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Bitterroot Basin:

State looks at last trickle of water rights requests

BUDDY SMITH
Star 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.

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

Dozens of Natural Resources and Conservation Agency staff are considering four new permits to tap Mitchell Slough and Bitterroot River water and one request to change a water right at Kent and Judy Siebel's Stevensville-area ranch.

The Siebels have applied for a dozen 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 Shockley, temporarily closed off surface water rights while the water courts essentially sorted 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 Paul Ryan, a department water rights 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.

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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 a a water rights 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 took a look at the Bitterroot River.

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

Some details are out of the Siebel permit application that originally holes from old previous gravel mining that have partially filled with groundwater, Ryan said.

If he's called the Siebels want to rehabilitate and restore the stream and 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 Little Bitterroot 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 and any changes, or some 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.

KATJA STROMNES-ELIAS
Star Reporter

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 exciting structure of scholarships and performing arts opportunities for students and future generations of valley youth, according to guild chairwoman Beth Lebowitz.

Cuts to the arts from public schools, music classes and more have been trimming the value of a youth's experience at school, Lebowitz said, and so the guild wants to help provide those students their exposure of culture, develop their self-esteem and learn skills to develop their valley.

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 start recognizing the need for some positive alternative programs."

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

"There's a lot of need 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 is in the arts.

For example, students involved for four years or more in the arts outperform their "non-arts" peers on the SAT, according to the National Endowment for the Arts, the Bitterroot Dance Academy, for instance, all the advanced dance students boast 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 presented.

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

It takes a month to pull this locally created performance together, Lebowitz said. It features a dramatic production of melody with a medley of musical theater including Broadway, classical ballet and more.

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

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Hamilton:

New planner hopes to juggle growth, quality of life

JENNY JOHNSON
Star Reporter

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

Nearly four weeks into his job, Schenrt is finding himself with Hamilton's comprehensive plan and zoning regulations to prepare for upcoming challenges the city planning might encounter.

The real challenges here are to

maintain the quality of life and - at the same time - let the market flourish," Schenrt said in an interview Thursday. "Land-use regulation can protect people's quality of life."

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

The city's 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 directions for the placement of cellular towers. They proposed a moratorium on cell-tower construction for four months. As a result, Schenrt will lead the city in developing a cell-tower placement plan.

During the 120-mile round-trip commute from Missoula every day, Schenrt 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 in other states, Schenrt, a planner, builder, real estate sales man and property manager - Schenrt said he has perspectives from all angles of the business world.

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

On the other hand, Schenrt said he'll be on the lookout for policies that people think will protect their quality of life, but end up giving them a lower quality of life. 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 diverse, not homogeneous, so they always move," he said. "You've got to keep up the pace as an administration."

He said he recognizes limits put on communities with big subdivisions and subdivisions. For example, he looks forward to plans of the Business Improvement District, and under-reviews a commercial business exists. Also, reviews of commercial businesses 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 dollars to be creating developments, he said. However, currently doesn't have such a trust.

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High 25 Low 9 **Forecast**
Yesterday
High 27 Low 5
a chance of snow.
High 27 Low 5
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