



Courts wait for decision on furloughs

By Vera Sloan

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Court employees on the third floor of the Thomas County Courthouse are waiting to hear whether they will work a regular schedule or have to take up to 24 days of unpaid furlough between late March and the middle of June.

A bill approved by the Kansas Legislature last month, and awaiting the governor's signature, restores \$5 million to the judicial budget. After the House passed the bill earlier in February, the Supreme Court put plans for a furlough on hold. At the time, some legislators claimed the bill would eliminate the need for any furloughs, and the Supreme Court cancelled plans to start the cuts in February.

As of today, said Ron Keefover, education and information officer for the state judicial department, pending plans call for court workers other than judges to take 24 days of "forced furlough" to help the courts close an \$3.3 million budget gap this spring. This includes six to seven employees at the Thomas County courthouse.

Keefover said he feels the governor will sign the bill. A decision on the furloughs should come before March 25, when the first furlough day is scheduled. He said the department need to see how much is left in the budget for payroll to the middle of June. The state's fiscal year ends June 31, he

noted, but for payroll purposes, the cutoff is June 13.

Kim Schwarz, Thomas County district court clerk, said if it happens, the furloughs would mean workers here would be off work without pay March 25 and 26, every Thursday and Friday in April and May, and June 3 and 4. That means six to seven people without pay every Thursday and Friday for 12 weeks.

Closing the doors of the top floor of the court house would do more than just take a bite out of the employees' paychecks, however.

"It would directly affect public access to what the courts offer to the public every day," said Schwarz. "It would affect the waiting time to obtain a marriage license. Small claims filings and restraining orders against stalking and abuse would be put on hold, as well as other court filings."

An \$10 surcharge on court filing fees effective July 1 was expected to bring an additional \$5 million to the state's coffers, Keefover said, but just how much won't be determined until it's evaluated at the end of the fiscal year. He said the figure could be higher, or even lower than \$5 million. The courts will evaluate furlough savings at the same time.

Magistrate Judge Rick Ress of Colby, whose budget comes out of the 15th Judicial District, said there would be no hearings during the furlough days without clerks.

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Wind farm awaits utility agreements

By Kevin Bottrell

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A wind-turbine farm planned for south-central Thomas County remains stalled, waiting for someone to buy the power.

Peter Kennon, project developer for the Spanish firm developing the field, Acciona Energy, said the Solomon Forks Wind Farm is nearly ready to build. The company has completed all the environmental studies, land agreements and other preparation, he said; the only thing left before construction is to get a contract with a utility company.

"We're just waiting for someone to buy the power," he said.

The company was in a similar position when Kennon spoke to the county commissioners in July.

Electric markets have been turned upside down, he said. Acciona's original plan was to sell the wind farm's power on the open market, but the economy took a turn for the worse in the middle of

the project. The collapse of natural gas prices also dropped the price of wholesale power. Kennon said this makes wind less competitive, but still a good investment in the long run.

The good news, he said, is the company can market their power to any utility in the Southwest Power Pool. Acciona has offered the project to several utilities, including Kansas City Power and Light Co. Although the timeline keeps slipping, he said, the current plan is to have a contract and begin construction within several months.

"We're really optimistic," he said. "I think Solomon Forks is a very good project."

The firm also is close to finalizing a cooperative agreement with Thomas County, he said, but is holding off until there's a firm date for the start of construction. The agreement would include things such as who would be responsible for road maintenance

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KATHRYN BALLARD/Colby Free Press

Colby girl gives hair to cancer patients

Ashtyn Dennis made a courageous decision for a 6-year-old last week: she decided have her long hair cut and donate it to Locks of Love, an organization that makes wigs for cancer patients. Ashtyn got her long braid chopped off and a brand-new style for what was left Monday, Feb. 22, at Personal Touch on Franklin Avenue. She said she was inspired to donate her hair after one of the teacher aides at Colby Grade School had cancer treatment and lost her hair. Ashtyn's grandmother, Patty Drake, went with her since her parents were working.



State Legislature looks at utility sales tax

By John Hanna

Associated Press Writer

TOPEKA — A proposal to help close Kansas' budget shortfall by imposing the sales tax on residential utility bills cleared a committee Tuesday in the state House.

The bill also would require churches to pay the 5.3 percent sales tax on the goods they buy and levy the tax on Kansas Lottery tickets. On a voice vote, the Taxation Committee forwarded the bill to the House floor.

The measure would raise almost \$170 million during the 2011 fiscal year, begins July 1, by eliminating sales tax exemptions. Most of the new revenue would come from taxing people's home water, electric and natural-gas bills.

But the bill faces an uncertain future in the full House, where many Republican members oppose raising taxes. The committee took the unusual step of sending the bill to the House without actually endorsing it.

"I am opposed to this bill as it's coming out

of committee, but we need to have the debate," said Rep. Jeff King, an Independence Republican who asked the panel to advance the measure. "We're not going to get anywhere by hiding the ball and ducking debate."

The budget shortfall for the next fiscal year is projected at \$416 million, but that figure is likely to go up this week when legislative researchers recalculate it. Kansas tax collections in February were \$71 million short of expectations.

Gov. Mark Parkinson had said he opposed further cuts in education, social services and other programs to keep the budget balanced, but he backed off last week. February's slump in tax collections means he can't rule out proposing more cuts before the end of June, Parkinson said.

The Democratic governor also proposed raising sales and tobacco taxes to close the budget gap. But the House committee rejected his plan to raise the sales tax from 5.3 percent to 6.3 percent for three years.

Revenue Secretary Joan Wagnon said she

was pleasantly surprised that the same committee didn't kill the bill to eliminate sales tax exemptions. She's been a vocal supporter of the idea.

"This is a hard bill to vote for," she acknowledged.

House Speaker Mike O'Neal, a Hutchinson Republican, said the chamber probably will debate the tax bill next week.

The Taxation Committee's ranking Democrat, Rep. Julie Menghini of Pittsburg, worried that allowing a discussion would be more about election-year politics than budget policy, an idea O'Neal dismissed. All 125 House seats are on the ballot in this year's elections.

Menghini also is wary of imposing the tax on utility bills, strongly criticized by both utilities and consumer advocates during hearings. The state removed the sales tax from those bills in 1979, the year after Democrat John Carlin narrowly won the governor's race by making high utility charges an issue.

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Briefly

Head Start taking applications

Thomas County Head Start preschool is accepting applications for 3- and 4-year-old children. The program takes applications all year, but children must be 3 by Sept. 1 to start class in the fall. Tuition is free. To apply, call 462-6067.

World Day of Prayer is Friday

Colby churches plan a World Day of Prayer service at noon Friday at the United Methodist Church. Lunch will begin at noon and a worship service will follow. Women from the Christian, Episcopal, Presbyterian and Methodist churches will lead the service. For information, call Millie Horlacher at 462-3104.

In Brewster, the churches will hold a service at 10 a.m. at the Community Church, 511 Third St. A fellowship time will start at 9:30 a.m., with the service

at 10. For questions, call Nadine Kemmer, (785) 694-2456.

Gem Lions soup day Saturday

Winter days are good for homemade soup, corn bread and crackers, and that's what's on the menu from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday at the Gem Community Building. Gem Lions Club publicity chair Ken Poland says the Gem ladies make the best soup and cake, plus there is plenty of room and time for visiting. Donations will be accepted, with proceeds going for community projects.

Seniors plan potluck Tuesday

The group More Fun Together plans a potluck dinner for people 50 or older who are alone, widowed, divorced, separated or who have partners in nursing homes at 6 p.m. Tuesday at the First Presbyterian

Church. Bring a dish to share. Table service and beverage will be provided. The building is accessible by an elevator near the east doors. For information, call the church at 462-6342.

Professor to speak here

Dr. Ron Green, a professor of religion at Dartmouth University, will speak at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Cultural Arts Center at Colby Community College as part of the Max Pickerill Lecture Series. For information, call Linda Davis-Stephens at (785) 460-5528.

Low-income tax help at library

The American Association of Retired Persons will offer a tax help seminar from 1:30 to 4 p.m. every Thursday until April 15 at the Pioneer Memorial Library. The seminar is designed for low- and middle-

income people with special emphasis on those 60 or older. For information, call Alvin Volk at (785) 460-2645.

Girl Scout cookies on sale here

Girl Scout cookies are on sale through Sunday. If you don't want to buy cookies for yourself, you can ask Scouts to deliver them to Genesis Food Bank or Kansas military units and families. If you have not been contacted, call Mint Culver at 460-6005 or Penny Cline at 460-2929.

