

Some youngsters miss opportunity

School district considering adding preschool program

by Jonathan Green

The Hot Springs County School Board dove headlong into a thicket last week with a discussion about offering a preschool program.

Superintendent Marty Kobza outlined a draft proposal to offer half-day preschool for up to 25 children beginning in the fall during a special meeting April 8.

The Children's Resource Center (CRC), Head Start and private day care and preschool providers currently serve youths in the community. Head Start and CRC provide services to children for free or reduced cost, while private providers charge varying amounts.

Kobza said that leaves children in the middle of the social-economic spectrum underserved. Some families too well off to qualify for CRC or Head Start cannot afford private day care.

Kobza said there is an ongoing problem with students being unprepared for kindergarten and preschool programs help equip children for entering school.

But he emphasized, "We don't want to be in the day care business."

The program would be administered by the Fremont County Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), possibly with vocational and technical programs for older students. What impact the program will have on county taxpayers depends upon a board vote. (See separate story.)

One full-time teacher would be employed in the preschool program, teaching morning and afternoon sections of 12-14 children each. Kobza said the program would be limited to children who would begin kindergarten the next year and would not include younger children.

The preschool would occupy one room in the elementary school, Kobza said. Three rooms will be vacated when the fifth grade moves to the middle school, and two of them will be repurposed for special education classes, currently crammed into non-classroom space.

Consensus ended there, however.

Board member Belenda Willson said she would not vote for any proposal with income limitations because it violated the character of public schools.

Board member Karen Leyba seemed inclined to support such restrictions so the district would not be directly competing with CRC, Head Start and private providers. Leyba works for CRC.

Dan Webber, whose wife Bethany operates Kid-die Kollege, pressed Kobza and district business manager Lisa Pearce for details.

If approved, the preschool program will probably be paid for with a special tax levied by the board, up to a half mill. Webber asked if the half mill tax would be sufficient to fully fund the program after an expected reduction in the county tax base in fiscal year 2010-11.

Kobza was unsure. He said projections indicate a half mill should generate about \$125,000 in FY 2009-10, of which \$81,000 is required for the preschool program.

If the half mill were not enough in FY 2010-11, Webber asked Kobza if the district would push for additional taxes. A ballot measure could increase the tax to as high as 2.5 mills.

Kobza said that decision would need to be made by the board.

The board directed Kobza to put together a firm proposal for a possible vote in May.



Sydnee Bryan of Thermopolis scoops up one of the thousands of eggs during the Thermopolis Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt on Sunday.

—Pat Schmidt photo

Voters go to the polls on May 5 here

Voters in Hot Springs County will decide two measures in a special election May 5.

Proposition One asks whether the lodging tax should be renewed. Proposition Two proposes to add one fourth of one cent to the sales tax levied here, with the funds going to the Thermopolis-Hot Springs Economic Development Company (EDC).

Renewal of the lodging tax is supposed to be included in regular elections but was overlooked in the election last November. The 4% tax is paid by those who stay in motels and campgrounds and is not collected on meals or any other type of sales.

State statutes require that the funds be spent in an attempt to attract more visitors, using a local lodging tax board. Most counties in the state collect the tax, and it has been in existence here since the 1980s, going to 4% two elections ago.

During its existence, the EDC has used a variety of funding sources, mostly from the Town of Thermopolis and, to a lesser degree, Hot Springs County. Other funds have come from local businesses, matching funds and some grants.

If approved, the sales tax in the county would be 5.25¢ on the dollar. More detailed stories on both ballot measures will be published next week.

Runaway from boys school eludes officers in Thermop

by Jonathan Green

A runaway from the Wyoming Boys School is suspected of stealing a car here and driving to Casper April 8, according to Thermopolis police and Hot Springs County sheriff's officials.

It is unknown whether he has been returned to the facility.

Julio Torres, an official at the Boys School, refused any comment on the matter Tuesday morning.

"That information is confidential," he said while declining to say whether or not the boy had been captured.

"I cannot make a comment," he said.

The boy, 17, was reported as a runaway while in Thermopolis April 7. He was on a day-pass eating dinner with his mother and brother at A&W Lanes at about 3 p.m.

Sheriff's deputy Kim Black said the boy told his mother he was going to the rest room but failed to return. His mother reported his absence to the Boys School, which notified area law enforcement. A statewide notice was issued.

Police officers and sheriff's deputies launched a search for the boy. Around dusk on April 7 an A&W employee, who had earlier seen the youth, spotted him near the Broadway Bridge, according to Black.

A dispatcher contacted Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad to determine when the next train would be coming through Thermopolis, because law enforcement worried the boy might attempt to leave town that way.

The next day a woman reported her vehicle had been stolen while she was unloading groceries in the 100 block of South Second. The maroon 1992 GMC Jimmy with local license plates was later found in Casper.

Police chief Mark Nelson said the runaway was suspected of stealing the utility vehicle and said his mother lives in Casper.

The undamaged vehicle was returned to its owner after Casper police checked it for evidence.

New recreation center concepts presented during initial meeting

by Pat Schmidt

Citizens got their first peek at what a recreation center could be here during a meeting Monday night at Thermopolis Middle School.

"Nothing is set in stone, and at least two more public meetings are scheduled for citizen input," Hot Springs County Recreation District director Donnie Bjorhus said.

The meeting was conducted by representatives from the two Colorado firms hired to do the study, Bob McDonald of Ohlson Lavoie Collaborative and Jeff King of Ballard, King and Associates. (McDonald is the son of former University of Wyoming women's basketball coach Margie McDonald.)

Bjorhus said the two firms were selected because of their current and past experience with such projects in Wyoming, including Gillette, Laramie, Jackson and Green River.

McDonald discussed components and site selection. Among the ideas being considered are:

- An entryway with a front desk.
- A child care area for parents who are using the facility.
- An indoor playground.
- Teen area.
- "Exer-gaming" area, which is similar to a Wii system but involves more exercise.
- Offices.
- A medium size multipurpose room than can be split into two rooms by a divider curtain.
- A small multipurpose room.

- A gym with three courts and a multiple use floor.
- Kitchen capable of serving to those in the multipurpose rooms or perhaps a large banquet in the gym area.
- An exercise area
- Locker and shower rooms.

They indicated the gym area could seat 650-700 people.

McDonald reported four possible sites had been found:

1. The Wychgram property northwest of the intersection of 12th and Arapahoe streets.
2. Land on Lane 3 west of Ryan Brothers.
3. School property west of Thermopolis Middle School.
4. The old Empire Refinery site on the southeast end of Amoretti Street.

On Tuesday, Bjorhus said the plan is to hold further meetings with the property owners, all of whom have expressed interest. The study has not gone into other factors such as access across adjacent properties.

Among the factors that will be considered by the consultants and recreation board before making any recommendations will be factors such as youngsters getting there easily, nearby utilities and cost.

King discussed revenue and expenditures in general terms, such as the percent of expenses that would go for personnel, utilities, etc. The income estimates included what could be expected from memberships, activity and sports fees or even banquets.

"We're still taking input and will continue to do so throughout the next two meetings," Bjorhus said.

One reason is just 20 people attended the meeting, partly due to Monday being the day after Easter and probably because the meeting had been postponed twice by storms.

To comment, just contact Bjorhus at the armory recreation center.

The date of the next meeting will be set after the recreation board meets with representatives of the two firms.



Wyoming Department of Transportation employees clear a rock slide from Wind River Canyon while Hot Springs County sheriff's deputies help with traffic control Thursday afternoon. No vehicles were damaged, and U.S. Hwy. 20 reopened after only a few minutes.

—Jonathan Green photo