

DILLON TRIBUNE

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2005 • VOLUME 124, NUMBER 5

MAKING HEADLINES SINCE 1881 • DILLON, MONTANA • 75 CENTS

Bluebirds: Area project seeks to provide nesting areas for bluebirds

By Elaine Spicer

For many, bluebirds are symbolic of the coming of spring, of happiness, and even of the impact humans can have on wild species. If you have an interest in these small, brightly colored birds, take part in a presentation by Mountain Bluebird Trails on Monday, February 7 at 7:00 p.m. in the Multi Purpose Room at the Beaverhead County Courthouse.

Mountain Bluebird Trails (MBT) is one of a number of organizations across the country focused on increasing the populations of bluebirds through creation of nesting habitat.

According to Bob Niebuhr, President of Mountain Bluebird Trails, bluebirds are a "secondary cavity nester", which means they don't actually make their own holes in trees, but simply find and use other birds' old holes.

Due to a "tremendous loss of habitat as far as old trees and fence posts", says Niebuhr, bluebird populations saw a serious decline. Another factor in the bluebirds' decline was the increase in English sparrow and Starling populations. Both birds are also secondary cavity dwellers and are particularly aggressive towards other birds.

In the mid-1970's, however, bluebird lovers began a campaign to increase the birds' habitat, and, therefore, numbers. Thus began what Niebuhr calls "probably the most successful grassroots program in the United States", that creating nesting trails for bluebirds. "People became concerned and groups were formed to put out artificial nest boxes. These birds love them, if they're put in the right place and monitored," he adds.

In 1974, Mountain Bluebird Trails was formed, when a man named Art Aylesworth put out five nestboxes for bluebirds. Aylesworth's initial idea, according to the organization's website, "grew into a dream of bringing back bluebird populations to the abundance he remembered from his childhood." With the help of volunteers, his dream created the bluebird organization, which today has over 370 members and is still growing.

MBT continues to work on the conservation of bluebirds and other cavity nesters by conducting educational programs, distributing educational materials, collecting and sharing nestbox data, and aiding in the development of nestbox trails.

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Bluebird babies

These young bluebirds hatched in the nestbox of Christopher Brown last summer, after the Dillon student took part in a section involving bluebirds through Sharon Morehouse's class at Parkview Elementary. A program advocating reestablishing bluebird populations is planned for Dillon on Monday. Photo courtesy Lezli Brown

Street work starts

By John Barrows

It's been 10 years in the making, but next week workers will start construction on the Montana Street South project. Work will begin Monday, Dillon Director of Operations J. S. Turner said Tuesday, but actual construction will start on Wednesday, February 9, with the beginning of the milling operation. The milling procedure entails a large machine that will grind the asphalt down to the old concrete as a first step in the project.

On Wednesday the crews will work between Helena and Bannack Streets on both sides of the street, and the next day, Thursday, Feb. 10, they will work from Helena to Reeder Street.

The crews will work both sides of the street and there will be no parking at all in the area where crews are working. Those parking in the area will be towed, Turner said.

The next block of work will begin February 21 when crews start the cutting procedure to get ready for the new storm drain on the west side of Montana. The entire project will be completed by June 3, Turner said.

Every Monday, at 10 a.m. in City Hall there will be a construction meeting, open to the public, to outline the work for the week.

IN BRIEF

Barrett Foundation receives donation for mammographies

The Barrett Hospital Foundation recently received a major donation from the employees for the Dillon Safeway store, in the amount of \$4,975.

That donation, raised by the employees in a series of fund-raising events, will be added to a fund started last year to promote breast cancer awareness educational programs and complimentary screenings for women under the age of 50 who have no insurance, are underinsured or can't afford the screenings.

The Southwest Montana Mammography program began with a grant, the largest ever given to an organization in Montana by the Susan G. Komen Foundation.

The Safeway employees' donation, Barrett Hospital Foundation executive director Nondi Harrington said, is the second from the employees.

The foundation and its board of directors, Harrington said, "extend a tremendous thank you" to the Safeway employees for their continuing interest and involvement with the program. A related story appears on page B-2 of this issue.

Assault charged

Dillon Police Chief John Gutcheck confirmed the ongoing investigation into a sexual assault on the campus of the University of Montana Western last week.

The victim, a 17-year old UMW student, reported the rape at 1:00 a.m. Thursday, January 27. Alleged assailant Gregory Charles Soha, 21, was apprehended following the report.

Soha has been charged with sexual intercourse without consent, a felony. Additional charges, relating to alcohol, are pending said Gutcheck. He added the incident allegedly occurred at Mathews Hall.

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Barrett Hospital works on improving finances

By John Barrows

Much of last week's hospital board meeting was dedicated to learning the facility's current financial situation and outlining steps that will be taken to help it improve.

Part of the problem comes from the fact that Barrett Hospital suffered operating losses during the past three months... a time when, according to Chief Financial Officer Dick Achter, operating margins are generally at their best.

In a financial report to the board, Achter noted that December was a matter of revenues being underbudget and expenses over, leading to an operating loss of almost \$181,000, compared with a budgeted operating profit of about \$20,000. When non operating revenues are added, the net loss for the month was a \$120,413, compared to a budgeted gain of \$29,310.

For the six month period, the hospital has a net operating loss of \$92,962 and a net loss of \$17,910, compared to a budgeted operating gain of \$188,815 and a budgeted net gain of \$228,987.

A loss is also expected in January, Achter said.

For the first six months, gross patient revenues were \$7,054,787, down slightly (\$7,154,712) from the budget.

The hospital does, however, have a very good ratio, 146 days, of cash on hand, that helps keep the hospital in a solid cash position, he said.

A number of steps are being taken,

including the Financial Improvement Task Force, which was done in January and meeting with department managers about the financial outlook and cost improvement strategies.

On January 20, he noted, the board of trustees had that special meeting to look at the hospital's vision statement and values, and how to make them happen.

The meeting was facilitated by Steve Kinder, vice president for Brim Consultative Services that included the board, the Chief of Medical Staff and the administration.

A three-step process is being undertaken, on a strict timetable, that would include looking at barriers to the achieving the hospital's visions, and series of target dates set.

It all means, Achter said, that "we will have to do some short term things in expenses. We are having to squeeze our staff to do more with less."

"I'm confident the staff will get the job done," Mootry said, "but I can see

"We have our work cut out. There are no magic answers..."

JOHN MOOTRY, HOSPITAL CEO

Deductions from Revenue, which includes Medicare reimbursements, were up, from \$1,450,057 to \$1,693,392. Bad debts had actually improved, from budget, from \$223,158 to \$65,860. That meant, Achter said, a net patient revenue of \$5,295,535, down from a budgeted \$5,481,498.

Operating expenses stayed essentially the same, at \$5,599,940, up just \$800 from budget.

he pointed out, to improve a number of areas, including expenses and accounts received.

John Mootry, the hospital's Chief Operating Officer, told board members that the figures are indicative of a changing market.

And that means, he noted, a "mandate essentially to rebudget to be more in line with the market."

Part of that effort includes conven-

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Challenges await ChalleNGe program at legislature

By John Barrows

Beaverhead County's legislative delegation, Debbie Barrett for the House of Representatives, and Bill Tash, for the Montana Senate, are getting ready to help win support for the Montana National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program, which may be in for a fight in the legislature next week.

Tash noted Tuesday that there appears to be an effort to try and remove the funding for the program, which is housed on the campus of the University of Montana-Western in Dillon and has been since 1999.

The program, which provides a residential opportunity for young people, ages 16-18, who have dropped out of high school, is rated as one of the top such programs in the United States.

Not only does the program help youth earn their GED, since all of them have dropped out of high school, it also provides counseling opportunities, a chance to help design their own life plan and see for themselves the opportunities they can make for themselves.

Military style discipline helps provide a sense of order for the cadets, who first undergo a two-week pre-Challenge program at Fort Harrison in Helena and then a five month and a half month residential program at Clark Hall at Western.

A hearing for budget testimony is planned for 8 a.m. Tuesday, February 8, in Room 317A. The meeting, held by the Joint Appropriations Committee, directly relates to the Challenge Program, which both

See CHALLENGE on Page A-3



Successful completion

Cadets from the Montana National Guard Youth Challenge Program bring in the colors for a graduation ceremony at the University of Montana Western, one of 11 that have occurred since the program started nearly six years ago. The future of the program may be on the line in the legislature next week.