

COMMENTARY

Our View

County needs audit to address economic development issues

Malheur County's economic development department needs to be fixed. The county agency is operating in damaging ways that threaten future job recruitment. Citizens ought to demand an outside investigation.

The Malheur County Economic Development Department is supposed to promote the county as a place to build or grow a business. The idea is that a growing economy helps us all. Citizens get employment or better jobs. The business community gets new customers. And local governments get more people paying the cost of public services.

Accomplishing any of that depends on trust. Particularly in this territory, people should expect that a person's word is their bond, that contracts are fine but a promise made is a promise to be kept. The recent conduct within the county agency makes it a wonder anyone would trust it.

In 2013, county officials turned over managing the department through a contract with Gregory Smith and Company of Heppner. Greg Smith is the county economic development director, and here's some of what the public has gotten lately for the \$180,000 a year it pays his company.

The county's efforts to erect the Treasure Valley Reload Center continue to stall. Real estate is again an issue. Smith last year told the state land would cost \$1.6 million when in fact the county had already signed deals costing more than \$3 million. The county now is struggling to meet state directives to shrink the site, but Smith was warned of state limits six months ago. Smith's agency also suggested Union Pacific would supply all the rail cars onion growers would need — after the railroad told Smith

otherwise.

Then, Smith put Malheur County in the national news by complaining that reporters from the Enterprise were reaching out too often and at all hours. He decided claiming he was the victim of criminal conduct was a smarter choice than simply answering questions. His choice has been criticized and even ridiculed — not great for someone who is supposed to burnish, not bust, Malheur County's reputation.

More outrageous is his department's treatment of the people at Bluebird Express Car Wash. These folks were counting on a property tax break, assured by Smith's agency that it was coming. In Smith's own words, though, the business "never" qualified for local tax breaks. He didn't notify the company of that until after the Enterprise started asking questions.

In the intervening nine months, John Braese, Smith's chief aide in Ontario, told the company story after story about the status of the tax break, including the apparently completely bogus claim that the tax credit was being held up by state officials.

State officials were unusually candid and blunt in refuting Braese's claims. The state, for one thing, doesn't approve tax credits. A spokesman for Business Oregon said the agency didn't have the application as Braese claimed and didn't have any conversation about sending documents back to Malheur County — as Braese claimed.

There are at least two possible explanations for this outrage. One is that Braese did what he did under orders from Smith, and Smith alone bears responsibility. Or Smith can claim he had no idea what Braese was doing. That suggests Smith isn't running the

shop as he's paid to do. Under either scenario, Malheur County failed its duty to the community.

To get his contract with Malheur County, Smith agreed to open his company to state and county officials "to satisfy audit or program evaluation purposes deemed necessary." The Malheur County Court must invoke that provision immediately, retaining independent outside auditors to scrutinize the Malheur County Economic Development Department. Let those with no tie to Malheur County look at the performance of the agency. Let experts trace what the community is getting for \$180,000 a year. Let the experts untangle the truth about the treatment of Bluebird.

And the auditors need to assess whether it's time Malheur County had a full-time economic development director. Remember, Greg Smith has lots going on besides tending to his local contract. He has full-time jobs in Boardman and in La Grande, he is a state legislator, he is managing a rail project in Albany, and he is Harney County's economic development director. Auditors should assess whether Smith is spread too thin.

Malheur County will always have challenges recruiting new employers. That challenge shouldn't be compounded by sloppy and misleading work by well-paid contractors supposedly working for the community's benefit. Taxpayers can't rely on Smith for answers and the county commissioners so far appear to be looking the other way.

Commissioners need to pay attention long enough to recruit outside auditors to give the community the truth it deserves about what \$180,000 a year is buying. Taxpayers ought to insist they do so. — LZ



ON THE EDGE OF COMMON SENSE

By Baxter Black, DVM

It seemed a nice day to be trolling for buffalo

Buffalo Bob took the call on his cellular phone.

I caught the last of the conversation: "and if that don't work try a shot. No . . . not a tranquilizer, a 30-30. At least you'll be able to eat the meat."

"Escaped buffalo pose a problem," he said after hanging up. "That fellow was callin' from West Virginia. I told him a trick that worked for me . . . trolling."

Bob explained that a few years back he and Dave bought 12 head of buffalo from a grain farmer on the plains of Colorado. Bought 'em over the phone. The price was right.

He and Dave arrived in the small town of Flagler and took a motel room. Three days later they were still tryin' to gather the 12 head.

The first day they built a trap out of panels in the quarter-section pasture. The trap was big enough to fit the USS Eisenhower.

They baited it with alfalfa and spent all afternoon tryin' to coax, drive and trick the suspicious buffalo herd into the trap. The herd ignored it like fat trout in a well-fished stream.

That night they called a noted wildlife veterinarian who had buffalo experience. The vet arrived the next day armed with a tranquilizer gun and enough ammo to put Yellowstone Park to sleep for a fortnight.

They drove out to the herd and re-enacted the stampede from Dances with Wolves, but hit nary a buffalo.

Concerned with the expense of the tranquilizer, Bob and Dave built a buffalo blind out of tumbleweeds.

They parked the vet with his trusty musket behind the tumbleweeds and chased buffalo by him for two hours.

Unfortunately "Dr. Dead Eye" couldn't hit the top of his head with a chafing dish. Not one bullseye.

The third morning found Bob making excuses to the grain farmer.

"Well," he replied, "Do what you can. They're yours. I've got to go to dad's place and haul a dead calf to the dump."

A light flickered somewhere in Buffalo Bob's desperate brain. He remembered trying to drag a dead buffalo calf out of a field. The herd went crazy and followed the calf through some primitive protective instinct. He actually had to get the tractor into fourth high to stay ahead and get out of the gate!

"Bring that dead calf over here. I want to try something."

The farmer complied, even though it was a Hereford cross.

Bob stationed a man by the trap gate and circled the herd, draggin' the dead calf behind his pick-up. The buffalo cows went berserk and started chasin' the calf. Bob made a couple more circles, stirring them up and on the third pass drove straight into the trap.

The herd followed like greyhounds chasin' the mechanical rabbit!

"Wow!" I said, as the light dawned. "Trolling for buffalo. So that's what you advised your caller from West Virginia."

"Yeah. I don't know if it'll work, though," said Bob. "His buffalo is loose in a lady's back yard on the nice side of town."

Corrections

Donation for Vale school

A photo caption in the Aug. 28 Enterprise incorrectly identified one of the schools Malheur Drug was providing donations. Malheur Drug donated robotics equipment to Vale High School, not Ontario High School. The Enterprise regrets the error.

• *The Enterprise strives for accuracy in its reporting. To report errors, contact les@malheurenterprise.com.*

BUSINESS BEAT

Labor Day Pivots Your Business

By Andrea Testi
For the Enterprise

The original intent of Labor Day, to be an annual national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country; goes hand in hand with the mission of America's small businesses — to get the country working and move toward sustainable economic prosperity.

Labor Day is a celebration of the American spirit, values of which have consistently been driven by workers — including that of small businesses, who make up the backbone of the American economy. Small businesses represent over 99% of the country's



employing firms, nearly 50% of all private-sector jobs, and account for more than 50% of all sales in the United States. This collective output is nothing short of impressive.

For most small business owners, Labor Day represents a time of reflection, transition, and appreciation. It's a time to salute everyone's contribution to the economy, and to get your business ready to move forward into fall.

Reflection — Think about your employees and what their work means for your business. They are critical assets to your small business, so what keeps them motivated? Are you building loyalty to encour-

age them to continue working for you? Are you giving them an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to your business? Are you listening to their concerns and comments?

Motivated, loyal workers are the foundation of your valuable business. Reflecting on how you can create an environment so that your workers are driven and thrive will benefit your business for years to come.

Transition — Summer is winding down, school is back in session, and as the leaves change color; so will the tone of your business. You are gearing up for a busy 4th quarter so that you can end the year financially strong.

According to the National Retail Federation,

more than 30% of shoppers will start shopping for their holiday gifts directly after the Labor Day seasonal transition. Take time to consider how your business will move forward for the upcoming year, and your goals for what you want to achieve between now and then.

Appreciation — Thank your customers and vendors for being loyal by sending them a 'welcome to fall' thank you card. Announce a private 'fall sale' to make your frequent customers feel exceptionally recognized. Don't forget to take time and reward yourself for all the hard work you do.

Get ready to welcome fall with an invigorated business to include freshened marketing, new inventory, sparkling window displays, revitalized employees, and even a revisit of your accounting and business procedures.

Our country, the economy, and your small business are constantly evolving. While the ride can be turbulent, it's the change of season when celebrating Labor Day which gives you the opportunity to reflect on the gratification of what being a small business owner really means to you and our community.

Remember, it isn't the time you spend at your business, it's what you do while you are there, the customers you delight, and the products and services you deliver that matter.

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