

# Town hall meeting draws big crowd

By Linda Schneider and Karen Krien

It was a wake-up call for district legislators early Saturday morning in Bird City. The Bird City American Legion hall was packed with people standing in the back as around 300 gathered to show their concern about school and health care financing budget cuts being made by the state.

At the same time, everyone realized that the state is over \$400 million in the hole and there is no money. One of the speakers said this deficit didn't happen overnight, however, there needed to be a solution and people were looking at their legislators and the government to solve the mess they are in.

Schools and health care administrators have been making cuts in order to keep programs and services and it is rumored that the state will continue to make cuts. The people gathering at the Legion hall were concerned, if not a little angry.

Cheyenne County residents from both St. Francis and Bird City began arriving and filling up the Bird City American Legion Hall long before Senator Ralph Ostmyer and Representative John Faber made their appearances.

Sen. Ostmyer opened the meeting by saying he knew folks had a lot of questions to ask; however, he wanted to keep the meeting within the time limit to be able to get to the next meeting. In the end, the meeting ran over 10 minutes of the hour allotted.

He wanted to talk about a new bill concerning the death penalty, but it was clear the crowd had other ideas about what was going to be talked about.

Rep. Faber told the group that even though he was no longer on the state School Funding Committee, he was familiar with how school finances work, and knew the concerns communities are having over the cuts.

He didn't think there would be additional cuts in education and health care, however, that didn't solve the state's financial dilemma.

"The news is not good, but the 'bleeding' has slowed down," he said.

He added that he knew that some were in favor of a 1-percent sales tax increase and he said that it was funding cuts that would make the real difference in making ends meet. He added that over 26,000 could lose their jobs due to a sales tax increase. In addition, Kansans that live on the east side of the state travel the short distance to Missouri to buy food and other items where there is no sales tax.

Rep. Faber explained there was a free service provided by the state to school districts. A post-audit that could assist schools in locating areas where cuts could be made and adding that he was disappointed that no one within his district asked for the service.

This comment received a lot of attention. It was echoed throughout the hall that there was no such thing as a "free service," and that tax payers end up paying big bucks for those specialists coming to do the assessment.

St. Francis Superintendent Rob Schiltz added that the figures which were being handed out at the meeting were misleading. He said that the state's figures calculated the money used for repairing school buildings, retirement funding and money sent to the service center in Oakley. When the state's budget is figured, the money used to refurbish the state capitol building is not included with the payroll.

The state, he said, instead of directly paying the Northwest Kansas Educational Service Center in Oakley as it used to, now sends that money to the schools which, in turn, pay the service center. The employees' retirement money (KPERs) is electronically deposited in the schools account and that same day, electronically withdrawn.

It isn't our money, Mr. Schiltz said. It is making the school's budget look far better than it is and this money is being used to give incorrect information to the public.

"You send us funding then turn right around and take it back," he said.

Lea Keller, St. Francis, said she was concerned about the decisions made in the state's capital. Legislators want the community's businesses to grow, she said, yet, schools, hospitals, and assisted living are the businesses here and the state is cutting the funding to sustain them. In addition, the major employment field in Cheyenne County are teachers and nurses.

Wheat and corn crops, and cattle put Kansas on the map and the state legislatures should make it their business to keep western Kansas here — instead they want the communities to survive on shoestrings.

We have tried to be fiscally responsible but, she said, the state government didn't run out of money overnight. If we need to raise taxes — so be it!

"I urge you to fight for us," she said. "If we need to make an appearance on the Capitol steps, then we will be there!"

From this point, three questions were posed to the legislators:

- Kansas is facing a \$400 million shortfall. What is your plan as an elected official to address this situation?

- How do you expect local services, schools, hospitals, nursing home to survive?

- A 1-cent sales tax increase would generate substantial revenue by many; funding the cuts locally would put the shortfall on few, especially in western Kansas. Which of these are you more likely to support?

Rep. Faber answered that the Appropriation Committee will be taking next year's budget to the House to be voted on. This will decide whether there will be further cuts or raise taxes. The 2010 budget is already set and cannot be changed.

"We are making it by the skin of our teeth this year," said Rep. Faber. "There will probably be a flat budget and few cuts, but not to education or medical."

Sen. Ostmyer added that the state is in a dilemma, especially since accepting the federal bailout money. He said that has to be paid back some time and how many times do we need to raise taxes to do that.

"Vote us out in 3 years if we are not doing the job," said Rep. Faber.

Rick Reeser, former Good Samaritan Village administrator, said the government needed to reduce expenses and increase revenue. He suggested the state government should reduce the number of employees. He added that if the communities have to cut back, the state government needs to do cut backs also. Rep. Faber said the only recent job growth in Kansas was in governmental jobs.

Mr. Reeser added that it is a tremendous strain in the medical industry to have a fire marshal inspect a nursing home facility and require the replacing of a \$15,000 exhaust hood over the kitchen stove because a seam was not sealed, and then say there are going to be funding cuts.

Mr. Reeser continued by asking where is the logic in having to pay for the fire marshal when the county fire chief can do the same thing.

Barbara Antholz, Cheylin staff, asked the legislators about the suggestion of looking to combine classes of less than 25 students. The schools, she said, are already on a tight budget. Does this mean students are going to be bused to Hays?

"You both need to stand up for the little people, we are important, too," she said.

After receiving three years of funding cuts to the developmental/handicap services, is the state going to reopen state institutions? asked Bonnie Burr, member of the Northwest Kansas



IT WAS STANDING ROOM ONLY with community residents from both Bird City and St. Francis. Above, hands were being raised to show their support for keeping the community schools and medical facilities open.

Developmental Services. She added that it would be more expensive to open state institutions to accommodate the needs in Kansas.

"Goodland is asking for a \$1 million grant to replace the bricks on Main Street, I hope you don't vote for this and instead send the money to Developmental Services," she said.

Cheylin Superintendent Bruce Bolen was at the microphone and told the crowd that Cheylin has a prudent board of education, great staff and teachers and the supplemental fund cannot pay staff and the problem begins when the school makes their budget based on the funding the state says it will provide, then starts cutting — it hurts because there can be no planning.

Last year, the state cut \$20,000 in July, after the budget was made and approved. Then another \$75,000 was cut in November.

Mr. Schiltz said the St. Francis schools lost \$240,980 in state money last year. There have been 7.3 teaching positions, one administrator and six assistant coaching positions cut in the last few years along with the other smaller cuts. The board, he said, does not want to cut programs or staff.

Terry Miller, county clerk, said he had been asked by other clerks to ask Rep. Faber why he had voted to take away all or part of the taxes collected on cell and land-line phones. These taxes, Mr. Miller said, have helped the county establish the 911 dispatch center and furnish radios, pagers and other necessary equipment.

Mr. Faber said that wasn't what the bill had stated. Mr. Miller countered, saying if that was the case, then there were a lot of clerks and other people across the state who had misinterpreted the bill.

Mr. Faber said it was possible that he had not completely understood the bill.

Mr. Miller later said the bill, Senate bill 48, if it had passed would have allowed big telephone companies (Sprint) to get their hands into the "pot." Mr. Faber was one of 15 voting to take away the funding. There were 106 voting against it.

Jannelle Bowers, Cheyenne County Emergency Medical Service director, said she was shocked to learn that ambulance runs were cut \$93 a run for 2010. People, she said, don't want to wait 30 to 60 minutes for an ambulance to pick them up. If the state forces small ambulance services to close, the ambulances will be coming from Goodland or Colby.

It was clear to the legislators that Cheyenne County residents wanted some answers and they wanted to be heard.

Larry Kramer, St. Francis, said he was on a fixed income and didn't feel that he could afford a tax increase, even if it was only a penny.

"We have a voice, and we are not here to kill the messenger," said Dr. Mary Beth Miller. "Everyone here has a stake in this county and you should represent us."



BONNIE BURR, Bird City resident, expresses concern over the recent cuts in developmental care and services.



BARBARA ANTHOLZ, Cheylin teacher, speaks about the importance of representing Cheyenne County and its residents.

Times staff photos by Linda Schneider

## SEE THE NEW Taurus



### At Yost Ford Mercury

St. Francis, Ks  
785-332-2188

### Beautiful Car, Beautiful Features

Tax dollars from your vehicle purchase stay in Cheyenne County to support schools and other county finances.

### Buy at Home

Where you get the best parts, sales & service