



COLBY FREE PRESS



COLBY FREE PRESS FILE PHOTO

Members of Colby High's Singers perform earlier this year. A combined 23 members of the school's band and vocal groups will

compete Saturday at the state contest in Andale. Students will perform in a variety of categories.

School's music on stage for state

By John Van Nostrand
Free Press Publisher

Colby High senior Lauren Cox said the judges at the state band contest are tough. But she expects that knowing it is the biggest stage high school music students will be performing on.

A combined 23 members of the Colby High school band and choir groups will compete at the 4A state band and choir contest Saturday at Andale.

Eight of the 23 will compete in band.

"This is much higher competition than at regionals," Cox said. "And the judges will be tougher too."

Cox, along with Liz Bond and Paige Pfeifer, will play a flute trio at state. Cox is thrilled that the rules at state have changed since her appearance at state as a freshman.

"We had to memorize all the music," she said. "Now, we don't have to."

But even with the music in front of them, the challenges still exist.

The trio, under the permission of band director Jill Nickols, selected the music they wanted to play. Cox said it does not matter if the trio picked an easy piece to show off, or a complex piece to show more talent. Making sure everybody knows what to play and when is key.

"You have to know your group," she said.

Cox said the music is from the "Nutcracker Suite." Cox said the pieces have been altered, "to jazz it up a little so it's not as traditional."

Nickols said having the students

performing at state select their own music has benefits.

"I bring them several things to choose from but it gives them ownership if they pick it," she said.

Echoing Cox, Nickols said students who select challenging music to play at state can be a catalyst for the future.

"It gives them the opportunity to work on things," she said. And scoring high at the state contest

See "MUSIC," Page 3

Colby library bound with success, growth

By Patty Decker
Free Press Editor

"It was another great year for Pioneer Memorial Library," said Director Jeff Friesen, before the Colby City Council.

"Perhaps this best reflects our ongoing commitment to service," he said.

In reviewing the year, Friesen said a serious effort was made to secure resources needed to renovate the basement of the library.

"Our goal is to create a youth area that can also serve on occasion as an activity area for special events."

By December, the library had enough grants, gifts and donations saved to start construction.

"If construction goes according to schedule," he said, "the basement should be completely renovated and ready to use by the beginning of this summer."

Another concern was the fountain in the front of the library originally built in 1963. Friesen spoke about the vandalism in 2004, which led to an assessment that the structure needed repairs.

In 2005, he said the bowl was resurfaced and all the copper components replaced. The following year, the fountain was restored and returned to operation.

"The fountain should now stand bright, beautiful and tall, well into the future," he said.

As part of the library's annual report, Friesen also told the council the number of people using the facility "significantly jumped" in 2006. He reviewed many of the services and programs the library of-

fers to include Booked for Lunch, a free reading discussion program that meets at noon on the first Wednesday of the month from September through May.

In the spring, the library offers story times for preschoolers, toddlers and families and at the end of May and through July each year, a summer reading program is held.

"The library is also a popular meeting place," he said, "with a variety of groups using the facility."

Some of those included the Boy Scouts, High Plains Mental Health, the youth center group organized by Todd Stramel, Western Prairie RC & D, Heartland Rural Counseling, the Chess Club and more.

"Because of the overwhelming numbers of people wanting to use the meeting room, some groups were able to use the basement for their activities and there is no charge," he said.

The library, Friesen said, continues to look at technology services and consider how to improve.

"With an eye towards the future and an ear to the ground," he said, "we continue to look for ways to improve our image as a progressive, forward-thinking library."

Friesen has been the director for almost three years, following JoAnne Sunderman's retirement in June of 2004.



Friesen

Health initiatives close to passage

TOPEKA (AP) — New programs for helping poor Kansans buy health insurance and encouraging small businesses to cover their workers won final legislative approval Wednesday.

The House voted 120-0 and the Senate, 38-0, to approve compromise legislation bundling modest health care initiatives into a single package. The measure went to Gov. Kathleen Sebelius.

"Health care access and affordability are longtime priorities of this governor and she's happy to see the first step cleared in this process," said spokeswoman Nicole Corcoran.

The measure falls short of answering Sebelius' call in January for a plan to eventually bring universal health coverage to Kansas. But supporters believe it will set up a debate over more sweeping proposals next year and help some of the state's 300,000 or so uninsured residents get coverage.

The Kansas Health Policy Authority, an agency set up in 2005 to review health care issues and administer some state programs, plans to continue discussing proposals this year for improving access to care and controlling increases in insurance costs. Also, a joint legislative committee plans its own debate.

"This bill is important because Kansans need to have a better health system, and that means more access to health care, more affordable health insurance premiums and more of a focus of primary care and prevention," said Marcia Nielsen, the authority's executive director. "This bill is a significant down payment to do just that."

House and Senate negotiators pieced together the legislation from parts of other bills before legislators started their annual spring break

April 4. Lawmakers reconvened Wednesday to wrap up their business for the year.

"It sets the groundwork for something we'll work on for the next several years and provides the track we need to be on," Rep. Jerry Henry, D-Cummings.

Key provisions in the bill create a new program under which, starting in 2009, the state would give poor Kansans about \$3,200 a year for health insurance. By 2012, the state would be providing \$77 million annually to 24,000 people.

The only note of caution came from Sen. Julia Lynn, R-Olathe, who worried about the cost of the program.

She still voted for the bill.

The bill also would permit more Kansans to set aside pretax income to cover health expenses and to allow the state to make no-interest loans to help small businesses form associations to purchase health plans for their employees.

In addition, the measure initiates a study of overhauling the Medicaid program serving about 250,000 needy Kansans, establishes an inspector general to root out Medicaid waste and fraud and expands health screenings for newborns.

Rep. Jeff Colyer, R-Overland Park, a physician who had a big hand in drafting the legislation, said the bill is a step toward a new "major concept," moving people from Medicaid and being uninsured into the private market.

"People expect some change. We're giving them some," he said. "They want it done well, and they want it market-oriented."

The Legislature didn't draft a plan for bringing universal coverage to Kansas as suggested by Sebelius, a Democrat, because many Republicans were wary of expanding government's reach.



TISHA COX/Colby Free Press

Mary Jane Smith, far left, visited with outgoing housing authority director Jodi Hurst, left center, while incoming director Shirley

Skolout talked with Barbara Highland, far right, during a reception Wednesday at the housing authority office, 600 S. Mission.

Housing Authority has new director

By Tisha Cox
Colby Free Press

The Colby Housing Authority's outgoing and new director were honored with a reception Wednesday.

Jodi Hurst, 50, is leaving after 15 years as director.

Her last day is Monday. New director Shirley Skolout, 44, starts Monday.

The housing authority provides low-cost housing with to low-income families and senior citizens.

"I'm leaving to pursue other options," Hurst said. "I have enjoyed this job, and still do."

After 15 years, she said it was

time for a change, but she will be helping Skolout with the leadership transition.

Before Hurst took the director's job, she was working part time in Paul Steele's accounting office as an auditor and also part time at the housing authority. After two years, she applied for the director's job.

The authority is responsible for 112 apartments in Colby at South Park Apartments and Meadowlark Manor.

"We maintain pretty good occupancy," she said.

Hurst's duties were taking care of the accounting in-house, working with applicants and residents, area agencies and also the federal Department of Housing and Urban

Development.

"We are under HUD guidelines and we report to them," Hurst said. The regional office is in Kansas City and national headquarters are in Washington, D.C.

Working with residents was her favorite part of the job.

"It was really great doing that part of it," she said.

She also thanked the staff for their hard work. "The office was rated high-performing," Hurst said.

She and her husband A.J. have four grown children and five grandchildren.

Skolout is looking forward to starting her new job. Before taking the housing authority job, she worked one year at Colby Commu-

nity College in resource and referral.

"It involved working with daycare providers and helping people find daycare for their children," she said.

Skolout also has 20 years of financial experience.

"Working with the housing authority will be different, but I'm ready for the challenge of working with residents, and the day to day operations," she said.

Skolout is also finishing her bachelor's degree in organizational and leadership management through Friends University.

She and her husband Gery have two children.