



COLBY FREE PRESS

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Group considers cuts as opposition to taxes is waning

TOPEKA (AP) — A Senate committee is considering spending cuts, but opposition to increasing taxes to solve budget problems appears to be weakening.

The Ways and Means Committee on Thursday finished three days of hearings on a budget plan drafted by Chairman Steve Morris and Senate President Dave Kerr. It is designed to balance the budget without increasing taxes during the state's 2003 fiscal year, which begins July 1.

The plan would cut the current \$4.5 billion budget about \$85 million, or 1.9 percent, then freeze spending at that level for the next fiscal year. The result would be a fiscal 2003 budget slightly smaller than the one for fiscal 2001.

But Kerr, R-Hutchinson, and Morris, R-Hugoton, now support a plan to increase tobacco and alcohol taxes to raise almost \$87 million in fiscal 2003. That bill would permit the state to avoid some of the cuts the Kerr-Morris budget plan would require.

The tax legislation, which emerged from discussions among GOP senators, is an alternative to a package from Gov. Bill Graves.

He wants to increase cigarette, sales and motor fuels taxes and vehicle registration fees to raise \$228 million.

The Senate's tax plan includes a 35-cent-a-pack increase in the cigarette tax. Graves' package includes a 65-cent increase. The current tax is 24 cents; the Senate plan would make it 59 cents; Graves' plan, 89 cents.

Graves promised Thursday to fight hard for his 65-cent increase and announced that a new coalition of health and social service groups would lobby for it.

Also endorsing it was House Speaker Kent Glasscock, R-Manhattan.

Even legislators who oppose tax increases said their colleagues are feeling pressure from local school officials, who have warned that districts

will have to cut programs and reduce teaching staffs if state aid is reduced.

"I think it's just the prospects of being accused of cutting schools that has people panicked," said Rep. Melvin Neufeld, R-Ingalls.

The state faces a \$426 million gap between projected revenues and spending commitments for fiscal 2003.

Much of the problem is caused by higher-than-expected costs in social services and laws requiring the state to set aside extra money for higher education and road construction.

The Kerr-Morris budget plan would cover the budget gap by using rainy-day funds and reducing spending, including an immediate \$39 per-pupil cut in state aid to school districts.

But if some legislators want to avoid cuts in aid to schools and other spending, they are not sold on Graves' cigarette tax proposal.

"It'll drive consumers across the state line," said Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley, D-Topeka.

"Cigarette smokers are going to try to find the best price that they can find for cigarettes. I think we've got to try to negotiate."

Conservative Republicans argue that Kansans don't support any tax increases.

"I think it's very unanimous that people want spending cuts," said Sen. Susan Wagle, R-Wichita. "Certainly, they prefer a sin tax over a general tax increase, but I just don't think there's any mood out there to increase any tax."

Also: —Bipartisan negotiations over congressional and legislative redistricting continued, and Graves predicted lawmakers would resolve the issue quickly.

—The House Appropriations Committee introduced a bill to allow the state to issue up to \$110 million to establish new scientific research centers at state universities.



JAY KELLEY/Colby Free Press

Daniel Zerr was putting the sound system together at the Colby Comfort Inn in preparation for the Pheasants Forever Banquet and Auction tonight.

Activities start with a social hour at 6 p.m. The annual event is expected to bring in thousands of dollars for pheasant habitat.

Hundreds to attend Pheasant banquet

By JAY KELLEY

Colby Free Press

The Pioneer Chapter of Pheasants Forever will hold their 18th Annual Banquet tonight at the Colby Comfort Inn Convention Center.

The annual event is open to the public and will include an auction, drawings and raffle. Prizes and auction items include framed wildlife prints, paintings, firearms and a beef bundle. There will also be a youth gun drawing for

kids under 16.

The banquet will start with a social hour from 6-7:30 p.m., followed by dinner and the auction and drawings at 8 p.m.

Past banquets have drawn hundreds of people and all proceeds will be used for habitat work in the area. Pheasants Forever provides habitat for pheasants and other wildlife by seeding farmland and also educates the public about ethical hunting and the wildlife needs.

School bus driver on an 'odyssey' turns himself in; kids okay

By TIMOTHY D. MAY

Associated Press Writer

OLEY, Pa. (AP) — Thirteen children were back home after a school bus driver with a loaded rifle took them on an odyssey that ended in another state when he turned himself in.

The students returned home with their parents early Friday, more than 16 hours after their bus veered off its route and went to Landover Hills, Md., 115 miles away. The children were unhurt but the parents had had the fright of their lives.

Driver Otto Nuss, 63, was taken to jail Thursday night after surrendering to an off-duty officer and was sched-

uled to appear in court Friday on federal kidnapping charges.

The motive of the journey was not clear. Several of the Berks Christian School students said Nuss told them they were going on a field trip to Washington. They said they played games, helped Nuss plan the route, and felt at ease when he stopped the bus to treat them to lunch at a Burger King.

"He never touched anybody," said eighth-grader Josh Pletscher, 13. "We were having fun. We were having cars honk their horns."

The school held an assembly and religious service Friday to celebrate the safe return of the children. About

200 students came in, including at least three of the 13, school administrator Robert Becker said.

"I was glad to actually see them and talk to them," said Becker, who spent the morning counting heads. "It was the first time that I got a lot of details. I was thankful to know that none of the children were abused."

The bus had picked up the students, ages 7 through 15, at a high school in Oley at about 7:30 a.m. Thursday for their daily six-mile trip to the religious school in Birdsboro.

When the bus failed to reach its destination, area residents, a police helicopter and cruisers frantically searched

the route in rainy, foggy weather.

Craig Ziemer, the father of one of the children, 11-year-old fifth-grader Ashley Ziemer, called the six hours when the bus was missing "the most horrible thing I've ever experienced."

The students on the bus said the driver ignored a dispatcher's efforts to contact him by radio, according to an FBI affidavit from special agent Thomas D. Neeson. Nuss told authorities some of the students wanted to return home, but he told them they could not, the affidavit said.

"He said he wanted to show them Washington, D.C.," FBI spokesman Peter Gulotta Jr. said.

The journey ended with the bus parked outside a Family Dollar discount store in Landover Hills, just a few miles from Washington. Nuss entered the store and approached off-duty Officer Milton Chabla, who was wearing his uniform, police said.

Nuss told Chabla he had left a gun on the bus, police said. He said he had taken the children against their will and wanted to turn himself in. "He wanted the kids to be OK and let their parents know they were OK," Chabla said.

Gulotta said the semiautomatic rifle was found behind the driver's seat, covered by a coat.

Some children had seen the gun on

the bus and feared the driver was going to kill them, according to the affidavit. They told FBI agents the driver told them not to go near the rifle.

"One of the students, fearing what might happen, wrote 911 in reverse on a fogged bus window," according to the affidavit.

After the children and their parents were reunited Thursday at a Maryland police station, all were bused back to the parking lot of the public high school in rural Oley.

Speaking to reporters after their return, children on the bus said Nuss asked them to help plan the route to Washington on a map.

Briefly

Weather: Might climb to 70

Colby's temperature could reach 70 on Saturday, advises the National Weather Service in its forecast this morning. Tonight, clear, lows around 20 and southwest winds 10-15 mph. Friday, sunny, highs in the middle 60s and southwest winds 10-20 mph. Friday night, clear, lows in the middle 20s. Saturday, partly sunny, highs near 70. Sunday, partly cloudy, lows in the lower 30s and highs in the lower 60s. Colby's high Wednesday was 37 and the overnight low this morning was 9. The soil temperature at the 4-inch depth is averaging 32. Precipitation remains at 0.10 inches for the month. The records for January 24: 68 in 1981 and —26 in 1894. (The daily temperatures, precipitation and records are provided by the Northwest Kansas Research-Extension Center, Colby.)

Refund assistance planned Tuesday

Rosalie Seemann will be at the Meadowlark Manor from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Tuesday to assist with Food Sales and Homestead Refunds. She will also assist with the LEIAP applications, Low Energy Income Assistance Program. Those needing assistance should bring all their necessary papers with them.

La Leche League meets Sunday

Anyone interested in learning more about breastfeeding for infants is invited to La Leche League Sunday, 2-4 p.m. in the basement of the Presbyterian Church. The meeting will focus on *Advantages of breastfeeding for mother and baby*, said Connie Davis, leader of the group. This is the first of four meetings on the fourth Sunday of each month.

Other topics are: Feb. 24, *Breastfeeding in the early weeks*; March 24, *Avoiding difficulties*; April 28, *Nutrition and weaning*. For questions or information, call Davis at 462-7188.

Pinewood Derby on Sunday

The Cub Scout Pinewood Derby will be Sunday at the armory. The race will begin at 2 p.m. with weigh-in starting at 1 p.m. After the boys race, Tanya Sager, cubmaster, said there will be a parents' race.

Girl Scout cookies on sale

Girls Scouts have started taking orders for Girl Scout cookies and will continue through Feb. 1. Delivery dates are Feb. 19 to March 8. Money will be collected upon delivery. To order cookies, contact any Girl Scout, or Shannon Koon, cookie chairman, 462-6662.

Wellness Fair set for Saturday

Those who had blood work done for this year's Wellness Fair will receive an explanation of the findings at the event on Saturday during presentations scheduled for 9:30 a.m., 10:30 a.m., 11:30 a.m., and 12:30 p.m. The fair will be open from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and is being held in the student union at Colby Community College.

Recycling center takes phone books

The Thomas County Recycling Center is taking old telephone books at its collection site, 720 E. College Dr. in Colby. Those wanting to drop off the books should use the magazine bins, coordinators said.

Firefighting technology



JAY KELLEY/Colby Free Press

Colby firefighter Sean Hankin demonstrates a thermal imaging camera on loan to the department to Wal-Mart manager Roger Voss. The camera was used in a training burn on Jan. 5 and is available for demonstration to civic groups.

