



REPRESENTATIVE JOHN FABER (above) talked with banker Bob Gaskill after a “town hall” meeting Saturday at the Decatur County Courthouse. Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer (below) told the audience the Oberlin School District is safe from consolidation plans this year. — Herald staff photos by Kimberly Davis

Leaders discuss money

By **KIMBERLY DAVIS**
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The area’s state legislators talked about money – or the lack of money – at the state level and a newly released post audit report on school consolidation with about 40 people in Oberlin on Saturday.

Rep. John Faber and Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer were at the Decatur County courthouse over the lunch hour as part of their annual “listening tour.”

The men started their morning in Bird City, where over 350 people turned out to talk about schools, then moved on to Atwood, Oberlin and Norton.

Sen. Ostmeyer said they would try to come back in April, noting that there was a big funeral in town that day.

People are concerned about their schools, said Sen. Ostmeyer, adding that he’s sure there will be a school here.

The school budget is being propped up with money from the federal stimulus bill, he said. When that ends in 2012 and 2013, he said, the state will need to fill that void, possibly increasing taxes, or people and government are going to have to tighten their belts.

But, he said, that doesn’t mean towns like Oberlin are going to lose their schools.

Rep. Faber said this is his 14th year in office and probably the toughest. In the past, he said, he served on policy committees, but with his working relationship with the school finance formula, he was put on Appropriations this year.



The governor and Legislature are working on cuts to avoid a big state deficit this year and another in the next fiscal year, which begins July 1. The “recision” bill just passed actually resolves almost

all of the revenue shortages this year, said Rep. Faber.

He said he thinks the economy is turning around a little, but it’s still a mixed bag.

Rep. Faber talked about the

possibility of a 1-cent sales tax increase proposed by the governor.

It’s a two edged sword, he said, even with language to remove the increase in two or three years.

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District safe from a merger

By **KIMBERLY DAVIS**
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It looks like the Oberlin School District is safe when it comes to a consolidation plan issued by the state Division of Legislative Post Audit in a report last week.

The report shows two consolidation scenarios, said Superintendent Duane Dorshorst, neither of which showed the Oberlin district merging with anyone else. Mr. Dorshorst passed out a few sheets from the post audit report at the Oberlin School Board meeting last Monday.

He said the first scenario uses the 1960s criteria, which is when the Norcat district consolidated with Oberlin. The second scenario would merge districts with fewer than 1,600 students. Although Oberlin has fewer than 1,600 students, the study also looks at the square miles a district covers. Mr. Dorshorst said Oberlin has 828 square miles.

The report came out at 4 p.m. the day of the meeting, he said, so not

everyone had seen it yet.

He said his guess was that the Legislature might try to force the first scenario and not the second, but for Oberlin that won’t mean a whole lot.

He said he can see the Legislature using the report as a tool to start putting pressure on some schools that maybe should have consolidated in the past, especially in the northeast part of the state where there are two or three Class 1A schools in the same county.

More important to the district than the consolidation report are the cuts in the state budget which could threaten school money. As it is right now, said Mr. Dorshorst, if revenues hold steady, the district will lose \$150,286 of what was already planned for in this year’s budget.

The good news is that the board and officials saw this coming and built in enough cash for this year,

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Council discusses policy for Gateway

By **KIMBERLY DAVIS**
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The Oberlin City Council discussed policies for The Gateway, but didn’t take a vote, during a special meeting last Monday.

City Administrator Austin Gilley said he would like to get some advice on marketing the building. He said he thought it would cost \$3,000 to \$4,000 for a marketing report.

The council decided not to accept or decline the proposed policies for the building until the study could be done. The council asked Mr. Gilley to get some bids.

The council asked questions about a few of the proposed policies.

One would prohibit smoking on Gateway property, said Mayor Joe Stanley. This isn’t really consistent with the other city property. The staff can’t smoke inside the buildings or vehicles, but can on the grounds, he said.

After discussion, the council asked Gateway Manager Kathy Brainard to add cigarette receptacles to her priority list on improvements.

Those should be put 15 feet or so away from the doors, said Councilwoman Rhonda May, or maybe the policy be “smoking in designated areas” instead.

The No. 9 policy would prohibit glitter, sprinkles, birdseed, rice and bubbles, said Mayor Stanley. Lots of churches don’t allow those items either, but do allow bubbles.

If this is for outside use, said Ms. May, lots of people use wheat here and the birds eat that.

There was no decision made. The No. 15 policy bans weapons of any kind on Gateway property, said Mayor Stanley. He asked if this means no “concealed carry” weapons or no more Pheasants Forever banquets, because they give

New policies proposed

The Oberlin City Council looked at 28 proposed policies for The Gateway during a special meeting last Monday.

This is the second time the council has looked at the list.

The proposed policies include:

- While recreational use of the facility is encouraged, priority must be given to paying customers.
- The arena may be partitioned off to rent at a reduced price when other events are taking place.
- No use of sporting equipment outside the arena.
- No smoking on Gateway property.
- Alcohol permitted in rented areas only. Alcohol is served and consumed at visitors’ and customers’ own risk.
- Tape that is used to mark positions or play, etc., must be removed before leaving.
- Tape cannot be used on walls.
- Pyrotechnics, including sparklers, are prohibited.
- Glitter, sprinkles, birdseed, rice and bubbles are prohibited.
- Scotch tape, nails, pushpins

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guns away?

That could just be left out completely because The Gateway is a government building so concealed guns aren’t allowed anyway, said Mayor Stanley.

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Recreation conversation next week

Everyone is invited to a Decatur Tomorrow “community conversation” planning session next Wednesday on recreation.

The conversation, said Gary Anderson, steering committee co-convenor for the group, will focus solely on recreation opportunities.

The session will start at 7 p.m.

next Wednesday at the Golden Age Center in downtown Oberlin. Refreshments will be served.

The conversation will be run the same as past ones, with a brief presentation, a time for questions and then small-group discussions, he said.

Mr. Anderson said the recreation

and economic development directors from Greeley County will be at the meeting to give a presentation about what has happened with the recreation program there, which he said benefits all ages.

“One of the most remarkable aspects of Greeley County’s program,” said Mr. Anderson, “is

what they have been able to do on a limited budget.”

Quality recreation and access to it, said Mr. Anderson, has been a highly rated topic at past community conversations. This conversation will give everyone here a chance to talk about what they would like to

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Former hospital employee gets probation

An Oberlin man has reached an agreement with his former employer to pay back every penny of what he embezzled, plus \$6,000 to cover investigative work by the Decatur County Hospital’s auditors.

Dave Nichols was sentenced last Tuesday to nine months in prison, which was suspended in lieu of 18 months on probation, said County Attorney Steve Hirsch. That means Mr. Nichols will be on supervised probation by Court Services for 18 months, but won’t serve time unless he

violates any conditions of the probation.

Before sentencing, Mr. Hirsch said, Mr. Nichols and hospital officials negotiated an agreement that Mr. Nichols would pay \$36,811.01 to the Great Western Insurance Co., the hospital’s insurance carrier. The hospital, said Mr. Hirsch, already has received that money from the insurance firm. Mr. Nichols also will pay the \$1,000 deductible to the hospital and an additional \$6,000 for the auditors’ work. That’s a total of \$43,811.01.

The former bookkeeper also has to write an apology letter to the hospital and do 100 hours of community service. There will also be court costs to pay, said Mr. Hirsch.

Mr. Nichols, former chief financial officer for the Decatur County Hospital and Decatur Health Systems, was charged with writing checks on the Wheat Ridge Terrace apartments account for his own benefit over the last two years.

The first check, of the 22 checks, dated back to May 2008 and the last to June 2009.



*Officials talk money

(Continued from Page 1A)
Everyone knows that won't happen once it's there, he said.

He said he doesn't see there being any more cuts in education this year, adding that the Legislature is about halfway through the budget hearings. They are trying to hold spending flat through fiscal 2011.

The job of the Appropriations Committee is to take the available revenue and balance the budget, said Rep. Faber.

It isn't just school budgets that are vulnerable, he said. Public safety was cut 15 percent last year and Norton people worried that they were going to lose their prison. That didn't happen.

Sen. Ostmeyer said over 350 people worried about their schools turned out for the men's meeting in Cheyenne County. When that many people show up, he said, you know there is a problem. He said he and Rep. Faber are taking those issues back with them.

The representatives opened the floor up to questions: Magistrate Judge John Bremer said he appreciated the work the men were doing on the judicial budget and for watching out for the poorest-paid people in the judicial system so that they didn't have to bear the brunt of a 5 percent shortage.

Rep. Faber said there were cuts all across the board on salaries, including legislative pay.

Sen. Ostmeyer said he is humbled every day he sits in the Senate chamber. He said there is a push to raise taxes, which goes against his grain, but at the end of the day, the state can't have a negative balance.

He added that he still wants to protect western Kansas. Sen. Ostmeyer said he isn't shirking his duty and not asking anyone to cut their salaries. He said he isn't saying that county and city employees or teachers are overpaid.

He and Rep. Faber talked about the state losing money to people driving to Nebraska to buy groceries or people driving to Missouri to buy cigarettes or gas. You can't just raise these taxes and expect more revenue, they said.

Jay Anderson, a former councilman, asked how much would have to be cut from the tobacco tax to increase the income and keep people from driving to buy cigarettes over the state line.

It's an interesting question, said Rep. Faber. It comes down to how far people are willing to drive to save a buck. There were people in his neighborhood near Brewster years ago who were driving to McCook to buy groceries. They weren't

saving on gas, he said, he was sure of that.

Increasing the tax on cigarettes just hits the wrong people, said Sen. Ostmeyer. Smokers will come up with the money to buy the cigarettes, even if some of them can't afford it. People should remember that smoking is bad. The state taxes just enough to get a revenue stream, he said, but maybe it should just be banned.

With another set of radical school consolidation schemes this year, asked Steve Haynes, president of Nor'West Newspapers, is there any sentiment to force consolidation?

No, said Sen. Ostmeyer. He said he visited with Dale Dennis with the state Department of Education, and he assured him that's not going to happen.

The closest we'll come to consolidations this year, said Rep. Faber, will be for magistrate judges.

Sen. Ostmeyer said he thinks it's important to have a judge in each county so that when there is a problem, the law officer doesn't have to take an offender to Hays or somewhere to see a judge. If the magistrate judge districts are combined, he said, it won't be long until there are combined counties and everyone is driving to Hays for day-to-day business.

At the beginning of the meeting, Rep. Faber gave out sheets per pupil spending for each area school district. Oberlin Superintendent Duane Dorshorst said a lot of that money doesn't actually stay in the district, so it's not a true reflection of what is getting spent on kids. As enrollment drops, he said, the spending on each child increases to provide the same services. If the district starts looking at \$180,000 more in cuts this year, he said, that means they will have to start cutting programs.

While the money from the state has continued to drop, said Mr. Dorshorst, the local contribution has increased without the community complaining. He said the citizens have increased that amount willingly.

Mr. Dorshorst said he was asking the legislators to find ways to think outside the box. There has to be another way other than tax increases to increase revenue for education.

"We are going to do everything we can to hold spending flat," said Rep. Faber.

The school district isn't the only one hurting, said Mr. Dorshorst. Everyone is in the same boat, but if we stop providing opportunities in education, it hurts the kids and their chances in life.

It's more than a two edged sword,

said Sen. Ostmeyer, and not a problem that can be run from.

The Good Samaritan Center, said administrator Janice Shobe, took a 10 percent cut in state Medicaid payments this year. About half the residents here and in Atwood are on Medicaid, she said. It costs about \$140 a day to care for a resident. Before Jan. 1, the center's were receiving \$134, and now it's \$120.

That's hard to deal with, she said. To make it worse, the state proposes a "bed tax" which is \$3 a day for each bed. That can't be passed on to the Medicaid residents, she said, because it won't be paid, so then it's \$6 a day for the private patients.

Supposedly, the center will get that money back, said Mrs. Shobe, but she knows they won't, and besides, it's wrong to tax the frail and elderly.

Education takes 53 percent of the state budget, said Sen. Ostmeyer, but cuts also hurt the seniors, the handicapped and others. He said he worries about the way we treat the elderly. It's unfair that the "greatest generation" is being hurt by this.

Lynn Doeden, chief executive officer of Decatur Health Systems, said Medicaid cuts will cost the Decatur County Hospital \$40,000 a year and the nursing home \$36,000. Three people might lose their jobs, she said, or they could just decrease services.

Many of the patients are elderly and can't travel to get health care, she said, so she doesn't want to decrease the services.

"How is the President going to make more jobs," asked Mrs. Doeden, "if we are going to have to cut jobs because of Medicaid?"

Rep. Faber said he doesn't want to cut jobs, but his committee has to take the revenue the state expects and make the budget balance.

"People are probably going to hear some scary things until the budget is balanced," he said. "Keep your voices loud. Keep talking to us."

The group talked briefly about sales tax on utilities and gas and why Rep. Faber didn't vote to continue the 911 tax on cellular phones. He said he understood the bill he voted against was to take the tax off of land-line phones. Decatur County Commissioner Stan McEvoy said the vote was to keep the 911 tax on cellular phones, which helps keep the 911 system updated.

Rep. Faber said that wasn't the way it was explained to him, and it wasn't his intention to do away with it.

how to make money for the state.

All of the school districts in Kansas are looking at the same things, he said. All of the districts are getting a cut. In St. Francis, the community just had a meeting to discuss some ideas. It had a good turn out.

Mr. Dorshorst said when the board set up the special meeting for next Wednesday, they didn't realize there is a "community conversation" at 7 p.m. about recreation.

council members agreed, but it really needs to be warmer so they can see where the water runs to.

There's a leak in the theater, said Ms. Brainard, which should move up the list. There's a hole in the theater wall which is about pinky size.

The council agreed to let Ms. Brainard spend up to \$50,000 out of the Bremer fund for the projects after she prioritizes the list.

Having a party



DURING HER Valentine's Day party at Oberlin Elementary School on Thursday, Melody Koerperich reached into her bag to pull out a goodie. — Herald staff photo by Kimberly Davis

*Council waits on policies

(Continued from Page 1A)

The mayor also asked about a policy saying that the music and bar at events would stop at midnight.

On the proposed No. 18 policy, said Ms. May, she thought it should say no gratuities are expected, but a donation could be made to The Gateway. The proposed policy says gratuity accepted as donation to Gateway Oberlin Civic Center.

Policy No. 26 says leftover food not taken by the customer may be donated to nonprofit organizations. Ms. May asked what nonprofit organization here takes food.

Mr. Gilley said they don't know of any, but thought it would be nice to include that so the staff would have the authority to do it.

Mayor Stanley asked if The Gateway changed to more of an event center, how many events do they think they would get in two years? A lot, said Ms. Brainard, if the center is marketed differently.

There was some discussion on the difference between a facility and an event center.

Ms. May said she the difference is between things put on by local

people and professional promoters. Most local things aren't "events," she said.

The big thing, said Mr. Gilley, is not allowing outside catering. Event centers cater, it's a business and that's how they make money. This is a good time to make a change because there are some events shifting to the new Golden Age Center, he said. He said he would like to get someone in to help with a marketing plan.

Councilman Ray Ward said changing to an event center might cut out the local people.

There's lots to offer at The Gateway, said Ms. Brainard, and there can be more than one event going on at a time, so it wouldn't cut out the local people using the building.

The big change would be use of the kitchen would be kept to The Gateway crew, said Mr. Gilley.

It's important to make the community still feel welcome to use The Gateway, said Councilwoman Marcia Lohofener, because of course they are. If the prices double, said Ms. May, there are a lot of people who would feel unwelcome.

Mayor Stanley said he thinks there is some confusion. He said he's not sure marketing the building as more of an event center would cut out some of the smaller meetings. That's not the case, he said; it just changes the use of the kitchen.

The Gateway is a rentable facility, said Mr. Gilley; no one is going to get cut out of using it. There just needs to be more events here to cover the costs. Of course the lack of hotel space in town is a deterrent, he said.

It sounds like there is no money for a hotel right now, said Ms. May. The group talked about whether general obligation or revenue bonds could be used to build one.

The hotel is a huge issue, said Mr. Gilley. He said the city has two to three years to make an event center a success or employees will probably lose their jobs. If Oberlin doesn't get a hotel, it might be tough to make the building an event center. That's what's been happening for the last 10 years. There were no decisions made on the policies. Mr. Gilley said he would get some prices to get marketing advice.

*Public meeting next week

(Continued from Page 1A)
he said. He added that while the board and school officials figured there would be cuts coming from the state, they also know that there might be cuts coming here in the near future.

The board has decided to hold a special meeting to start talking about the financial future at 6 p.m. next Wednesday at the district office.

*Projects to get prioritized and done

(Continued from Page 1A)
to put the name in tall capital letters on the north and east sides of the building, with lighting, so people know what the building is when they enter the town.

Even the letters on the front of the building, said Ms. Brainard, say Gateway to the Future. That doesn't really tell people what the building is. Those letters need to be painted or replaced or something, she said. People have actually stopped thinking the building was a museum, said

The special meeting, said Mr. Dorshorst, isn't to come up with a plan, but to begin a conversation.

He has talked with the area legislators about what the cuts mean, and not just for the school districts either. State cuts hurt the school, the Golden Age Center, the hospital and lots of other agencies, he noted.

The lawmakers don't just need to say that they will cut taxes, he said, but look for revenue sources and

Ms. Brainard.

The stage floor in the theater needs some work, she told the council.

A plywood stage floor, said Ms. May, isn't OK. She added that she would support spending money to fix it.

Other items, said Ms. Brainard, include fixing the locks on the kitchen and west doors, fixing the dishwasher and doing something about ice on the back parking lot. The drainage needs to be looked at,

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