

LOCAL

Health care after a year of COVID

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LOCAL

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Kickin' around

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Pinedale Roundup

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One Dollar



BRADY OITMANS PHOTO

Jonah Energy Vice President Paul Ulrich (front) makes his case for an exemption in current tax scheduling to the Sublette County Board of Commissioners. Chair Joel Bousman, left, and commissioner Sam White, a former energy worker, were among those who listened to Ulrich's request during Tuesday's meeting.

Jonah seeks exemption

By Brady Oltmans

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PINEDALE – Sitting inside the Pinedale Library's Lovatt Room, a section of a building in a town largely built upon the oil and natural gas sector, the Sublette County Board of Commissioners heard a request from one of its largest backyard energy titans to receive an exemption from a monthly tax payment schedule, as enabled by Senate File 60, which passed the Wyoming Legislature last month.

Paul Ulrich, vice president of Jonah Energy, made the company's pitch to the commissioners for an exemption. He said Jonah Energy has analyzed Wyoming data in recent years. He brought up House Bill 158, a bill introduced a few years ago, which was meant to put protection measures in place for counties

that were experiencing delinquent tax issues. That bill passed and one of the concepts out of that bill that gained traction was switching tax payments to monthly in order to lessen the impact of a company went bankrupt or closed its doors.

"Jonah Energy objected to that bill, not because we don't want to pay our taxes, but because we don't believe it fixed the problem," Ulrich said. "I'm telling you today I still don't believe House Bill 158 or Senate File 60 fix your problem. If somebody is unwilling, whether it is an operator, private individual, small business or large business to pay their taxes, they're unwilling to pay their taxes."

Ulrich pitched the commissioners on a full evaluation of the monthly payment schedule to

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New Year's Day driver trial set

Both courtrooms likely in use

By Joy Ufford

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SUBLETTE COUNTY – The vehicular homicide case against Jade S. Jewkes, of Jackson, is set to go before a 12-person jury on Monday, Sept. 20, in 9th District Court.

Jewkes pleaded not guilty at her March 25 arraignment to two charges of aggravated homicide by vehicle.

The first charge alleges she caused the death of a Pinedale man while driving with an alcohol concentration of .08 percent or more, the second that she caused his death while intoxicated to a degree rendering her incapable of driving safely, court records show. Jewkes is also charged with a misdemeanor of driving under the influence of alcohol.

She was arrested and charged after being in a fatal collision with Shane Deal, of Pinedale, on New Year's Day on Highway 191 in the Hoback Canyon north of Bondurant. Jewkes' erratic driving that

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Making history

Pinedale senior first to earn Congressional Award – Gold Medal

By Robert Galbreath

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PINEDALE – The Cambridge English Dictionary defines "commitment" as a desire to give one's time and energy to a job, activity or something you believe in.

Pinedale High School senior Zoe Griffin embodies the true meaning of commitment when it comes to her passions – music and agriculture. Griffin spent countless hours over the years learning the French horn and raising and showing livestock through 4-H.

Griffin's efforts paid off. The senior went through the grueling audition process and made it into the All-State band four years in a row on an instrument that is particularly hard to master.

"Once you get good at it, it's so much

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RACHEL GIRT PHOTO

Pinedale High School senior Zoe Griffin received the Gold Medal Congressional Award at the Cheyenne Civic Center on April 18. Also pictured, from left, are Sens. John Barrasso and Cynthia Lummis and Rep. Liz Cheney.

Transfers, timelines, vacancies and ball fields

SCRHCD and Hospital District take steps toward union

By Robert Galbreath

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PINEDALE – The Sublette County Rural Health Care District (SCRHCD) and Hospital District boards moved closer to financial union at consecutive meetings held on Wednesday in Marbleton.

The transfer of all finances and assets from the SCRHCD to the Hospital District is scheduled for the end of the fiscal year

on July 1. With that deadline looming, the Hospital District Board of trustees voted unanimously to authorize several members of the SCRHCD business office to begin the process of transferring ownership on certain accounts, including retirement funds and investments, between the entities.

The employees given the authority included Dave Doorn, SCRHCD administrative director, Kelli Lovell, finance manager, Michelle Stauthamer, staff accountant, and Brittany White, human resources and payroll.

Doorn told the SCRHCD trustees that Lovell was taking the lead on working through financial agreements with Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance firms to prepare for the transition.

The Hospital District also passed a motion authorizing Doorn to sign ongoing service contracts on behalf of both boards.

The Hospital District trustees passed a motion to adopt a board vacancy policy and code of conduct to begin the search for a new board member following the resignation of Dr. Brendan Fitzsimmons. Tonia Hoffman, board chairwoman, stated that the Hospital District's attorney vetted the vacancy policy and code of conduct.

The Hospital Board will begin a 30-day public advertising period for the vacancy with a tentative goal to fill the seat at next month's regular board meeting, Hoffman stated. The structure for the interview process was to be determined, though Hoffman added that

each candidate will receive the same set of questions in advance. Hoffman encouraged interested members of the public to contact her.

Timelines

Doorn reported to both boards that the loan application with the U.S. Department of Agriculture was nearly complete. A final, revised financial report from Eide Bailly was expected next week, he said.

The SCRHCD's attorney, Rachel Weksler, was working on the agreement with the Highland Irrigation District to relocate a ditch running through the district's property and the paperwork was nearly ready to sign, Doorn added.

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COMMISSIONERS

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determine if it was best for Sublette County. He said that's all he was pitching with the exemption was to determine if that was the best course forward for all those involved.

Ulrich said if Jonah Energy switched to monthly it would effectively require the company to set aside \$21 million in its books for years so that money can't be used for production and development.

Based upon previous production numbers, Ulrich said it would cost Sublette County and Wyoming about \$9 million. And Jonah Energy has one of the few rigs currently drilling, he added.

"We're not asking for a tax break or anything special," Ulrich told the commissioners. "We're asking for a full evaluation of keeping our tax schedule the same based on the negative ramifications for us, in not having that money for capital, and you, not receiving those tax benefits from those capital investments."

County treasurer Emily Paravicini addressed the board before Ulrich and suggested the commissioners deny the exemption on the grounds that there isn't enough time to put together a system that could be used across other counties. She said it's more important to have something standard across the state rather than individual counties have their own separate systems. That way if a company is in multiple counties and has to jump through different hoops for each, it becomes mess and unnecessary, Paravicini said.

"So that it's the same everywhere and we have everybody's interests protected," she said. "Not only our county and our county constituents, but all the different entities we distribute to and our produces so that they know that this is in their best interest also."

Deputy county attorney Clayton Melinkovich said he's already heard from other counties who would be interested in duplicating Sublette's potential exemption for energy companies.

Commissioner Joel Bousman expressed his concern to address a NOVC in this situation, which Ulrich said Jonah Energy is willing to look at. Commissioner Sam White, a longtime energy sector worker himself, asked about payments off contracts that Jonah Energy enter into with entities that purchase energy from Jonah. Ulrich said that was beyond him. White said he didn't have a problem doing an evaluation but he did have worries with inflation and previous bankruptcies by energy entities in Sublette County. Commissioner Doug Vickrey asked about a ballpark figure, which Ulrich put at \$1.75 million each month under the SF 60 payment schedule.

Ultimately, the board agreed with Jonah Energy to undergo a full evaluation with a collaborative group including two commissioners, Paravicini, Melinkovich and county administrator Matt Gaffney.

That group would begin consulting outside parties, like the state Department of Revenue, as needed.

Also during the meeting:

- Commissioners voted to approve a new full-time and two part-time positions for seasonal workers at the county's Road and Bridge department. Road and Bridge Supervisor Billy Pape also presented commissioners with a proposal to lease equipment, which the board granted him permission to pursue on a sample basis. Pape also said Free Dump Day will be May 6 and 7 at the Marbleton-Big Piney landfill because they previous encountered insurance issues at the transfer station.

- Zero Brothers Construction out of Rock Springs was granted the bid for a culvert replacement project.

- Commissioners also carried a motion approving an employee sick-leave donation that was conducted during executive session.

- The board also approved Gaffney's extension request of Families First Coronavirus Response Act leave. Gaffney said he'd explore possible tax credits with that.

- The board approved a sale of the 2006 Horton ambulance known as "Big Red" to a buyer in Valparaiso, Fla., for \$40,000.

- Commissioners approved a request by Sublette County EMS to install eight new beds - four different bunk beds - at its Sand Draw location, which were previously purchased for quarantine purposes.

- The board approved the annual wildland fire prevention plan as presented by Sublette County Fire Unified Battalion Chief Shad Cooper.

- Julie Kraft of the Weed and Pest board made her annual presentation to the commissioners.

- Amber Anderson of the Pinedale Aquatic Center made her budget presentation that included raises in rates and equal budget allotment from the school district.

- The board approved a motion that would transfer land around the Bonurant Cemetery to the Upper Green River Cemetery District.

- Commissioners also voted to move forward with surveying and transferring the lands of the Marbleton ball fields to the town of Marbleton. That is conditional on separate votes of land and assets from the Town of Marbleton and Sublette County Rural Health Care District.

- Todd Hurd of Forsgren Associates Inc. gave an update on projects. He said construction on both the Daniel Fire Station and fairgrounds is continuing. He and Sublette County Libraries Director Sukey Hohl said there's one contractor bid remaining for the Big Piney Library construction project. Commissioners approved an increase in that project's cost with the expectation of lowering expenses to stay around the outlined project's budget.

TRANSFERS

Continued from 1A

Doorn hoped to have the USDA loan application complete and ready to submit by early May.

Trustee Jamison Ziegler told the board that the building committee received six responses from construction firms to the request for qualifications for a construction management company and contractor. Emily Ray, SCRHCD communications director, said the final deadline to receive RFQs was May 17.

The six respondents were highly qualified and were "hungry to get to work," Ziegler added. Once the board confirms a manager at risk and approves pre-pricing, that will trigger the bidding process for contractors, Ziegler explained. Ziegler stated that the board's goal was to break ground on the critical access hospital in August.

SCRHCD board chairman Mike Pompy said that work was continuing on the merger between the Sublette Center and SCRHCD and Hospital District. SCRHCD trustee Kari DeWitt said that the initial goal for a merger on July 1 would likely be pushed back. The Sublette Center remained committed to the process, but the procedure to combine a private, nonprofit entity with a governmental entity involved complicated legal work that was expected to take longer than three months, DeWitt added.

The looming fiscal-year deadline had Sublette Center administration and

financial staff "maxed out." DeWitt said, and the center needed "a little more time" to do its due diligence on the merger.

Hospital District trustee Kenda Tanner reported that a meeting was scheduled between representatives from the boards and Sublette Center staff to answer questions and address employee concerns during the last week of April.

Ballfields and management agreement
Doorn said he was approached by the Pinedale Little League and adult softball league requesting use of the old ball fields, now owned by the SCRHCD, until the new ball fields are completed in early July.

The SCRHCD board of trustees voted unanimously to allow the leagues to use the old ball fields through July 1 pending proper liability was in place.

Star Valley Health CEO Daniel Ordyna and Chief Operating Officer Mike Hunsaker attended the SCRHCD and Hospital District board meeting. During the Hospital District meeting, Hoffman reported that the trustees received a draft agreement for management with Star Valley Health.

The Hospital Board will submit the draft to its attorney and enter into final negotiations with Star Valley Health over the next 30 days, Hoffman said.

Hoffman announced that the final version of the bylaws were completed and will be posted on the Hospital District's website.

TRIAL

Continued from 1A

afternoon led to motorists to report her but she collided head-on with Deal's truck as he drove south and she drove north, according to court records.

Judge Marv Tyler gave Jewkes' trial top priority for the week with attorneys agreeing to five trial days "if health conditions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic permit," according to the case management order. The pretrial conference is set for Aug. 20 at 9 a.m.

9th District Court is in the process of preparing for COVID-19 precautions that address public safety during its upcoming

in-person hearings as is the Sublette County Circuit Court.

Circuit Court is currently preparing to use both courtrooms for its April 28 six-person, one-day jury trial of Rex F. Rammell, of Rock Springs. Rammell is charged with four misdemeanor violations of the Wyoming brand inspection law, W.S.S. 11-21-103(b) in June 2019.

3rd Circuit Court Judge Gregory Corpening is presiding over the Rammell case, with deputy county attorney Stan Cannon facing Rammell, who is representing himself.

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