

Gillette News Record

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BREAKING GRAD

First-generation college standout earns prestigious President's Award, **B1**

RIVALRY WEEK Thunder Basin hosts Campbell County on the gridiron, **B7**

Public to weigh in on college district

Pair of meetings will gather input on local effort to break Gillette College from NWCCD

By **JAKE GOODRICK**
NEWS RECORD WRITER
jgoodrick@gillette newsrecord.net

The dates for two public hearings about the potential of breaking Gillette College off into its own college district have been set.

The first will begin at 2 p.m. Oct. 10 in Gillette. A second is scheduled for 6 p.m. Oct. 14 in Riverton.

The specific meeting locations for both hearings have not yet been determined, Robert Palmer, Gillette College Advisory Board chairman, said during a recent advisory board work session.

Palmer also is on a task force appointed by the Campbell County Commission to help in the planning and possible creation of a new community college district.

The public hearings are part of the Wyoming Community College Commission's decision-making process when considering the proposed formation of a new district. Under the rules, one hearing must be held within the county where the new district is being proposed and another one outside.

An application was formally submitted Sept. 1. The Wyoming Community

College Commission has 90 days to make a decision from that point.

"There was no additional request for supplemental data based upon the information that was submitted by the task force, nor were there any questions so far," Palmer said.

If the application is approved, it would move on to the next phase of the process. According to Wyoming statute, the application would then go to the state Legislature and from there, it would need the approval of a majority of Campbell County voters.

The county's push to form its own community college district comes after the Northern Wyoming Community College District decided to cut sports programs at both Gillette and Sheridan colleges earlier this summer.

When Campbell County officials and

residents appealed to the district board with a plan to finance Gillette College athletics through the rest of this academic year while putting together a more sustainable long-term plan, the board unanimously rejected the idea.

A formal survey must be completed by a third party as part of the review process to become its own district, and in addition to hosting the required public hearings.

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education has been selected to prepare the survey, Palmer said.

"These are professional organizations that are associated with higher education and they don't have a dog in the fight, so to speak," said NWCCD President Walter Tribley at the work session. "They don't have an agenda. They're a third

party, understand higher education and know how to do these things."

The survey is meant to assess the need for the proposed district, the financial ability of the district to support a college, the educational soundness of the proposed community college plan and any other matters that may help the commission as it considers the application.

Once the necessary steps are completed, the WCCC will have a formal meeting on or about Nov. 20, where it is expected to make a final vote and decision.

"It's our understanding that they will have a decision rendered or discuss this for decision-making at their Nov. 20 meeting," Palmer said.

The public hearings are expected to be in-person, Palmer said.

Potential budget cuts top concerns for county school board candidates

Opinions mixed on where, how to trim money; distance learning

By **CARY LITTLEJOHN**
NEWS RECORD WRITER
clittlejohn@gillette newsrecord.net

Trying times and budget cuts were the main talking points as candidates for the Campbell County School District Board of Trustees faced questions from the Campbell County League of Women Voters.

Practical concerns for in-person and remote learning raised by the COVID-19 pandemic and financial concerns because of downturns in the energy sector and the economic impact of the pandemic were at the heart of most questions during a recent forum in Gillette. The candidates also faced questions about resources, performance standards, extracurricular activities and safety of students and staff.

The first question of the night set the tone for all that would follow. The moderator referenced Gov. Mark Gordon's request that school districts voluntarily cut 10% from their budgets and asked where Campbell County could reduce expenses.

In his response, incumbent Ken Clouston, CEO of Gillette Physical Therapy, leaned heavily on his private sector experience.

"As a business owner, I would ask our administrative staff to come up with their 10% plan, then I would ask each building principal to see what they think, in their own building, could be cut 10%."

Incumbent Chairwoman Anne Ochs, a 27-year veteran of the district, said prior experience would guide her decision-making, citing some of the hard decisions the board had to make in 2016.

"The key to keep in mind is you want to make those cuts as far away from the children as you can," Ochs said.

Heidi Gross, executive director of the Gillette College Foundation, said she doesn't support cutting teachers' salaries. She pointed to "things that are normal during a budget process, like printing costs, office supplies" and learning resources that teachers are using as areas for potential cuts. "You always look at open positions in any budget scenario to see if there are some types of positions that can be eliminated."

Larry Steiger, retired from the district after three decades, reiterated that cuts should be done in a way so as to affect students as little as possible.

"We've all seen with this coronavirus at the big universities, your presidents take a cut, the A.D.s take a cut, the football coaches take a cut," Steiger said.

He drew an analogy to the local school district, suggesting that cuts shouldn't happen at the teacher-level, but for the higher-ups in the district.

Questions also touched on topics like up-to-date computer science standards, funding for education at rural schools and how to improve centers like the planetarium and Adventurarium.

The four candidates represented just over half of the field of seven running to fill four open positions, each a four-year term.

Incumbent Lisa Durgin and newcomer Susan Bennett didn't attend the forum nor did Heidi Herrmann, but Herrmann's husband, Cody, read a statement prepared by the candidate.

"I decided to run for school board because I believe the board needs fresh perspectives and new ideas to get through the challenging times that we as a community are facing," Herrmann's statement said.



News Record Photos/Jake Goodrick

Tyler Hushagen works the grill at The Railyard in downtown Gillette on a steady Friday afternoon. After struggling through the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, local restaurants and retailers are reporting business is picking up.

Viral response

Hotels struggle, other businesses do OK during pandemic tourism season

By **GREGORY HASMAN** * NEWS RECORD WRITER
ghasman@gillette newsrecord.net



Hundreds of vintage car fans and beer lovers pack the Third Street Plaza on Saturday afternoon to check cool, classic cars and craft beer from regional breweries. The Summer Brewfest and Car Show combined for a single event after the Brewfest was originally postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted tourism across the world, and Campbell County has not been immune to the industry's struggles.

But a slow local tourism season doesn't tell the whole story.

The La Quinta Inn in Gillette saw business drop by 50% each month in July, August and so far in September. In May and June, it was down about 30%. This includes the hotel missing out on bus tours where people from Las Vegas or California have normally come to stay while heading to places like Mount Rushmore in South Dakota.

With travel all but halted for many people either for vacations or business, the hotel had to cancel 400 rooms a month the past five months as a result.

"I was hoping it would have ended a lot sooner than it has," La Quinta General Manager Kasie Wanke said about the impact from the pandemic.

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