

BIG SKY

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BONG PATROL

People were reportedly smoking marijuana in a Baxter Lane parking lot. "I know there's a bong. That's about all I know," the caller told dispatch. | PAGE A7

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Study: Bozeman's cost of living above average

By LEWIS KENDALL
Chronicle Staff Writer

Bozeman's cost of living is above the national average, but only slightly, according to a new report.

The report was released this week through a partnership between Bozeman's Prospera Business Network and the Council for Community and Economic Research. It researches six different categories — including the cost of groceries, housing, utilities, transportation, health care and goods and services — to generate a composite affordability score.

Bozeman's overall score for 2015 was 102.7, meaning the city's cost of living was 2.7 percent above the national average. Manhattan, New York, ranked the most expensive area in the study at 127 percent above aver-

age, while McAllen, Texas, was the cheapest, 22 percent below average.

The standout categories on Bozeman's report card were housing and utilities. The area's housing costs were 12.9 percent above the national average. According to Prospera data, the average price of a 2,400-square-foot new home on an 8,000-square-foot lot was \$363,664, while the average monthly rental rate for a 950-square-foot apartment was \$995.

Low utility prices — nearly 15 percent below average — helped to counteract housing costs. But the latter plays more of a role when it comes to affordability, said Prospera program director Drew Little.

"So many of the categories are so close to average, it does really come down to housing," she said. "There's a lot of mov-

ing parts to it, but anything we can do to increase the supply of housing will help."

The quarterly data is based on 60 items — from bananas to haircuts to Internet subscriptions — that Prospera priced and averaged. The report does not factor inflation or include taxes, but each of the six categories are weighted differently.

Bozeman ranks more expensive than comparable western cities that participated in the index. Of those cities, only Pierre, South Dakota, and Olympia, Washington, measured above average cost of living.

But Little said the expense is a worthwhile trade-off.

"For all of the reasons that this is an amazing place to live, it's pretty amazing that we're not at a cost of living that is like these more expensive places," she said. "If you want a cheaper cost of



ADRIAN SANCHEZ-GONZALEZ/CHRONICLE

An affordable housing complex goes up in Bozeman on Wednesday. A recent report by Bozeman's Prospera Business Network has found that the area's housing costs were 12.9 percent above the national average.

living, you can live in McAllen, Texas, but you wouldn't have the quality of life."

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TURBULENT TIMES

Airport director shares federal funding concerns with Sen. Tester



ADRIAN SANCHEZ-GONZALEZ/CHRONICLE

Sen. Jon Tester, right, listens to the concerns from Brian Sprenger, director of the Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport, on Wednesday, Feb. 17, in Belgrade, regarding parts of the FAA Reauthorization bill, which the U.S. Senate will see for a vote later this month.

By TROY CARTER
Chronicle Staff Writer

The Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport director hopes a Federal Aviation Administration bill will fix a funding loophole and address private air-traffic control tower costs.

Airport director Brian Sprenger met with Democratic Sen. Jon Tester on Wednesday to discuss details of the FAA's six-year reauthorization bill introduced in the U.S. House earlier this month by the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. The bill is due from Congress by the end of March.

The bill requires that tens of thousands of unionized air-traffic controllers leave

the FAA's employment and be organized under a federally chartered not-for-profit organization. The new corporation would also oversee a \$40 billion modernization program called NextGen.

The FAA bill would also ban in-flight cellphone calls, require a baggage fee refund if bags arrive late, and mandate timely rule-making on the use of small drones in the national airspace.

It's already drawing criticism from the ranking Democrat on the committee, Rep. Peter DeFazio of Oregon, for allowing a corporation to control a \$40 billion program without congressional oversight.

The controller's union president told the committee that the union supports the bill, saying that Congress is unable to provide stable funding and an independent organization run by a board of stakeholders could deliver results similar to those in Canada, which has seen success with a similar model.

Sprenger told Tester the air-traffic

controllers at the airport in Belgrade, the busiest in the state, are already private contractors.

Private towers like Bozeman's should get financial support "equitable" to what FAA towers get to pay for heating, lighting, radios and maintenance, he said. Getting these costs off his books would mean attractive prices for airlines in Bozeman and being able to focus on other projects, such as the planned runway and parking garage.

"They want us to fence around it now. That's all our expense," Sprenger told the senator. "Meanwhile in Helena, Billings or Great Falls, it's all federal expense. That's one of the frustrating things is, it's not so much reauthorization, but the devil is in the details. How does that work? We're not real pleased with the way it works right now. If we go that way we want that addressed. We just want it to be equitable and fair."

More FAA | A7

Belgrade to put \$25M high school expansion on ballot

By SAM WEBER
Belgrade News

The Belgrade School District will ask voters to approve a \$25 million high school construction bond and forego mill levies in the May 3 election.

The \$25 million would add 18 classrooms to the high school and bring enrollment capacity to 1,200. The school currently has about 800 students.

An average Belgrade home has a market value of \$182,343. If the bond is approved, the average homeowner can expect a \$115.85 annual increase in their taxes or \$9.65 per month.

Since it's a trustee election, the high school bond and operational levies for both the elementary and high school districts could all have been on the ballot. However, trustees worried taxpayers would not support a bond and two mill levies at once.

During a School Board meeting Monday, trustees decided the high school bond is more pressing than either mill levy.

Belgrade School District clerk Jay Bates said the state budget for the elementary district's general fund is predicted to increase \$332,381.90 next year, due to an increase of 52 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. The Office of Public Instruction may revise those numbers, though, Bates said.

In the high school district, nine fewer students means a potential general fund reduction of \$59,134.50. Despite that decrease, Bates said other influences on the budget could result in a budget similar to this year's.

More BALLOT | A7

Montana settles ex-player's claim; won't revive rape case

HELENA (AP) — The state decided to settle claims that the University of Montana mishandled the investigation of a former school quarterback accused of rape rather than reopen the widely publicized case, an attorney representing the state said Wednesday.

The decision was made even though the state believes school officials acted properly, said attorney Dale Cockrell, who was hired by the Montana Department of Administration's Risk Management and Tort Defense Division.

Under the agreement, the state will pay Jordan Johnson \$245,000 to drop his claims that school officials had predetermined his guilt after the rape accusation was made in 2012 and ran a biased investigation that resulted in a recommendation of expulsion.

Johnson was not expelled, and a jury in 2013 acquitted him of rape.

The settlement between Johnson, the university and the Montana University System was approved Tuesday by District Judge Deann Cooney of Helena

after months of mediation. The money will come from a fund that state agencies and universities pay into to resolve legal claims.

Cockrell said the state would have prevailed in a lawsuit over the investigation, but officials believed it would be better to settle the matter than go through the dispute again.

"We believed it was just better to put this matter to bed," Cockrell said.

Neither the woman who made the allegation nor her representatives were involved

in the mediation or settlement, Cockrell said.

"It would not have been appropriate," he said.

The settlement lists 11 claims made by Johnson, including violations of due process and civil rights along with sexual discrimination, negligence and destroying evidence.

David Paoli, Johnson's attorney, said he had drafted a lawsuit but Johnson instead wanted to pursue a settlement.

"Any student accused of wrongdoing deserves a fair and impartial hearing of the facts of

his or her case," Johnson said in a statement provided by Paoli.

"Officials at the University of Montana — people who were in positions of great power — were unfair and biased. Their misconduct made my family and me unnecessarily, both emotionally and financially."

The case against Johnson — the Grizzlies' starting quarterback at the time — received national attention and was the subject of a book by "Into the Wild" author Jon Krakauer titled "Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town."