



# Water rate increase passes first reading

by Holly Thomas

The main item for discussion at Tuesday night's Town Council meeting was the first reading of the water rate increase ordinance. Essentially, the rate increase would raise the base rate for all water users and then increase the per thousand rate (meaning the fee for every 1,000 gallons of water used will increase as well). From the Carl Brown study, the town base rate was identified as one rate that needed to be raised. Currently, the town's rate is well below average base rates for communities in the area. For example, the smaller community of Basin has a base rate of approximately \$25 whereas Thermopolis' current residential rate is \$13.20. Mayor Mortimore commented on the heart of

the issue – the current water utility debt - several times saying, "We have to at least get in the black." In addition to the current debt, he reminded council of expensive projects looming on the horizon including deteriorating town waterlines. Council members discussed alternatives to the proposed plan including increasing the base rate even higher but allowing a higher minimum (e.g. 4,000 as opposed to 1,000 gallons) before per thousand fees begin; and implementing a tiered system charging heavier water users higher fees than those who use less. Mayor Mortimore noted he did not want to discourage people from watering lawns and some of the plans mentioned might have that effect. The cemetery board and the ball fields were

identified as big consumers of water for the town and the idea of using raw water for these areas to give the town water plant relief was discussed. Mayor Mortimore reminded the council that this was not a new idea and had actually been brought up for many years. The entire council agreed that this was an important issue that should be researched in more detail. After much discussion on all sides of the water issue, council passed the first reading of the water rate increase ordinance with the agreement that more discussion and edits would be needed for following readings. Work sessions were set for August 25 to discuss more options for water rate plans and raw water usage for the cemetery board and ball fields.



## Super Soaker

photo by Holly Thomas

Ashley Griffin soaks Beth Lewis during the Gottsche Water Gun Run held Thursday at One Eyed Buffalo. The hot day brought out runners young and old to get some exercise as well as some wet-and-wild fun with water guns and balloons.

## Future of Hot Springs County Memorial Hospital discussed

by Cindy Glasson

Chairman of the Hot Springs County Memorial Hospital Board, Bill Williams, along with other board members, doctors and members of the community had a lengthy discussion with the Hot Springs County Commissioners on Tuesday regarding the future of the hospital. Williams told the commissioners his board has been working diligently over the past year to find a solution to the failure of the proposed hospital district in hopes of saving the hospital and the quality care given to the county's residents. To that end, the board formed a committee that has spent time talking openly with people in town regarding all sides of the issue, from why they did or didn't vote for the hospital district to what suggestions they would have for the board going forward. The board has talked with other small hospitals to garner their ideas and even checked into creating an affiliation with other hospitals to create more of a regional hospital association.

An Accountable Care Organization, a group of hospitals banded together, sounds good for patients, and Williams said in some ways, it would be, but the bottom line is that an association like that eventually moves the hospital one step closer to a "one payer plan", one where a

single company owns a number of smaller facilities. "We've spent a great deal of time talking about this option," Williams said. "We have to kind of compare the regulations of a hospital to the regulations of a bank. We would all be members of another organization, not stand-alone entities. "Banks have consultants and other member banks to lean on for advice and information." While that may sound like a good idea, in the long run, it means one company is in charge of everyone, like little cookie-cutter hospitals, and the independence of quality care for the community is lost in the shuffle. The Wyoming State Legislature defeated a bill to expand Medicare in the state, leaving the hospitals in the lurch when it comes to reimbursement costs. "Costs have grown exponentially," Williams said, "yet Medicare reimbursements are just one-percent over costs. How can any business remain in business with just one-percent over cost? The legislature's idea is to 'kick the can down the road until it's someone else's problem.' They're certainly not going to bail the small hospitals out for unpaid medical care." Williams admitted the hospital has taken a lot of criticism over the past year, from not being big enough or diverse enough, to the board being jaded.

However, Williams pointed out, the board is more diverse than ever, filled with younger members from all corners of the community who are fully engaged in what goes on at the hospital. Without the hospital, Williams said we're poised to lose a lot as a community including jobs, families and other businesses. "Our physical plant (the hospital) is nearly 60 years old," he said. "It's deteriorating to the point where we wonder every day what is going to break next that may compromise patient safety or patient care. "We can't expect any help from anywhere else to fix this thing. We, as a community, need to decide if we want health care in this community or lose the whole thing." **Proposal** The board's proposal is four-fold. First, they would like a grant from the county to update their master facility plan. Next, they would like to see a one-cent special purpose tax put into place to cover the cost of remodeling, repurposing or replacing the current facility. Their third proposal is the passage of a hospital district to help offset the costs of actually running the hospital, and finally,

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## Governor Mead reviews 2015 revenues with local officials

by Cindy Glasson

Wyoming's Governor, Matt Mead, was traveling the state earlier this week with the elected officials from Wyoming Girl's State, visiting with various county and town officials and made a brief stop in Thermopolis. Speaking with the County Commissioners and assistant to Thermopolis' Mayor, Fred Crosby, Mead said the revenue expected this year paints a not-so-pretty picture. The revenue anticipation report will come out the end of October and with coal production being suppressed on a federal level and the prices of oil and natural gas down, "we're living on borrowed time," Mead said. The governor said the state is actually about \$60 million ahead right now, but anticipates losing about \$15 million a month in the coming year. "We can stay where we are right now (with budget disbursements)," Mead said, "but there won't be any exception requests. Nothing extra." The group discussed the state's rainy day fund, controlled by the legislature. The questions were what the rainy day fund is for and when are we going to use it? What should we use it for? If not now, when? The legislature refused to dip into the rainy day fund last session, anticipating a greater need this year, but Mead is concerned they still may not loosen the purse strings. "I'm going to ask for robust amounts for local governments," Mead said, "but it's not going to be easy." During last year's legislative session, Mead asked for \$25 million and was granted just \$8 million. There were record savings in the permanent fund, up 55%, and the rainy day fund doubled. According to Mead, the University of Wyoming takes a huge chunk. "I support the university," Mead said, "but they're getting a huge piece of the pie. I hear criticism all across the state about it." Last year, the university received \$8 million to

cover half the cost of a swimming pool. There was just \$8 million divided between all the municipalities in the state. U.W. has proposed a \$190 million budget this year. What each town and county receives is dependent upon a strangely vague set of criteria with some municipalities and counties receiving much larger disbursements than others, creating animosity between entities. Hot Springs County always ranks low on the distribution list and we're 23 this year. Last year, the county received just \$43,000 of the \$8 million distributed. "As things get tighter it's probably going to get worse, and that's not good," Crosby said. Mead said the outlook for natural gas volumes changing any time soon doesn't seem likely and the coal forecast is difficult to figure, mostly due to federal regulations. The governor said last year the legislature wasn't too receptive to passing out funds from the rainy day fund, but this year, he's not going to let them go without doing something. "I don't see how they can say it's not raining," he said. The group also talked about the upcoming determination on whether or not the Sage Grouse will be listed as an endangered species. The word should come down from the federal level the end of September. Mead said his work with the Western Governor's Association has given him insight into the current endangered species listing qualifications and is looking at suggested changes to those criteria. "When we have proven they are back in population they are still on endangered lists," he said, referring to all animals currently listed. The governor said the wolf situation is one that really bothers him, their management, hunting status and so forth. "It should be up to us," Mead said. "We need to appeal the federal decision."