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RAVALLI REPUBLIC

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Bitterroot Basin:

State looks at last trickle of water rights requests

BUDDY SMITH
STAFF REPORTER

Nearly two years after lawmakers temporarily turned off the tap to surface water in the Bitterroot Basin, a half-dozen water requests remain unfinished business.

New state water specialists will try to narrow that list to one.

Department of Natural Resources and Conservation officials are considering four new permits to tap Mitchell Slough and Bitterroot River water and one request to change a water right at Ken and Judy Siebel's Steepleville area ranch.

The Siebels want to develop portions of their ranch, including existing gravel pits, into fish and wildlife ponds and artificial wetlands, officials said.

The new requests are for three diversions from the east branch of Mitchell

Slough, one diversion from the middle branch of Mitchell Slough, and one Bitterroot River diversion.

Lawmakers in 1999, led by Victor Republican Jim Shockey, temporarily closed the Bitterroot Basin to new surface water rights while the water courts essentially sort out how much is left for use.

The five water requests that will be the subject of a public meeting next week are applications received before the legislation, said Patrick Ryan, a department water resource specialist.

In addition to the Siebel applications, officials have yet to consider one other request for surface water from an unnamed tributary on the west side of the Bitterroot River, he said.

A draft environmental assessment is finished and a public meeting is scheduled for Feb. 14, at Stevensville City Hall from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Mitchell Slough's waters have recently been debated over as a separate matter, aired at a public meeting in January.

Under consideration by the Bitterroot Conservation District is whether permits are required for work within Mitchell's banks. In their environmental assessment for the new water rights, state officials

looked at that separate issue, Ryan said. But the outcome of the conservation district's decision, whether Mitchell is a stream or a ditch, has no bearing on the four water requests the state is considering now, he said.

Whatever you call Mitchell doesn't matter when processing water rights, he said.

"It could be water in a ditch; it could be the Bitterroot River," Ryan said. "Whether it's called an apple or an orange, we look at it as water."

Some ponds that are part of the Siebel project application were originally holes from old previous gravel mining that have partially filled with groundwater, Ryan said.

He said the Siebels want to rehabilitate and shape the banks and try to create habitat for fish and wildlife that would inhabit the area, including planting new vegetation and landscaping.

Additionally, the Siebels have submitted an application to change a 1978 water

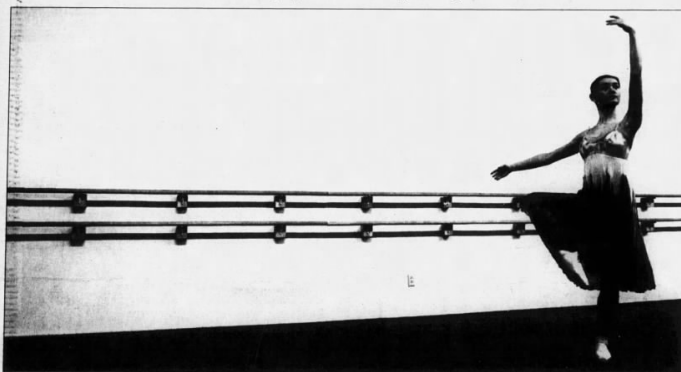
right permit to add a point of diversion to divert water from the Bitterroot River via the Mitchell Slough to the permitted 87-acre place of use.

Meanwhile, Wednesday's meeting will allow time for comment on the draft EA and for discussion of any impacts not addressed in the document, Ryan said.

Comments received at the meeting, or anytime during the 30-day comment period, will be considered and incorporated into a final EA, a document and essentially a decision that will be published shortly after the comment period.

About 35 people attended the first meeting on the water requests late last year, Ryan said.

Bitterroot Valley of Montana Performing Arts Guild



Melinda Estus practices a solo she will perform during this weekend's benefit concert for the Bitterroot Valley of Montana Performing Arts Guild. Six performances have been choreographed for 20 young dancers to accompany a piano concert by Russell Perri Saturday evening at the Hamilton High School Performing Arts Center.

Giving a boost to valley arts

Group hopes to increase opportunities with scholarships and performing arts

KATIA STROMNES-ELLIS
RUMBLE EDITOR

There is no funding and a lot of incredibly talented youth in this valley.

- Beth Lebowitz, guild chairwoman

And just what does art do for kids? That's a question that begs answers in Ravalli County, according to the Bitterroot Valley of Montana Performing Arts Guild recently formed by six local women.

They are building an escalating structure of scholarships and performing arts opportunities for the current and future generations of valley youth, according to guild chairwoman Beth Lebowitz.

Cuts in the arts from public schools - music, dance, drama, visual - have been trimming the value of a youth's experience at school, Lebowitz said, and so the guild wants to help pay for students to broaden their experience of culture, increase their self-esteem and learn skills to develop talent.

Lebowitz pointed to Ravalli County statistics showing an increase in juvenile crime,

and markedly so among girls. "It goes back to that," she said. "We started recognizing the need for some positive alternative programs."

Individual families are left to pay for lessons in the arts, and that is not always possible, Lebowitz said.

"There is no funding and a lot of incredibly talented youth in this valley," she said.

Lebowitz also pointed to Montana Arts Council literature, which says that developing math and language skills improve when a student studies the arts.

For example, students involved for four years or more in the arts out-perform their "non-arts" peers on the SAT, according to the College Entrance Examination Board. And at the Bitterroot Dance Academy, for instance, all the advanced dance students

bout a 3.75 or higher grade point average, Lebowitz said.

The community benefits when kids spend their time in healthy activities, and performances are a joy for audiences, she said.

Saturday night, for example, the guild presents their second showcase in two months. In December, the "Nutcracker" was performed.

Tomorrow at 6:30 p.m. in the Hamilton High School Performing Arts Center, "A Piano Man's Serenade" is a fund-raiser that includes hors d'oeuvres, gourmet coffee and desserts.

It took a month to pull this locally created performance together, Lebowitz said. It features a dramatic production of melody with a medley of dance choreography including jazz, classical ballet and hip-hop.

Russell Perri, a noted local musician performer, wrote and will perform the music; he said.

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Bitterroot snowpack 59 percent of average

BUDDY SMITH
STAFF REPORTER

Mountain snowpack is lagging at nearly half of the average for February in the Bitterroot basin, though a fresh pasting this week boosted sparse mountain accumulations.

It's too early, however, to size up the next fire season based on snow-water content alone, the state's fire coordinator said. But he acknowledges this isn't a good start.

Snowy days still lie ahead, but based on snowpack surveys from last month the Bitterroot watershed has some catching up to do, said Ron Kaiser, a hydrologist for the Natural Resources and Conservation Service in Bozeman.

Mountain snowpack on Feb. 1 in the Bitterroot basin was 53 percent of last year's accumulation, and 53 percent of a

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Bail raised on alleged fugitive

LISA BAUMANN
STAFF REPORTER

The Corvallis man who denies an alleged criminal alias appeared in District Court Wednesday after a deputy attorney requested that his bail be raised more than eight times the original amount.

Ravalli County Chief Deputy Attorney Geoff Mahar told the judge that a Scotts Valley, Calif., warrant for Ronald Ray Nance had been recently raised from \$50,000 to \$500,000 and he requested that bail reflect that change.

Bail for Richard Duane Ashford, who authorities believe is also known as Nance, was previously set at \$60,000, which covered the California warrant and a \$10,000 Washington warrant.

Mahar said he didn't know why bail was

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Hamilton:

New planner hopes to juggle growth, quality of life

JENNY JOHNSON
STAFF REPORTER

Community planning is a serious job, according to Hamilton's new director of community development - Rocky Sehnert.

Nearly four weeks into his job, Sehnert is familiarizing himself with Hamilton's comprehensive plan and zoning regulations to prepare for upcoming challenges that city planning might

approach.

The real challenges here are to

maintain the quality of life and - at the same time - let the market flourish," Sehnert said in an interview Thursday.

"Land-use regulation can protect public values."

One of the first issues to pop up on Sehnert's watch is cellular towers within the city limits.

The city's zoning board of adjustment has been handling a cell-tower application for six months, but the council decided Tuesday that the city ought to have more clear direction for the placement of cell towers. They put a moratorium on cell-tower construction for four months. As a result, Sehnert will lead the city in developing a cell-tower ordinance.

Despite the 120-mile round-trip commute from Missoula every day, Sehnert said he likes his job at City

Hall and loves the city of Hamilton.

"This town has a lot of charm and character," he said.

With most of his practical experience on the other side of planning - as an inspector, builder, real estate salesman and property manager - Sehnert said he has perspectives from all angles of community planning.

He wants to keep and create policies that maintain the standard of living people in Hamilton have grown to love, he said.

On the other hand, Sehnert said he'll be on the lookout for policies that people think will protect their quality of life, but end up giving them a town they didn't want. He cited Boulder, Colo., as an example of community development run amok. The homes in Boulder became so

expensive, local families couldn't afford to live in the city any longer, he said.

"Communities are movies, not photographs - they're always moving," he said. "You've got to keep up the pace as an administrator."

He said he recognizes limits put on communities with big ideas and little revenue. For example, he's looking forward to plans of the Business Improvement District, and understands a financial hurdle exists. Also, revenue to expand infrastructure in small towns is limited, he said. One way to attract more money is to set up a trust so people are encouraged with tax deductions for donating to development, he said. Hamilton currently doesn't have such a trust.

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Good morning to...

Gary Burr of Stevensville. Gary loves to downhill ski and said that's one reason he's here in the valley.



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Weather

High 25 Low 9 Forecast
Yesterday Mostly cloudy with a chance of snow.
High 27 Low 5

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