

"ANYTHING TWO PEOPLE KNOW IS NOT A SECRET."

# THE CHEYENNE HERALD

the local advocacy journal

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## Cheyenne's proposed recreation center

(more on page eleven)

by Dave FEATHERLY

Not since the owner of the Nagle-Warren Bed and Breakfast trekked to the podium at Cheyenne City Council chambers and professed that 292,000 annual visitors to the depot was a "conservative" estimate has there been a project presented with more certainty of acceptance and success. And less convincing.

Forget that only 65 members of the public attended meetings to determine the need for and type of recreation center we should have. Forget that the "City / County Group" was a "no show" for their turn to provide input to the consultants.

Forget that the proposed cost is anywhere from \$27 to \$50 million. Chump change.

Forget that many of the elements in the presentation were canned projections from the National Sporting Goods Association and others - with no connection to activities in Cheyenne or Laramie County.

Forget that one of the major contributors to the input was Preston University. What they said they could, or would, use if such a facility were built (with public funds, of course) can be dismissed out of hand. Who told these consultants that Preston was a "player" in this community anyhow?

Preston was allowed to wax eloquent, but the Base or YMCA was not an invitee?

The **Ohlson Lavoie Recreation Collaborative and Aquatic Design** is not unique. Much is regurgitated from elsewhere.

The half-inch thick spiral-bound "FINAL REPORT" of their "Feasibility Study" has such a local flair to it that they referred to "Kahill Park," when it should be Cahill.

The Report suggests "a meeting with Lucy Campbell at the Library regarding the process the Library went through. Library issue failed in its first attempt for funding."

Wrong. And wrong.

It's Lucie Osborn and the Library never sought funding for a new Library prior to the proposition that was approved by voters. Earlier, a million dollars was sought for a study, not construction. That failed.

The Report says there were "ten stake-

holder interviews" and "two public meetings." Stakeholder interviews were one hour each and "participation in the user group meetings unfortunately could have been better and the public meetings had an attendance of 65 people total."

A Report in support of a rec center to cost up to \$50 million was based on poor attendance and 65 members of the public? Ohlson proposes a 119,800 sq. ft. facility, at a cost of \$34 million. It's only money.

Among the considered sites was South Cheyenne Community Park. The Report refers to it in this way: "Located in South Cheyenne, this existing park has limiting geometry and access issues." There is no existing South Cheyenne Community Park. Their work just doesn't hold up.



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## Utility Relief Cut Short

by Ken Esquibel

As a lifelong resident of the state of Wyoming, this has been one of the warmer winters I can remember. Until this past week we have enjoyed temperatures well above normal. We have also had to deal with utility bills way above normal.

Since my last article, there was another 35% increase in the price we pay for natural gas. Like I said in that article, not a day passes that the effects aren't felt - in our homes or in our pocket books. I could only wonder what the effects would have been had this been a hard winter!

This report has to do with bills the Wyoming State Legislature will be considering during this budget session that address **UTILITY TAX RELIEF**. Those bills include "House Bill" (HB) 105. This is one of the really good bills out there. If passed, it will raise the limits for qualifying for the Wyoming Low Income Energy Assistance program. The next bill is HB 121. It is also another good bill that creates a trust fund for emergency energy assistance when all the federal dollars are gone. These two bills have to go hand in hand because if we raise the qualifying limits, then that means the federal money would eventually run out much sooner.

One thing that does bother me is the two words: **LOW INCOME**. I feel that even by raising the qualifying level to 250% of the poverty level, average working families will still not qualify for this program. One of the other bills to have been successfully introduced was HB 55. This bill is designed to provide a sales tax refund for qualifying people on **LOW INCOMES**. Why is everything low income, low income! I guess they figure if you have a job you can pay your utility bill, no matter how high it gets. These bills just don't take into account everything else that working families have to deal with.

There are four other bills that have been successfully introduced in the House of Representatives that deal with tax relief, but not energy assistance. They are HB 117, which lifts the sales tax on food. This bill has to do with the high cost of feeding your family, and should have been passed 10 years ago. The next two bills are HB 122, which provides a tax credit for home owners, and HB 97, which changes the property tax assessment rate.

Those bills have to do with the high cost of property taxes, and should have also been passed 10 years ago. If you have owned the same property for the last decade you probably have seen your property tax double in that amount of time.

So these bills have nothing to do with the high cost of utility bills.

When I speak of a bill being successfully introduced in the House, this is only the first hurdle a bill needs to jump over on its way to the Governor's desk.

Four other bills have already been killed and all four would have helped people across-the-board, regardless of your income. As I believe it, the only requirement of these four bills was that you had to be a resident of the State of Wyoming.

Those bills were HB 172, which would have removed the fourth penny

from the sales tax, and HB 187, which would have removed the sales tax on utilities for a period of two years.

Also, two House Joint Resolutions failed. They were HJR 7, which would have provided a per-capita distribution of excess tax money to state residents (this was the bill that mirrored the Alaska residents tax rebate program), and HJR 5, which would have created an emergency fund to help residents during emergencies.

Even though the legislative process is not completed with addressing these issues, there are only two utility relief bills that remain alive, with many more hurdles left to jump. The chances that both these bills will make it to the Governor's desk are still good because the legislature does feel pressure to do something. The total cost for both bills is sixteen million dollars, not a huge price tag when we enjoy a two billion dollar surplus. Then again this is basically window dressing for a problem that is greatly affecting far more people than will be helped by the passage of these bills.

I will report back to you the final results of bills after the budget session ends, as well as what the Colorado State Legislature is doing to address the same problems. This should give you some idea of the other options that are available to assist the residents of this state - when it comes to the high cost of energy.

Also I would like to report that the my proposal to the Laramie County Democratic Party has been tabled until after the filing period for the candidates seeking office to the Wyoming House of Representatives is final!

(Editor note: Ken Esquibel's proposal is: "I would propose that at the next Laramie County Democratic Committee meeting, that they request all Democratic candidates seeking state house elections refuse to accept any campaign contributions from these companies.")

### LAST MINUTE UPDATE

As of adjournment on Friday, February 24, 2006, the only referenced bill to have remained alive in the Wyoming State Legislature is HB 55. This bill has been passed out of committee with an amendment. It now will provide a state tax refund not to exceed \$230 and a utility bill sales tax refund not to exceed \$105 - for a period of two years - for qualifying individuals. So if you are real poor and good at jumping through hoops you may receive \$165.50 a year for the next two years, period. But don't rush out and spend this refund yet, there are still two more weeks left in this budget session. There are two more bills that are still alive that are designed to add funds and increase the income and equity levels for senior and disabled citizens and also increase the benefit level of tax relief. One bill is HB 123. The other bill that is still alive is HB 124, which is the weatherization bill, again you have to qualify, or what they are saying is you have to be poor. I mean **LOW INCOME**.

Believe me, I am all for helping those low income people, but there is a big difference between what is considered low income and what is considered a livable wage. These bills are designed to make it look as though the powers that be are really looking out for what they consider to be in our best interest. **NOT!**

*Ken Esquibel is a citizen lobbyist. From 2001 thru 2004, he served in the Wyoming State Legislature in the intern program. (Editor's note: Ken Esquibel was the Democratic candidate in HD41 in 2004.)*

## For only \$34 million, residents will get ...

*New rec center will offer amenities from aerobics to zen (not really zen, but we needed a "z" to go from "A to Z")*

According to the "Feasibility Study, FINAL REPORT," a new recreation center for Cheyenne will include: **A five court gymnasium; aerobics room and studio; weight/cardiovascular area; track; leisure pool with water slide, spray features and spa; lap pool; outdoor family pool; multi-purpose/meeting rooms with a stage and kitchen; youth fitness area; teen area; child care room; indoor play structure; boxing area/ climbing wall; arts and crafts room; pottery room; woodshop/ birthday party rooms; gymnastic center; concession area and administrative area.**

All of this for the unbelievable bargain-basement investment of \$34 million.

With child care provisions in this new recreation center as well as the new county library, mothers will seldom have to listen to the squalling of their pre-toddler boys again.

Wait. Wait, wait, wait.

There seems to be some fine print in the presentation book. **"There is no guarantee that the expense and revenue projections outlined in the operations analysis will be met as there are many variables that affect such estimates that either cannot be accurately measured or are subject to change during the actual budgetary process."**

Yes, and there are also just plain mistakes, preventable exaggerations, and calculations based on markets dissimilar to Cheyenne. But, what the hell, they're just numbers on a page. Like the downtown parking garage and animal shelter, the projections are conservative and revenue estimates will be exceeded. Easily exceeded. Oh, yea.

There is no reason to believe that this new place won't run just as efficiently and cheaply as existing facilities. Of course, all of the existing facilities will have to be shuttered to use the help and the revenue to pay for the new rec center. Johnson Pool, of course, will be drained. After all, the southside kids can easily peddle their new Schwinn's along some of the busiest streets in the city and across some of the most dangerous intersections to get to the distant rec center - conveniently placed at Windmill and Dell Range. Well, it's convenient for the Bicycle Station, at least.

Just like the 292,000 people J. Greg Smith promised would visit the downtown depot if only he were given a design, marketing and construction contract that very night, there will be people streaming into a new rec center. Like the garage and animal shelter, revenues will cover costs. Sure they will. And Microsoft is relocating to Cheyenne.

Of all the absurdities within these pages, the input from Preston University is worst. If SF69 (Private School Licensing) passes in this session of the legislature, it is highly unlikely Preston University will be here if the rec center is ever built. (It should be noted that the YMCA was not considered a "stakeholder" for this study. But Preston was.)

Preston admitted to the consultants that they have "no on-site students" but their short-term plans include: "Knowledge Park. Training component. Looking for 400-1,000 acre site. Hotel and conference center. Business center." Don't quit reading just yet. Preston says their "Business/training center will eventually have 900-1000 students every 9 months. Even looking to develop housing for students. Plan to have as many as 1000 trainers/staff members running the training center." Preston thinks the "spending threshold" should be \$50 million. Fifty million dollars!! How much will be theirs?

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