



COLBY FREE PRESS

8 pages

Governor makes water proposals

By Kevin Bottrell
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Four months after holding an economic summit on the Ogallala Aquifer in Colby, Gov. Sam Brownback has announced four recommendations his administration will be making to the state Legislature when it convenes in January.

"Without the Ogallala Aquifer, agriculture and all of its related businesses could not be sustained, manufacturing could not continue, recreational opportunities would diminish and the towns in the area would cease to exist," Governor Brownback said in a release Wednesday. "Our proposed legislation will help to conserve and extend this vital resource so important to our state's economic future."

Work on these proposals began at a July economic study in Colby. That meeting brought together farmers and members of various organizations along with government officials to discuss the Ogallala Aquifer.

After the summit, the Kansas

Water Authority formed the Ogallala Aquifer Advisory Committee to review short and long term conservation solutions. Using information from the summit and the committee's recommendations, the Water Authority came up with four proposals for the Legislature:

- Get rid of the "use it or lose it" law for groundwater rights in areas where new water right development has been prohibited. The law takes away rights to pump wells if they are not used. In his address at the July meeting, Brownback said repealing use it or lose it is one of the first things the state needs to do.

Wayne Bossert, manager of Northwest Kansas Groundwater Management District Four, said the issue is not as simple as it sounds.

"It's a no brainer right now," he said. "The downside is that now the state can't get a water right off the books. You don't want inactive water rights 20 years from now."

Bossert said many water users think that if they don't use their water rights up each year, they au-

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In from the cold



KEVIN BOTTRELL/Colby Free Press

This small bat was either in search of a good education or somewhere warm and out of the wind when he hung himself up in the corner over the door at the Thomas County Learn-

ing Center today. The temperature at noon was 29 degrees, but wind chill brought that down to 14. The National Weather Service is predicting a slight chance of snow tonight.



KAYLA CORNETT/Colby Free Press

Parts of Sacred Heart Catholic Church received new paint and new carpet this summer.

Church shows off new elevators, other renovations

By Kayla Cornett
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After seven months of construction, The Sacred Heart Catholic Church finished its renovations at the end of the summer.

The renovation included increasing the gathering space outside of the sanctuary, the addition of an elevator, adding two restrooms on each level, repainting and installing new carpet throughout the church and creating new sidewalks and flower beds outside of the church.

Construction began on the addition of the elevator and restrooms in the first part of January and was completed in the third week of August. That phase of the project cost \$560,000. The

contractor was Paul Wertenberger of Hays.

Dick Snider, maintenance staff at Sacred Heart, said the elevator was added mainly for people in wheelchairs to be able to get to the church basement for various events, such as dinners.

The repainting, recarpeting and other miscellaneous work done on the church began on May 21 – the last day of school. It was also completed by the end of August. This work, which cost \$80,000, was done by Tim Lindberger of Salina.

The church paid for these changes through donations and fund raisers, including a pledge drive. The majority of the money used to pay for the renovations was raised in the last four years.

Four homes on holiday tour

Come see how some of your neighbors have decorated for the holidays at Kappa Upsilon's Holiday Home Tour from 2 to 5 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 11. There will be a cookie walk before the tour from noon to 2 p.m. at the Colby United Methodist Church, featuring homemade Christmas cookies and candy.

On the tour this year are Bill and Deb Mariman, 404 Smith Dr.;

Wayne and Linda Bossert, 370 N. Lincoln Ave.; Francis and Kathy Britton, 412 Smith Dr.; and Leo and Shawn Stephens, 1290 N. Brookside Dr.

Tickets are \$10. They are available at Donelan Jewelry, Plum Creek and Heritage Salon. Lana Johnson, a Kappa Upsilon member, said the money raised by the tour gets donated locally.

Midwest employers expect to make cuts

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) – Job growth has slowed significantly in nine Midwest and Plains states, and many companies in the region expect further job cuts in the coming six months, according to a monthly survey of business managers released Thursday.

About 18 percent of survey respondents reported job reductions for November, said Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the Mid-America business conditions index survey.

Business managers also were asked in the November survey about their hiring expectations for the next six months.

"Only 30 percent expect to add workers, while the remaining 70 percent anticipate layoffs or level employment for the first half of 2012," Goss said. "These expectations are somewhat more optimistic than December 2010, when 24 percent anticipated worker additions for the next six months."

The overall regional Business Conditions index rose to 52.6 in November, jumping 2.7 percentage points from 49.9 in October.

Organizers say any survey score above 50 suggests economic growth in the next three to six months, while a score below 50 suggests economic decline.

States in the survey are Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma and South Dakota.

The prices-paid index, which tracks the cost of raw materials

and supplies, rose to 60.9 from October's 56. On average, supply managers anticipate the cost of the goods they purchase will increase by 3.7 percent over the next six months, which would make for a 7.4 percent yearly increase. Twenty percent of supply managers said they expect costs to rise more than 6 percent over the six months.

"Last February when we asked the same question, supply managers expected annualized price growth of 8.8 percent," Goss said. "Thus, anticipated wholesale price growth has declined by 1.5 percentage points since February."

The report indicated business leaders surveyed remain pessimistic about economic prospects for the first half of 2012. The November business confidence index sank to 49.1 from October's already weak 49.5.

The inventory index climbed to 52.9 from October's 48.5. The export index rose to 52.1 from October's 50, while the import index rose to 49.5 from October's anemic 48.

The other components of the November index were:

- New orders at 52, up from October's 51.2;
- Production or sales at 52.4, up from October's 48.5;
- Delivery lead time at 56.5, down from October's 57.9.

Welfare fraud could be costing taxpayers millions

By Bill Draper
The Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – State auditors trying to weed out food-stamp fraud believe more than 7,000 people in Kansas may be getting benefits to which they aren't entitled and costing taxpayers as much as \$22 million a year, the state's top social services official said Wednesday.

Rob Siedlecki, director of the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, blamed what he called lax enforcement under previous administrations that cut back on fraud investigators – an allegation quickly rejected by his predecessor, who said the department did what it could with limited resources.

Siedlecki said he understands many people need assistance and that it's his job to ensure qualified residents receive help. But he noted that every dollar wasted on fraud could have been given to someone who was eligible to receive it.

"We know people are hurting," he said. "But if you want to game the system, we're going to come after you."

A state review of welfare programs conducted in October found 312 possibly dead recipients, 941 cases in which there was severe risk of identity fraud, 261 recipients believed to be

incarcerated and 6,400 who had out-of-state driver's licenses.

That number was far higher than the results of a recent audit by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which runs the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, previously known as the Food Stamp Program.

The federal audit found that 883 beneficiaries were improperly receiving assistance between August 2009 and August 2010. They included people who were dead, had invalid Social Security numbers or were double-dipping from the federal program.

The federal audit didn't consider some factors included in the state's review, such as prison inmates who may still be collecting assistance or individuals who had non-Kansas driver's licenses. The latter accounted for the bulk of the state's possible fraud cases.

"This report confirms what we already knew: that benefits fraud and mistakes exist in the SNAP program," Siedlecki said.

One common way people are committing fraud is by selling their Vision cards, which are used in place of food stamps, for less than face value. That means program participants are getting cash while purchasers are getting benefits they don't deserve.

Siedlecki said the state is developing the automated Kansas Eligibility Enforcement

System, a \$140 million project aimed at improving the state's accuracy in determining eligibility for cash and food assistance, and medical benefits by cross-referencing state and federal data sources. He said the federal government is picking up the tab for most of the KEES system.

Siedlecki said that when he took over as SRS chief in January, there were only eight welfare fraud investigators statewide – including one investigator for all of the state's 47 western counties – and no anti-fraud director.

"They gutted the office in half, had no director and no investigator in the state's largest city, Wichita," Siedlecki said of previous administrations. "Finding fraud wasn't a priority."

The secretary called welfare fraud "low-hanging fruit" that is easily detectible through examining program data. He said the total of welfare fraud in Kansas could go as high as \$30 million once investigators start digging deeper.

Don Jordan, who was social services secretary under Democratic governors Kathleen Sebelius and Mark Parkinson, said those administrations did not take welfare fraud lightly.

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