



I-70 Travel Section Inside!

75¢

Monday

May 6, 2013

Volume 124, Number 72

Serving Thomas County since 1888



COLBY FREE PRESS

8 pages

County fights prairie-chicken plan

By Sam Dieter

Colby Free Press
sdieter@nwkansas.com

Thomas County commissioners Tuesday agreed to join Kansas counties trying to influence the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as it prepares a plan to protect the lesser prairie chicken from extinction.

The commissioners voted at their end-of-the-month meeting to join counties in a "natural resources coordination plan," after hearing a presentation from Sheila Ellis, a representative of consulting firm Stillwater Technical Solutions. They capped the amount of money they would

pay at \$2,355 – enough to participate in the plan for three months – to be taken out of the county general fund.

"I don't like spending money, but we got to do something to stop this mess," Commissioner Byron Sowers said. "I would like to know more about what happens after the first three months."

A letter that Stillwater sent to the commissioners said the firm wants to build up a group of Kansas counties to influence the service as it decides whether to list the prairie chicken as threatened or protect the birds with a "range-wide conservation plan." The firm wants to set up a county-supported plan before the agency makes

it decision this fall.

Stillwater says it plans to bill all counties \$785 a month for an environmental engineer, a research analyst and their travel and lodging expenses, according to the letter, and the county can decide whether to renew the agreement or not.

"We don't believe that the lesser prairie chicken is endangered," Ellis told the commissioners. "We just believe that they want to regulate land use."

She said the service could regulate or restrict land use for farmers and ranchers, electric companies, wind farms and oil and gas companies if it lists the birds as threatened. A map she showed areas

where the agency might restrict land use, included northern Texas, western Oklahoma, eastern Colorado and New Mexico and southwest Kansas.

Thomas County is on the very northern edge of the proposed conservation area, but Ellis said her understanding is that the birds are moving north with the drought. Her boss, James Carlson, said later that the agency could change the boundary if, for instance, some of the birds are found in Nebraska.

Ellis told the commissioners the coordination plan will "give local government an equal place at the table with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service."

She said she thinks the plan could help prevent the listing.

"Quite honestly, we don't want them to list the lesser prairie chicken," Carlson said later.

He added that coordination would require the federal agency to get the counties' input on its conservation plan whether or not it lists the birds as threatened.

She mentioned that three school districts in Texas used a similar plan to stop a highway that would have run from Mexico to Canada, and that county commissioners have used similar plans to contain

See "COUNTY," Page 2

Trooper wins award

By Sam Dieter

Colby Free Press
sdieter@nwkansas.com

A Kansas Highway Patrol trooper who lived and worked in Colby until recently has been recognized for his work getting kids to wear their seat belts.

Tod Hileman of Hays, public resources officer for Troop D, received the "People Saving People" award at the state Traffic Safety Conference in Wichita for his work with the Seat belts Are For Everyone, or "SAFE," program. He has helped start and maintain the program in 11 northwest Kansas schools.

"It's not just me," Hileman said of the award. "I'm kind of sharing it with all my teacher sponsors and all my kids."



Tod Hileman

See "AWARD," Page 2

Soddy records go online

The Prairie Museum of Art and History has 1,000 records cataloging the lives of people who were born in, lived in or worked in a sod house uploaded to a new website, prairiemuseum.pastperfect-online.com.

The effort to make more than 20 boxes of letters, photographs, sod-house surveys, certificates and log-cabin surveys available has kept the museum staff busy for the past five years, said Chris Griffin, the museum's registrar. The work had the backing of the Ervil and Ronald Thiel Charitable Trust.

"The process of scanning in documents and photographs has been going on for over five years," said Griffin, "and will continue until all the information is digitized...."

"The collection was given to the museum in 2008, and so far, over 13,500 records have been scanned and uploaded onto the museum's private database. Many of the records have multiple images and each has had to be ... cataloged and recorded for identification and so that we can keep track of its location...."

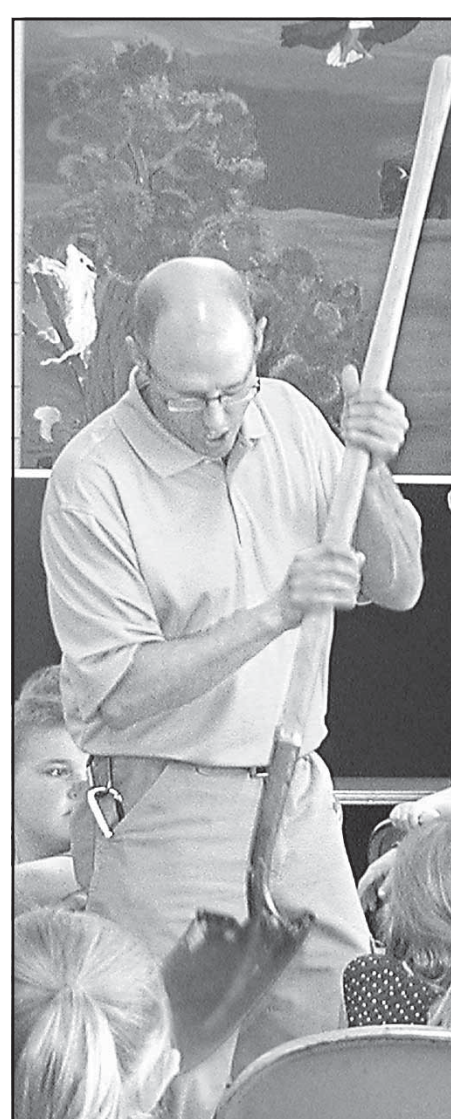
"A thousand of those records are now available online for pub-

See "SODDY," Page 2



Natalie Wederski (left), a kindergartener at Sacred Heart School, put on a hard hat to dig for plastic coins last Monday at the Colby Grade School after-school program. Principal Lance Krannawitter (right) helped perform a skit about the importance of calling ahead before you dig to avoid hitting utility lines. Southern Star Central Gas Pipeline brought a backhoe (below).

SAM DIETER/Colby Free Press



Hands-on lesson: call first, then dig

A group of kids at Colby Grade School got a lesson in how to stay safe when working in the back yard.

Jared Hamilton, with Southern Star Central Gas Pipeline, was at the grade school to show the kids what to do and what not to do to avoid hitting electrical wires, water mains or other underground utility lines. The kids saw a video of about the 811 "Call before you dig" program, and watched a skit where Hamilton convinced Lance Krannawitter, the grade school principal, to call ahead before planting a tree.

They also got to see one

of Southern Star's backhoes, parked in the playground outside the grade school. A sandbox had been set up full of dirt, where each of the grade schoolers got to put on a hard hat and yellow vest, and dig around for plastic coins.

The visit was a part of the after school program which the grade school is holding Monday to Thursday afternoon this year.

In Kansas, you can call 811 or (800)-344-2733 a few days ahead of a digging project to find out if you might hit a utility line.

Kansas legislators near end of year's education bills

By John Milburn

Associated Press

TOPEKA (AP) – Senators and representatives are expected to make quick work of remaining education issues when the Kansas Legislature returns Wednesday to finish the 2013 session, including a proposal sought by Gov. Sam Brownback to improve elementary reading scores.

The plan calls for testing first-graders and holding them back if they aren't reading at grade level. Students could be retested and parents would have a say in the matter before anyone is retained.

The Senate approved the compromise but it still needs House approval to go to the governor.

Brownback, who first raised the issue of fourth-grade reading scores when campaigning for governor in 2010, said he would take a look at what legislators send to him. He said the discussion has been healthy, prompting some school districts to take a look at their own policies.

"That's what my effort's about," he said recently. "Let's get on top of this thing earlier so kids can read."

Brownback sought support for his early learning initiatives dur-

ing stops in Pittsburg and Iola last month on a statewide tour for higher education. He said the goals of programs, including the international Save the Children organization, that partner with school districts to improve student learning fit with his agenda of increasing the number of fourth-graders reading at grade level.

Mark Desetti, lobbyist for the Kansas National Education Association, the state's largest teachers' union, said he didn't expect many surprises in the final days of the session, noting that most of the major policy debates had been settled or deferred to next year.

"Idleness is the devil's workplace" he said. "Who knows what will come up."

"What are left are the budget and the tax policy to support it. I hope that they concentrate on that and are out within their 80 days."

House Education Committee Chair Kasha Kelley said she was disappointed that legislators didn't approve several measures she believes would have given students and parents more education options. One plan that stalled in the House would have established a scholarship program for special-needs students, financed by contributions from businesses

and corporations. Students would have been able to use the scholarships to attend alternative schools in an effort to meet their needs.

"I think that's our responsibility to give those opportunities to students and parents," said Kelley, an Arkansas City Republican.

One issue that won't be discussed in great detail will be changes to the state school finance formula. The state is appealing

See "KANSAS," Page 3

