costs.

While the simplest solution would be for state lawmakers to increase the 911 tax to provide enough funding to operate dispatch centers in rural areas, common sense does not always prevail in Salem. And the legislation would likely take longer than our local dispatch center has before closure.

If a local dispatch center staffed with local dispatchers who have knowledge of the local area is important to residents, now is the time to support it through this ballot measure.

While it is also true state Public Employees Retirement System costs are contributing to the dispatch center's operating costs, the local center and its local employees should not be punished for the failure of state legislators to fix the retirement system.

Many changes are needed at the state level, but little can be done about that locally right now. Locals can, however, provide the financial support to maintain this local service.

Some may not be aware John Day taxpayers have been

subsidizing dispatch services for the rest of the county for years — at an increasing rate each year as costs continue to rise. The dispatch center operated by the city provides services for everyone in the county, but John Day residents have been shouldering a larger share of the cost because the city is covering most of the funding gap. This cannot continue.

Although the city provides the service, the dispatch center benefits everyone in the county. This is not a John Day issue. This is a Grant County issue.

Without support from county residents, the local dispatch center — and its local jobs and the economic benefit they provide — will fade away. Another local industry lost. Like the mills, once shuttered, the center and the jobs will never return.

But county residents can support this service now to keep the center open. At \$38 per \$100,000 of assessed property value, we believe the value of maintaining a local dispatch center far exceeds the price tag associated with this ballot measure.

It is also important to note that voting yes on this ballot measure will not increase taxes forever. The local option tax on the ballot can last a maximum of five years. After that, it drops off the books.

This ballot measure will not solve all of the problems, but it will prevent the closure of the local dispatch center while statewide solutions are sought.

And work is certainly needed at the state level to fix the 911 tax and state retirement system.

Until then, we hope county residents agree the local dispatch center is worth saving and vote yes on ballot measure 12-69.

## Zoning laws limit housing

To the Editor:

As a recent retiree desirous of relocating to Eastern Oregon, I have been astoundingly unsuccessful at finding either a "livable" house for sale in Grant, Malheur, Harney, Baker, Wallowa, Union, Wheeler, Wasco, Gilliam, or Morrow counties, or a city lot with city utilities, on which to place a newer single-wide manufactured home.

I would think a far-seeing county government would realize that the coming tsunami of retirees would appreciate a loosening of the zoning laws in your counties that would result in an almost immediate increase in population. Retirees do not abuse the roads, nor require much in police or fire protection.

They participate in local elections, donate to local charities and in general enhance the areas they live in.

Yet the stranglehold exerted on the zoning laws mystifies me. I can only assume that the powers that be in local government will not allow progress in this area because there's no direct profit in it for them. Alas, on to Idaho I go.

Linda Everett  
Oak Grove

## Eastern Oregon does not need reinvention

To the Editor:

We are appalled at the city manager's comment in the Oct. 11 issue of the Blue Mountain Eagle on page A3: "This is going to reinvent Eastern Oregon..." Where does he get the authority to reinvent all of Eastern Oregon? The 911 issue is countywide, so the County Court has jurisdiction over that, if there is a problem.

It is in good hands now, so if it isn't broke, why fix it? How can a city manager impose a tax on the whole county where the biggest property owners out of the city pay the most taxes? For sure, we will vote an astounding no vote on this tax as will many of others. So why go to the expense of putting it on a ballot?

Then this big money spender sitting in city hall wants this greenhouse on the DR Johnson property (which there was no need for the city to buy) that will be in competition with the individuals who depend on the farmers market every Saturday to market their produce. It is not the city's responsibility to interfere and/or compete with private enterprise. Furthermore, who wants to eat produce raised in sewer water?

This man just wants to break the city with his big city ideas. Eastern Oregon, including John Day, does not need to be reinvented. The rural lifestyle is why we and so many others love Eastern Oregon.

The best move the John Day City Council can do now is to give this big spender with his big city ideas a one-way ticket out of Grant County.

Harriet Crum  
John Day

*Editor's note: John Day City Manager Nick Green's comment referenced in this letter referred to the city's strategy for growth, specifically a proposed housing incentive program. In a separate interview, Green said the city of John Day currently provides 911 emergency dispatch services for all of Grant County, but state 911 tax revenues distributed to the city do not cover the operating costs. Green lobbied the state legislature and was awarded \$420,000 from the state to cover the funding gap for the next two years but said, unless voters approve a local option tax for future funding, the city will likely shut down its dispatch center, outsourcing 911 services to Frontier Dispatch, a regional center in Condon. The local option tax will be on the ballot in the upcoming election.*

## Residents support the John Day 911 dispatch center

To the Editor:

Taxpayer funding for the 911 dispatch center is something that we should all support, no matter where you live in Grant County. Why support a service that is based in John Day if you live beyond the city area? If you live at the outer reaches of Grant County like we do, you understand that the 911 dispatch center provides service that extends way beyond the city limits. They know and serve the entire county.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

When a plume of smoke pops up after a lightning strike on the North Fork (75 miles from John Day), we can call 911.

If it is the middle of the night, we don't doubt that someone will be there, someone who knows the region and has situational awareness of current local conditions that may be critical in determining a response. Several years ago, the local 911 dispatcher informed us that there were many current fire startups in the area after a severe electrical storm.

That affected the decision of neighbors in our end of the county to team up, attack fire starts and monitor things until help arrived. A dispatcher in another county would not have had critical information about what was happening locally.

It is also an advantage that local dispatchers are likely to know locations of emergency events based on descriptions of county landmarks. I may not know the mile post number near a road emergency, but by describing a roadside house and barn, the local dispatcher could identify the location.

This has happened. A local agent has situational awareness that a distant 911 agent would lack; and poor situational awareness is a major cause of worker errors.

Residents in Ritter go to John Day to shop, seek professional help, bank, visit doctors, attend community events. We spend a lot of time there. We think of the 911 dispatchers as good neighbors. We greet them in Chester's. It's personal; they know us and care about us. For the security of the entire county, I'm willing to pay my share to keep 911 local in John Day.

Kay Steele  
Ritter

## Dispatch keeps community safe

To the Editor:

So for Grant County to lose our local dispatch system would critically hurt our whole community and the county. The other smaller communities depend on our dispatch system.

To even think about losing our dispatch system is not an intelligent move because our people deserve to have a dispatch system that they can feel comfortable with, not some system that is located however far away.

Our local dispatch system is a major part of keeping this community safe and thriving, so to take that away would take everything else away too — like feeling safe.

Alexis Hafer  
John Day

## Vote no on 911 local levy

To the Editor:

The advocates of increasing property taxes for expanded 911 funding want you to believe that we should make a decision on the levy based on emotions — that somehow regionalization means when you make an emergency call no one will be able to find your home and that taxpayers are obligated to give every government employee a job no matter the cost. The upcoming ballot initiative, though, is only about one thing — the Public Employee Retirement System and state and local governments' refusal to address the unreasonable burden that uncontrolled costs have placed on taxpayers.

The city of John Day has been warned for over a decade that their borrow-and-spend policies were not sustainable. In the words of City Manager Nick Green, "...the city is not in a financially sustainable position with regard to its public safety spending."

Instead of addressing this issue when they had a chance, the city chose to increase benefits to employees and throw money at foolish projects. Now the bill has come due and, like always, they expect property owners to step up and bail them out.

Of course, the tax increase proponents will argue that it is only a few pennies a day, which seems reasonable if you can ignore the already enormous burden of repaying loans for all the city borrowing and uncontrolled costs for other local governments (such as the \$3,000,000 we are paying in benefits for School District 3 employees alone).

Regionalization will allow money that currently is being spent on employee benefits to be spent on new technologies. Our police, fire and EMTs are still local people with local knowledge.

City dispatchers are union protected and will land on their feet.

Government employees are valuable members of our community and government employment is important to our economy, but nobody is entitled to a job with endless benefits.

We can't continue to kick the PERS can down the road, and governments' unwillingness to address this issue doesn't mean that voters cannot.

Vote no on increased taxes; vote no on the 911 local levy. Restore some fiscal sanity to Grant County.

Shaun W. Robertson  
John Day

## Vote yes on Measure 12-69 for local dispatch

To the Editor:

Vote yes on Measure 12-69 and keep 911 local. It's a bargain, and someday your life may depend on it.

A yes vote on Measure 12-69 will keep our emergency dispatcher jobs right here in Grant County, rather than outsourcing our 911 calls to another part of the state. Local dispatchers know our county's geography and its people. They can help lost hunters and tourists find their way from personal knowledge of the terrain, not just Google Maps. In contrast, dispatchers elsewhere won't know the backstory behind a given call or what road washed out a year ago.

Dispatch at a distance also means increased downtime if communications to other parts of the state fail. A phone system glitch somewhere else in the state could take down our 911 capacity. Lives could be lost.

Jobs will certainly be lost if we lose our dispatch. Our county does not need to lose good, professional jobs and their benefit to our local economy.

This measure is a stopgap measure, which is only needed because the state telephone tax is out of date.

If local governments can persuade the legislature to update the phone tax before 2019, the \$38 per \$100,000 of assessed value will never even be collected, but our safety and our local economy will be better.

That's less than \$40 a year for a \$100,000 property! Pretty cheap for a security system that covers the entire county.

I'm voting yes on 12-69, and I hope you will, too.

Janine Goodwin  
Prairie City

## Local 911 cost is a great bargain

To the Editor:

At 38 cents per thousand dollars of home value, I consider keeping 911 local a great deal. I live in Bear Valley and believe that this county-wide service should be paid for by all county residents. It's worth every cent. Several years ago, I misdialed while making a call to a 919 area code.

I realized that I didn't have the correct number, and not realizing that I had dialed 911 as the area code, I dropped the call and went outside to work.

Apparently the call rang through to dispatch, so the dispatcher called back. Receiving no answer, she then called my wife whom she remembered worked at Seneca School to verify.

I was working on the roof that day, so my wife called a neighbor to check on me. He immediately came over and found that I was OK, and I called dispatch to let them know that no help was needed.

Time elapsed? Less than 10 minutes. If it had been a critical situation, the dispatcher's knowledge of the local contacts would have saved my life.

As it was, her local expertise saved emergency personnel from an unnecessary trip. It's obvious — local dispatchers are familiar with local geography and people.

They work for us and help us professionally every time. It's in all of our best interests to vote yes on 12-69!

Mark Cerny  
Bear Valley

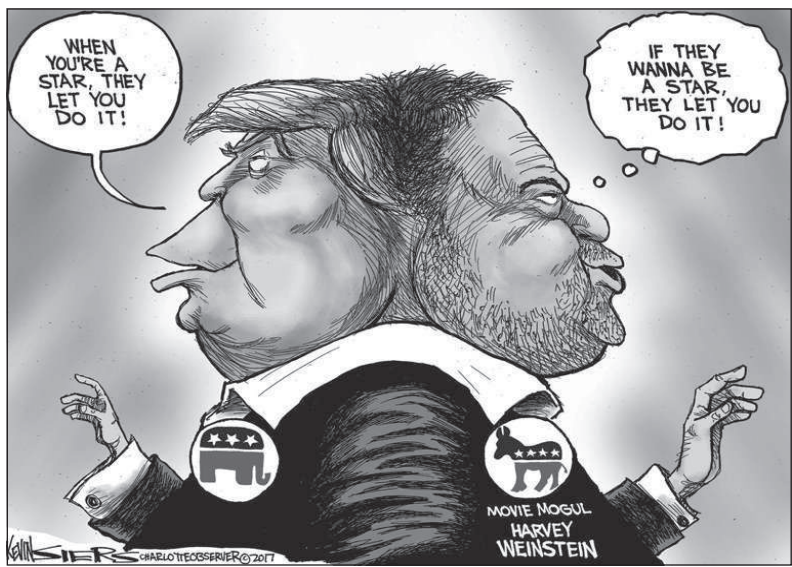
## First responders need to find callers

To the Editor:

Short and to the point! I believe that meeting local 911 assistance needs requires first responders to be able to find the callers!

We live in a one-of-a-kind community — many are "on the fringes" of the phone book!

Nicky Essex  
John Day



**Blue Mountain EAGLE** USPS 226-340

Grant County's Weekly Newspaper

Email: [www.MyEagleNews.com](http://www.MyEagleNews.com) John Day, Oregon  
Phone: 541-575-0710

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PUBLISHED EVERY WEDNESDAY BY EO Media Group

Periodicals Postage Paid at John Day and additional mailing offices.

1 YEAR SUBSCRIPTION RATES (including online access)

Grant County .....\$40  
Everywhere else in U.S. ....\$51  
Outside Continental U.S. ....\$60

Subscriptions must be paid prior to delivery  
POSTMASTER — send address changes to  
Blue Mountain Eagle  
195 N. Canyon Blvd.  
John Day, OR 97845-1187

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