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School and church busy

Last week was a busy one for Sacred Heart School in Colby. At the Christmas program Wednesday evening, Austin Gerstberger (left, above), Makenzi Rhymer, Kora Busby, Coryl Carman, Breylin Shanahan and Jamis Hale formed the front row of the choir as they sang a lullaby to Baby Jesus. Braydon Horinek (left, at right), Kourtney Finley and Oaklynn Carmon played sheep during the concert. On Tuesday (below) there was activity of a different sort with the demolition of the house where Sister Loretta Podlena had lived next to the Sacred Heart Catholic Church. Podlena retired last year and moved to her hometown of Great Bend. The nun had served the church since 1997, said Sacred Heart Principal Laura Krejci, and the house had been both a rectory and a convent before she lived there.



LAURA KREJCI
Sacred Heart School
SAM DIETER/Colby Free Press

City plans to heat water tower

By Sam Dieter

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Colby will pay as much as \$12,000 for an experimental machine to keep the water standpipe near Country Club Drive and Interstate 70 from freezing up.

The city council voted to buy a water mixer from Pax Water Technologies at its meeting Tuesday night which would mix colder water at the bottom of the pipe with warmer water at the top.

"My opinion guys, we don't have a choice," City Manager Tyson McGreer told the council at its meeting Tuesday.

Pax, a Richmond, Calif., company that builds mixers for water tanks, wants to test the mixer here. If it doesn't work, McGreer said, the city won't have to pay for it. The system is one of four or five that Pax is building and testing nationwide, he said, adding that the city can find out how the mixers

work in other towns if it turns out to be too warm here this winter.

The company is building the mixer right now and should be able to install and test it next month. McGreer said it will be about three feet wide, adding that he's not sure how much the device will cost the city. Later, he said it should be \$10,000 to \$12,000.

Public Works Director Omar Weber said a block of ice has formed in the tank in the winter. Over time, he said, ice moved up and down the inside of the pipe and broke a small pipe that takes well water to the very top of the tank. The oldest water at the bottom of the 159,000-gallon tank would otherwise be used first, he said.

Earlier, the council asked for a contract to be drawn up with Utility Service Group to repaint and maintain the city's water tower. Council members debated

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Businesses to be closed

Most area businesses and government offices will be shutting down at least for Christmas this year.

For Colby, this means eating Christmas dinner at home, although on Christmas Eve you will be able to get a latte and maybe a bite to eat on the way to Grandma's house. On Tuesday Montana Mikes will be open from 11 a.m.

to 2 p.m.; Pizza Hut will be open until 6 p.m.; McDonalds will be open until 8 p.m.; Subway will be open until 2 p.m.; Sonic will be open until 5 p.m.; Taco John's will be open until 3 p.m.; and Village Inn will be open until 2 p.m.; and El Dos De Oros will be open all day. These restaurants will all be

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Schools plan for safety needs

The Colby School District is moving forward with plans to make schools safer, high school Principal Jeff Wallingford told the school board last Monday, from training the staff to a plan to keep schools locked all day and control who can enter.

The district's school safety team, which includes law enforcement officers as well as school

staff, met Dec. 10 to continue safety discussions, he said.

The Colby Police Department has been training the staff in all the buildings and running them through exercises, Chief Ron Alexander said later.

Middle School Principal Rob Ross told the board that the safety team has met several times with his staff, discussing topics like locking down the school buildings, creating name tags for all staff and visitors, panic buttons, tasers, replacement of glass-bottomed doors and corridors, and creating all-call capabilities in more locations at each school.

"I'm encouraged by what the team wants to do," said Alexander.

In a recent survey, parents and staff indicated they support the idea of locking school doors while school is in session.

Of the 220 respondents, 62 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the idea of keeping school buildings locked during school hours to deter potential intruders.

Locking the buildings presents logistical difficulties that must be worked out, said Ross.

Cameras and buzzer systems must be installed to make a lockdown feasible, along with possible swipe-card entry at doors and between the intermediate and primary buildings.

Jail design needs more input from agencies

By Heather Alwin

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Hundreds of details need to be ironed out if Thomas County is going to build a new jail, and officials have begun brainstorming.

At a meeting earlier this month, county commissioners, the sheriff and the undersheriff discussed some of their options.

Much of the discussion centered around the best groupings of cells and inmates, but the group also discussed ways to develop the best plan for the jail.

"We've got a preliminary design," said Commissioner Mike Baughn, a former sheriff. "Some of it's good and some of it's bad."

Sheriff Rod Taylor said he would like to see meetings with a group of representatives from each agency involved, including a commissioner, a representative from the sheriff's office and the county attorney, to share ideas and formulate a plan.

"That's where the whole process has

been flawed (thus far)," said Baughn, adding that he does not think the county went through a proper needs assessment before making preliminary plans.

"This (jail study) should have been done before we ever got to this stage," he said, gesturing to the draft plan done by Colby architect Glen Strait.

Taylor and Undersheriff Marc Finley voiced strong agreement.

Taylor said he thought the county could have saved "a year or so" by starting with an assessment of the need instead of jumping into a design.

Finley later suggested visits to other recently constructed jails, incorporating ideas from those into Thomas County's design and avoiding other counties' mistakes.

Baughn said he wants to investigate all the possibilities presented by combining the jail with court functions and go with the cheapest option. The county could choose to build only a jail; a jail and court facility; or a jail, court and all county administrative functions, eliminating the need for the current courthouse.

Commissioner Paul Steele said he wants to see the jail construction paid for with a half-cent sales tax instead of increasing property taxes, and he wants to evaluate what can be built if the county commits to a certain level of taxes.

"We want it to be right and we want it to be adequate," said Steele, comparing a future jail to the current law enforcement center, which he said was "obsolete when it opened."

"The longer we put off (a decision)," said Baughn, "the less support we're going to receive from the public."

Whatever plan the county comes up with, Baughn said, he thinks the county should have it reviewed by the state's Department of Corrections.

Although Kansas does not have jail standards or inspect jails, he said, the department will inspect jails and plans on request.

Finley said the American Jail Association is also willing to look at plans.

Baughn said the jail never before had the ability to classify inmates into separate groups, but the new jail could be designed

to allow that.

For example, a new jail could separate inmates charged with misdemeanors from those charged with felonies, pre-trial inmates from post-trial inmates and inmates with mental health issues or serious illnesses from the general population.

If the jail is properly designed, the county could begin offering work release for those convicted of some crimes, said Finley.

Currently, work release is impractical because a work-release inmate would mix with the general population every night, triggering a requirement to be strip-searched each time he comes back into the jail. The jail does not have enough manpower to perform the necessary searches, said Finley.

In a new jail, however, work-release prisoners could be kept separate from others, increasing security without such detailed searches.

Finley said he discussed cell-size options with the architect who works with Dr. Al-

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