

LOCAL

Vaccine registration opens to 18 and older

See **A2**

LOCAL

Fishing for the Fight chosen for donation

See **A10**



SPORTS

The Drift returns

See **Section B**



Pinedale Roundup

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MARCH 19, 2021

One Dollar

SCSD No. 1 trustees defy mask mandate in schools

By **Robert Galbreath**
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PINEDALE – The Sublette County School District No. 1 Board of Trustees passed a motion eliminating school SMART Start Plans and replacing them with the minimum guidelines set out by state public health orders. The motion made an exception for public health orders on masks in schools and lifted those requirements for students and staff in the district.

The vote was 4-2, with chairman Jamison Ziegler and trustees Clayton Olson, Marie McGuire and Stacy Illoway voting in favor. Trustees Chris Nelson and Rachel Weksler voted against the motion with Charles Prior absent.

Gov. Mark Gordon lifted the statewide mask mandate on March 16.

Statewide Order No. 1, modified on March 16, requires students, teachers and school staff to wear masks or face coverings when social distancing by 6 feet is not possible. Gordon stated in a March 8 press release that masks were justified in K-12 schools as a safety precaution to keep facilities open and allow activities and sports to continue.

The board's decision to no longer enforce the use of masks in district schools is a violation of Statewide Order No. 1.

Doug Mason, the district's attorney, told the board that he did not know what the legal consequences for the district would be, but added that he was not aware of any cases where the state retaliated against local agencies for noncompliance with state orders.

State Superintendent Jillian Balow addressed concerns about lifting mask restrictions statewide, except in schools, in a statement clarifying what the changes to the state health orders meant for schools, said Linda Finnerty, Wyoming Department of Education communications director.

"Superintendent Balow then worked directly with both the Governor's office and the State Health Officer to ensure that communities and school districts maintain the flexibility and authority they need to discuss the issue – this has been a mainstay commitment during COVID-19," Finnerty added. "The superintendent also communicated with the Wyoming Association of School Administrators to seek input from local districts."

The public health orders did not originate from the state superintendent and WDE, and enforcement would be determined by law enforcement or the county attorney, Finnerty explained.

Ziegler said the board had received significant public backlash against continuing the mask mandate in the district after March 16.

See 'SCHOOL' on page **A9**



BRADY OLTMANS PHOTO

Patrons pony up to the bar and celebrate St. Patrick's Day at the Cowboy Bar in Pinedale a day after Gov. Mark Gordon lifted the statewide mask requirement.

'We don't feel like illegals now'

Life continues as mask requirement ends

By **Brady Oltmans**
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PINEDALE – Largely illuminated by the final hour of daylight beaming through its windows and reflecting off the green glass of half-drunk bottles of Jameson, the Corral Bar was alive again.

Not only was it 5 p.m. after a mid-week work day, it was also St. Patrick's Day. But more than that, it was only the second day since Gov. Mark Gordon did not extend the statewide mask requirement and restrictions on bars and restaurants that Sublette County bars could celebrate the news that took effect March 16.

St. Patrick's Day gave bars and patrons a perfect opportunity to celebrate – even if only for the lifting of appearances.

Gov. Gordon enacted a public health order on Dec. 9 that required masks be worn in most public settings. That came nearly nine months after Wyoming's first confirmed case of COVID-19 and in the midst of the state's spike in case transmission. The spread was vast and Wyomingites died. Gov. Gordon said, at the time, the decision was made to prevent more drastic circumstances.

"With these actions we can avoid taking the more drastic step of closing schools and businesses," Gordon said in a press release announcing the requirement.

That decision brought scrutiny among Wyomingites. A lawsuit was filed against the governor last month arguing that the health orders were unconstitutional.

Just over three months after the order was enacted, Wyoming's case transmission dropped significantly and deaths became sparser. So, on March 8, Gov. Gordon announced the removal of the mask

requirement, as well as restrictions toward establishments like bars and restaurants.

Over the course of those three months came fatigue, as well as personal philosophical differences.

Boone and Cindi at the Cowboy Bar pulled up to the bar to enjoy a few St. Patrick's Day drinks. When someone else at the bar said it felt like real life again, Boone set the record straight.

"It always has here. That's why we go here."

Both of them know several people who contracted the coronavirus over the past year. They talked about how her family back in her native Colorado dealt with mask wearing in more population-dense areas like Denver. They said they were both taken back by a trip to Salt Lake City over the summer where few masks were worn.

They, like most between the two bars in downtown Pinedale, didn't feel pressured when having to put on masks in bars throughout the last three months. So the removal of the mask requirement came more as a psychological one than a practical one.

"We don't feel like illegals now," Cindi said.

As stand-up comedy played on a TV in the Cowboy Bar, the St. Patrick's Day festivities ramped up at the Corral Bar. Boston-based Irish-influenced band Dropkick Murphys played over the speakers, both indoor and outdoor. Laughter among the locals filled the pockets of silence between songs.

Almost a full calendar year to the day since the novel coronavirus altered life for Wyomingites, resembled normal – as if it had ever changed.

Hospital District moves forward

By **Robert Galbreath**
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PINEDALE – The Sublette County Hospital District Board of Trustees retained the Crank Legal Group in Cheyenne as legal counsel following an executive session at its March 17 regular meeting. Tom Labau, the district's previous legal representative, stepped down due to a conflict of interest earlier this month.



Tonia Hoffman

Chairwoman Tonia Hoffman stated that she felt confident in the Crank Legal Group's proposal. Hoffman said that believed the district had the ability to move forward with selecting a management partner and finalizing the memorandum of understanding with the Sublette Center through legal counsel provided by Crank Legal Group.

The board agreed to hold a public meeting to make the final decision on a management partner. The meeting is scheduled for Monday, March 29, and will be held in Big Piney or Marbleton with a specific location to be determined. The meeting time is set for 5 p.m.

Hoffman said the board will immediately enter into executive session to discuss personnel, including confidential employee surveys. The executive session is anticipated to last approximately two hours. After the executive session, the meeting will be open for public discussion and comments followed by a board vote, Hoffman added.

Trustees unanimously adopted bylaws during their Wednesday meeting. The document drafted by previous legal counsel was drawn from bylaws used by three rural hospital districts in the region, Hoffman said, and included amendments made by hospital district board members.

Board member Kenda Tanner said that the finance committee was still working to secure a line of credit with First Bank. The bank required three years of tax reports from both the Sublette County Rural Health Care District and Sublette Center, Tanner said. The committee is still waiting on final reports and Tanner hoped to have the application completed next week.

The board voted to purchase a board of directors insurance policy to protect trustees from liability pending a line of credit. Hoffman stated that she received bids from two companies, and both came in at around

See 'HOSPITAL' on page **A9**



SCHOOL

Continued from 1A

McGuire said that placing a demand on students to wear masks after the governor lifted the mandate for the wider community was illogical and frustrating. During the surge in COVID-19 cases in Sublette County last fall, schools did not appear to be high-risk areas for transmission, McGuire added. She cited significantly lower numbers of COVID-19 cases in the county in recent weeks.

McGuire explained that as a mother, she would never tell her children to do anything without backing her decision up with a logical reason.

Illoay stated that he disagreed with a mask mandate in schools after March 16. The district needed to take a stand against orders that no longer made sense, Illoay said.

McGuire asked for feedback from administrators on enforcing the mask mandate.

Pinedale High School Principal Brian Brisko said that enforcing mask requirements was a growing battle for administrators and teachers. He added that the schools were willing to continue the fight, but said that students were increasingly vocal in their opposition and refusal to follow the mask mandate following the governor's announcement to lift restrictions. Students frequently took their masks off the minute they left school grounds to socialize with friends without maintaining proper social distancing, Brisko added.

Pinedale Middle School Principal Eric Makelky explained that staff and faculty were worn down trying to enforce the mask rules and spent an increasing amount of time badgering students. Students' growing belligerence reflected broader public sentiment in the community, he added.

Greg Legerski, principal at Pinedale Elementary School, told the board that his school had fewer problems requiring young students to follow rules on masks.

Weksler encouraged the trustees to stay the course. She said schools in Sublette County were fortunate to remain open all year, and she saw no reason to go against state health orders when the district was so close to the end of the school year. Weksler cautioned the board against changing health mandates as families travel for Spring Break.

Weksler added that students were only required to wear masks when social distancing was not possible and did not need to wear them all day. She said that low transmission rates at schools could be attributed to following guidelines like wearing masks and social distancing. Weksler encouraged the board to look beyond Sublette County at the wider pandemic still raging in other communities.

PES teacher Keri Hecht explained that some teachers and staff, particularly those in high-risk health categories, might be uncomfortable returning to work without a mask mandate in place. She was thankful



Joy UFFORD PHOTO

Middle-school students participate in the winter concert, some singing in masks, weeks after the statewide mask requirement was implemented.

that schools remained open all year, and encouraged the board not to put schools in jeopardy of closing.

PES Assistant Principal and BOCES Director Janel Scurlock said that she was uncomfortable with the precedent the board was setting by defying state orders. Refusing to follow guidelines was contradictory to the message schools taught students, she added.

Nelson stated that while he felt conflicted about the issue and understood the public's frustration, the board needed to set an example for following rules to prevent chaos. He cautioned that defying state orders sent the message to students that rule breaking was OK.

Superintendent Jay Harnack was on an excused absence that was unrelated to the board's decision, he confirmed to the Roundup.

Other board news

- Board members accepted a plan to replace the district's analog system with the new Sublette County Interoperable Radio System, or SIRS. Sublette County Sheriff

K.C. Lehr and County Fire Warden Shad Cooper outlined the new SIRS program and said the company working on the transition, L3Harris, was offering new radios to each school and bus at no charge to the district. The new radios come with a two-year warranty, Cooper said.

Lehr and Cooper stated that they field-tested the radios numerous times and were satisfied that the technology would provide better communication to the district.

- Trustees voted unanimously to remove the recommendation to eliminate a full-time

HOSPITAL

Continued from 1A

\$12,000 a year. Trustee Dr. Brendan Fitzsimmons said that in today's world, purchasing insurance was a reality and \$12,000 was reasonable to cover five people.

Sherrie Escobar, executive director at the Green River Valley Health Foundation (GRVHF), and Dave Racich, president of the foundation, gave a presentation to the trustees. Escobar emphasized that the GRVHF's mission in advancing health care and wellbeing in Sublette County and helping all residents obtain care. She stressed that the GRVHF was a separate, nonprofit organization and not a front for the Sublette County Rural Health Care District.

Escobar and Racich encouraged further talks with the hospital district to determine how the organizations can work together. Escobar said that donors were willing to provide the hospital district financial assistance in its project to build a critical access hospital and assisted living wing once a management partner was in place and the USDA loan was approved.

physical education teacher from the proposed budget reduction plan. The 2021-2022 budget reduction plan was introduced to the public in January.

Nelson, a member of the board finance committee, said the committee is considering ideas on athletics and activities and the district was waiting for the state legislature to determine education cuts. He cautioned the board that the district was not out of the woods financially, and encouraged trustees to consider the consequences of kicking the budget cut can down the road.

- The board voted to accept policy changes outlining the role of the nonvoting student advisor on first reading and policy revisions on entrance age requirements, public concerns and grievances and staff grievances on second reading.

- Trustees voted to renew the Region V BOCES mill levy.






OVERVIEW & FEATURES

- Average Lot Size: 41 Acres
- Municipal Water & Sewer
- Underground Utilities
- Pedestrian/Bike Path
- Landscaped 1-Acre Park
- School Bus Stops
- Postal Service
- 3.32-Acre Storage Area
- Protective Covenants
- Homeowner's Association
- Architectural Guidelines
- Wind River Mtn Views
- Wyoming Range Views
- Maintained Streets

Short-Term Owner Financing Considered

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