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TUESDAY, FEB. 24, 2026

News L&T

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District ...

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that, and they will be extremely beneficial in the future given the students we'll be getting in the school who have hearing loss issues. With the office staff, we have two secretaries and a parent coordinator. All of that is to help explain who all works with these kiddos."

And there are certainly many students at BSEL, Downs said.

"We have 275 students currently enrolled at Bright Start Early Learning Center, and there are 22 students we know we'll be enrolling before the end of the year, and the majority of them will be coming to us from Russell Child Development Center," Downs said. "There are also multiple screenings we're doing. The morning always has heavier enrollment - we currently have 154 in the morning session and the other 118 are in the afternoon session. Since probably around November, many new enrollees have gone in the afternoon session, and we'll continue with that. Our ELL population is at 178, which is a big majority of our students. We currently have 96 students on IEPs, with 25 more in progress. We also currently have eight students in wheelchairs, and that is the highest number we can collect even throughout the district - and technically,

"We're also aiming to strengthen our parent engagement by creating meaningful and accessible opportunities for everyone to share their ideas and influence how the school operates."

— BSEL INSTRUCTIONAL COACH VERONICA NEVAREZ

some areas that can be improved upon. "With our areas for growth/improvement, the two areas that saw low scores were teachers having formal ways to provide input regarding the optimal function of the school and the success of the whole school," Downs said. "The latter is the one I found particularly concerning because the teacher rating was 4.01, but when we drill down more specifically, especially with individual staff recognitions, that was our absolute lowest score. Dealing with the challenges we have throughout the day, I want our staff to feel like they're supported and appreciated because they have a hard job but show up every day to do it."

BSEL Instructional Coach Veronica Nevarez then spoke to the board about other information gleaned from the data.

"We're also aiming to strengthen our parent engagement by creating meaningful and accessible opportunities for everyone

to share their ideas and influence how the school operates. We're aiming to increase that half a point, and part of our action plan includes a hub that houses many of our common documents," Nevarez said.

"In addition to that, we added a tab where we're documenting our PLC meetings, our outlines for the PLC presentations, and we'll soon start sending out the minutes of those meetings afterwards. That is our general hub that houses a lot of basic information about conferences, district resources and other similar information. As we come to data points, that's where we've created summaries that are accessible, and that's available to staff and administrators in a one-stop location."

To conclude the presentation, BSEL Social Worker Debi Flores then talked about ways to help improve staff recognition efforts.

"Like Jamie said earlier, one of our other goals is for Bright Start Early Learning

Center leadership help staff feel more recognized and celebrate their accomplishments," Flores said. "Our goal is to raise that score from 4.01 to 4.35, and we want to do that by creating consistent ways to help recognize individual and building successes. That part of our action plan includes showing appreciation through notes and cards in the staff members' mailboxes, e-mail shoutouts, verbal acknowledgements throughout the day, shoutouts during staff meetings and other similar gatherings. We also want to recognize that everyday professionalism such as consistent attendance, punctuality, hard work/effort, positive classroom practices and personal milestones. We want to make sure we sincerely acknowledge the work our staff members are doing, because they truly are valued by us administrators and by the families, and the deserve to feel that."

In the meeting's new business, the board approved a bid from Southwest Glass in the amount of \$13,300 to furnish and install a metal roofing system over the existing slope glaze entryways at entrances 1 and 15 at Liberal High School and a five-year Planned Service Agreement with JCI beginning Dec. 1, 2025. The board also approved a quote from Convergent in the amount of \$24,635.82 to refill the district's spare stock of access control equipment and early graduation applications from Samir Herrera Peralta and Edwyn Rios.

County ...

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Huddleston asked commissioners to tell Droste to revise her grant plan to include no raises, and she then talked about raises supposedly written into grant applications for the Seward County Health Department.

"If the plan is for these women to continue working 34 hours per week, the money put in for salaries shows a higher rate of pay than what they have been getting," Huddleston said. "Other women may be getting raises also, but because their pay comes from more sources than what I can see, I don't have that data."

Huddleston then suggested commissioners ask SCHED Director Brie Greeson if she was planning for raises and for whom, and if Greeson brought matching funds down to the state's minimum requirement, she added raises in the grants would be funded by the county and not the Kansas Department of Health and Environment due to a lack of money for the raises.

"There's a total of \$62,000 more in matching than the minimum required for the set of grants," Huddleston said. "That's without considering the state formula grant. What I am hoping the commission will do is make it clear to Brie there aren't going to be any raises, and she needs to subtract the money that was reassigned to raises out of the county matching that's earmarked for salaries."

With many, including both

Huddleston and Greeson, making light of the state's state formula grant, Huddleston said matching amounts have risen significantly, while the grant amounts themselves have remained quite steady.

"The matching amount went up \$230,000 for no reason," Huddleston said. "The award for that grant is only around \$38,000 and has been pretty constant for the last few years. However, in 2024, the matching was \$402,000. By 2026, it had gone up to \$650,000, and now for 2027, it's \$885,000. Why? It seems this money is getting committed in some way, and we're at revenue neutral. Why not leave this the same as last year?"

Huddleston concluded her comments by noting four grants for services health departments often provide Greeson has not applied for yet.

"Applying for some of those additional grants could bring in more money and finance more hours for the staff to be working," he said.

Prior to Thursday's regular meeting, the commissioners hosted a work session to review a proposed amended budget for both the county and its Rural Fire District.

County Counselor Forrest Rhodes said, however, the county does not have the authority to reduce the mill levy through the budget process, and the mill will not change until the Board of Tax Appeals orders it.

"What will authorize the county to reduce the mill is not passing the budget," he said. "It's going to be compliance with BOTAs order."

Rhodes, though, said the county does have full control over its

spending.

"If we want to amend the budget to expressly reduce what our expenditures are, recognizing what we know is going to happen with the tax revenues, that's fine," he said.

Commissioners voted to approve both amended budgets, with the county's mill levy at the Revenue Neutral Rate of 41.211 mills for FY 2026 and 8.209 mills for the Rural Fire District. Both of these rates are pending formal approval or instruction from BOTA.

Some at Thursday's meeting questioned if a public hearing was necessary for the adoption of the amended budget. Administrator April Warden said discussions with the State Division of Accounts and Reports revealed as long as funds were decreased and not increased, no budget hearing was necessary.

Warden added County Clerk Stacia Long is also not required to recertify the budget unless she chooses to do so as long as reductions and not increases were made.

As for JCAPS's FY 2027 Comprehensive Plan Grant Application, Commission Chair Steve Helm said the plan had no financial impact on the county or in the 26th Judicial District.

"JCAPS is reimbursed 100 percent of all operational expenses," he said. "This is approved by the agency director and JCAPS Juvenile Corrections Advisory Board chairperson. Our recommendation is to approve the 2027 Fiscal Year Comprehensive Plan Grant application for submission to the Kansas Department of Corrections and to

allow the commission chairman to sign the agreement."

Commission Vice Chair Todd Stanton said while the funds may come from the state, they are nevertheless taxpayer funds and go through the county.

"There does seem to be a concern about the pay scales being in line with the other county salaries, and that appears to be not the case," he said. "How are we going to bring those two in line, which is mandated?"

Droste rules and guidelines from the Kansas Department of Corrections and referenced by the *Leader & Times* and Huddleston were revised in December 2024.

"Under the subsection 'Unallowable Expenditures' under the final bullet, it says, 'Salary and Wage Costs: Grantee may not fund bonuses or other financial incentives outside of a position's normal salary costs with KDOC grant funds,'" Droste said. "Grantee must demonstrate salaries for all positions are reasonable and consistent with market rates. It does not say county positions. It's market rates."

Droste said JCAPS's market is court services, and the agency mirrors that market, and employee salaries are rates that come from the Office of Juvenile Administration and the state itself.

"It is not in line with county funds, but I am following our financial rules as it is not required in our financial guidelines," she said.

Stanton asked to have the 26th District's rates compared to other area judicial districts. Droste said

she could get those, and she added raises recently put in were based on a quartile.

"I did not jump up to the next pay matrix," Droste said. "I stayed within the 2024 pay matrix that was approved last year."

Droste said the OJA quartile dictates pay goes up every four years.

"That is why Monica did not get the pay raise," she said. "She has been a JSO for eight years, so she is capped. Myself and the rest of my staff, we all jumped up a quartile, so our pay stays stagnant for the next four years. None of us will be getting a pay raise for the next four years based off the 2024 OJA pay scale."

Droste said one employee was scheduled to get a raise this year, but she elected to not give the raise in order to have pay available for youth resources.

"That was not within the budget for me to still be able to pay for the resources for the youth," she said. "That is a primary concern of ours."

Droste said under a prior JCAPS director, some staff were at OJA pay, but not all of them were.

Stanton emphasized whether the money comes from the county or the state, it still comes from taxpayer dollars.

"How do you feel this fits in with the current county policy that we're simply not doing pay raises?" he said.

"I fully understand, and I respect that," Droste said. "I understand what is going on with the county and the constituents within the county. I definitely understand how

this looks, and I would love for it to not look that way. However, our funding does not come from that."

Droste said while the sheriff's office does handle tough cases on a constant basis, she emphasized that office and JCAPS are different.

"Our department mirrors Court Services," she said. "We supervise diversion. We supervise probation. We supervise parole. We supervise bond. We also help house police protective custody youth."

Droste said several of those cases in the past two weeks forced her to cancel her day-to-day operations for a time.

"We are starting a new early intervention program," she said. "All of that stuff is completely separate of what the sheriff's department does. We cannot compare to the sheriff's department because they're two completely different agencies."

Stanton then asked for a chart showing JCAPS salary levels for the past five years. Droste said she does have such records.

The commission voted to table the item until its March 2 meeting to allow Droste time to obtain the records. When asked about a deadline for approval, she said she does not have to take the item before the 26th District's other counties.

"Our agreement with the six counties is you guys are the ones who would make that determination," she said. "I do have a deadline. I have to have this completed, approved and signed and sent to KDOC by March 15."

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