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State rep to chair school budget panel

By Kevin Bottrell

kbottrell@nwkansas.com
The Goodland Star-News

Rep. Ward Cassidy of St. Francis is already hard at work preparing to take over as chairman of the House Education Budget Committee and vice-chair of the House Education Committee.

"I'm excited," said Cassidy, a former teacher, counselor and principal for the St. Francis schools. "I've already been

consulting with the governor and the House leadership. I've got the first two weeks ready to go."

Cassidy is only starting his second term as a state representative, but with redistricting, many experienced House members were defeated, paving the way for incumbents with less seniority to get top committee assignments. Cassidy said former education chair Rep. Clay Aurand of Belleville probably would have stayed on had he been re-elected.

In reapportionment this year, done by a panel of federal judges in Kansas City after the Legislature deadlocked on drawing new maps, Cassidy picked up Sherman County and the Colby area in his district, losing Norton and Phillips counties. The same redistricting threw many incumbents together in the same districts, there and elsewhere.

Cassidy said he got calls from all three candidates for speaker of the House, including eventual winner Ray Merrick,

about the chairmanship. He said people were impressed with his performance during his first term.

"I don't go for that conservative-moderate divide," he said. "I just say that I'm for northwest Kansas. I'll work with everyone."

He said Education Budget Committee reviews the budgets for Kansas school districts, community and technical colleges and the Regents universities. Cassidy, who spent 20 years as principal of

St. Francis High School, said he plans to spend the first two weeks of the session teaching committee members about school finance. He said he hopes to bring in superintendents and college presidents to talk to the committee.

"The governor has requested we look at a two-year plan," he said. "This would be much better than what we have now, with districts always waiting to hear what the

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Insurance owner retires next week

By Christina Beringer

Colby Free Press
colby.society@nwkansas.com

Since 1985, Cindy Cersovsky has been serving customers and providing property, casualty and crop insurance to the Colby area. Thursday, she said farewell during retirement open house and helped welcome new owner Darvin Strutt.

Next Monday will be her last day in the office, she said, adding that she hopes to spend time with her grandchildren and her husband, and helping him on their farm east of Colby.

"I truly appreciate my customers' past loyalty and friendship and thank them for allowing me to serve their insurance needs," she said.

Cersovsky said that she received her license in the fall of 1985 and began working for Rudy Gerstner Insurance Agency in the downtown office building where she still works. When he retired, she bought the agency on Jan. 1, 1998.

"I'm ready to be a grandma," she said, "and my customers are in good hands with Strutt Insurance Services. He's been in the business for many years. I'm not concerned about retiring at all and my customers shouldn't be worried either, since Darvin and I write with the same companies,

are both independent agents and especially since my staff will help with the transition, too."

"10 years ago, we made a pact that if Cindy ever wanted to sell out, I'd buy her business," Strutt said. "I kind of forgot about it, but then she approached me to see if I was still interested. After some thinking, we decided a merge would be very good for both companies and it will absolutely be a big benefit to our customers."

Strutt said that for now, Cersovsky's employees and customers will continue to do business at the downtown office at 370 N. Franklin. Within the next year, he said, he plans to merge everything into one space where they can work together.

He said he has plans in the works to make this happen sooner rather than later, but added that nothing has been finalized just yet.

Like Cersovsky, Strutt provides property and casualty insurance, including crop protection. He is licensed in Kansas, Nebraska and Colorado.

On Jan. 1, 2013, Strutt will celebrate 30 years in the insurance arena. He said he received his license and began working for Bill Hopper at Farm Bureau Insurance in Colby before going out on his own in 1986.

For three months, he said, he



Cindy Cersovsky (center, at left), former owner of Cersovsky Insurance, looked at the cupcakes and other treats served at her retirement party Thursday. Her last day in the office will be next Monday. New owner Darvin Strutt (below) sampled some of the cookies that he made for the party. Ten years ago, Strutt promised Cersovsky he would buy the agency - which she had owned since the beginning of 1998 - if she ever wanted to retire.

JANENE WOODALL
Colby Free Press

worked in Hays with his father-in-law before coming back to Colby in September to become manager of F&M Insurance, which had been associated with Farmers and Merchants Bank. Then, in 1992, he bought the agency and has been working independently since.

"I'm looking forward to working with new customers," said Strutt, "who will see no difference except for the name change. And we will strive to make customer service as good as or better than before."

"With so many similarities in our businesses, this really is a great fit for us."



Board to back health program

By Sam Dieter

Colby Free Press
sdieter@nwkansas.com

The Colby School Board agreed Monday to pay half the \$40 fee for any employee who wants to enter the Thomas County Wellness Challenge, which starts Tuesday, Jan. 15, with a "weigh-in" at the county Health Department.

The program will include comprehensive blood tests and testing for percentage of lean and fat body mass every Tuesday from then until March 12.

Superintendent Terrel Harrison said Citizens Medical Center wanted the district to urge its employees to get checked out. Other large employers, including Colby Community College, have pushed their employees to take part in recent years, she said, but the school district has not because of the cost. The district has 170 employees, and the hospital estimated that usually 25 percent will enroll, which

would be about \$850.

Later, Harrison showed the board a copy of the district emergency management plan, noting the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut on Friday. She said the plan contains confidential codes so it can't be made public. It is revised every year, she said, and includes a plan for every kind of emergency.

"It doesn't matter what we have," she added, "it goes from a bus accident to everything."

Board member Brice Barton said he hoped all teachers would see the plan.

"It's not just some book on a shelf," he asked.

Harrison responded that teachers do have to look at the plan, and that they have drills to prepare for emergencies.

Harrison said predictions of the budget shortfall for the state were down from \$328 million to \$295 million for the fiscal year

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City will apply for trail money

By Sam Dieter

Colby Free Press
sdieter@nwkansas.com

The Colby City Council gave community leaders the go-ahead Tuesday to apply for money to add walking and biking trails around town.

Megan Carmichael and Sue Evans, representatives of the Thomas County Healthy Communities Coalition, said they plan to apply for federal money through the Transportation Enhancement Program. Evans told the council the application is due to the state by

Feb. 15.

The city would have to pay for 20 percent of project, plus all of the design and planning costs, she said.

The council did not take a vote, gave Carmichael and Evans its blessing to prepare the application, but will vote to approve the application.

Evans said later that she knows several people who cannot find a safe way to get downtown on their bikes.

"There are a number of people who do ride their bicycles to the area (downtown)," she said. "Our community's built for cars, it's not

built for walkers or for bikers."

She and Carmichael said they plan to hold probably two meetings along with City Manager Tyson McGreer and Mayor Gary Adrian where residents can give ideas on what would make a good project.

The Kansas Department of Transportation is offering cities federal money through the program to improve walking and biking access.

Evans told the council that the project is a reimbursement program, similar to a grant except that the department will not give out

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Health regulators clear modified fish

By Mary Clare Jalonick and Matthew Perrone

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON - Federal health regulators say a genetically modified salmon that grows twice as fast as normal is unlikely to harm the environment, clearing the way for the first approval of a scientifically engineered animal for human consumption.

The Food and Drug Administration on Friday released its environmental assessment of the

AquaAdvantage salmon, a faster-growing fish which has been subject to a contentious, years-long debate at the agency. The document concludes that the fish "will not have any significant impacts on the quality of the human environment of the United States." Regulators also said that the fish is unlikely to harm populations of natural salmon, a key concern for environmental activists.

The FDA will take comments from the public on its report for 60 days before making it final.

The FDA said more than two years ago that the fish appears to be safe to eat, but the agency had taken no public action since then. Executives for the company behind the fish, Maynard, Mass.-based AquaBounty, speculated that the government was delaying action on their application due to push-back from groups who oppose genetically modified food animals.

Experts view the release of the environmental report as the final step before approval.

"We are encouraged that the environmental assessment is being released and hope the government continues the science-based regulatory process," AquaBounty said in a statement.

If FDA regulators clear the salmon, as expected, it would be the first genetically altered animal approved for food anywhere in the

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