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Colby charter school's fate in limbo

By Tisha Cox

Colby Free Press

Uncertain funding has made the future of Thomas County Academy uncertain as well.

The issue was discussed Monday during the Colby School Board meeting.

Superintendent Kirk Nielsen said as the board prepares the budget, they need to consider the charter school. The district stopped receiving funding for it from the state in December.

When the state reworked its budget year, the money intended for charter schools had to be spent by the first semester by districts.

The charter school is an alternative to the regular classroom, where students learn at their own pace.

The same state standards are used for the academy and mainstream students, but teaching methods are different.

Nielsen recommended the district no longer fund the charter school, but the board approved continuing with the school, conditional on receiving assistance from the state.

The motion passed 6-1, with board member Kevan Taylor voting against.

Taylor said he voted no because it is not clear when the district will find out about a charter school funding grant it is applying for.



FILE PHOTO

Thomas County Academy students showed off one of their projects. The school's future is in question because of financing.

The board will again review the charter school's future during its April meeting.

Work on the charter school began in 2004 and Thomas County Academy opened in fall 2005 under the direction of Kristin Eberle.

Diana Wieland, the district's curriculum director, said the district received about \$250,000 from the state to start the charter school. All of those funds have been spent.

Eberle said the academy has worked for its students.

"I fully believe in this charter school," she said. "It has been their new hope."

During 2005-2006, the charter school received \$76,800 from the state. It also received that amount this year. Most of that amount was for teacher salaries and operating costs. Costs for one year for the academy are \$82,000.

Because money from the state had to be spent by December, the district used the money to purchase software and equipment now being used by the entire district.

Twenty-four students are enrolled at the academy.

The original plan called for the academy to teach fifth through eighth grades the first year, and add-

ing two grades a year until reaching 12th grade.

"We chose not to expand that," Wieland said.

Expansion wasn't done because of space limitations and personnel. The current space at the middle school can handle about 30 students.

With the money the district had and the number of students, it needs a maximum of two teachers, said Wieland.

"More students coming into the district for the charter school would mean more money from the state, but that has not happened," Nielsen said.

And he does not want to use money from the general fund for the school.

Wieland said the district has started a program, incubated it, and still has the option of getting more students.

The question exists if the charter school will go on.

She said an increase in enrollment would help the situation, and so would more state funding.

Increasing out-of-district enrollment was what the district was counting on for funding when state money ran out.

The district can apply for a \$50,000 grant from the state.

Board member Stan Molstad said he was surprised the school has not attracted as many students as anti-

pated and thinks it could still draw more. Board member Joel Powell asked about how charter school students compare with their regular classroom peers.

"They're doing quite well," Wieland said.

Robb Ross, middle school principal, said test scores are comparable.

Powell said the charter school is giving the district a chance to do what it talks about — a cutting edge education.

"If we quit, we're taking a step back," he said. "I'm impressed with what we've seen from it so far."

Powell said it is "hypocritical" to talk about doing some of the things the district has started with the charter school, then do away with it. He said he will be disappointed if the charter school is discontinued.

Board president Tracy Rogers said the board needs to consider the needs of all the students in the district, and not just a few.

"I wish the district had more money so this wasn't an issue," Rogers said.

Nielsen asked middle and grade school principals Robb Ross and Terrel Harrison to come up with areas where they could make cuts. Both could cut half a teaching position, but Nielsen will not ask them to do it.

Wieland said she does not want to see one program benefiting over

another, or buildings pitted against each other, for funding.

"There are some tough questions but I think it can be done," she said. "I will continue to fight for Thomas County Academy, but not at the expense of academic cuts elsewhere."

Ross said good things are happening at the charter school, but he will protect his own turf.

"What is best for all kids?" he said.

Diane Carter, parent of a charter school student, seventh-grader Caleb Carter, said her son has enjoyed the technology available at the school. This is his second year at Thomas County Academy.

"We thought it would be a better way of learning for him," Diane said.

She said in some ways, it is better than a mainstream classroom, but it has had its challenges.

"It's really different from regular school," Diane said.

Responsibility for assignments is put back on students, and expectations are different. Because the curriculum is project-based, students have to be aware of deadlines, and take responsibility for what they learn.

She said they have managed to deal with the challenges.

If the charter school is closed, Diane said Caleb "would do all right with the transition back into a regular classroom."

...and the band played on



TISHA COX/Colby Free Press

Members of the Colby High School band rehearsed before the annual all-district music concert at the Colby Community Building Tuesday. The concert featured a combined performance with all levels of the music program.

County's court could move

By Jan Katz Ackerman

Colby Free Press

Lack of an elevator in the Sheridan County Courthouse has prompted talk of moving Sheridan County District Court to downtown Hoxie.

Sheridan County Commissioners Keith Kennedy and Ron Schamberger on Monday said they are considering purchasing a building in downtown Hoxie and moving the court to 825 Main Street.

The vacant building, is owned by Michelle and Lenny Patmon.

Kennedy said installing an elevator to the third floor of the courthouse built in 1917 might be more expensive than buying Patmon's building.

Asked how the commissioners could justify spending \$55,000 for a building, Kennedy said "I don't know where that figure came from."

Michelle Patmon disagrees.

"We have had one of the commissioners, Mr. Kennedy, talk to us a couple times," Patmon said. Should the commissioners move forward and purchase the building, it would require extensive remodeling to house the offices of Magistrate Judge John Cahoj and Senior Clerk of the District Court for the 15th Judicial District Vergie Went.

The building would also be the new office space for Rhonda White and

"I would expect the cost of providing and equipping a suitable facility to be quite expensive."

— District Judge Glenn Schiffner

Lisa Minimum, Went's deputy clerks.

In addition, the court requires a large walk-in vault for court records, a jury room, as well as handicap accessible restrooms for the staff, jurors and public.

As far back as June 1999, Sheridan County Commissioners have talked about installing an elevator in the courthouse in order to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

That Act went into effect on Jan. 26, 1992, with structural changes to allow accessibility to have been done by Jan. 26, 1995. Sheridan County's courthouse for the past 12 years has not complied with the federal law.

Chief Judge Jack Burr of Goodland said the commissioners have not contacted him about moving the court.

Cahoj said he knew the commissioners were considering moving the court, but it is something that will have to be "weighed out and studied."

District Judge Glenn Schiffner

said he has heard about the idea of moving the court, but has not been contacted by commissioners.

"While we will cooperate with the commissioners," Schiffner said, "I would expect the cost of providing and equipping a suitable facility to be quite expensive."

Schiffner said a previous commissioner asked him to look at what was then the ambulance garage to see if it could be converted for use by the District Court.

"Based upon a plan that I submitted, they found it to be too expensive and abandoned the idea," Schiffner said.

"Although I have not seen the building they may now be considering, I would think the costs of converting it could even be more expensive."

Located on the west side of Main Street, two businesses flank the building being considered by the commissioners.

Mahanna said he would like to see someone in the building, but did not know how the court would impact parking along Main Street.

County approves financing compactor

By Tisha Cox

Colby Free Press

Thomas County Commissioners Monday chose Sunflower Bank, working with Systems Finance Corp. of Wichita, to finance a new compactor for the landfill.

Total cost of the compactor is \$262,793. The county will finance \$162,793 and pay \$100,000 in cash.

The commissioners received five bids, five-year and seven-year terms. They were from Farmers and Merchants Bank, First National Bank, Peoples State Bank and BankWest, all of Colby and Sunflower Bank/Systems Finance Corporation of Wichita.

Each proposal was for a five- or seven-year term.

Farmers and Merchants bank was 4.60 for five years and 4.65 percent, seven years; First National Bank, 5.741 and 5.87 percent; Peoples

State Bank, 5.58 and 5.74 percent; BankWest, 5.36 and 5.56 percent. Systems Finance Corp. was 4.33 percent for both terms.

Commissioner Paul Steele asked to see the balances on the landfill funds to figure out how much they will have to finance.

"We're spending big bucks," Steele said.

In other business, the Thomas County Office Complex was discussed.

Jim McGuire, maintenance, said fire doors are needed for the Thomas County Health Department. He said one set of doors in the north hallway could be reversed and a panic bar added for only the cost of labor. The doors would only be closed after 5 p.m., and the women's restroom could be changed to a unisex bathroom. The commissioners approved the door modifications.

Injury accident on Range Avenue



JOHN VAN NOSTRAND/Colby Free Press

Colby police assessed the scene of a two-car accident at 5:20 p.m., Tuesday, at Range and Second Street in Colby. The accident is still under investigation, said Police Chief Randy Jones today. Preliminary reports indicate Hubert Cooper of Colby, driving a 2002 Lincoln made a left-hand turn in front of Jennifer

Call, also of Colby, driving a 1995 GMC. Cooper was driving north on Range when he attempted to turn left onto Second Street, but failed to yield to Call, who was driving south on Range Avenue. Cooper was taken to Citizens Medical Center with minor injuries. He was treated and released.