MONTGOMERY COUNTY
Chronicle

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AMERICA 250
Celebrating America's Semiquincentennial
1776-2026

Lady Ravens advance

CCC takes down Seward County to advance to Region 6 semi-final round

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Barrager earns honor

Cherryvale sophomore, state medalist is All-Area Girls' Wrestler of the Year

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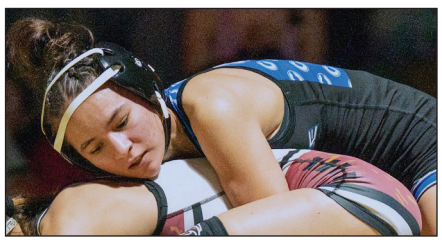


THURSDAY, MARCH 12, 2026 | 16 PAGES | ALWAYS CLEAN AND NEWSY! | $2.00 PER ISSUE

25-year tax break sought for downtown project

Missouri firm plans to transform Independence's Professional Building into 48 apartments, two retail spaces; original architecture to be highlighted

BY ANDY TAYLOR
chronicle@taylornews.org

INDEPENDENCE — Plans to develop the Professional Building at 201 N. Penn Ave., in Independence into 48 apartment unit and several commercial units were unveiled at Monday's Montgomery County Commission meeting.

Commissioners heard the proposal from Mike Ballew, representing US Federal Properties of Kansas City, Mo. The development firm is in the business of rehabilitation developable properties and governmental buildings.

Ballew said plans to develop 48 apartment units and two commercial spaces will amount to a $9 million investment from the company.

The rehabilitation will include restoring the exterior to its original condition. The five-story building, which was built in 1920, has some modern-day metal cladding that covers some of the architectural elements — including glass windows — from the building's original design. That metal cladding will be removed, and the glass windows will be restored.

The Professional Building, as photographed with this panoramic perspective from the Myrtle Street entrance, has been an anchor property for the downtown Independence business district since its construction in 1920. The property is targeted for redevelopment, which would include 48 apartments and two commercial spaces. PHOTO BY ANDY TAYLOR / MONTGOMERY COUNTY CHRONICLE

An additional change to the exterior will include enclosing in the walk-thru corner entrance. Enclosing that space will allow for more square footage for a commercial unit.

The main entrance will face Myrtle Street and will be appropriately designed to denote its purpose, he said.

The interior will make use of the original space as a bank lobby and include a corridor that will be two stories in height. Second-level apartment units along that corridor will include small patio areas that will overlook the main lobby.

He said the apartments will be market-rate priced in the range of $800 per month while commercial spaces will be rented to occupants in a range of $800 to $1,200 per month (utilities included).

US Federal Properties intends to begin work on the property in December with a goal of having units ready in fall 2027.

Funding package

To sweeten the redevelopment of the Professional Building, US Federal Properties is working with the Independence Housing Authority to designate the property into a Rural Housing Improvement District, or RHID. This district creates a 25-year tax abatement on the increased valuation of the property once the project is completed.

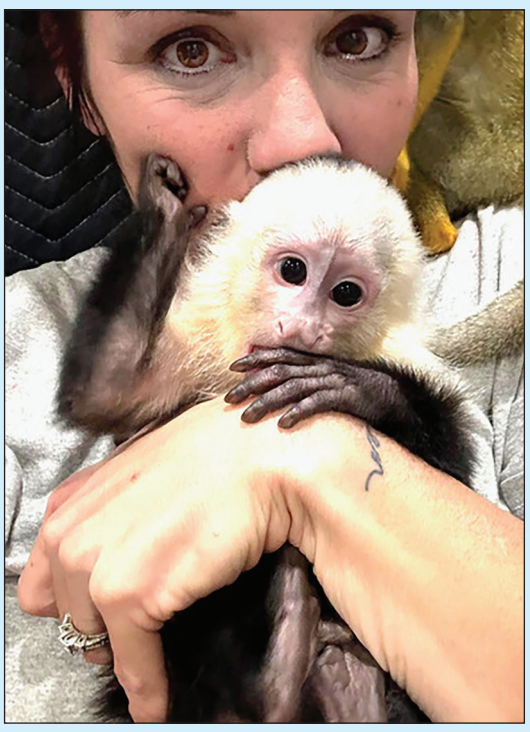
US Federal Properties will still pay taxes on the current base valuation of the property, which, according to the Montgomery County Appraiser, is $350,450.

April Nutt, Independence Hous-

• See **DEVELOPMENT**, page 3

Based on TripAdvisor reviews of Kansas tourist attractions . . .

Caney zoo is top place to see in Kansas



(Left photo) Tom Harvey teases one of his bears up close while (right photo) Alexis holds onto her favorite spider monkey, which she features on Facebook streaming. COURTESY PHOTOS

CANEY — What's the No. 1 tourist attraction in Kansas?

According to TripAdvisor, which is the world's largest travel platform, it's the Safari Zoological Park in Caney.

It even beats out Boot Hill in Dodge City, the Strataca salt mine in Hutchinson, the Keeper of the Plains sculpture in Wichita, the Tanganyika Wildlife Park at Goddard, and even the Eisenhower Library in Abilene.

The zoo in Caney, owned by Tom Harvey, is an animal preserve known for close interactions with animals and educational tours.

There are lions and tigers, bears, wolves, lemurs, sloths, anteaters, hyenas, baboons, macaques, coatis, and more.

Built in 1989, the zoo is known for its encounters where visitors can feed certain animals and hold reptiles, baby kangaroos or baby lemurs.

Harvey's wife, Alexis, produces a daily Facebook video that tells about her many little spider monkey friends. They scamper all over her head and arms as she talks on the videos.

TripAdvisor reviewers gave the zoo the highest possible score of 5.0 in its report.

Said one TripAdvisor reviewer about the Caney zoo: "What really stood out was how interactive the experience was — feeding the animals, learning about them up close, and watching the worker interact with a bear!" one reviewer wrote. "The staff went above and beyond to make it special. Every single worker we met was friendly, knowledgeable, and clearly passionate about what they do."

School and church groups, senior citizens and other groups often make bus trips to Caney to walk along the zoo's shaded paths on guided tours. Visitors often spend 3 to 5 hours at the park.

It is important to call ahead when you plan to visit, because hours sometimes vary. But with springtime weather on the horizon, the Safari Zoological Park will become a popular place with regular hours.

Upcoming special hours will include the week of spring break: Saturday, March 14 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., then all week March 16-21. On those days, you can just show up and enjoy a tour.

The park is located two miles east of Caney on old Highway 166, or 1751 CR 1425,

The park is still closed for daily tours, however you can call them to arrange private tours.

Call 620-515-2886 for more information or go to the zoo's Facebook page (Safari Zoological Park Caney, KS)

Tripadvisor

Listed in order as being first through fifth in the state by TripAdvisor are the following:

1. Safari Zoological Park in Caney
2. Boot Hill Museum in Dodge City.
3. Strataca, an active underground salt mine at Hutchinson.
4. Tanganyika Wildlife Park at Goddard, near Wichita.
5. Keeper of the Plains sculpture in Wichita.

Vape shop owner sues AG Kobach, KBI, sheriff and police

BY ANDY TAYLOR
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INDEPENDENCE — The owners of two vape shops — including one in Independence — are suing Kansas Attorney General Kris Kobach, Kansas Bureau of Investigation director Tony Mattivi, and numerous law enforcement officials officers for what the owners contend was an illegal and unconstitutional raid on their businesses in October 2025.

> Federal lawsuit by Indy Vapes LLC stems from raid on business in October 2025

The lawsuit by Indy Vapes LLC, owned in part by Dominette Celli, and McHempimre LLC of Abilene, owned by Megan Carolan was filed in U.S. District Court in Wichita on March 4.

Indy Vapes is located at 223 N. Penn Ave., in Independence.

The two owners are being represented by attorneys with the Kansas City, Mo.-based law firm of Graves Garrett Greim and the Houston, Texas-based firm of Chalmers Adams Backer and Kaufman.

Local persons named as defendants include Melissa Johnson, Montgomery County Attorney; Ron Wade, Montgomery County Sheriff; the Montgomery County Commission; Montgomery County sheriff's deputies Natalie Rees, Will Wilkinson, Ty Luperdus, Jodie Whitson,

• See **LAWSUIT**, page 3

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The timeless humor of Will Rogers

"Diplomacy is the art of saying 'Nice Doggie!' until you can find a bigger stick."