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Independent Record

SPECIAL INTERNET PREVIEW

VOLUME 111, No. 5, February 4, 2010

THERMOPOLIS, WY 82443

USPS 627-300

75¢

Bobcat Band bounces with the beat



The Bobcat Band entertains basketball fans during Friday's home games. Pictured at left playing the saxophone are Lisa Pearce and Nicole Rush. Playing the clarinet above is high school student Justice Stehlin. — Keith E. Domke photos

Land pact in works for center

Greater Learning Foundation soon may sign lease for new Discovery Center in county

by Tom Burkindine

Plans for the county's tourism center are moving along as the Hot Springs County Greater Learning Foundation expects to sign a lease for a seven-acre tract of land on which to build the center.

The foundation's board met last Tuesday and agreed that the language of a lease agreement was satisfactory and could be signed as early as the board's next meeting. Attorneys for the town of Thermopolis, Hot Springs County and the Wyoming attorney general's office are currently reviewing the lease.

The piece of land in question is the site of the old drive-in theater on the buffalo pasture near the Hot Springs State Park entrance and would be the site of the Wyoming Big Horn Basin Nature and Discovery Center. The structure is being designed as a regional interpretive center focusing on natural and cultural resources of the area.

Plans include a visitors center linking area parks and sites, a Big Horn Basin Natural Resources Center, a Hot Springs State Park Interpretive Center, classrooms and activity areas, a regional technology center, and a Folk Arts Center that will display local artisans' work.

According to a study conducted by tourism consultant Dean Runyun Associates, the center has the potential to generate at least \$2 to \$3 million a year in tourism revenue for the Big Horn Basin and surrounding areas.

The building would offer additional space for community events, create jobs for the construction and ongoing operations of the building while also driving local economic opportunities. The center is described as a "clearing house for other businesses" which would also promote tourism activities and the natural resources of the region. The multiple components of the project would fill a void of activities to keep people in the area, filtering money into the local economy, local officials have said.

The GLF had requested \$100,000 in state funding which had been delayed pending the signing of the lease agreement and the formation of a Joint Powers Board. Those conditions will be met after the board signs the lease. The language of that agreement was amended in order to ensure the lease was not binding.

"We're moving in a very positive direction," board member Tom Anderson said.

In a related development, the GLF was denied funds from the Broadband USA program, but has been urged by the state to

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County jobless rate up as books close on year

by Keith E. Domke

Hot Springs County's unemployment rate nudged up slightly in December, but remained better than the state's percentage as a whole, statistics showed.

As 2009 came to a close, the Wyoming Department of Employment Research & Planning reported that the local jobless rate was 6.6 percent compared to 6.3 percent in November. The state figure was 7.6 percent, up from 7 percent the month before.

In addition, during the 2009 calendar year, the county's unemployment rate worsened by more than 50 percent from 4 percent in December 2008 to the 6.6 percent number a year later. Statewide, the December 2008 rate was 3.6 percent, more than doubling to the 7.6 percent figure this past December.

"Over the year, employment decreased by 20,600 jobs," the jobless

Hot Springs County unemployment

	Dec. '09	Nov. '09	Oct. '09	Dec. '08
Labor force	2,335	2,392	2,374	2,378
Employment	2,182	2,242	2,216	2,283
Unemployed	153	150	158	95
Jobless rate	6.6%	6.3%	6.7%	4.0%

report stated. "From November to December, Wyoming lost 1,600 jobs."

Across the Cowboy State, only three of the 23 counties reported lower unemployment rates from last November to December—Sublette, Teton and Uinta. Nonetheless, Teton still had the second-highest jobless rate in Wyoming at 9 percent in December, trailing only Johnson at 9.3 percent. Big Horn and Lincoln were at 8.8 percent.

"Most county unemployment rates followed their normal seasonal pattern

and increased from November to December," the state report stated.

On the other end of the scale, Albany had the best percentage at 4.6. Goshen was next at 5.9 percent, followed by Niobrara at 6.3 and Washakie at 6.4. Hot Springs and Crook tied for fifth at the 6.6 percent.

The national jobless rate in December was 9.7 percent, up a tad from November's 9.4 percent. In December 2008, the number was 7.1 percent.

Locally, 2,182 Hot Springs Coun-

ty individuals had jobs in December out of a 2,335 labor force. The unemployed total rose by three from November to December at 150 to 153. In December 2008, there were 95 who were jobless.

The workforce numbers also change from month to month. In November 2008, that figure was 2,392. In December 2008 it was 2,378.

Across Wyoming, 10,457 people were unemployed in December out of a 290,109 labor force.

According to the state report, construction and natural resources and mining posted the largest job losses during 2009. Notable job losses also were seen in manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, transportation and utilities, professional and business services and leisure and hospitality. Employment increased in educational and health services and government.

the highest number of bathers coming in July. The low month for the year was December. As expected, the busiest months are during tourist season from May through October.

Statistics show the outdoor pool is overwhelmingly the choice of visitors.

A few more individuals enjoy Bath House in 2009

by Cindy Glasson

Visitations to the Bath House in Hot Springs State Park were up slightly during 2009, according to a report from park superintendent Kevin Skates.

A total of 31,819 bathers visited the Bath House during the year, a

number nearly identical to 2004's total. In 2008, 29,942 individuals used the facility.

Other-year totals were 30,140 in 2007 and 28,913 in 2005.

More than 234,000 people have used the free pools and tubs since 2001.

Excluding 2006, when the Bath House was closed for four-and-a-half months for construction, the number of visitors per year has averaged 30,818.

In 2009, the state-owned facility averaged 2,652 visitors each month with

Quarberg readies for budget session

by Tom Burkindine

The Wyoming Legislature will kick off the biennial budget session on Monday and local representative Lorraine Quarberg said she expects a busy month.

Quarberg foresees several controversial bills to be introduced, although she said the primary purpose of the legislative session would be to approve the budget proposed by Gov. Dave Freudenthal.

The governor submitted the \$2.998 billion budget in December for the 2011-12 biennium. The proposal would be a \$4 million cut from the previous biennial budget.

The budget still places Wyoming in a better position than most states in the union, although it does reflect the decline in revenue seen in recent years. Wyoming expects to receive \$350 million less in revenue than during the previous biennial period.

"It's still a robust budget. There aren't a lot of extra funds being used, but it's a good budget," Quarberg said. "I expect a fairly smooth session. In my conversations with fellow leg-

Residents express concerns

by Tom Burkindine

Wyoming State Rep. Lorraine Quarberg, R-Thermopolis, conducted a Town Hall meeting Monday night, and about 20 members of her constituency attended to voice concerns about federal funding in Wyoming.

Citizens said they were not interested in government money coming into Wyoming and agreed when Quarberg said, "the federal government got their power from the states, and not the other way around."

Concerns were voiced about a variety of topics, including the Flaming Gorge Reservoir water supply, federal funding to clean up abandoned mines, and state health codes relating to small fund-raising and public events.

A lively discussion followed about the direction in which the country and Wyoming should be headed. Locals spoke about personal responsibility and getting back to the conservative values that have led Wyoming to remain financially independent.

Quarberg said a major concern for her was the non-transparent budgets of the Wyoming Department of Transportation and the state's Game and Fish Department. She stated that those two departments' budgets were not open to review by the Legislature and called that lack of oversight "bad public policy."

She also told her constituents that she felt Wyoming should cycle on a zero-balance budget, reworking departmental budgets every few years in order to cut any unnecessary spending.

islaters, I think everyone understands the financial situa-

tion."

Quarberg said she made it

a point to attend all budgetary hearings this year to ensure she was aware of any issues that would affect her constituency.

"I made a conscious effort. I felt it was important to fully understand this budget," Quarberg said.

In addition to the budgetary issues, which will dominate the session, Quarberg said she expects plenty of conversation about state sovereignty. Because of a federal healthcare proposal, Wyoming may join several other states in proposing amendments to its constitution.

"I anticipate it will come up," Quarberg said. "I feel strongly, and hope my colleagues do also, that we have to keep the federal government from getting power from the states."

For such an amendment to pass, it would have to gain two-thirds majority vote from both the state House and Senate, the governor would have to sign off and then a public vote would be conducted.

"I'm deeply concerned about having to amend our Constitution to keep the federal gov-

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State Rep. Lorraine Quarberg, R-Thermopolis, is heading to Cheyenne this week as the Legislature begins its 2010 budget session on Monday. Quarberg conducted a town hall meeting on Monday to inform interested residents about the budget and other matters as well as to learn about some local concerns heading into the session.

— Keith E. Domke photo