



COLBY FREE PRESS

Senate gears up for school finance debate this week

By JOHN MILBURN

Associated Press Writer

TOPEKA (AP)—Debate on school finance will remain largely behind the scenes this week as senators step back to digest the latest education proposals and assess support for them.

While there is plenty for legislators to like, there is an equal amount to dislike. Chief among the things to dislike is raising taxes to raise more money for elementary and secondary schools.

A growing number of legislators are quick to point out what Senate Majority Leader Lana Oleen already recognizes as the looming problem: a hole in the 2002 budget.

That hole is being created by slower than expected revenue growth through February. As of Feb. 28, the state's revenue collections were nearly \$50 million short of expectations.

Unless the numbers rebound, Oleen said, any increase in education spending is in doubt.

"The realization is that the money is not there to fund the governor's plan and the budget," said Oleen, R-Manhattan, a member of the Senate Education Committee.

Last week, Gov. Bill Graves proposed a \$112 million plan to raise the base state aid per pupil \$110, from \$3,820 to \$3,930, increase special education funding and set aside \$34 million in incentives for excellence.

The plan would be financed by raising the sales tax from 4.9 percent to 5.1 percent and increasing motor fuels taxes 2 cents a gallon.

The fuels tax would free \$36 million

in sales tax money currently used to finance the 10-year, \$13.6 billion comprehensive transportation program.

Graves plans to travel the state this week, pleading the case for his plan to editorial writers and broadcasters. He said Friday that he has an obligation, especially as a Republican governor, to explain why he wants to raise additional revenue after six years of pushing tax cuts.

"Over the last six years, we probably have not been overfunding education," Graves said. "We just need to catch up a bit, and that's what this effort is all about."

Oleen and three other senators on the education committee have floated a three-year package that, among other proposals, raises the base state aid per pupil by \$90 each year. It is financed by raising the sales tax 0.2 percentage points each year, taking the rate to 5.5 percent.

Oleen said the increases in the final two years may not be needed if the President Bush's administration follows through on promises to increase federal funding. That would free state dollars for teacher salaries or increasing base state aid.

A House school finance plan is simple, following Graves' 2001 budget recommendation to the letter, adding \$68 million new dollars and raising the base state aid per pupil by \$50, \$3,820.

What will emerge remains to be seen. Oleen said there are enough options circulating the Statehouse that what develops may be a cafeteria plan

— a little something to satisfy everyone.

A bipartisan plan will be trotted out Monday focusing on "Skills for Success" for kindergarten through grade three. It is the product of a working group assembled by House Speaker Kent Glasscock, R-Manhattan.

The two-year plan would cost \$29.4 million, with some of the money coming from the state's share of the national tobacco settlement, the rest coming from the state general fund.

House Minority Leader Jim Garner said \$7.5 million would be spent the first year to expand the program for poor 4-year-olds.

Also, during the plan's first year, educators would determine where students are academically. In the second year, the state would spend \$21.9 million on interventions to raise student achievement in the first three grades.

"It is a long-overdue needed reform in education," said Garner, D-Coffeyville.

Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley, D-Topeka, called the House plan "a good exercise" that focuses on success in the early grades.

He said any finance package passed by the Senate has to recognize that early intervention issues have to be addressed.

Oleen said it will be crucial for any school finance plan to hold together the coalition that supports a significant spending increase. Senators — and the governor — must do their homework and let their constituents know what is at stake, she said.

Derailment investigation continues

NODAWAY, Iowa (AP)—Investigators are trying to determine if shattered rails found amid 3,000 feet of torn-up roadbed and twisted passenger cars may have caused the Amtrak crash that killed one person and injured 96 others. The California Zephyr's engineer told investigators he was operating the train at 52 mph, well below the posted limit of 79 mph, on a straight stretch of track in southwest Iowa when he felt a tug late Saturday.

"He applied the brakes with an emergency application and brought the train to a stop. However, at the same time the train was derailing behind him," federal crash investigator Ted Turpin told reporters Sunday. The derailment spread a zigzagging trail of silver-colored cars along a muddy embankment.

The train was traveling from Chicago to Emeryville, Calif., with 210 people aboard when passengers were slammed into the sides of their cars shortly before midnight.

"It just shook and shook again, and everybody screamed," said Shaheda

Ula of Laramie, Wyo., who suffered a broken hip. "I don't remember anything after that."

The National Transportation Safety Board has requested records from the Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railroad, which owns and maintains the track, on the number and weight of trains that pass through the area.

That stretch of track is visually inspected three times a week, and is examined monthly with an ultrasound device that can discover internal defects called transverse fissures. The fissures can occur when the steel in rail is forged, Turpin said.

"It starts out as a small, little nucleus. And then it opens and starts to break inside the rail," he said. "You'd never see it from the outside."

He said investigators found pieces of broken rail, but hadn't determined if the steel fractured before or during the derailment. Broken rails will undergo laboratory tests, he said.

Investigators will also look at the stability of the bed and whether satu-

ration from melting snow was a factor.

"Something appears to have been wrong back in the train between the interface of the wheels and the rail — something — we still haven't determined that," Turpin said.

Passenger Joseph Conn of Hobart, Ind., said he got off the train and found one of the front cars overturned and another dangling from a 20-foot-high embankment.

He described "shredded ties, shredded rails, torn up ballast on the roadway, just a torn-up mess."

About 3,000 feet of track was ripped up, Turpin said. The line was reopened to train traffic early Monday, said Burlington Northern road master Bob Jansen. Jim Anderson, who lives less than a mile from the site, said he was in bed when the derailment startled him and his dog.

"I thought my furnace blew up. I heard a bunch of grinding and then boom," he said. "That dog of mine jumped out of bed and started growling at the window."



PATTY DECKER/Colby Free Press

Sandy Swob, director of the Household Hazardous Waste Site, was bulking old paints today and preparing for the collection from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., Saturday, March 31, at 190 W. 4th St. Thomas Countians interested in recycled paint can call Swob at 462-4525.

Spring cleaning

Free collection day nearing

By PATTY DECKER

Free Press Editor

Spring is just around the corner — Tuesday, in fact — and according to Sandy Swob, director of the Household Hazardous Waste facility in Colby, it's a good time to clean out those old paints, cleaning products, and other items that have been stored away all winter — but don't throw them in the trash.

"Thomas County offers a safe disposal alternative through the household hazardous waste facility," she said today.

The collection day is planned for Saturday, March 31, beginning at 9 a.m. and will continue until 2 p.m. at the site, 190 W. 4th St..

"This is a free service to Thomas County households only," she said. "No business wastes can be accepted."

Some of the items that can be brought to the collection site include batteries, photo chemicals, herbicides, kerosene, pool chemicals, anti-freeze, adhesives, brake fluid, disinfectants, insecticides, gasoline, paints, solvents, rat and mouse poisons and art/craft products.

There are items that will not be accepted, she explained, and some of those include empty containers, explosives, radioactive waste, medical waste, compressed gas cylinders, ammunition, smoke alarms, heavy metals or asbestos.

For a complete and detailed listing

of items that can or cannot be taken, Swob said people can either call her or get a list from the county clerk's office.

In addition, used motor oil should be taken to the Thomas County landfill for recycling, she said.

Swob recommended that when transporting items for collection, residents should check all containers and make sure the lids are on tight and if the label is coming off, to tape it back on. Other suggestions, she mentioned, were to leave products in their original containers when possible and haul items in the car trunk or truck bed only.

For questions, call Swob at 462-4525.

Landowners in Indiana take part in wildlife habitat program

SULLIVAN, Ind. (AP) — Three years ago, when Jeff Abrams looked out the windows of his rural Sullivan County home, he saw unused farmland.

Now he can see three acres of prairie grass and wildflowers filled with songbirds, deer and an occasional wild turkey.

"I'm really pleased with the way it turned out," he said. "The wildlife's really benefited from it."

Abrams took advantage of the Wild-

life Habitat Incentives Program, also known as WHIP. Administered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, it provides planning and funding toward the establishment of a permanent wildlife habitat.

Abrams was so pleased with the results on his land in southwestern Indiana and his role in it that he began working for the conservation service this year reclaiming land. Seeing how much wildlife benefits from perma-

nent habitats was his main reason for switching from farming to conservation, he said.

The primary goal of WHIP is to help boost animals whose numbers are declining, including those that are rare, threatened or endangered, according to the Indiana Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Abrams said changing unused farmland into wildlife habitat takes patience, as well as time and money, which is where the program helps.

"Without it, it would have been tough to do because of the expense," he said. The program covered 75 percent of the costs, which include planning and planting.

"They pretty well set up the whole thing for you. All you have to do is go by the plan," Abrams said. "It's a pretty simple program."

The cost starts around \$150 per acre for simple projects, said Roger Stonebraker, a district biologist for the conservation service. More compli-

cated projects, such as wetlands, are more expensive, he said. The conservation service has set aside \$225,000 this year for funding.

"It's just the average Joe out there who wants to do good things for wildlife but isn't a farmer," Stonebraker said in describing the typical participant.

Projects that may be funded through WHIP include: permanent wildlife habitats, such as grassland or bottomland hardwood tree establishments;

fencing to exclude livestock from streams, wetlands, woodlands and other wildlife habitats; wildlife watering ponds; wetland creation, enhancement or restoration; and in-stream fish habitat improvements.

With the help of Stonebraker, Kim Owings of nearby Shelburn plans to begin a permanent wildlife habitat this spring. The project includes wildflowers and a clover ring around eight acres of pasture land that will act as fire barriers, she said.

Briefly

Weather: Looking good

The snowy weekend forecast last Friday didn't materialize, and the outlook through Wednesday of this week looks pretty good. Here goes: Tonight, partly cloudy, lows in the 30s and southwest winds 5-15 mph. Tuesday, partly sunny, highs 60-65 and northwest winds 10-20 mph, turning to the northeast. Tuesday night, cloudy, lows in the 30s. Wednesday, cloudy, rain a possibility and highs 55-60. Colby's weekend temperatures: highs, 43 Friday, 43 Saturday and 42 Sunday; lows, 23 Saturday, 27 Sunday and 25 this morning. There was 0.02 inches of precipitation over the weekend, bringing the month's total to date to 0.24 inches. Snowfall for the month remains at 2.9 inches. The records for March 19: 90 in 1921 and -3 in 1923. (The daily temperatures, precipitation and records are provided by the Northwest Kansas Research-Extension Center, Colby.)

Nursing home lesson set

Mila Bandel, Cheyenne County Agent, will present a

lesson on the basics of selecting a nursing home on Tuesday from 10-11 a.m. in the Thomas County Office Complex meeting room. She will discuss what to consider when looking; what to look for when signing a nursing home contract; what happens when the resident's money runs out; nursing home care costs; and the legal rights a resident has while in a nursing home. This is a free lesson.

Advanced ballots available

Advanced ballots for the Tuesday, April 3 general election will be available for voters on Tuesday, March 20, said Tracey Perkins, Thomas County Clerk. Advanced ballots need to be returned on or before 7 p.m., April 3.

School board meeting tonight

The Colby Board of Education will meet at 7 p.m., today, in the board room of the administration building, 210 S. Range. In addition to regular reports from principals, discussions will continue on a building proposal with Su-

perintendent Kirk Nielsen and Mike Woofler of Woofler Construction. In addition, the board will consider approval of the old high school building on the national register of historic places.

Personnel matters will include employment recommendations and resignations. For a copy of the agenda or information, call 465-5000. All school board meetings are open to the public.

Forensics training Thursday

Persons who agreed to participate as judges in the Colby High School forensics tournament will meet at 7 p.m., Thursday, in the teacher's lounge for a training session. Volunteers can call 465-5300 for information.

Fundraiser planned Tuesday

A silent auction and soup supper fundraiser is planned for 5 p.m., Tuesday, in the Colby High School commons area.

The purpose of the event, said Roni Dietz, one of the organizers, is to help raise money for Sharon Vap, paraprofessional in special services, who has had a recurrence of lymphoma cancer and faces more chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant. The auction/supper is in conjunction with the winter awards ceremony and will be followed by a worker auction featuring the senior class. Everyone is invited to attend all events that evening.

Site council meets next week

The Colby Grade School Site Council will hold its regular meeting at 6:30 p.m., Monday, March 26 in the cafeteria. Everyone is invited to attend. For information, call 465-5100.

College board meeting today

The Colby Community College Board of Trustees will meet today at 5 p.m. in Thomas Hall administration building. The meeting is open to the public.

