



COLBY FREE PRESS

Grass fires a hazard now through fall

By Tisha Cox
Colby Free Press

Spring hasn't brought too many showers yet and a lack of rain usually spells trouble. The potential for grass fires grows in Thomas County with warmer weather and little precipitation.

Colby Fire Chief Bob McLemore said dry weather hasn't been much of a factor yet.

"We haven't had too many calls," he said, "and a burn ban hasn't yet been imposed on Thomas County this spring."

McLemore said the average number of grass fires is about 30 from spring to fall.

As the season edges closer to summer, McLemore said the fire department is more cautious when

allowing people to burn.

"I think people have been more cautious too," he said. "It's definitely going to get dry again."

Whether or not there is a ban is a day-to-day issue.

"Each day we check the fire danger," he said, "and people have to call the fire department to check before they can do a controlled burn."

The ideal conditions for a controlled burn are high humidity and low wind.

The burn can only be done during the day. Those wanting to burn must also make sure exposures are protected, watch the burn and make sure any excess brush is cleared away.

Fires will happen. McLemore said lightning is one threat, but most

often, the causes of grass fires are more usually from trucks and equipment in the field. Fires along highways or Interstate 70 are caused by hot parts falling off a vehicle or discarded smoking materials.

"They usually don't burn that bad," he said.

Though many problems occur during dry spells, a wet year can also prove a problem. More precipitation means more growth, and in summer and fall, when things dry up, there is more material that can be a fire hazard.

McLemore said the best advice to prevent a fire is to keep vegetation down to a minimum and make sure there are fire breaks.

For more information, call the fire department at 460-4454.

Mumps in Thomas County

Thomas County was added to the Kansas Department of Health and Environment list with either confirmed or probable cases of mumps reported, said Sharon Watson, with the department.

Health officials in Kansas said there are 461 mumps confirmed/probable cases in 45 counties as of Friday.

Local health departments are also

investigating 81 patients with potential symptoms of mumps and in Douglas County, 204 cases are reported.

In addition to Thomas County, other cases are located in the following counties: Allen, Anderson, Atchison, Barton, Bourbon, Butler, Chase, Clay, Cowley, Crawford, Dickinson, Douglas (204), Ellis, Franklin, Geary, Gove, Grant,

Greenwood, Harvey, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Labette, Leavenworth, Lyon, Marshall, McPherson, Miami, Nemaha, Norton, Osage, Phillips, Pottawatomie, Pratt, Reno, Riley, Rooks, Saline, Sedgwick, Seward, Shawnee, Sheridan, Wabaunsee, and Wyandotte.

Watson said Iowa health officials have reported 1,552 cases of mumps as of May 3.

Uninsured numbers grow

WICHITA (AP) — Rising health insurance costs put about 70,000 Kansas workers on the rolls of the uninsured between 1998 and 2003, and with small businesses struggling to keep the popular benefit for their employees, that number could be headed even higher.

Industry executives say that short of a health care overhaul, there's not

much of a chance that costs will go down.

A report released last week by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation showed that between 1998 and 2003, individual premiums in Kansas increased 40.6 percent, or an average of \$981. Because of that, many workers who were offered insurance declined because they

couldn't afford their share of the premiums.

"Premiums are rising quite drastically — and that's after adjusting for inflation," said Michael Davern of the University of Minnesota, who was a principle researcher in the study. "Employers and employees are absorbing the growth — but how long can they do that?"

Colby women research moral climate in public schools

By Patty Decker
Free Press Editor

Two Colby women were among 120 attending a conference in Topeka recently led by Kansas bishops hoping to create a moral climate favoring education.

Executive director of the Kansas Association of Community Colleges Sheila Frahm and Colby School Board member Janice Frahm, attended as lay members of the Colby United Methodist

Church.

"I always enjoy following education and related political issues," said Sheila.

The conference dealt with student diversity, rural schools and applying values in the modern world.

They also received a primer on finance issues and discussed religious faith and science education.

"We want to set a moral climate that says these are the concerns you ought to be bringing to bear on mak-

ing these decisions," said Bishop Scott Jones, who is the new United Methodist Church Bishop Jones said.

"In that sort of fundamental way of shaping the debate, we have a contribution to make."

The conference came the same day the House Select Committee on School Finance trimmed \$65 million from a Senate-passed school finance plan. The legislation would instead phase in a \$401 million increase in aid to public schools over

three years.

But the bishops said they're not advocating any particular bill, nor do they plan to get involved in legislative campaigns.

"What we do want people in our denominations to do is to vote, to be involved in the process, to run for election, to be active in school boards and the development of curriculum, to be as involved as possible," said Dean Wolfe, of the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas.

Last year clergy largely from

more conservative denominations and churches led a successful effort to amend the Kansas Constitution to ban gay marriage. Some promised they would be more active in debates over abortion and how evolution is taught.

Sheila said she thought it was refreshing to have church leadership reminding others of what the role of the church can be with politics.

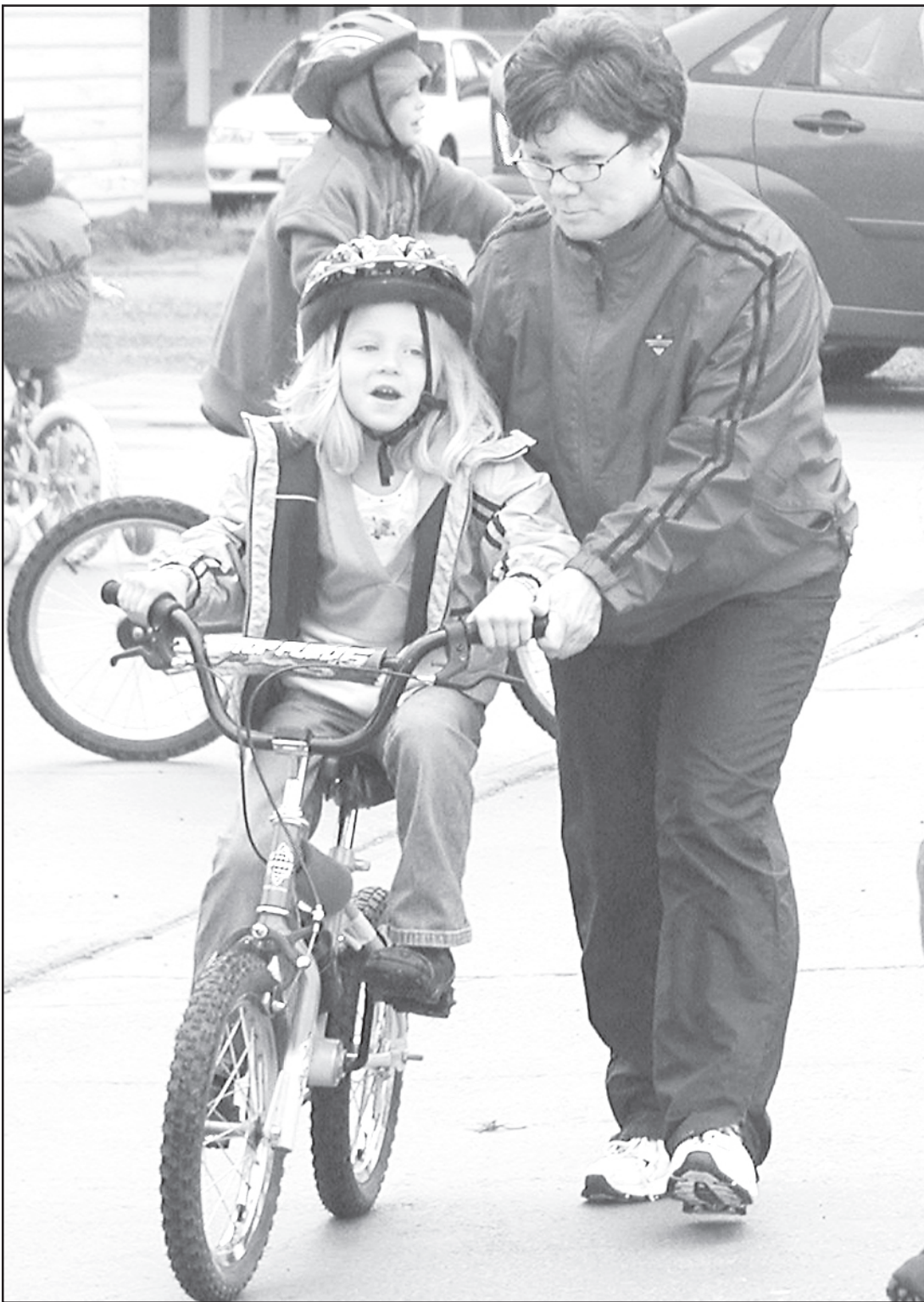
"It's not the church's role to tell its members how to vote, not hand-out pre-printed voter guides which

is in total violation of how a church must operate under the state/federal laws and tax codes, but rather the church can help inform its members and encourage personal decisions and involvement with issues and candidates," Sheila said.

Those at the conference are aware of both sides of issues.

Bishops acknowledged people often associate Christians with support for giving parents tax vouchers so they can send their children to private schools.

Balancing Act



TISHA COX/Colby Free Press

Puddle Duck Preschool student Brooke Alexander, left, got a little help Friday getting up to speed on her bike from preschool assistant Wanda Spresser. Teacher Amy Jennings said students brought their bicycles to ride that day, and not even a little rain could keep them from enjoying themselves. This week is the last week of school for the students before summer vacation.

On the way down

Colby's Eli Robert looked for a place to land during the long jump event Friday at the Colby High School Invitational Track meet. Robert won the event with a distance of 18 feet. See more results on page 8.



JOHN VAN NOSTRAND/Colby Free Press

Negotiators set on half-price parks

TOPEKA (AP) — Insights from a lifelong state parks user helped scuttle a plan to give Kansans free admission to state parks in favor of cutting fees in half for all visitors, as legislative negotiators tried to resolve sticky budget and tax issues.

Sebelius also lost two of her key health care proposals as the House and Senate negotiated over a bill meant to complete a state budget likely to approach \$12 billion for the fiscal year beginning July 1.

The three senators and three House members can't finish their work until at least Monday because their bill, now worth about \$100 million, has to account for whatever additional aid to public schools legislators approve.

Also, a provision meant to block state-funded research into human cloning could prove contentious.

As of Saturday, legislative leaders believed three issues had to be resolved for the 2006 session to adjourn — the budget, funding for public schools and business tax breaks.

A second group of negotiators

agreed Friday night on tax issues, including Sebelius' plan to phase out property taxes on business machinery and equipment.

Parks were an issue because Sebelius hoped to both boost attendance and answer long-standing concerns that the state's 24 sites are starved for money and deteriorating. She wanted to set aside \$5.25 million to boost parks funding but allow Kansans to enter free starting Jan. 1, 2007.

Senators embraced the idea, but House members resisted, proposing half-price admission for Kansans instead. Fees have been rising; they are \$7 per day for vehicle and \$46.65 for a yearlong vehicle permit.

A key player in the debate was Rep. Brenda Landwehr, R-Wichita, one of the budget negotiators, who's used parks for years, particularly Cheney State Park, along the Sedgwick-Kingman county border.

She said she worries free admission would encourage farmers and others to drive their equipment over park roads there as a shortcut.