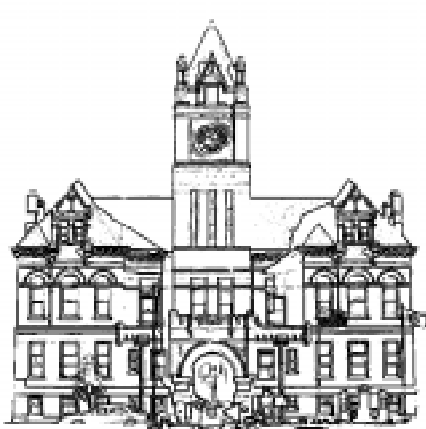


COLBY FREE PRESS



6 pages

Operational costs force local budgets to rise

By JAY KELLEY

Colby Free Press
Although mill levies have gone down in Thomas County, the chief reason is not a need for less funding, but an increase in valuation, according to the budget figures for three major county taxing organizations.

Thomas County, the City of Colby and the Colby School System have all increased their budgets for 2001. The school system was the only group to increase their mill levy, from 35.466 to 38.708 mills.

Each mill equals \$1 on \$1,000 dollars worth of property.

County Clerk Tracey Perkins said the valuation was based on the total value of personal property, real estate, minerals, utilities and oil and gas in the county.

This year's total valuation rose from \$63,666,311 to \$68,253,874. Perkins added the major increase came in real estate values with oil and gas second and the utility values third in responsibility for the increase.

All three entities have dealt with increased costs in providing benefits, especially insurance to employees. Thomas County costs increased by \$21,000, the city by \$37,000 and the school system costs were up \$28,000. School superintendent Kirk Nielsen said, "Insurance went up last year, too, and it isn't getting any better."

In terms of dollars, the school system budget increase was the largest at \$370,891 and the city's increase the smallest at \$91,412.

The county increased their budget by \$285,304 over 2000.

In terms of percentage of the budget, Colby remained the smallest, increasing the budget by less than one percent. The county budget increased by the greatest percentage, about seven percent.

The school system budget increased by about four percent.

Most of the increase in the county budget comes from taking over the landfill, from \$74,000 in cost-sharing to \$252,000 as the county took over operation on Jan. 1.

Salary costs also took up a big chunk of the budgets, with the largest increase coming from the county at \$61,000 and the smallest coming from the city at \$10,528. The school system came in at \$26,000.

One large increase, cited by Nielsen, was energy costs.

Although the school has locked into a price for energy that is half the current rate, it is still double what they paid last year.

The city and county are also affected by higher costs in everything from fuel

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— Diana Wieland
curriculum director

for vehicles to heat for buildings.

Holding costs down is a priority, according to all three agencies, but they say doing business costs more every year.

Some agencies are trying to obtain funding from non-traditional sources in an effort to provide up-to-date services at less cost.

Diana Wieland, curriculum director for the school system, said her office brought in over \$800,000 this year in grants. One of the major areas for grants is in continuing education. "We are able to get a lot of products we wouldn't be able to get otherwise," she said. These grants are through both government and private sources, she added.

The Thomas County Health Department takes advantage of grants, but health nurse Kathy Ryan said it isn't always free money.

"You have to provide certain programs and matching money for many of the grants."

Ryan said the health department gets over \$50,000 in grant money, but some of that is spread over other counties as well.

Carolyn Armstrong, Colby city manager, said the city looks for every opportunity to get grant money. Right now, Armstrong said the only grant money in use is for runway light improvements at the airport. "We will be bidding that out soon," she said.

The lights are necessary not only for commercial and private aircraft, but medical airplanes to transport seriously ill patients rapidly to larger hospitals.

"Those planes can't legally land without proper lighting," said airport manager Mark Ostmeyer.

Local leaders point to the fact that board members, commissioner and council people are taxpayers also with a vested interest in keeping taxes down. There have also been some calls for property tax reform at the state level to ease the burden.

But for now, some property owners are going to feel the pinch.



PATTY DECKER/Colby Free Press

ABOVE: The sewer/combination truck was operational on Wednesday at the corner of W. 6th St. and Mission as crews vacuumed the storm drains. Standing near the truck was Gary Delzeit, wastewater lead worker, preparing to use the remote control for the cleaner. Other city employees assisting in the operation included Bill Taylor, Fred Britt,

Ron Kogler and Wheat Lippelmann placing the vacuum into the drain. **BELOW:** Doug Lewis, also employed with public works, took down one of many ribbons, lights, and wreaths hung on light poles along Franklin Avenue on Wednesday afternoon. Taking holiday decorations down started on Tuesday and will continue as weather permits.

Mild weather works in city crews' favor

By PATTY DECKER

Free Press Editor

The city's public works department is taking advantage of the warmer weather as crews continued taking down holiday decorations and cleaning sewer lines and storm drains on Wednesday.

Gerry Bieker, director of public works, said the new sewer/combination truck, which was budgeted, approved, and purchased in October of 2000 at a cost of \$150,000, is a great asset.

"The new truck, along with the camera unit, will help us resolve problem (sewer) lines and speed up cleaning operations," he said.

Prior to the upgraded equipment, Bieker explained that crews would clean lines and drains using shovels and buckets.

"We can do a much better job now of pulling materials out of drains and lines and clearing debris away more efficiently. We can also solve problems quicker and have a better maintenance program," he said.

The sewer/combination truck is

designed to loosen and suck up mud on the basins of the storm drains using a vacuum-type cleaner. In addition, the hydraulic cleaning equipment on the truck will do the job of flushing lines which in turn will reduce problems with backups in the main systems.

Citing an example of the powerful vacuum action, Bieker said that the suction is such that it can pull a brick some 30' out of a manhole.

The new truck is also scheduled for a fairly aggressive maintenance program with sewer drains and lines, according to Bieker.

"We have targeted to cover the entire town in a couple of years and residents can expect to see the truck out approximately 10 days a month (depending on the rest of the department's workload and temperatures)," he said.

Another job of the public works department is putting up and taking down decorations, and again, weather played a major role in helping with the effort.

Bieker said that crews started taking down wreaths, lighting and banners Tuesday and will continue to work on that project throughout the week.



Buffington, Rinehart head county's emergency medical services

By MAXINE NELSON

Colby Free Press

Joshua Buffington is the new director of Thomas County Emergency Medical Services, and Martin Rinehart is the assistant director, replacing Jim Cave and Marion Lindberg, who recently resigned their positions to pursue other opportunities.

Buffington in grew up Altamont in southeast Kansas.

"I attended college at Labette County Community College in Parsons, majoring in electronics for a year, and then got into a motor vehicle acci-



J. Buffington



M. Rinehart

dent, which took me out of school," he said.

"After that I attended school off and

on until I met my wife, and she and I moved to Colby so she could attend school, and that is where I met Jim (Cave) and Marion (Lindberg). They trained me to be an EMT. I've been doing that, working for them in 1997 and 1998," he said.

"In 1998, we moved back to southeast Kansas to be closer to our families. Since 1998 I've been working at Neosho Memorial Regional Medical Center.

"I worked as an EMT on the ambulance and as an ER tech in the emergency room there," he said.

Currently, Buffington is attending paramedic class in Great Bend two nights a week. He will be finished with that in December.

Buffington and his wife Holly have a son Andrew and are expecting another child in July.

Rinehart grew up in Bird City. "After I got out of the service I moved to Colby in 1972. I have lived here most of my adult life," he said, "and was trained as a diesel mechanic, working for Cummins Diesel for 18 years, and Colby Implement for five years."

"I have been an EMT going on 10

years, and when this position came open, I thought I would try this and see if I couldn't make it work. I have always liked working with EMS and felt the community needed this top notch service," he said.

Rinehart's wife Ceanne works at Citizens Medical Center, and has for 28 years.

She works in the outpatient clinic with the specialists from Denver. Their son John lives in Denver and is the assistant manager of a video chain store. Their daughter Anne lives in Apache Junction, Ariz. with her daughter

Carolyn. Anne works for an insurance billing agency.

Looking toward the future, Buffington said the Thomas County Commissioners have approved the purchase of a new ambulance within the year.

Buffington and Rinehart will be going to Training Officer School, first level and second level, as soon as it is offered, sometime this summer. Upon completion, they will go to instructor coordinator classes so they can do training for emergency medical technicians.

Briefly

Weather: Dry and mild

The National Weather Service sees continuing dry and mild weather for the Colby area through the early part of next week. Tonight, clear, lows in the 20s and north winds 5-15 mph. Friday, sunny, highs in the 50s and west winds 10-20 mph. Friday night through Monday, continued dry, lows in the 20s and highs in the upper 40s to around 50. Wednesday's high in Colby was 59 and the low this morning was 26, climbing to 35 by 8 a.m. The soil temperature at the four-inch depth is averaging 30 degrees. There was no precipitation overnight and none recorded since Dec. 1. The records for Jan. 4: 70 in 1956 and -24 in 1959. (*The daily*

temperatures and precipitation are provided by the Northwest Research-Extension Center, Colby.)

Singles dance planned Friday

The Colby Singles Group has announced there will be a dance from 8 p.m. to midnight on Friday, Jan. 5, according to Don Birzer, one of the organizers. Jim Barnes, Orleans, Neb., is providing entertainment and all single people and alums are invited. For information, call Birzer at 462-2127.

Open house upcoming in Rexford

Everyone is invited to an open house tea at the Rexford

Community Building, Saturday, Jan. 13, from 2 to 4 p.m. The purpose of the event is the presentation of a check from the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks for Rexford's playground equipment improvement project, officials said. "We welcome all our neighbors in Thomas County to help us celebrate," said Kathi Hapke, one of the organizers of the open house.

Grade school site council to meet

The Colby Grade School Site Council will meet Monday at 6:30 p.m., Jan. 8, in the grade school cafeteria. The public is invited. For information, call 465-5100.

Midwest Energy accepting trees

Used Christmas trees may be left at the Midwest Energy, 1125 S. Range, after Christmas for recycling. All decorations and plastic tree removal bags must be removed from the trees before they are deposited. The collection points will remain open through the first week of January.

Concert set at high school

Dan and Wendy Smith of Kansas City will perform at 7 p.m. Sunday Jan. 7, at Colby High School. The event is sponsored by Mingo Bible Church. The public is invited. For information, call the church at 785-462-2992.

