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Ravalli Republic

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Valley senator proposes expanding CHIP program

JENNY JOHNSON
Staff Reporter

Hamilton Senator Dale Berry introduced a bill this week that would increase the number of children eligible for the state Children's Health Insurance Program.

Senate bill 338 was discussed in the Senate Public, Welfare and Safety Committee Wednesday with testimony from the Bitterroot Covering Kids director Melissa Sundberg.

SB 338 is the last of three bills this session to expand eligibility for the government-funded insurance program.

It would raise the income limit

for CHIP from 150 percent of the poverty level to 175 percent.

So a family of four could make \$30,000 a year and be eligible for the program instead of the current cap of about \$25,000.

"It's a big change," Sundberg said. "It opens the door that much wider - it would encompass a whole lot more families."

Sundberg, who has facilitated the enrollment of hundreds of children into the program, said she told the committee about personal experiences with children who need health insurance but don't qualify under current limitations.

"I felt compelled to go talk to them," she said. "There are fami-

'I felt compelled to go talk to them. There are families who are falling through the cracks.'

- Melissa Sundberg,
Ravalli County CHIP director

lies who are falling through the cracks. CHIP benefits hard working families that can't come up with a couple hundred dollars for insurance premiums."

The bill would also give the Department of Public Health and Human Services to limit the amount or scope of availability, depending on available funds,

Berry said.

"The bill raises the cap, so the (Department of Public Health and Human Services) has the flexibility," he said.

Even with enough money to insure children who fell above the current income level, the department would not have the authority to do so without the bill.

And if a waiting list exists for CHIP enrollment, the department could raise the eligibility in order to enroll the poorest children on the waiting list first, Berry said. Eligibility would change depending on the amount of money directed for the program out of the executive budget, and the number of children on the waiting list. Currently the program is full with a waiting list, according to Mary Dalton, head of the department's CHIP and Medicaid bureau.

Another piece of the bill would allow the department to pay for some medical services on a fee-for-service basis rather than through

an insurance plan.

Berry said he was going to mediate a discussion with Blue Cross Blue Shield and medical officials Thursday afternoon. Department officials are trying to convince dentists to sign up for the program, so the insurance company - the only one in Montana that insures CHIP members - can operate on a fee-for-service basis.

The bill will head to the Senate floor sometime next week, Berry said.

"I feel fairly confident that it will make it," he said.

Man arrested for toting shotgun into Darby saloon

LISA BALMANN
Staff Reporter

Entering a Darby bar while slinging a shotgun on Valentine's Day landed a 43-year-old man in jail where he now faces two felony charges.

David Mark Fuller of Darby appeared in Justice Court Thursday on charges of assault with a weapon and criminal endangerment.

Fuller allegedly entered the Sawmill Saloon before 10 p.m. Wednesday night with a 410-gauge shotgun and followed a man out the back door, where the gun fired in the direction of a nearby residence.

He allegedly threatened others in the bar before zeroing in on the victim, a man who Fuller said has been living with him but has



David Fuller

not paid rent nor provided any money for groceries.

Fuller said he offered the man refuge in his home earlier this winter because the man had been living in the Darby area in his car.

Ravalli County Chief Deputy Attorney Geoff Mahar said Fuller may have been under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol during the incident.

Fuller shivered and cried as he sat in court cloaked in a jail blanket. Justice of the Peace Jim Bailey directed that Fuller receive medical treatment if necessary after his appearance.

Bailey set bail at \$50,000 due to Fuller's previous criminal history, which includes prior drunken driving and possession of dangerous drugs convictions.

Mahar said Fuller may have a felony criminal history and that other assault charges may be added as the investigation continues.

Fuller remains in the Ravalli County Detention Center while his case proceeds.

Planning board maps public participation

JAMIE OGDEN
For The Ravalli Republic

Community involvement is a top priority for the Ravalli County Planning Board as they prepare to draft a growth policy for the county.

The Planning Board met Wednesday night at the county courthouse to discuss, among other things, strategies for maximizing public involvement in developing a growth policy for Ravalli County.

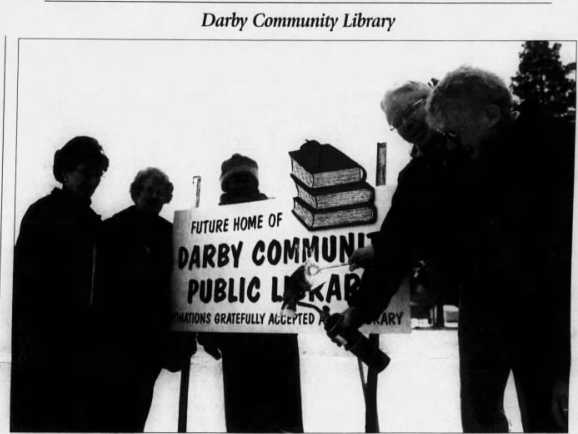
Board member Frank Laible of Victor said she believes the success of the growth

policy depends heavily on the involvement of citizens.

"We feel that it's really critical that this is a plan created by the people," Laible said. "If this Planning Board is behind a desk and creates a growth plan, it won't go anywhere."

Board vice-chairman Sonny LaSalle of Hamilton said good communication and access to community groups will be a vital part of disseminating information and gathering input.

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After making the final payment on the land, Darby Library Board Members set fire to the mortgage Thursday morning.

Paid in full

Darby's library board celebrates the retirement of its mortgage

JENNY JOHNSON
Staff Reporter

An aggressive fund-raising campaign paid off this week for the Darby Community Public Library.

Board members burned their mortgage documents in celebration Thursday morning after paying off a \$30,000 mortgage on the site of the future Darby Library.

The board purchased four lots adjacent to Town Hall last March.

The future Darby Library will eventually stand on the bare land, but for now, the board is happy just to own the land, free and clear.

"It feels really great," said

Verly Kosteczko, chairwoman of the board of trustees.

The library board raised money by selling pieces of the property for \$10 a square foot - as long as they were donated back to the library. There were also two \$10,000 grants: one from an anonymous donor and the other from Peggy and Howard Rapp, who gave \$10,000 in matching funds.

The board put down \$5,000 on the purchase and mortgaged the other \$25,000 on a five-year contract. With donations from individuals and organizations, the land was paid in full as of Jan. 10 - years ahead of the purchase agreement.

A meeting with Bob Cooper

of the Montana State Library was scheduled for Thursday to discuss raising funds and building a library.

The board is now forming a building committee but doesn't have a schedule for the construction, Kosteczko said.

An architect will need to be hired and plans made for the new library, which will likely double the size of the current library.

This year the board plans to secure an architect and draw plans for the new building.

The current library is housed in a Main Street log building that's less than 500 square feet and 67 years old.

The downstairs room holds

the book collection and three public access computers, while the upstairs was remodeled in 1994 for a small reading and meeting room.

There building has no plumbing, so facilities are available at the next-door Darby Town Hall.

More than 500 people or families are registered at the library, which circulated almost 5,000 items last year.

The library operates on a 3.5 mill levy from the library district and receives \$1,500 from Ravalli County and about \$800 from the state.

One paid staff member and volunteers keep the library open Monday through Friday from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Good morning to...

and happy 90th birthday to Walt Heaves of Hamilton. Walt was born in Corvallis in 1911 and has been running a store in Hamilton since 1964.

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Weather

High 27 Low 11 Forecast
Yesterday Cloudy with a chance of snow.
High 35 Low 26

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Forest Service considers paving part of Nez Perce Road

BUDDY SMITH
Staff Reporter

Dusty in summer and tough to maintain, a 3.8-mile section of Nez Perce Road that borders with traffic ought to be more like a county lane that's paved, according to Forest Service officials.

They want to lay asphalt on the almost four-mile stretch of forest road 468 - from Nez Perce junction with West Fork Road to the Bitterroot National Forest boundary near Little West Fork River.

In a story that's been repeated elsewhere in the county, residential development has grown along the first few private miles of Forest Service road. And now paved access is needed to better serve those residents, said West Fork District Ranger Dave Campbell.

"It's a very tough situation to try to maintain it in its current state - from the use it's getting - which is a lot of traffic on that road designed for forest access," Campbell said.

The road, maintained by Ravalli County in winter and by the agency in summer, is graded more often than other forest roads, Campbell said, but that doesn't stop some from saying it needs more work.

Maintenance for a paved and consistently widened road could be assumed by the county, Campbell said, though that hasn't been officially decided, according to Road Department Supervisor Mike Wales, who has talked with forest officials about designs for the road.

In 1990 and in 1999, the then-Ravalli County Commissioners indicated they'd agree to such an arrangement. And

now forest officials have the funding for paving and have written an environmental assessment.

Design criteria would factor in to whether the current board of commissioners would accept full-time road maintenance, though "anything's possible," Wales said.

"The best way to do that is to build a premium quality road," he said.

Road maintenance up the West Fork is disproportionately higher than elsewhere in the county, he said, in part because of the distance required to haul mopupwork. So budgets will have to be considered.

Nez Perce Road leads to places like Fales Flat, Nez Perce Pass and the forest beyond, but the first few miles bend through mostly private timberlands, touched there and there by public lands.

While there's support among residents for a few miles of asphalt, Campbell said, not everyone at this remote fork in the road prefers pavement.

"It says something about the kind of place there in the value of a gravel road over a paved road," he said.

Also, a curve would be straightened to improve sight distance and fish in the adjacent Nez Perce Creek would benefit from less dust and dirt, forest officials said. And while digging is easier, officials want to replace a fish barrier culvert at Nelson Creek before pavement is poured.

Forest officials have written an environmental assessment and they're taking comment through Saturday, March 31. That document is available at West Fork Ranger District, 6785, West Fork Road, Darby, MT, 59829.