

Windfall

County has \$509,000 from hospital district to spend

By Melody Martinsen
Acantha editor

The Teton County Commissioners last week held public hearings in Choteau and Fairfield to take comment on how the \$509,000 left in the coffers of the now-defunct Teton County Hospital District should be spent.

Under state law, the remaining assets of the hospital district reverted to the ownership of the county after the district was dissolved. Commissioners Jim Hodgskiss, Joe Dellwo and Dick Snellman will continue to take comment up to Oct. 15.

The commissioners have said that they plan to use the money to benefit health-related services in the footprint of the hospital district, which included the Pendroy, Bynum, Choteau, Greenfield, Fairfield and Golden Ridge areas. The Dutton and Power areas withdrew from the hospital district shortly after it was formed in the 1970s.

At the first hearing on Oct. 6 in Choteau, representatives from the Choteau Area Port Authority's childcare committee, Lisa Haas and Heather McCartney-Duty, requested funding for an array of childcare services. Former Teton County Hospital Board members Eva Anseth and Jackie Weist attended and submitted written comments opposed to providing any funds for childcare and supported using the money to benefit healthcare services.

At the hearing in Fairfield on Oct. 7, seven Fairfield area residents requested \$100,000 to be used by the Fairfield Community Civic and Recreation, Inc., a non-governmental nonprofit, for an ongoing community hall renovation project.

In their presentation, McCartney-

Duty and Haas made the case that high-quality childcare results in healthier children, who are more likely to succeed in school and less likely to fall prey to drugs and alcohol. Using this funding to support the childcare would have positive health benefits for those children in the future, they said.

McCartney-Duty of Choteau is an outreach specialist with Family Connections-Montana, a nonprofit based in Great Falls. She is working with CAPA on the childcare issue and helps educate communities on the needs of childcare, helps educate families about childcare options and works with childcare providers to enhance and improve their businesses.

McCartney-Duty said Teton County, like many other counties, has a critical shortage of high quality childcare that is affecting the ability of parents to work outside their homes. Research shows, she said, that children who have received high-quality childcare

are less likely to develop as adults heart disease, high blood pressure or depression and are less likely to use drugs or tobacco, than children who did not have access to high-quality childcare.

Teton County, she said, is meeting less than 8% of the need for childcare of infants to preschool-aged children, she said. When parents cannot find high-quality childcare, she said, they may need to leave the community in search of childcare and jobs.

She said parents in Choteau, Fairfield, Dutton, Power and Greenfield are all working on solutions to the scarcity of high-quality childcare.

Haas, who is a member of the Choteau Area Port Authority Board, said the board has become involved in the childcare issue because lack of childcare hurts economic development efforts in the city and the county.

Haas said the CAPA is asking for up to \$100,000. ■ See FUNDS, page 2



Pandemic issues

Board of Health hears challenges of contact tracing

By Melody Martinsen
Acantha editor

The Teton County Board of Health, meeting Sept. 23, reviewed the county's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and talked about how the Teton County Health Department is handling new cases and contact tracing.

Board members Randy Morris, Barb Shaffer, Elaine Sedlack, Tim Sinton, Ken Bassman and Jim Hodgskiss attended the meeting along with Teton County Health Department Director Melissa Moyer, among other county staffers.

Moyer told the board that as the pandemic persists, the Health Department is now seeing a few cases at a time occur in the county and her staff has been able to handle the work to do contact tracing. This contrasts, she said, to the 15-person cluster of cases that occurred all at once in late June and early July, in which her staff had to contact 80 people identified as close contacts of those infected and put them in quarantine.

Moyer also told the board, however, that she and her staff are now running into people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 who will not cooperate with contact tracing. Moyer said her staff contacts each person in the county who is diagnosed with COVID-19 and asks them to try to figure out where they were exposed and when their contagious period started. Typically, she said, infected people are contagious 48 hours before onset of symptoms or before a positive test result is received.

Her staff then works with the infected person to identify their "close contacts" — those people who were around the infected person in that 48-hour period, with or without masks, in close proximity (less than six feet) and for 15 or more minutes.

Those people who are defined as close contacts are required to quarantine in their homes for 14 days from the date of their exposure.

Moyer said she thinks people are refusing to give those names because they don't want their friends' and family members' lives to be disrupted by a two-week quarantine.

Instead, Moyer said, she thinks sick people are trying to contact people on their own, but may be telling people they have to go into quarantine when, in fact, they were not actually "close contacts."

She said she and her staff, when confronted by this, encourage the sick person to be candid and to help prevent others from spreading this illness.

Also, she said, the county has a roster of volunteers who can help deliver groceries and cleaning supplies, for example, to sick people and to those in quarantine, but the volunteers cannot help people in quarantine that the county does not know about.

Moyer also discussed the wastewater samples from the Choteau sewage treatment plant. The most recent tests, Moyer said, are showing a reduction and then a flattening in viral RNA from the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the wastewater. This continues to show that COVID-19 is present in the city, she said, but is not yet useful as a factor to determine how many people are getting sick here.

The sample pulled on Sept. 16 showed 147,475 genome copies (RNA from the virus) per liter of sewage, normalized for dilution. That sample was much lower than the sample pulled at the first part of

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Acantha photos by Jeff Martinsen

Volunteer firefighters from Augusta, Fairfield and Choteau along with firefighters from Malmstrom Air Force Base and many area ranchers, farmers and Hutterite colonies battle a fire in the historic Bunkhouse Inn on Main Street in Augusta on Oct. 10.

Historic Bunkhouse Inn burns down

By Vonnie Jacobson
Acantha reporter

"They are just numb," was how Wanda Holt, manager of the Bunkhouse Inn, described the feelings of owners Matt and Lori Folkman after losing the historical inn in a fire on Oct. 10.

"Along with the shock and sadness, we so appreciate and are overwhelmed at the amazing support from everyone in Augusta and the surrounding communities," Holt said. "You can't find a better place, I'm so proud to live in Augusta."

Interviewed Sunday afternoon, Holt said there were still embers burning and it would be a while before it will be safe to sift through the remains and determine whether anything survived. A bright spot, Holt said was saving the original "Bunkhouse" sign as the building was burning.

The fire, which started in the back of the lower level, was reported at 1:34 p.m. The fire engulfed the Inn on Augusta's Main Street (U.S. Highway



Levi Hodgskiss and his father, Jim Hodgskiss, of Choteau empty their farm water truck.

287) Saturday afternoon but did not spread to any other structures with the heroic efforts of the fire fighters and community members.

Responding agencies included volunteer fire departments from Augusta, Choteau, Fairfield, Malmstrom Air Force Base and area Hutterite



Volunteer firefighters from Fairfield and Choteau arrive to help the Augusta VFD.

colonies.

Augusta Volunteer Fire Chief Jason Mosher was eating outside the Buckhorn Bar directly across from the Bunkhouse when the fire started. Interviewed on Monday morning, Mosher said girls playing in

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"Community spread" of COVID-19 now seen in county

By Melody Martinsen
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From Saturday to Monday, five more cases of COVID-19 were reported in Teton County, and the county is now likely seeing "community transmission" of the infection, according to the Teton County Health Department.

On Oct. 10, the TCHD received notice from the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services that one county resident had tested positive for the novel 2019 coronavirus, which causes the COVID-19 illness. Then on Oct. 11, DPHHS informed the TCHD that two more county residents tested positive for COVID-19. On Monday, Oct. 12, two more cases, related to each other, were diagnosed by a rapid test, but are yet to be confirmed by the state



lab using a PRC test, the TCHD said.

TCHD Director Melissa Moyer on Sunday said that the source of infection for the three cases over the weekend are not known.

"The individuals are unaware of where they may have contracted the virus," she said. "This may be an indication of community transmission in the county. Community transmission, or community spread, is when public health professionals cannot specify an

origin for an infection, such as tracing it to specific travel or contact with a specific individual."

On Monday, she updated the situation to say that she is fairly confident that the county is now seeing community transmission of COVID-19. Moyer said people in the county need to use all the tools they have to reduce the risk of getting ill: wear facial masks in indoor public settings and in outdoor settings where social distancing is not possible; wash hands with soap and water frequently; wash down high-touch surfaces with disinfectant regularly; limit your public outings to necessities; stay home if ill; and avoid crowds.

Moyer said she wants county residents who are experiencing any kind of cold or flu symptoms to call their medical provider and work with the

provider to determine whether they should be tested for COVID-19. People may want to blame symptoms on allergies, smoke in the air, working out too hard, or something else, but during a pandemic, people should report even mild symptoms including cough, fever, vomiting, diarrhea, congestion, loss of taste or smell, body aches and fatigue to their healthcare provider so they can be tested and not inadvertently infect others.

Last week, Teton County saw several other developments in the pandemic. A second-grade classroom at Choteau Elementary School was put on a 14-day quarantine, starting on Oct. 5, with the teacher and students required to isolate at home and continue school through distance learning.

On Oct. 2, COVID-19 was diagnosed

in a Choteau group home, where nine staff and residents were sickened. While the majority of those who became ill had mild or no symptoms, one individual was hospitalized.

On Oct. 7, Moyer said the DPHHS notified her that two more county residents, both members of a Hutterite colony in the county had tested positive for the viral illness.

COVID-19 symptoms can range from mild to severe illness and appear two to 14 days after a person is exposed to the novel 2019 coronavirus.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, however, an estimated 35% to 45% of people who catch the droplet-spread infection do not ever show symptoms. The CDC and other credible, viral and infectious

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