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First graders performed for friends and family last week at a music program held at West Elementary School. Photo by Skilar Boland/The Goodland Daily News

County weighs changes

By Tom Betz

The Goodland Daily News

People across the state were reacting Tuesday to the announcement by Insurance Commissioner Kathleen Sebelius denying the sale of Blue Cross and Blue Shield to an Indiana firm.

Meantime, Sherman County commissioners were hearing about changes in the county's coverage under Blue Cross and Blue Shield.

Charles Krull, northwest Kansas representative for the state's largest insurance company, was in Goodland to discuss the county's program.

He told the commissioners that with the present plan, and no changes in the program, the county would face a 19 percent increase in premiums with a total maximum cost of \$549,000.

To reduce the increase, Krull suggested the commissioners consider increasing the stop-loss level from \$10,000 to \$15,000. Under the current program the county pays all claims under \$10,000. The employee's out-of-pocket expense is a maximum of \$750 for a single person and \$1,500 for a

family. The change in the stop-loss would not change the out-of-pocket level for the employees, but would increase the level of payment by the county on large claims.

Krull said changing the stop loss to \$15,000 would reduce the county premium by \$52,000. Based on the history of claims over the past year, he said the county might have to pay out an additional \$15,000.

"This is a risk, but based on the experience, I believe it will be in the county's favor," Krull said.

Another suggestion he made was to opt for the Blue Choice program, a preferred provider network. He said there would not be any difference in Kansas, as everyone who is in a competitive alliance program are also in the Blue Choice network. He said this change could give the county a 4 percent reduction in cost.

Other suggestions were to increase the employee share pay from \$750 to \$1,500 for a single and from \$1,500 to \$3,000 for a family, and to increase the prescription drug card pay level from

the current \$5 for generic and \$10 for name brand to \$10 and \$20.

With these changes he thought the county premium would be closer to what it was last year, maybe about a 2 percent increase.

Commissioner Mitch Tiede said he could see increasing the stop-loss level to \$15,000, but not changing any of the other benefits. He asked what the percent increase would be if only this change was made?

Krull said with only the stop-loss change, the increase would be about 12 percent. He said he would again recommend the Blue Choice option because it would be worth a 4 percent discount on the claims.

"We are looking at health care reform coming sometime in the future," Krull said. "You are doing better than the statewide average."

The commissioners thanked Krull and asked him to provide the figures showing the change in stop loss and the Blue Choice option. They said they would make a decision at their next meeting Tuesday.

Ambulance supervisors ask county to buy ambulance

By Tom Betz

The Goodland Daily News

Ambulance supervisors asked Sherman County commissioners to buy them a newer ambulance, showing them the two vehicles during Tuesday's meeting at the courthouse.

Steve Evert and Jeff Krall said the service has an opportunity to replace an older ambulance with a newer vehicle for \$70,000.

Evert said the oldest has three ambulances, with the service being a 1990 model which is kept in Kanorado; a 1991 model which is the second ambu-

lance in Goodland and is used for most of the out of county trips; and a 1995 model with normally is used in the county.

Krall said said they would like to purchase a used box-type ambulance from Justin Bentzinger.

Evert reported he had contacted a company out of Hays about used ambulances and found a 1998 model for \$69,500 and a 1997 model with more miles and lower cost.

Commissioner Frank Frankenfled asked about the possibility of getting a grant to help purchase the ambulance.

Evert said he had talked to the Northwest Kansas Planning and Development and was told that grants are available for new ambulances. There would be an administrative fee, he said, and the new ambulances which cost about \$100,000.

The commissioners went outside to look at the two ambulances. Evert showed the commissioners the cramped quarters of the older ambulance and talked about the problems with transporting patients.

Krall said the newer box-type ambulance is a 1999 model which was a criti-

cal care unit for Children's Hospital in Denver. It has 41,000 miles on a Ford F450 chassis.

"This is a quiet machine," Evert said. "It may even be a little quieter than our Med 1 (the 1995 ambulance)."

Krall said the ambulance would be bought as is, and showed the commissioners there was about \$5,000 of equipment on the car that was part of the deal.

"I think the price is reasonable after I looked into it deeper," Evert said. "I was not sure at first."

The commissioners said they would

consider the purchase, and were to put the decision on the next meeting agenda so they could see where to get \$70,000.

Commissioner Kevin Rasure asked Krall about the status of air-ambulance operator Eagle Med, and when they plan to be in Goodland. Krall said the target date is April 15, and that they have been conducting training sessions and looking for a place to rent for the crew's quarters while on duty. He said they have not found what they were looking for, and may consider buying something.

Evert said when Eagle Med has been holding training sessions, they have allowed the county emergency medical personnel to attend and pick up needed training credit hours.

After the meeting, County Clerk Janet Rumpel said the county probably could take the money for the ambulance out of the special health services fund, which comes from a special countywide sales tax.

"We try to keep enough of a carryover in case the hospital needs something like this or for doctor recruitment," she said.

Company gets calls after cat was successfully cloned by Texas scientists

By Malcolm Ritter

AP Science Writer

A company that plans to clone household pets has been deluged with calls after Thursday's announcement that Texas scientists had cloned a cat, the company's chief executive officer said today.

A female domestic shorthair, called "cc" for "copycat," was born Dec. 22 and is now healthy and frisky, researchers at Texas A&M University in College Station said.

Headed up by Dr. Mark Westhusin of A&M's veterinary medicine school, the project funded by a company called Genetic Savings & Clone was the first reported success at efforts to clone a

household pet.

"There's a huge interest in this," said Lou Hawthorne, CEO of the company. He said the expected demand for dog and cat cloning is "far more than we'll be able to handle for many years."

Hawthorne said most of the callers to his company since the cloning was announced by the journal Nature have asked about cats, but some have inquired about dogs, too.

Researchers say dogs are harder to clone than cats, but Hawthorne said, "we're going to do both of them."

Hawthorne's operation first launched the \$3.7 million Missyplicity Project, an effort to clone a mixed-breed pet dog named Missy.

He said it will take more than 18 months before the company can come up with a standard price for cloning cats.

The kitten born at Texas A&M looks different from its calico genetic donor because the pigmentation pattern of the animal's coat isn't controlled strictly by the lineup of genes.

"This is a reproduction," said A&M researcher Duane Kraemer "not a resurrection."

Pet-cloning proponents also say pet owners should realize a new clone won't come equipped with a ready-made bond to the owner or carry other memories.

Kraemer and Randall Prather, an

animal cloner at the University of Missouri who wasn't involved in the Texas project, say cloning cats could pay off for more than pet owners.

It could help research that uses cats for learning about human diseases, they said. Kraemer noted that cats are used in neurological research, and that a colleague wanted cat clones to help in AIDS research.

Moreover, the work could help in preserving endangered cat species, they said.

Wayne Pacelle, senior vice president for the Humane Society of the United States, called the new advance "unfortunate news." Scientists should be moving away from using animals in

research, and the biggest problem endangered cat species face is habitat destruction, he said.

As for people who'd like a new version of a deceased cat, Pacelle said many communities have too many cats for too few homes, and cat cloning "goes in the opposite direction of where we need to be."

People whose cats have died should "go through a grieving process, and then go to a shelter and embrace another companion in your household," he said.

The kitty clone was the team's only success after transferring 87 cloned embryos into eight female cats. Overall, the success rate was comparable to

that seen in other cloned species, the researchers said. Other mammals cloned before include sheep, cattle, goats, pigs and mice.

The researchers tried cloning with two types of cells from adult cats. The lone success came in one of the attempts using cumulus cells, which are found in the ovary, from "Rainbow," an adult member of the university's cat colony.

The researchers removed the nucleus from cat eggs and fused the eggs with cumulus cells. Three were grown into embryos and implanted in a female cat. Sixty-six days later, cc was delivered by Caesarean section.

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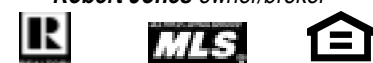
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