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Fire chief resigns, Steckel named interim

By ROBERT PIERCE
• Leader & Times

Seward County has hired an interim fire chief following this week's announcement of the resignation of former Chief Andrew Barkley, who had also been recently serving as the county's Emergency Management director.

The hiring and a local burn ban were discussed Tuesday in a special county commission meeting. The burn ban was added to the agenda upon the suggestion of Commissioner Clay Louderback.

"All of the surrounding counties, when we get into a dry spell like this, put a burn ban into effect," he said. "I feel that would be important to the conditions we have right now and alleviate some accidents from happening."

As far as the position of fire chief, Administrator April Warden said upon Barkley's announcement, she scheduled time to meet with fire department staff to get a better understanding of how to handle the situation and how they were handling the news of the resignation, as well as what they saw going forward and their feelings on hiring an interim chief.

"They asked me if they would be allowed to have discussions amongst themselves," Warden said. "They were all trying to wrap their heads around everything."

Warden said Braden Steckel, who was approved Tuesday as the interim chief, and Deputy Fire Chief John Steckel visited with her Tuesday morning, and she said the wishes of the staff were to have Braden as the interim chief with John



Interim Fire Chief Braden Steckel and Administrator April Warden answer questions from commissioners at Tuesday's special meeting. L&T photo/Robert Pierce

remaining as the deputy chief.

Warden likewise said fire department staff also was not in favor of keeping that department and Emergency Management together.

"They said it's just too much to do with the amount of staff they have and needing to be focused on firefighting to be able to

keep up with emergency management detail," she said. "It's going to mean the training of new staff."

Along with Barkley, current Emergency Management Coordinator Rosa Conley announced her resignation, and both resignations will be effective March 6. Warden said John Steckel is not opposed

to helping with Emergency Management until a director is found.

"He's been a part of Emergency Management, but it is the wishes of the fire department that Emergency Management not remain under the fire

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Seward County planning second sheriff sale

By ROBERT PIERCE
• Leader & Times

Seward County's tax sale is in the process of being scheduled.

At last Thursday's commission meeting, Treasurer Mary Rose said the necessary journal entries (JE) have been completed, and it is currently in circulation for approval for all counsels who have parties in this case.

"They have a drafted notice ready to go, and they're waiting for the approval of the JE," she said. "Then they should be able to finalize a date, set publication and move forward."

"This is the journal entry to proceed with the upcoming tax sale," she said. "They met in court for the deeds to be transferred in their names. That one's moving forward as far as the writeoff you're talking about."

Commission Chair Steve Helm asked Rose to provide the commissioners with a recap of the prior real estate and include information such as net proceeds of the sale versus real estate taxes, interest and penalties owed on each property.

"Whenever we get those transferred to us with the payouts, we'll give those figures to you," Rose said. "You're probably going to have to take action on some of that writeoff once we get it."

Rose said there are two different journal entries involved with a tax sale.

"We're talking a financial journal entry, and this is going to be a court journal entry through the court case," she said. "The financial journal entry will eventually come before you once that is in its final stages. With the tax sale that's coming up, they do have the journal entry filed. They're waiting on all parties to respond back. We're nearing. We're getting close."

With a recent return to the Revenue Neutral Rate for the county's Fiscal Year 2026 budget and many local taxpayers filing payments under protest following the commissions September 15 3-2 vote to raise the mill levy more than 15 mills over the RNR, Commission Vice Chair Todd Stanton asked what percentages of real estate taxes had been paid thus far.

"In 2024, the first half, which is Oct. 1 to Dec. 31, at that point in time, 52 percent of taxpayers paid their first half of taxes," Rose said. "For 2025, that was at 39 percent. We have had a big decrease in paying the first half."

Rose said overall, county taxes would include gas, oil, personal property, real estate, special assessment, specials and trucks.

"In 2024, 52 percent paid that, and in 2025, 40 percent have paid," she said. "We are down in collection."

County taxes are distributed to many local entities, including USD 480, USD 483, Seward County Community College,

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County doesn't follow statute when amending budget

Administrator claimed state agency said a public hearing wasn't necessary

By EARL WATT
• Leader & Times

To comply with the request from the Kansas Board of Tax Appeals in returning Seward County to revenue neutral and refunding those who overpaid their taxes,

the Seward County Commission added an amended budget to the agenda Feb. 19 the night of the meeting and voted to accept it.

State law requires any amended budgets to follow the same process as the original budget, which requires publi-

cation 10 days prior to a public hearing, and after the hearing the commission can adopt the budget.

Seward County counsel asked if notice was required, and Seward County Administration April Warden stated she had checked with the Kansas Department of Administration Mandy Patek who said if the budget is being reduced, notice and a hearing was not required.

But Kansas Department of Administration Chief of Staff Samir Arif said the

KDA does not provide that type of guidance.

"The Department of Administration does not provide legal guidance to taxing subdivisions," he said. "When taxing subdivisions have legal questions, they must consult their own legal counsel."

Sources with the county commission have stated counsel is looking in to the issue, and any necessary requirements will be fulfilled.

Grace Place provides 'Love Notes' class to help young girls with relationships

By ROBERT PIERCE
• Leader & Times

A large part of the mission of Grace Place Pregnancy Care Center is to help pregnant women who are in need with their babies to be able to have a support system in the community.

With this in mind, Grace Place Youth Coordinator Mirella Buchman and Program Manager Maria Froese began thinking about helping girls with their life choices before they get pregnant.

Through thoughts and discussions, Buchman and Froese brought the 13-week class Love Notes to Grace

Place.

Buchman said Love Notes is primarily about life skills and how to effectively communicate.

"It doesn't just help you with relationships of boyfriend, girlfriend, but also with relationships at school, at home with how to effectively communicate and get your point across without having to feel like you don't know how to express yourself," she said.

Buchman emphasized one of the main goals of the class is to help teens to be able to communicate effectively while still having fun.

"We'll do games and crafts," she said. "The format is very interactive. For example, we were talking about

setting boundaries. Even if you're not interested in dating, in a job, you have to set boundaries. What am I willing to do for this job? When you go somewhere, you have a plan. You have a goal. What am I going to do?"

The most recent session of Love Notes started Jan. 12, and Buchman said discussions are taking place about what young people will do after high school and college.

"If we go through life without any goals, you're just going through life aimlessly," she said. "Our goal is to teach them to start thinking about those. Set some priorities. What is it you're looking for?"

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