

# Pott. Co. health insurance to rise

Beth Day  
The Times

County health insurance premiums to rise, but USI works to mitigate the damage.

USI Insurance Brokerage and Consulting manages the county employees’ insurance program.

Maggie Kempin, Trent Nichols and Kaylee Hutton, from USI, on Monday presented the commission with the cost containment strategy that USI has been using since 2018 when the county no longer went with the State Insurance plan.

Kempin explained that in 2024 Pottawatomie County on average spent \$12,091 per employee. The cost of the state plan per employee for the year was on average \$18,298. This comes to a savings of over \$6,000 per employee.

The county is a part of the Nexus Flint Hills captive which partners with 33 other area employers to help

bring costs down at select providers. The cost savings are shown in the 2025 year renewal projection.

To renew the plan as is last year the premium increase was 16.7 percent, implementing the Nexus Flint Hills program, increased the premiums by 12 percent. However, to go back to the State’s insurance plan would have increased premiums 45.5 percent.

Nichols explained that new federal regulations may also change programs and costs. These regulations and orders are new, and USI will be watching the outcomes, but there could be more potential savings for the County and pharmaceutical costs in the future.

**COUNTY FAIR FUNDING**

Ben Schoenberger, Pottawatomie County Fair Board treasurer, presented the 2026 County Fair budget request.

The county does not own the fairground property or buildings; however, they provide funding for the Fair Board to maintain and upkeep the grounds and buildings.

Last year the board approved upgraded flooring in the bath houses, and the construction of a concrete sidewalk.

This year the Fair Board is requesting \$125,000. A hundred thousand of that would come from the general fund, and the additional \$25,000 would come from the special parks fund.

One of the largest Fair expense is the facility insurance and Schoenberger mentioned that on top of the budget request any future cooperation to reduce the insurance cost would help benefit the fair.

The fair grounds and facilities themselves are also available for rent for gatherings and programs, and the Fair Board would be interested in partnering with any local communities or

organizations to provide a location for gathering.

**ATA BUS**

The Flint Hills Area Transportation Agency’s Director Anne Smith presented the agency’s proposed budget.

The organization provides transportation within Manhattan, as well as the K-18 Connector Route which goes from Junction City to Ogden, and then into Manhattan. Smith hopes that in the future this line can go all the way into Pottawatomie County.

A majority of the bus riders are employed or go to school full time but do not have access to a vehicle. By helping transport these people to work, shopping and medical appointments, aTa Bus provides a boon to the local economy, she said.

In 2025 aTa Bus requested \$30,000 for funding, this year the 2026 budget request increased by 15 percent to \$34,500. aTa

Bus uses federal and state funding, but 30 percent of that must come from local matches. These match funds do not apply to the ride shares charged per rider, but come from other organizations like the City of Manhattan, Pottawatomie County, Riley County, Kansas State University and United Way.

Smith emphasized the challenges her organization faced including the cost of software modernization as well as an aging fleet. She discussed the costs of buying buses in partnership with KDOT and the long wait time, almost a year, to receive the vehicle.

Other states have a surplus of buses and Smith is looking at ways to source vehicles from across the country, however, the freight cost is prohibitive. Smith attributed the weight time to the fact the vendors are typically partnered with the State of Kansas and KDOT and hopefully a change in vendors could speed the

process up for transportation organizations.

Another hurdle aTa Bus faces is hiring and retaining bus drivers. They offer in house CDL-C training which takes about a month to complete.

Smith indicated that she would be willing to partner with other organizations to help train drivers as well. Commissioner Merl Page also commented on the benefits of aTa Bus to the region and the community saying it “provides a huge value to the citizens and businesses in Pottawatomie County. The county gets more value than the cost.”

Commissioner Dee McKee said that she sees the value in aTa Bus but would like to see partnerships with schools or “more meshing and substance in our county.”

The commissioners will decide on the distribution of all funds during the budget process later this year.

## Cheers to Wamego!



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The 2025 Wamego Cheers Wine Festival was held Saturday in the city park. A large crowd enjoyed samples supplied by wine and cheese vendors. To the right, Glenn Brunkow serves up Sicilian lamb from his farm to Lance White.

**St. Marys**

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parade.

“We’ve been through this before, I think he’s just looking for reassurance,” said City Manager Maurice Cordell. The commission confirmed the route and street closure.

**PROPERTY INSURANCE**

Brooke Steiner from Charleson & Wilson discussed property insurance relating to hail and wind damage. “The last time I was here, we were looking at the wind-hail deductible,” Steiner said. “We were also looking at an increased wind and hail deductible quote.” Steiner presented a quote from Travelers Insurance, and the commission decided to take on a three percent wind-hail deductible.

**SEWER PROJECT**

The commission then discussed the sanitary sewer project at the Lakeview Lift Station. Cordell told the commission that he is waiting to hear about state funding for the project. The commission decided to carry over further discussion until the next meeting.

**STREET REPAIR**

Bob Schindler spoke to the commission on street repair.

“There are a couple blocks that are just going to need a complete tear-out,” he said. “You’re talking around \$10,000 a block for us to do that.” Schindler explained that for several streets around town, chip and sealing over the existing road would not be good enough, and the roads would require a tear-out before chip and sealing. He

showed the commission several photos of damaged roads.

“What do you think is the number of years that [chip and seal] would last, compared to the number of years that asphalt would last?” asked Commissioner Matt Childs.

Schindler said that asphalt would last 30-40 years, whereas chip and seal would last 20-25. Childs noted that the asphalt option lasts much longer, but is half the cost. There was a consensus to spend the \$10,000 per block for street repair.

**BEVERAGE CODE**

The commission then discussed the city ordinance regarding beverages. “So last year, we realized that our beverage code wasn’t up to date,” said Cordell. “We had the city attorney take a look at it. He suggested we just take the ... model ordinance and make it our own.” Specifically, the section on cereal malt beverages is out of date. Cordell explained he had already added parts specific to St. Marys and removed out of date sections, and the city attorney had approved it.

Childs asked about a section in the code stating that if the Armory is rented, alcohol may be consumed there with the appropriate license but not outside the building.

“Isn’t that the common consumption area?” he asked. It was explained that alcohol may be consumed outside in the common consumption area if the business providing the alcohol has been okayed by the Kaw Valley Chamber of Commerce, but that

the verbiage concerning the Armory was confusing. “We just need to de-conflict,” said Childs.

**RAILROAD PARK**

Caroline Gray, from the Kaw Valley Chamber of Commerce, spoke about the ongoing plan to beautify the Railroad Park.

“We met with the Rec Advisory Board, who actually really quickly approved the plan as it was,” Gray said. The plan involves landscaping, repair, and added features, such as public restrooms, yard games, and pergolas. “The main thing is we really want the public’s input on this,” said Gray.

Gray told the commission that she would like to send out a meeting for July on the plans for the park. She also asked what she and other members of the Chamber needed to do to get the project started.

Commissioner Gerard Kleinsmith said that he would like to see the plan set out in stages, with different projects prioritized. “I’m with you for the Railroad Park, I’d like to see some of those things happen,” he said. “But, you know, just coming in and saying ‘We need \$350,000 right now,’ probably not gonna happen.” Gray agreed, and said she would like to have a budget.

Gray and her group mentioned that the Rec board was a little slow. They asked if there was any way they could “join the Rec board and become one big group.”

“I think the Rec board should take the lead,” said Kleinsmith. “But if they’re not doing what you all think they should be doing

... we can’t stop you from knocking on doors and talking to people, or having a meeting.” He said he hoped the group would be able to work with the Rec board. “If you’re not getting results from the Rec board, keep coming to us.”

**SAFE STREETS FOR ALL**

Brandy Sutherland from Blue Valley Consultants spoke with the commission about the Safe Streets for All grant application. “This would be a county wide application for improvements that would assist with accessibility, mobility, and connectivity,” Sutherland said. She told the commission that it is not for street improvements but rather for sidewalks, trails, and other improvements. The goal of the program, said Sutherland, is to provide more safety and “reduce conflict between vehicles and pedestrians.”

“We want to be able to get people to walk safely from their preferred location to their preferred destination, in the safest manner possible,” said Sutherland. She also pointed out how getting people outside and walking helps with physical and mental health, so this would reduce medical expenses especially for seniors. Wamego and St. George have already approved this program, and Westmoreland is reaching out.

Sutherland said that St. Marys would put in \$2,750 into the grant if it was approved. Since the deadline to submit the application is June 2, it was decided not to take action until the next meeting.

**E-Bikes**

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of other advantages to the new bikes, according to Burton. One is physical fitness, another is accessibility and reduced car maintenance costs.

“These are assisted electric bikes,” he said. “They are very heavy, but they can get around St. George very easily, in many cases a lot easier than the They go up to 28 mph, most of the town is 20, with a few short 30 mph spots. They can go up to 60 miles one one charge.” Use of the bikes also reduces wear and tear on the patrol vehicles.

“The first day we got them, we uncrated them and charged them up,” Burton said. “We drove around to let people see them. That was (last) Tuesday. On Wednesday morning, we had “Bike to School”, almost 50 kids going to the elementary school. Riley County brought over bike cops and I pulled up the rear with mine. It was a lot of

fun.”

The idea is new to the area, but Burton hopes to see more. “This is a no brainer, especially for a town the size of St. George with our speed limits. When I brought it up, the department got on board really quickly. We proposed it to the city council and they unanimously said ‘Let’s do it, sounds great.’”

In addition to regular patrolling, Burton sees a lot of use during events such as the upcoming KAWNsas Fest. He’s also agreed to help with the country music concert set for August at Tuttle Creek.

“We’re trying to have fun, do things a little differently here in St. George,” he said. “Think outside the box and make sure the community is engaged and make sure the police department is engaged in the community. We want to think different, to make St. George the great town that it is.”

Giving up those two wheels, at least partially, is one way Burton is working

**Westy**

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The second phase would be construction, but this is not expected, even if the city engages with the grant, until several years down the line. This grant is federal with 80 percent of the total cost being covered by the Federal Highway Ad-

ministration and 20 percent by local entities.

Kansas Infrastructure Hub has offered to pay 95 percent of that 20 percent if the application is submitted by June 2. The deadline for the grant itself is June 26.

The Council has opted not to make a decision yet, but is expected to in the following days.

**Wamego**

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**INDUSTRIAL COMMITTEE FORMED**


City Manager Stacie Eichman proposed a new “Industrial Committee”.

With the exiting of Caterpillar, there is a new space


open for other businesses to fill. The forming of the Industrial Committee would allow for quarterly meetings to be held between the city and these businesses.


This committee was approved to ensure that cohesion and community flourish.

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