

BIG SKY

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ORIGINAL PIECE

A caller's vehicle was "decorated" with ketchup, mustard and feminine hygiene products. The caller believed he knew who did the artwork. The deputy contacted the suspect, who admitted to the prank and said he and his friends intended to clean it up. The victim later let the deputy know that everyone had apologized.

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Commission approves moving election precinct to MSU

By TROY CARTER
Chronicle Staff Writer

In a decision months in the making, the Gallatin County Commission voted unanimously Tuesday to move the election precinct covering most of Montana State University from a church off campus to a gym on campus.

About 60 people attended the hearing, including MSU President Waded Cruzado, who led public comment by urging the commission to help the land grant university fulfill part of its original mandate to strengthen our

democratic nation through informed voting.

She was followed by representatives from the Associated Students of Montana State University, League of Women Voters, Forward Montana and several residents, who all supported the move. No person spoke in opposition.

"We opened one public university in each state and territory of the union. And we did that to educate the sons and daughters of the working families of America. We did that in 1862, when our nation was right in the middle of a civil war, and rather than being constrained by those circumstances we envisioned a

better future as a nation by educating the citizenry," Cruzado told the commission.

The commission's decision solidifies a contract between the county and the university for the 2016 elections and a letter of intent to hold future elections for precinct 63B on campus through 2022.

The chain of events leading to the decision began last summer, when Forward Montana staff, a progressive civic engagement group, began to criticize voters' accessibility to the county's southern polling location, Hope Lutheran Church. The church is located two miles southwest of campus on South 19th Avenue

and is not served by bus, bike lane or sidewalk.

Initially, the three Republican commissioners balked at the idea of moving a poll on campus and faced public criticism, including charges of partisan voter suppression, which they have repeatedly denied. But they were then approached by ASMSU, which spoke with the backing of the university administration and said it was prepared to assist financially.

Through a series of public meetings hosted by the student government, the commission's reservations — parking and costs — were addressed by the university community.

More Information

To check if you are registered to vote, your registration status or to find your poll location, visit the Montana "My Voter Page" at <https://app.mt.gov/voterinfo> or call the Secretary of State's toll free voter hotline at 888-884-VOTE.

Before the vote, Commissioner Joe Skinner said their decision should not be interpreted as a first step in moving more, or all, of the county's southern election precincts away from the church.

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Low Bozeman wages put cost of living stats in perspective

By ERIC DIETRICH
Chronicle Staff Writer

Bozeman's cost of living may hover just above average, according to an index released last week by Prospera Business Network, but scaling that index to account for Gallatin County's below-average wages appears to provide a more complete picture of the affordability woes often reported by local residents.

That context helps explain the apparent disconnect between the cost of living figures, which put Bozeman living expenses at 2.7 percent above average last year, and the results of a separate survey also released last week, which found in part that only 18 percent of Bozeman respondents had a positive outlook on the city's cost of living.

Additionally, the latter survey found, only 10 percent of respondents rated the city positively on its affordable housing supply. The cost index estimated housing expenses at 12.9 percent above average for Bozeman residents, basing on data collected by the Council for Community and Economic Research.

Federal wage data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2014, the most recent year available, estimates that annual wages for Gallatin County workers average \$37,639. That's 73 percent of the national figure, \$51,364.

Put another way, that means each hour of labor earns a typical American worker \$24.70, 1.36 times the \$18.10 rate earned by an average Bozeman worker.

With that 1.36 wage-adjustment factor applied, Bozeman's cost of living number rises from 102.7 to 140.1, or 40.1 percent above the national average. Using similar math, the city's housing price index rises from 112.9 to 154.1.

As a comparison, Manhattan, New York — the most expensive community included in the cost index — has a cost of living estimated at more than double what's typical nationally. But New York wages also average more than twice the national average at \$108,355 a year, putting Manhattan's cost of living at 107.8 relative to pay, comparatively close to the 100-score defined as typical.

Chris Mehl, a Bozeman city commissioner and policy director at Headwaters Economics, pointed to Montana State University, Bozeman's retail hub status and tourism as factors in pushing down Gallatin County's average wage numbers, noting those industries tend to have comparatively high numbers of part-time and lower-paid employees.

Given that, Mehl said, it's important for the city to focus on nurturing other sectors of its economy, like the photonics industry, health care and software firms, diversifying the area's economic base and increasing the number of comparatively well-paid jobs.

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Weekend stroll



ADRIAN SANCHEZ-GONZALEZ/CHRONICLE

A mother and her son walk the trail above Peets Hill in Bozeman on Sunday.

Bozeman votes to create state's first charter school

By GAIL SCHONTZLER
Chronicle Staff Writer

Charter schools have been controversial in many states, but there was no controversy this week when the Bozeman School Board agreed to seek state approval for making Bozeman High's Bridger Alternative Program into Montana's first charter school.

The board voted 6-0 Monday night to apply to the state Office of Public Instruction for approval.

If the state Board of Public Education gives its blessing, Bridger would become a charter school next fall.

"I'm very excited about the idea," Bozeman High Principal Kevin Conwell said Tuesday. Conwell said charter status would "add credibility to a different approach to education — which is based on competency rather than 'seat time.'"

Traditionally high schools award credits toward graduation if students attend classes for a minimum number of days a year and earn better than an F. Montana requires 8,100 minutes in class per year per credit.

Under the competency-based approach Bridger adopted a couple years ago, students earn credits if they can show they've mastered a skill, like doing math or writing an English paper, and earn a B or better. It lets students move at their own pace, faster or slower than regular classes, and doesn't depend on "seat time."

"The great thing about (charter status) is it provides



CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO

Bridger Alternative School students stroll the hallway in the wing of the school now designated for Bridger classes. The integration of the alternative school to Bozeman High School's campus has had mixed results.

a framework around the Bridger program that has been so successful with the competency-based model," Conwell said. "It solidifies and legitimizes it and allows it to grow."

Bridger — created as an alternative part of Bozeman High more than 20 years ago to help pregnant teens and other students at risk of dropping out — now has about 80 students and a core of six teachers.

Superintendent Rob Watson said Bridger students wouldn't see any immediate changes. But charter status would open the door for the Bridger teaching staff to offer more electives using Bridger's performance-based or competency-based approach. Now art is the only elective that's competency-based.

Charter schools in other states have been controversial because they are publicly funded schools but run

more like private schools, answering to boards of parents or educators, independent of the local elected school board. Charter schools are intended to be free of many rules and regulations that public-school critics see as stifling — including, in some places, free from teachers' unions.

Montana is one of only seven states without charter schools. School-choice and conservative groups promote charters as offering parents more options when local public schools are failing.

Montana is often listed as a state that has no charter school law. In fact, Montana law for at least a decade has allowed charter schools, but only if they operate under local elected school boards and require the same teacher licensing, union eligibility and collective bargaining. Montana's charter law has never been used.

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Candidates to run for Bozeman School Board

By GAIL SCHONTZLER
Chronicle Staff Writer

Two seats on the Bozeman School Board will be open in the May 3 school election, and candidates have already filed to run to represent Bozeman elementary voters.

Vice Chair Andy Willett, a Bozeman attorney who has served on the board nearly four years, and Tanya Reinhardt, who works for a business consulting firm and ran unsuccessfully last year, have both filed to run for three-year terms.

Incumbent Elizabeth Williamson said she has decided not to run for a second term.

"I love the board," Williamson said, but her daughters are still young and "it's hard to do both." She said the School Board requires a lot of night meetings and she wants to be deeply involved as a parent with her children's school, which creates a conflict of interest when she's a School Board trustee.

The eight-member Bozeman School Board has seven trustees representing the Bozeman elementary district and one representing rural voters in the high school district. They serve three-year terms for no pay, set policy and budgets and hire staff for the school district.

Reinhardt, 49, was one of six candidates who ran last year for three seats, and she came in fourth.

"I still believe I have something to contribute to the School Board, both with my past experience and my interests in serving," she said.

Reinhardt represents parents as one of 40-some members of the Bozeman High School Advisory Committee, which is evaluating options for coping with the hundreds of additional students expected to enroll in the next few years.

She said the committee is leaning toward having two separate schools instead of expanding Bozeman High on Main Street from the current 2,000 students to 3,000 students, and she agrees.

"I think the space is too limited and lacks flexibility to grow," Reinhardt said. She is still weighing whether it would be better to build a freshman academy or a second full-fledged high school on a new site.

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Reinhardt



Willett