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Commissioners' offer to Holden a few weeks away

by Cindy Glasson

To date, no offer has been made on property owned by Joe Holden that lies west of Thermopolis, however, an offer is just weeks away now that an appraisal has been completed by DeLloyd Quarberg.

At Tuesday's meeting, the Hot Springs County Commissioners learned Quarberg had finished the appraisal and it will be sent to the Wyoming Department of Transportation (WYDOT) for review.

WYDOT does not have any input on the price that will be offered to Holden for the property slated for the new airport, but the appraisal must be reviewed by them to ensure all the proper steps were taken in compiling the report.

As with all land acquisitions made by the county, the amount per acre that will be offered to the landowner are kept in confidence.

After the review, the commissioners hope to be able to make their first offer to Holden within a couple of weeks.

The commissioners also signed paperwork for funding on both the state and federal level for the new airport.

While the grant monies are in place, the paperwork is the commissioners' official obligation

to the project, setting them up for the next round of funding.

Commissioner Mike Baker asked GDA Engineering several questions during the meeting revolving around what types of things could go wrong at this point.

"This project has surprised me more than once," Bakersaid. "I'm not looking for something that might trip us up, I just want to try to ferret out anything that might hit us on the side of the head without seeing it coming."

Dusty Spomer with GDA Engineering assured Baker there was very little that could go wrong at this point.

"There is always the chance that they'll only partially fund it, or not fund it at all," Spomer said, "but everything is very engineerable at this point."

"The only thing that might trip us up is something we haven't found yet, something we can't mitigate, like an endangered species."

The commissioners will be holding interviews with Crowley Air Service, LLC and DRA Services to choose the airport's Fixed Base Operator (FBO) Feb. 11. They will announce their choice Feb. 15.

DRA Services is the current FBO.

Law firm hired for BIA issue

by Cindy Glasson

The Hot Springs County Commissioners approved the hiring of the law firm of Holland and Hart, LLP to represent the county in matters dealing with a land acquisition south of town by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

In December, the commissioners were advised by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) the Tribe was seeking a status change for land purchased south of Thermopolis in the Red Cut area at the mouth of Wind River Canyon.

The status change would amount to taking the land off tax registers for the county and placing the parcel in a land trust for the tribe through the U.S. Government.

The commissioners request-

ed an extension of the comment period from the BIA and were granted an additional 30 days.

During that time, the commissioners conferred with Wyoming Attorney General Bruce Salzberg as to the county's options should the Tribe decide to build a casino on the property. In January, county attorney Jerry Williams advised the commissioners to seek outside counsel in the matter, someone who specializes in tribal law.

At Tuesday's meeting, the commissioners agreed to hire Tom Sansonetti with Holland and Hart to represent the county.

A monthly retainer fee will be paid to Sansonetti in the amount of \$10,000 per month. Sansonetti will then charge his

hourly rate of \$600 per hour from that retainer.

The contract is not a year-long contract and can be terminated at any time.

"Our stand is not for or against gambling or a casino," commissioner Brad Basse said. "We just want the process open and correct and to see that our concerns for the county are mitigated."

"We need to be able to put our foot in the door so we're sitting at that negotiating table."

While there is no state law that would allow compensation to counties with casinos in general, on a federal level there could be compensation available if detriment to the surrounding community can be proven.

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Kourtiny Baker smiles in delight as she hops her way through two minutes at the Absaroka Head Start Hop-A-Thon for Muscular Dystrophy. The students hopped a total of 1,661 hops during the two minute time limit. —Cindy Glasson photo

Head Start Hop-A-Thon results in 1,661 hops

You may have thought it was a little earthquake you felt last Thursday morning, but it was actually the hopping skills of the students at Absaroka Head Start participating in the MDA Hop-A-Thon.

The 12 students took turns in small groups hopping to raise money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association as part of learning about Disability Awareness Week, Jan. 24-28.

The little hoppers jumped a total of 1,661 hops with Brianna Lackey hopping the most with 219 hops in two minutes.

During the week the children learned about physical disabilities and how everyone is different, as well as the amazing things their bodies can do.

Each child collected donations for MDA and is eligible for a variety of prizes including coloring books, water bottles and lunch bags.

First semester grades get kudos

by Joe Sovo

High school principal Dustin Hunt shared good news about student performance in the classroom during the Hot Springs County School District meeting of the board of trustees Jan. 20.

The senior class was the most outstanding in Hunt's first semester grade report. During the first semester last year, there were six students with failing grades and none this year.

"I'm very proud," he said. "Kudos to those seniors' teachers and kudos to the senior students."

Last year, eight sophomore students failed a total of 30 classes; this year, only two students failed four classes. In the first semester of 2010, six juniors were failing in 10 classes; this year, only one student failed three classes.

In overall numbers, Hunt said 22 high school stu-

dents failed a total of 63 classes the first semester last year while six students failed 13 classes this year.

The principal attributes efficient use of study tables as the major reason for the improvement.

During the board meeting, Sonja Holm was recognized as the December Teacher of the Month. She is a 25-year employee of the district.

"She has a positive impact on student learning in the classroom," Ralph Witters Elementary principal Deb Brown said.

Beth Breining, who teaches at the middle school, was recognized as the January Teacher of the Month.

"She is interested in more than academic success," TMS principal Matt Spring said. "She's raised the bar in language arts." He said 98 percent of her students have achieved a grade of C or better.

Legislature reaches midpoint

Health Care Choice Act up for third reading in House

by Joe Sovo

Addressing what many feel is an unconstitutional law, House Bill 35 was on the floor of the State House on Tuesday as the 61st Wyoming Legislature heads into the second half of the general session in Cheyenne.

The Health Care Choice and Protection Act was up for third reading and Rep. Lorraine Quarberg (R-HD28) said Tuesday morning the legislation should be making its way to the State Senate. She said, in essence, HB35 declares "Obamacare" null and void.

"It's an easy issue for me. I feel that piece of legislation is not good for the people of the state," Quarberg said of the national health care legislation.

Senior U.S. District Judge Roger Vinson agreed with 26 states, including Wyoming that are party to a lawsuit saying the health care plan is unconstitutional and needs an overhaul. The plan would require U.S. residents to have health insurance by 2014, or face penalties.

Quarberg said there are 1,600 references in the

bill calling for rules and regulations to be implemented.

The Wyoming House has voted to strip all criminal penalties from the bill that seeks to block implementation of last year's federal health care law. The Wyoming Senate on Monday gave preliminary approval to a proposal that would allow the state's voters to amend the state Constitution to specify people have the right to choose whether to buy insurance.

HB50 (health insurance exchange) passed third reading in the House, but Quarberg voted against the bill.

"We would not be looking at that bill if it were not for Obamacare," she said. "I'm not going to support health care legislation that is tied to that."

Quarberg said U.S. Sen. John Barrasso is bringing legislation in Washington, D.C., that would allow a state to "opt out" of Obamacare. She said the

See Quarberg on page 10

Teacher contract bill might not make it to Senate floor

by Karla Pomeroy

Will the bill to remove continuing contract status (tenure) of teachers come before the Committee of the Whole? Sen. Gerald Geis (R-SD20, Worland) said in his weekly report Monday that SF52 was on General File for the first time last Friday but was not brought to the floor by the Senate leaders. The bill was again on General File Monday, but was on second page near the bottom.

"I think the public would like to see (tenure) go away," Geis said, adding that he has received several e-mails about the bill and it's about 50-50 in support and opposition. Most of those opposed to the bill are teachers or supporters of teachers, he said.

He said if the bill comes up on the floor for discussion he will listen to arguments from both sides.

The bill barely passed out of the Education Committee on a 3-2 vote.

Big Horn County School District No. 4 Superintendent Mary Fisher said her concern with the bill is the teacher evaluation process and the al-

lowance for a hearing if a teacher is dismissed after 90 days.

Two bills Geis has sponsored have moved on to the House after approval on third reading last Thursday, SF09 – economic analysis; and SF100 – cruelty to animals. The cruelty to animals bill modifies the definition of cruelty to include animal hoarders and those who operate or own a puppy mill. The \$50,000 allocated in the bill will be pass-through dollars distributed to county law enforcement agencies for reimbursement of expenses in animal welfare cases.

SF09 contains an appropriation of \$255,000 from the general fund to the Department of Administration and Information. It authorizes one full-time position, an economic analyst, to provide economic and demographic data, and statistical/economic/demographic research, and economic analysis for each county.

Geis said two big issues recently have been de-

See Geis on page 10

Fourteen ladies looming



WOW Discount hosted a looming class Tuesday afternoon and 14 ladies were on hand to knit stocking caps of many colors and sizes. Above, Mary Jane Brown allows a young Yorkie to watch as she uses a loom to knit a cap. Norma Fahrenkrug and Susan Lankford, the storeowner, were the instructors. — Joe Sovo photo

Quarberg

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U.S. House already voted to repeal it in its entirety. **Other key legislation**

HB122 (no duty to retreat) passed the House by a 57-3 vote on third reading.

“That’s a great piece of legislation that puts into statute that people can stand their ground if they so choose,” said Quarberg, sponsor of the bill.

HB167-castle doctrine was up for second reading in the House on Tuesday and received good support on the floor of the Committee as a Whole, she said. She’s sponsoring the legislation that modifies presumption related to self defense and defense of another while in buildings, modular units, trailers, campers and tents – in addition to your regular residence. It’s a matter of “where you’re resting your head for the night,” Quarberg said.

HB106 (departments of employment and work-force services merger) passed the House by a 56-0 vote. It would combine those agencies into one, as requested by Gov. Matt Mead.

Quarberg indicated a resolution, HJ006 (private property) will pass. It reaffirms private property rights.

The representative said she is working with the military department to transfer ownership of the armory in Thermopolis away from the military.

“They’re not putting any more money into it,” Quarberg said. “That makes it difficult for the recreation board and county commissioners.”

The question is, “Do we really want that building?” she said. “It opens the door for us to have control of the armory.”

It’s apparent the building needs repairs and maintenance.

“There is pretty significant work that needs to be done fairly soon,” Quarberg said.

Education issues

HB127 (school finance recalibration) passed the House. There were ninth-third-reading amendments attached. It would implement 2010 recalibration modifications to the Wyoming education resource block grant model.

“That’s part of local control for me,” Quarberg said.

The House adopted an amendment that will require school districts to maintain a student to teacher ratio of 16 to 1 in kindergarten through the third grade. The block grant currently funds for a ratio for 16 to 1; however, many district have chosen larger class sizes to save money.

HB182 (student assessment measures) was up for third reading in the House on Wednesday; Quarberg feels it would pass.

With the legislature about halfway through its scheduled 40-day session, time is running out for introduction of bills in the House and Senate. Any bill that does not get out of committee by Friday is likely dead.

Geis

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fining marriage and health care. He said once work begins on the supplemental budget, that will be another hotly contested issue.

The Senate last Thursday approved Senate Joint Resolution 5 – defense of marriage. The resolution requires a two-thirds vote of the Senate and two-thirds of the House to place the item on the General Election ballot in 2012.

If approved by the House by two-thirds majority and then by the voters, the Wyoming Constitution would be amended to read “recognize only a marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in Wyoming. The legislature may define the benefits and obligations of marriage, which may be different than the benefits and obligations afforded to all other civil relationships.”

Geis said, “I think it’s time for the people to decide, not just 90 people (here in Cheyenne).” He said he did not know if the House would get the necessary two-thirds, adding that the Senate got “just enough” votes. It was approved 20-10 with Geis in favor.

House Bill 74 - validity of marriage is awaiting introduction in the Senate. That bill, which was approved last Monday by the House, would void civil unions and marriages from other states that are not between a man and a woman when the couples move to Wyoming.

Health care legislation

The Senate is working on three health care bills this week. Monday they approved on second reading another joint resolution, SJR 02 – health care freedom. This proposes another constitutional amendment, thus requiring the two-thirds approval. The resolution would ask the voters to amend the Wyoming Constitution by creating a new section specifying that no federal or state law shall compel participation in any health care system by any person, employer or health care provider.

Geis said the resolution is a step to show support for the governor joining the lawsuit against the Health Care Reform Act approved last year.

“It doesn’t mean we want to get rid of it (health care reform), but rather get it to where we can afford it,” Geis said.

He added that most single people could afford to pay the fine more than they can afford to get insurance, which is mandated under the act.

The Senate also approved SF50–Medicaid options study and SF102–Medicaid cost study on second reading Monday. Both are related to the federal health care act. SF50 provides for a study related to options for reconfiguring of the Medicaid program per requirements under the act. SF102 provides for the development of cost estimates for the mandatory coverage expansion of the program.