

# Motel investors approach county about tax break

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP  
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Investors hoping to build a motel in Oberlin have asked county commissioners to consider a Neighborhood Revitalization Plan that would give tax breaks to anyone looking to build or renovate property here.

Key members of the group met with commissioners last Tuesday along with County Appraiser Alan Hale, who cautioned the commissioners to look at all facets of the plan before committing to it.

The plan, which Norton County has adopted, is a "countywide tax-rebate incentive program aimed to stimulate economic growth through improvements in existing properties and new construction," according to a pamphlet about the program in Norton.

As with all things related to money and taxes, however, Mr. Hale said that the program can be more complicated than it appears at first.

"There are two things to keep in mind," he told the commissioners. "If you're uncertain what it's all about and what to do, and if someone comes and says, 'We have to move on this thing,' don't go quick. Fact find and figure it out."

"I don't know what the tax impact or ramifications are. Norton County has been trying to figure it out for years. All I can tell you is in Norton, we (still don't know the financial impact), and we've been at it five years."

"We had about 8 to 10 applications the first year in Norton. Over five years there have been 69. The taxes on some of those agriculture buildings alone could be \$3,000 or \$4,000 a year. Research it to see if this is what you want, what kind of construction qualifies, if it's for agriculture buildings, commercial buildings, etc."

"We thought that maybe if we got this thing going, it could give us a few years to hop on top of the tax situation," said Connie Grafel, marketing director for the

Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp., the agency that brought the motel idea to area residents in a meeting last fall.

Mike McKenna, who was at the meeting as a supporter and investor of the motel project, said that the program could be a real boon to the local economy.

"I think this is something that Decatur County really needs," he said. "I think it could mean big changes. If I can be any help, I have all the documents that Norton has been using. I really do believe that they have worked out all the bumps in the road on this deal. And if you read the paper ... they're building a number of townhouses over there, and I really feel this was a big factor in making that happen."

"You wouldn't be giving up a thing you have today. What we're asking is for you to rebate a portion of the taxes on a new property, a rehab, commercial business or commercial building, but in those examples you're not giving up the tax load you have. If the revitalization increases the value of the building, then (part of) the tax load is rebated on it."

"Phillips and Norton counties have done it, Thomas is in the process of doing it now. I'm hopeful that you'll consider the 10-year term, because that's what worked well for other counties."

"For start-up businesses, the first year is critical for cash flow, and it could really help. There are so many first-year expenses you incur."

The commissioners seemed receptive to the idea, but said they wanted to research it further before committing to anything. Greg Lohofener, who spoke in favor of the program, said that it could definitely bring in a few investors who have been on the fence about the motel project. Mr. Hale said that if the program is put on the fast track, it could be implemented in as soon as 90 days.

## And the winner is...



FORMER K-STATE FOOTBALL STAR Josh Cherry pulled names for door prizes out a hat as organizers Doyle and Kay Brown watched during the second annual K-State alumni and fan gathering at The Gateway on Friday.

— Herald photo by Susan May

## \*County unsure of options

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ating both centers would be best for the community.

Mr. Metcalf asked if the society had a dollar figure in mind. That's hard to project, said Mr. Fitzgerald. If the losses stay at \$2,500 a month, it would be around \$30,000 a year. He added that the goal of Mrs. Shobe and her staff is to break even, and he didn't think the loss would be more than \$50,000 this year.

The group talked some about fees the society charges to the center, which include a "national campus administration fee" of \$1,200 a month.

"Would there be a cost savings to the community if the hospital ran the center?" asked Commissioner Brad Marcuson.

Mr. Fitzgerald said he thought there would be. It makes sense, since the hospital wouldn't have the national fee and some things could be shared.

The trend just doesn't look great to have two care facilities in town, he added.

If the society were to leave, said Mr. McEvoy, does it own all the equipment in the facility?

Yes, said Mr. Fitzgerald, but the society could donate all of that to the county. It would just take the computer systems that the medical records run on. There would be no reason for the society to move the furnishings, he said.

The society's lease provides for 60 days' notice to leave, he said, but with a 50-plus-year history, they aren't going to leave anyone high and dry.

Commissioners made no decisions, but Mr. Fitzgerald said the society would like to know what the county plans to do by the beginning of July.

## \*Votes remain similar

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Mrs. Wurm getting 370.

In Jennings, Robert Jones was elected mayor with 25 votes as a write-in candidate. Louise Cressler and write-in Robert Papp both were elected to the City Council, he with 27 votes and she with 28.

In Norcorat, Carl Lyon was re-elected mayor with 38 votes on a write-in campaign, and Ed Yeager and Luke Bailey were elected to the council. Both were write-in candidates, with Mr. Yeager getting 41 votes and Mr. Bailey 7.

In Dresden, Jacque Douglas, Keith Muirhead and Donald Ritter were elected to the council, all three with 19 votes.

The total voter turnout for the county was 547 out of 2,031 registered voters, or 27 percent, said Ms. Geihlsler.

## \*City must make big decisions about power

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here forever.

"Our plant," he said later, "being as old as it is — I don't see it running 24/7 ever again."

But, he insisted, that's no reason to let it go.

"I believe it to be in the city's best interest to not conform to the EPA regulations," he said. "The reason is because when power goes out here, we're on our own anyway, and they don't

care if you have generators or not. I think the best we can do is take care of them ourselves with what we have."

This is why the engines need overhauling, he said, so that if predicted blackouts and brownouts start this summer because everyone is demanding more power, at least Oberlin will have its trusty generators ready to go.

"I don't have any faith in the federal govern-

ment whatsoever," Mr. Castle said. "I think they're trying to drive small municipalities into ruin all over, and they're particularly hard on electricity ... and they seem to be getting away with it."

"So as long as they are, we either have to conform or do something else."

# Mental Health Center praises county support

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP  
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The High Plains Mental Health Center has seen some tough times over the years, but Decatur County has gone above and beyond in supporting the facility, officials say, donating 110 percent of its calculated share of the budget to make sure the service keeps running.

Representatives of the agency made their annual report to county commissioners last Tuesday, talking about the county's needs and letting the commissioners know where the center stands financially.

"Last year, the treatment site saw 27 people," said board member Walt Hill, "for a total of 121 Decatur County residents, up from 103 the previous year. It delivered about 50 percent more services, at a cost of \$283,000."

This year, the county actually budgeted 110 percent of what the center was asking, giving it \$20,649. While working on the budget for the coming year, however, the com-

missioners plan to return to the standard 100 percent support, which is \$18,701.

Sixty-nine percent of the residents that the agency saw last year made under \$25,000 a year, Mr. Hill said, showing that the services are most crucial for moderate-to-low-income people. While the center doesn't have a permanent office set up in Oberlin, it serves everyone in Decatur County as part of its region. Offices can be found in Norton and Goodland, he said, and the center's workers make a point to come out here to work with our residents.

However, that doesn't mean getting the money to keep those services going has gotten any easier.

"Only about 8 percent of our funding comes from counties," Mr. Hill said, "though they own us. The rest of the funding, about 65 percent, comes from fees we charge to patients, insurance and Medicaid. The state provides 15 to 20 percent of funding."

"The big problem is that the state

has reduced funding significantly, and we've had to make up for that by charging patients more, trying to capitalize on insurance payments and by reducing our costs. We've downsized by 50 staff positions in the last four years, and our staff is down to about 125 people."

Mr. Hill said that the facility can't deny services to someone just because they can't pay their bill, but it does the best it can to reconcile that with its accounts receivable department.

"The administration eliminated \$10 million from mental health this year," Mr. Hill said. "The governor put that back in after Sandy Hook, but in different ways, and we still don't know how it's going to come out. I've never seen things quite this unknown before. There's about \$480,000 that's in question; we don't know where it's going, but we know we used to get it."

## St. Francis man's death a mystery

A 45-year-old man was found dead in his home in St. Francis last Wednesday, and agents of Kansas Bureau of Investigation were in town processing the house as a crime scene later.

Sheriff's officers were called to 541 E. Third St. that evening, where Brad Figgins was found dead at the base of a flight of stairs at his home. The incident apparently was reported as a fall. The home was surrounded by yellow police tape.

A woman reportedly was in custody. A closed-door hearing was held in Cheyenne County District Court on Monday.

Cheyenne County Sheriff Cody Beeson said

that because of the complexity of the case, it was turned over to the KBI the following day. As of Monday, no details were available.

"We are working on the case," the sheriff said. "Our concern is for the safety of the community. Our hearts go out to the family."

Mr. Figgins was a driver for United Parcel Service. Survivors include a son, Garrett, and a daughter, Kaitlin, and his parents, Richard and Diane Figgins.

Funeral services were set for noon Tuesday at Peace Lutheran Church in St. Francis, with burial in the Kanorado Cemetery.



Mr. Figgins

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