



COLBY FREE PRESS

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Black Friday shoppers get busy here

This family at Just Peachy (top) looked for Black Friday deals. Jennifer Sterrett of Colby (right) was doing the same thing in Goulosh. MaryAnn Heubach and Keith Heubach of Atwood (below) dropped by Tubbs and Sons on Friday, when the dealership was offering \$1,000 off on used cars (Tubbs and Sons).

SHARON FUNK and SAM DIETER/Colby Free Press



Tax boost surprises landowners

By Heather Alwin
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Some Thomas County landowners received a surprise in their mailboxes recently, tax bills that were much higher than they expected.

Over the last few weeks, Thomas County offices have been getting calls from confused and irritated owners wanting to know why their taxes have increased so much.

Commissioner Byron Sowers said he recently got a call from an upset constituent asking about tax increases, and Commissioner Mike Baughn said he had received questions about township levies increasing. The county appraiser's, treasurer's and clerk's offices also reported complaints.

Reasons for each increase vary, depending on the taxpayers' situation, officials said, including where they live and the type of property they own. Since real estate taxes are paid in arrears, after the year they are assessed, landowners may not have noticed the changes until their tax bills came

this month.

For example, residents of Morgan Township, which covers the central part of the county, saw a 389 percent increase in their township levy – from 4.364 in 2012 to 21.340 in 2013. Each township board sets its township's levy rate based on planned spending for the year, officials said.

Other landowners are noticing changes because their property valuation increased, said Deputy Appraiser Kathy Cunningham.

Agricultural land values generally increased last year based on a state calculation of farm land values that incorporates factors like crop prices.

Cunningham said some properties were re-evaluated over the last year, too, and the evaluation crew discovered some situations where farm buildings had been erroneously designated as residential buildings.

When the errors were discovered, the buildings were re-categorized as agricultural, changing the assessment rate from 11.5 percent to 30 percent, said Cunningham.

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Pickup rolls early Saturday

A Colby man might have been outside for hours after being thrown from a truck early Saturday morning.

The Kansas Highway Patrol said that Brady J. Rietcheck, 22, could have been thrown from a pickup truck at any time between 1:30 and 9:17 a.m. on Saturday. The Colby Fire Department got a call about the wreck at about 9:30. Rietcheck was first taken to Citizens Medical Center and then flown to Swedish Medical Center

in Denver, where he was in critical condition this morning.

He was headed south on county road 20 in a 2006 GMC pickup truck, the patrol reported. About two miles south of town, he went into the east ditch, overcorrected the truck, then went across the road and into the west ditch. The pickup rolled after it hit the second ditch, and Rietcheck, who was not wearing a seatbelt, was thrown from the truck.

County wages up 3 percent

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County employees will get another wage increase next year after Thomas County commissioners approved a 3 percent cost-of-living increase for every county employee at their meeting Tuesday.

The commissioners had previously discussed giving a set amount to each department instead of increasing salaries across the board. This would have allowed each department head to set increases based on each employee's performance.

But the commissioners decided to give overall raises, setting each employee's pay rate for 2014 by approving the salaries as listed on a spreadsheet reviewed by Commissioner Mike Baughn.

Baughn initially supported the idea of giving department heads authority to distribute the 3 percent raise among their employees, but changed his mind after discussions with other commissioners.

"Salaries need to be set in cement by this board," said Commissioner Paul Steele, indicating the group should table the issue if each employee was not to be given a 3 percent raise. A motion to table the issue failed.

Baughn then moved to approve the universal raise, citing a lack of participation from department heads. He said he had not heard from any department heads that they wanted authority to allocate raises, so he voted in favor of establishing the set 3 percent raise for every employee.

The commissioners also voted to give a raise to Autumn Arasmith, the county's emergency management director, after she obtained state certification.

The group first passed an increase of \$1,000 a month for Arasmith based on their recollection that she was promised such an in-

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Foundation banquet on track

Tickets are on sale for the Northwest Kansas Foundation for HOPE (Help Offset Patients' Expenses) annual New Year's Eve fund-raising banquet at the City Limits Convention Center.

The event includes a social hour, dinner, auction and dance, raising money to help cancer patients with their bills.

Tickets are limited, said board member Deanna Mallory, adding, "When they're gone, they're gone."

The price is \$280 for an eight-person table or \$40 each for single tickets.

The social hour starts at 5:30 p.m. with dinner at 6, auction at 7 and dance from 8:45 to 12:30.

The foundation, founded by nine Thomas County women in 2009, has given out 150 grants to area cancer patients since its inception, totaling \$95,000, Mallory said. "Our goal is to help offset patients' expenses

for cancer treatment," said Mallory, adding that foundation grants can be used for any cancer-related expenses, including travel to get treatment.

One patient, Mallory remembered, cried as she told Mallory that she could not have gotten to Hays for her chemotherapy treatments without the grants.

Mallory said the foundation help "lets people focus on recovery, not the bills." The agency's coverage area includes Cheyenne, Decatur, Gove, Logan, Rawlins, Sheridan, Sherman, Thomas and Wallace counties.

All of the foundation's money goes to provide grants for citizens except for minor administrative costs for paper, stamps and banquet expenses, Mallory said. Board members are all volunteers and they have no staff.

Mallory said the foundation has already received some donations for this year's auction, including a Rock Haven Spa couples package,

\$50 gift card to Gella's Diner & LB Brewing Co. in Hays, home-baked cookies every month for a year, a pink-quartz-and-diamond pendant, movie passes for a year at Colby Cinema and Arcade, an oak wall jewelry box, football tickets, an S&T Communications gift certificate, an iron piece from Made of Iron, a handmade quilt and more.

To donate to the auction, call Sarah Laubscher or Carrie Bartlett at People's State Bank, 462-2224. For tickets, contact Pat Sloan at 443-3261.

The foundation holds several events throughout the year, including a wine tasting, the Colby Community College Walk for Hope and the Kansas Quick Lube Lube-a-thon. It also receives support through memorials and other donations.

Families affected by cancer can apply for a grant from the foundation at the website www.nwks-hope.org or at People's State in Colby.