



COLBY FREE PRESS

Auditor says county needs to change its procedures

By Jan Katz Ackerman
Colby Free Press

Thomas County leaders learned Monday they need to make changes in how they handle taxpayer money.



B. Staats

Brian Staats, accountant with Adams Brown Beran and Ball of Colby, told Commissioners Ron Evans, Paul Steele and Ken Christiansen some of the county's accounting practices need revised. He also told Thomas County Clerk Shelly Harms about changes she could make to improve monitoring county money.

Staats went over the 2005 audit report and said while most of the county's money practices are in good shape, several are not.

"It's important that you hire competent department heads and that they know about the budget and that you have oversight of that budget," Staats said.

Accounts in which more money was spent than budgeted during 2005 were the general fund, county health and historical society.

Staats said the overages could have stemmed from payroll or reimbursements which had not been accounted for by Dec. 31, 2005.

Staats said the commissioners and Harms need to make sure there is enough money in each fund and not make distributions which exceed the committed cash balances.

"We have a glitch now and then, but overall, I think we do pretty well," Steele said.

Staats said his firm would like to see the commissioners crack down

and not let any money be paid out without their authority.

According to the 2005 audit report, 1,003 treasurer checks were written instead of commissioner approved warrants.

Staats advised Harms and the commissioners that all payments, including money employees need for travel or meetings, go through the commissioners.

"Kansas law requires approval of all county expenditures by the commissioners," Staats said.

Harms said employees often are not timely in requesting money for travel expenses.

Staats told her she needed to be more firm about having requests go through both her office and the county commissioners so Evans, Steele and Christiansen can approve the expenditures.

Another area of concern Staats talked about was how contracts are approved.

He said in 2005, a lease purchase contract was signed by a former county employee in the emergency medical service and it was paid for with a treasurer's check.

"Only commissioners should sign contracts so you can monitor funds," Staats said.

Minor changes which could help track money included better review of accounts receivables in the emergency medical service and noxious weed departments. Staats said more timely collection of old accounts and better inventory lists would help the commissioners and clerk know where money goes.

"These are really well considered critiques on our policies and procedures," Steele said.

"It is my understanding that before we adopt this audit report all the audit adjustments will be placed in the record."

Red Cross Readiness



TISHA COX/Colby Free Press

Sarah Floyd, left, with the Wichita Red Cross chapter, readied Sherry White, new branch manager of the Thomas County Red Cross, to donate blood during a blood drive Wednesday at the

Colby Community Building. Jo Cheney, one of the organizers, said 126 viable units of blood came from 142 donors. There were also 13 first-time donors.

School board budget may increase

By Tisha Cox
Colby Free Press

Work on the 2007 Colby School district budget has begun.

The Colby School Board approved the publishing of the budget at its meeting Monday. The proposed 2007 budget is \$12,712,880. The 2006 budget was \$12,129,462, an increase of \$583,418.

"This is the maximum we will be able to spend without republishing," said Jo DeYoung, district financial officer. "The valuation is up quite a bit this year."

She said property taxes may also go up slightly. The county valuation

increased 2 percent; the 2005-2006 valuation was \$55,602,565 and for 2006-2007, it is \$56,808,636.

Last year, 46.708 mills were levied and this year, the mill levy is expected to be 46.66.

She said the two budget areas increasing the most are special education and at-risk programs. Special ed is increasing by \$44,261 and at-risk is going up \$81,539.

DeYoung estimated a 4 percent decrease in student enrollment this year. "I am not expecting that much of a decrease, but it does allow for a conservative budget estimate," she said. "I think we're very realistic on what we do," DeYoung said.

In other business, the board talked about one of several board policies. The one that drew most attention was a resolution allowing the use of school buses for public use.

Last year, a request was made by Rich Epp of J and R Marketing to use buses to take youth to a concert held on New Year's Eve in Colby.

Superintendent Kirk Nielsen told the board such requests aren't allowed under state policy, but the resolution would change that.

Board member Dewey Augustine asked what would happen if someone again asked to use the buses.

"No one should be turned down," he said.

Stan Molstad, board member, said the district has bucked policy by allowing buses to be used to give rides to veterans in several parades.

Board member Kevan Taylor said the existing policy should be left in place.

"It's probably the safest thing to do," said board member Janice Frahm. "I want to follow the law."

Joel Powell, board member, said it is not a good public image when other surrounding districts allow their buses to be used.

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Emergency medical director asks county for newer vehicle

By Jan Katz Ackerman
Colby Free Press

Thomas County Emergency Medical Service department heads asked for permission Monday to buy a new or different first responder vehicle.

Ken Gatlin and Marty Rinehart told commissioners Ron Evans, Paul Steele and Ken Christiansen the 1993 Jeep used to get to patients where an ambulance won't needs replaced.

Used on muddy or snow packed roads, Gatlin said the Jeep is starting to show it's age.

"It's got 178,200 miles on it and it's starting to need some repairs," Gatlin said.

Steele said commissioners need to look at vehicles with a warranty which might mean purchasing new versus used.

"I think there is a value to a warranty,"

"We've got to look at what's lowest and best for the taxpayers."

Paul Steele,
Thomas County Commissioner

Steele said. "If you buy used there's at least one to two years of warranty you won't get."

Evans said county policy requires the board take sealed bids for purchases of vehicles. Steele said the commissioners are required to take the lowest and best bid.

"We've got to look at what's lowest and best for the taxpayers," Steele said.

The commissioners directed Gatlin and Rinehart to get information about discounts offered to government entities and report

back to them.

"I'm assuming you want to stay local," Rinehart asked.

"Yes, we want to purchase locally," Christiansen said.

Rinehart said the county follows a five-year purchase plan for major items for the emergency medical service. He said ambulances are traded in every five years in order to maintain the latest equipment.

"We have two years to go," he said about the next time for buying a new ambulance.

Department consolidation

Thomas County Road and Bridge Director Clair Schrock updated the commissioners about the Willow Street project. That project will remove the two curves west of Country Club Drive near Interstate 70 exit 54, making the street angled.

Schrock said he talked with representatives of Penco Engineering of Plainville and construction will start either late this fall or early next spring. The new asphalt street will be 30-foot wide, have 2-foot wide shoulders and be 7- to 8-inches deep.

The commissioners talked with Schrock about the possibility of consolidating the road and bridge department and noxious weed departments.

Steele said combining the two departments would provide a savings to the county in salaries and it would allow cross-training of staff.

Both Evans and Christiansen supported the idea, but agreed it would require an assistant be hired to help whoever was hired for the larger department.

Schrock said either way, the county would have to continue to comply with commercial applicator license requirements.

He said a combined department could mean several people be licensed to purchase and apply chemicals.

After a brief discussion, Schrock said he supported the move to a larger department. He said he had no plans to resign his position as road and bridge director, but planned to apply for the weed director job in case the commissioners made the change.

Thomas County Clerk Shelly Harms said as of Monday morning she had received two applications for the weed director job and planned to take applications until 5 p.m.

Rookie year

Jennifer Burr, right, enrolled her daughter, Caitlin, at Sacred Heart School during enrollment Tuesday. Caitlin will be in preschool this fall.



TISHA COX/Colby Free Press

College settles lawsuit

WICHITA (AP) — Barton County Community College has settled a lawsuit with a former journalism instructor who alleged she lost her job over the student newspaper's coverage of an athletic department scandal in which eight people have been convicted.

Jennifer Schartz said she will receive \$130,000 under Wednesday's settlement of her federal lawsuit. She had also sought — but did not receive — reinstatement plus a grant of tenure at the Great Bend school.

Schartz spent three years as a non-tenured, part-time instructor and adviser to the student newspaper before the school's trustees

voted in April 2004 against renewing her contract, despite recommendations from her supervisors and then-president Veldon Law.

In her lawsuit, Schartz claimed she was dismissed in retaliation for exercising her First Amendment rights as a faculty adviser, for supporting the rights of her students and for refusing to censor the content of the student newspaper.

College officials said they were not required to explain the dismissal of a non-tenured employee. They also argued the school and its personnel were immune under Kansas law from the damages sought by Schartz.

Allen Glendenning, the school's