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Comanche County chairman questions overreach, pushes back against Tillman County jail resolution

By **Eric Swanson**
Southwest Ledger

LAWTON – During its April 29 meeting, the Tillman County Board of Commissioners passed a resolution stating that other counties must seek the board's permission before building a jail in Tillman County.

At the suggestion of state Rep. Trey Caldwell (R-Lawton), Comanche County Commission Chairman Josh Powers had been exploring a lead into the possibility of converting the former Southwest Oklahoma Juvenile Center into an adult jail that could house inmates from Comanche County Detention Center. SWOJC is located in the Tillman County town of Manitou.

Powers, who serves as the liaison between the commission and CCDC, is looking for a permanent solution to overcrowding at the jail. The state has said the jail cannot house more than 283 inmates at a time.

The CCDC had 422 inmates total on Monday, May 20. That number includes:

- 277 housed at CCDC.
- 13 in the Greer County jail.
- 12 in the Grady County jail.
- 43 in the Okmulgee County jail.
- 22 in the Seminole County jail.
- 55 in the Tillman County jail.



Kyletta Ray | *Southwest Ledger*

Formerly the Southwest Oklahoma Juvenile Center in the Tillman County town of Manitou, this 60-bed secure-care facility for boys ages 14-19 was consolidated in accordance with legislation enacted in 2017. Now owned by the Town of Manitou, the facility has remained vacant since 2022.

“Our objective is to follow the limits that are in place and find other means to accommodate those people,” Powers said in a May 10 interview.

Comanche County currently has inmate housing contracts with six other counties across the state, including Tillman, Grady, Greer, Okmulgee, Pottawatomie and Seminole counties, which have helped CCDC keep its numbers down, but they are only temporary measures, interim jail administrator David Weber said in an email to a *Southwest Ledger* reporter.

“We are grateful for these counties helping us, but we need a permanent solution which would be in the best interest of Comanche

County and its citizens,” he said.

Jail costs

Shortly after the Tillman County Commission passed Resolution 1732, Chairman Levi Krasser told the *Ledger* that the measure would ensure the board had a voice in any negotiations over building new jails in Tillman County. He added that the measure was not necessarily intended to block other counties from pursuing such a project.

Powers called Tillman County Commissioners’ resolution “aggressive.” He said the resolution was put in place to stop Comanche County from finding a permanent solution to house its inmates. He added that

Tillman County officials had not contacted him to discuss their concerns before approving the resolution.

Powers estimated that Comanche County spends about \$90,000 each month on housing inmates in the Tillman County Jail, located in Frederick, which goes a long way toward helping the jail cover its operating costs.

“I’ve been in touch with prior elected officials in Tillman County, who advised it requires \$1.3 million a year to keep the Tillman County Jail operational,” he said. “Comanche County taxpayers pay Tillman County almost a million dollars a year. So clearly without our funding, Tillman County would probably go bankrupt.”

Powers has directed Weber to prioritize sending inmates to the five other counties where Comanche County has contracts before shipping them to Tillman County.

Powers has directed Weber to prioritize sending inmates to the five other counties where Comanche County has

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Lawton spending big bucks to renovate wastewater plant

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

LAWTON – The City of Lawton is investing perhaps \$180 million or more to renovate its malfunctioning wastewater treatment plant.

Phase I of the upgrade includes replacement of the administration building, influent pump station, grit removal system, trickling filter mechanisms, electrical conduit duct bank, electrical switchgear, automatic transfer switch for standby power, primary effluent pumps, polymer feed system and several additional upgrades.

That project started in 2022 and those improvements are costing \$85 million.

The renovations are being financed with a pair of Clean Water State Revolving Fund loans of \$47 million and \$72.9 million issued to the Lawton Water Authority, Public Utilities Director Rusty Whisenhunt informed the City Council recently.

City officials have asked the state Department of Environmental Quality for an eight-month extension to complete the Phase I projects, which would result in a new completion date in August 2025.

Phase 2 of the WWTP rehabilitation project is in the design stage,

Whisenhunt wrote in a May 13 letter to the state Department of Environmental Quality. Phase 2 of the wastewater treatment plant overhaul will cost approximately \$90 million and “aims to expand solids handling, ultraviolet light disinfection, and sludge digestion,” Whisenhunt said.

The Phase 2 design will take Garver engineers approximately 15 months to complete, Whisenhunt informed the Water Authority on May 14. The design work is being financed “in large part” from a \$6 million Federal Communities Grant received last year, and remaining funds available through a CWSRF loan obtained in 2022, he said.

In a related matter, \$5 million will be spent to replace water and sewer lines in “high-need areas” of town and to construct a “dewatering facility” at the sewage treatment plant.

Those projects will be financed with a \$2 million American Rescue Plan Act grant from the Oklahoma Water Resources Board, coupled with \$3 million in matching city funds, records reflect.

Lawton’s wastewater treatment plant, which is at 8104 SE 15th St. between Gooden Road and Tinney Road, went into service in 1977, records reflect.

United Way of Southwest Oklahoma names Woommavovah President/CEO

From staff reports

LAWTON – Southwest Oklahoma native Mark Woommavovah has been named president and chief executive officer of the United Way of Southwest Oklahoma.

Woommavovah succeeds former president/CEO Lauren Ellis, who has accepted a position as CEO of United Way of Norman in Norman, United Way of Southwest Oklahoma officials said in a news release.

“We are excited about having someone of Mark’s caliber on board,” said Natalie Fitch, chairman of the board of directors. “He brings a wealth of experience and skills in relationship building, team building and project implementation, as well as a great knowledge of the southwest Oklahoma community and strong business acumen. With his leadership, we will continue to expand United Way’s impact on quality of life across southwest Oklahoma.”

Woommavovah is a retired lieutenant colonel of the U.S. Army and former chairman of the Comanche Nation of Oklahoma.

He received a scholarship to Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College, according to the news release.

After earning an associate degree there, he joined the Army and soon started at the



Mark Woommavovah

University of Oklahoma on an ROTC scholarship. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in criminal justice and a commission as a military police officer.

Woommavovah is a graduate of the University of Oklahoma, the University of Oklahoma ROTC commissioning class of ’92, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, according to the news release. He spent 31 years in the Army, one of only 12 Comanche citizens to earn the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Woommavovah is married to Amber, and they have three sons: Marcus, Michael and Dylan. He was a leadership and talent scout, a senior instructor of military science at the University of Oklahoma ROTC and a coach for the University of Oklahoma Army ROTC 10-Mile Team and

Sooner Battalion Running and Triathlon Club.

He was also a volunteer youth track and cross-country coach for Cleveland County Family YMCA, a member of the OK Runner Team and a mentor and advisor for the student athletes at the University of Oklahoma.

Woommavovah felt honored to serve the United Way of Southwest Oklahoma, he said.

“UWSWOK is committed to serving our community and making a difference through small acts of kindness,” he said. “Our organization believes that expressing gratitude and giving back to our communities creates a positive ripple effect in our lives, leading to a happy and purpose-filled existence, meaningful relationships and a strong connection to the community.”

Pinnell to speak on tourism during chamber luncheon

By **Tim Farley**
Southwest Ledger

LAWTON – Oklahoma Lieutenant Governor Matt Pinnell will advocate for the state’s tourism program May 22 when he speaks at the Lawton-Fort Sill Chamber of Commerce luncheon.

“We’re pretty excited to have him down here,” chamber president John Michael Montgomery said. “He’s always enthusiastic when making his presentation and I know we’ll be interested in hearing what he has to say.”

The noon luncheon will be held at the Hilton Garden Inn in Lawton.

Comanche County brings several tourism attractions including the Holy City of the Wichitas, Mount Scott, the Wichita Wildlife Refuge, Mears and Medicine Park, which has a plethora of gift shops, restaurants and a lake area home to boaters and fishermen.

“Certainly, there’s a lot of offer people in terms of tourism,” Montgomery said.

TravelOK.com lists Medicine Park as America’s cobblestone community for the round red rocks dotting this tiny, picturesque town, which has a fascinating history. The Plains Indians were well acquainted with this quiet oasis long before its time as a colorful resort town attracting celebrities, gangsters, politicians and journalists.

“The cobblestones – an abundant native geological phenomenon of the area – are found in most structures and imbue the town with its distinctive look. Take a lazy stroll on scenic trails by Medicine Creek or Bath Lake, dine in fine restaurants, or bask in the glow of the sun setting over the surrounding Wichita Mountains. A bevy of cottages, cabins and bed and breakfasts make relaxing easy, and shops with all manner

of arts, crafts and gifts offer plenty of browsing pleasure,” according to TravelOK.com.

Oklahoma welcomed 18.3 million visitors in 2022, a 3.3% increase from the previous year. Oklahoma also had the second largest year over year increase in travel spending, with visitors spending an average of almost \$500 a night, according to the state’s Economic Impact of Travel report.

Tourism is the Sooner State’s third-largest industry and is second only to oil and gas in bringing out-of-state dollars directly to Oklahoma, according to the report.

The boost in tourism has also added thousands of jobs to the state. According to the report, direct travel-generated employment increased to over 103,000 with the addition of approximately 5,230 jobs in 2022. That’s a 5.3% increase in employment compared to 2021, the report shows.

OPINION

Don't Thank A Veteran This Memorial Day

By **James Finck, Ph.D.**

It's never wrong to thank a veteran or active-duty military personal for their service, but even they will tell you that officially Memorial Day is not for them.

The official day to thank our veterans is Veterans Day; Armed Forces Day is set aside for active-duty military. Memorial Day is specifically reserved for those who gave their "last full measure" in service to our nation. We must understand that the holiday began as a day to decorate the graves of those who died fighting during the Civil War.

The holiday originally known as Decoration Day got its start the year after the Civil War ended in April of 1865. By the spring of 1866, Southern women were still dealing with the physical effects of the destruction of the South, but just as strongly struggling from the mental effects of having lost the war. One way to cope with the loss was the creation of what is known as the "Lost Cause," which maintained that Southern soldiers were heroic men who only lost because of the overwhelming strength and size of Northern army and the North's industrial output. As a way to honor these Southern men, women's clubs organized to maintain cemeteries and also to establish Decoration Days to adorn the Confederate graves with flowers.

While there are several examples of graves being decorated as early as 1861, the first organized event is still debated. The two cities that seem to have the best claim of the first official Decoration Day were both named Columbus, one in Georgia and the other in Mississippi. The best evidence seems to exist that Mary Ann Williams of Georgia first thought of a national day to decorate graves with flowers and chose April 26 as it marked the end of the war the previous year.

Williams sent letters to newspapers across the South asking for others to join her. It seems as if the women of Mississippi liked the idea and had their own celebration but had theirs a day earlier. Years later Pennsylvania and New York both claimed it was women in their states who held the first Decoration Days, but there is little evidence to support these claims. It should be noted that with both Columbus' Decoration Days the patrons cleaned and decorated graves of both Confederate and Union soldiers. These women had greater reason to hate the other side than we do today. Yet they honored soldiers who were willing to die for their cause even if it was something Southern women disagreed with. We might profit from their example.

While it seems that Williams was to first to call for

a day, the idea really took off the following year when Maj. Gen. John A. Logan, head of the Grand Army of the Republic a Union veterans' organization, issued General Order 11 establishing Memorial Day as a day to celebrate those who had given their lives by having programs and decorating graves with flowers.

The date was decided on May 30 so that flowers would have time to bloom. The first official day was held at Arlington Cemetery on May 30, 1868. Arlington, the home of Robert E. Lee, was confiscated and the land turned into a national cemetery in 1864 and it seemed the fitting place for the first Memorial Day Celebration. The keynote speaker was general turned congressman James Garfield. After the speech and songs, the participants placed flowers and small American flags by each grave, something that has continues today.

For the next several decades women's and veterans' groups continued to celebrate Memorial Day to honor the dead from the Civil War. Some states formalized the days with state laws. It was not until after WWI that the day was changed to honor the dead from all American wars and not just the Civil War. It was not until 1966, 100 years after the first celebration that President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law Memorial Day as a

national holiday on the last Monday in May to make a three-day weekend.

While the case seemed closed as to the start of Memorial Day, one twist occurred in 1996 when Professor David Blight, was researching at Yale for his excellent book "Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory" published in 2001. Blight found a handwritten source and newspaper evidence that in 1865 right after the South surrendered that a large group of former slaves in Charleston, South Carolina, went to the Washington Racecourse and Jockey Club that had been turned into a prisoner of war camp. They dug up the soldiers that had been buried in mass graves and reinterred them into separate graves. Then on May 1, 1865, more than 10,000 people, mostly former slaves and members of the Massachusetts 54 Colored Regiment held a parade before decorating the graves with flowers. What Blight found was evidence that the first Memorial Day was done by freedmen honoring those who gave their lives for their freedom.

Today Memorial Day for most marks the first day of summer and a day off work to hold a BBQ. However, its roots were a day to honor the 700,000 who gave their lives for a cause. On this Memorial Day its perfectly fine to smoke up some ribs or

barbecue some chicken, but also take time to remember the reason for this day.

President Abraham Lincoln said it best when he said, "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

In a nation as divided as ours, let's do as Lincoln suggested: honor those who died for us and ensure they did not die in vain, but instead honor them by working together and making sure this nation long endures.

Happy Memorial Day everyone and thank you to those who have given their life for freedom. May you never be forgotten.

James Finck is a professor of history at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma. He may be reached at HistoricallySpeaking1776@gmail.com.

Americans have an opportunity to remember the past!

By **Steve Fair**

President Stephen Grover Cleveland served as the 22nd and 24th president of the United States. He is the only president in American history to serve nonconsecutive presidential terms.

A former mayor of Buffalo and governor of New York, Cleveland was the first Democrat to win the presidency after the Civil War. A preacher's kid, he was described as being honest, self-reliant and being firmly committed to his principles.

Cleveland won his first term in 1884 against Republican nominee James Blaine, the former House Speaker. Blaine had been involved in several shady deals in his political career and Cleveland promised to 'drain the swamp.' Aided by the Mugwumps, Republican activists who rejected Blaine's history of corruption, Cleveland won all four swing

states, including New York by less than 1,200 votes and won the presidency by a razor-thin Electoral College margin.

Cleveland's first term included his getting married to a 21-year-old. He was 47. He also created the Interstate Commerce Commission. He removed import tariffs. One of the most volatile issues during his term was if U.S. currency should be backed by both gold and silver. Views on the silver issue were geographic; Northeasters in both Parties favored holding firm on the gold standard, while Western and Southern representatives called for the free coinage of silver. Cleveland favored holding to the gold standard.

In 1888, the GOP nominated Sen. Benjamin Harrison from Indiana. He campaigned heavily on the tariff issue, which had negatively affected the industrial states in the North. Cleveland won

the popular vote, but Harrison easily won the Electoral College vote. In his four years, Harrison imposed tariffs and approved the free coinage of silver—both controversial issues.

In 1892, Cleveland won the Democratic nomination on the first ballot and Harrison was nominated by the Republicans. Unlike their former matchup, the election of '92 has been described as the cleanest, quietest and most creditable campaign since the end of the Civil War.

Harrison's wife was dying and he didn't campaign at all. She died two weeks before the November election and Cleveland stopped campaigning to show his respect. No doubt that wouldn't happen today.

Aided by a strong third-party candidate who hurt Harrison among GOP voters, Cleveland easily defeated Harrison and returned to the White House for his second term.

Three observations:

First, 2024 is very similar to 1892. Two presidents are running against one another. Both have clear track records. Both have occupied the Oval Office. Both have measurable results in economics, foreign policy, immigration policy and governing style. This gives voters a unique opportunity for a side-by-side comparison of results. The political spinning normally associated with campaigns is hard to do when a candidate has a clear track record.

Second, Mugwumps could be the difference in 2024. In 1884, the Mugwumps put principle over Party. They crossed Party lines because they couldn't bear to support their nominee. Those in their own Party called them sanctimonious and 'holier than thou' because they wouldn't compromise. The Mugwumps wanted the swamp drained more than

they wanted a Party victory.

140 years ago, the Mugwumps were Republicans. Could they be Democrats this year?

Third, history doesn't repeat itself. That is a common misconception. History is linear, not cyclical. Mark Twain said, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." That means details, circumstances, settings and names may be similar, but history isn't recycled. Philosopher George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Americans have an opportunity to remember the past when casting their vote in November.

Steve Fair is Vice Chairman of the 4th District of the Oklahoma Republican Party. He can be reached by email at steve.fair@gmail.com. His blog is stevefair.blogspot.com.

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Emergency Management receives Community Wildfire Defense grant

From staff reports

LAWTON — Comanche County-Lawton Emergency Management will receive a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture, department officials announced in a May 14 news release.

The \$225,000 grant, awarded under the USDA's Community Wildfire Defense Grant program, will enhance the county's wildfire mitigation efforts, officials said.

The grant will help the department develop a comprehensive, countywide community wildfire protection plan. The plan targets the three main goals of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy: restore and maintain landscapes, create fire-adapted communities and improve wildfire response.

Priority was given to applications that represented areas with high wildfire potential, low-income com-

munities and communities impacted by disaster.

"Receiving this grant is a huge win for our citizens and responders," said Emergency Management Director Clint Langford. "These funds will enable our county to take a collective approach in identifying vulnerable and at-risk wildfire areas and develop strategies to protect citizens and critical infrastructure."

Langford said his department aims to create a plan

that will mitigate the impact of wildfires on the county and make it more resilient.

The plan will involve extensive collaboration with local agencies, community organizations and residents to identify wildfire risks, prioritize mitigation strategies and establish a framework for effective response and recovery.

Emergency Management officials estimated that they will begin developing the plan as soon as August.



JJ Francais | Southwest Ledger

Taxes withheld, warning letters issued over audits

By Mike W. Ray
Southwest Ledger

The City of Lawton's tardy audits of the city's financial ledgers for Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023 are having financial repercussions and triggering warning notices from a bank and from state environmental monitors.

For example, Lawton's motor fuels tax allocations for both years are being withheld until the audits are finished.

In response to a Southwest Ledger inquiry, Deputy Finance Director Kristin Huntley said the FY 2022 audit is finished. The FY 2023 single audit is "undergoing final testing, and when that testing is complete, the di-

rector of our audit will do a final review, then pass to her boss for a final review," said Caitlin Gatlin, the city's communications and marketing manager. Huntley "does not think that will be completed by the end of this month," Gatlin said.

"We don't know the exact amount" of motor fuels tax that is being withheld, former Finance Director Joe Don Dunham told Southwest Ledger last November. "That is calculated by the Oklahoma Tax Commission via a formula," he said. "We typically receive between \$10,000 and \$13,500 per month."

State law provides that a municipality's audit of a fiscal year should be complet-

ed by the end of that calendar year: i.e., the statutory deadline for completion of the FY 2022 audit was Dec. 31, 2022 – almost 17 months ago.

State law further decrees, "If a municipality does not file a copy of its audit" as provided in Title 11 of the Oklahoma Statutes, the State Auditor and Inspector shall notify the Oklahoma Tax Commission which shall withhold from the municipality its monthly allocations of gasoline taxes until notified by the Office of the State Auditor and Inspector that the audit report has been filed."

The incomplete audit also has affected Lawton's ability to borrow money, Dun-

ham told the Ledger. "Our credit rating is not bad," but the incomplete audit "affects our ability to borrow money, because banks want to see our financials," he said.

The Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality issued a Notice of Violation on Feb. 14 against Lawton's solid-waste permit to operate its sanitary landfill, for failure to provide "an approvable financial assurance update" for Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023.

Failure to submit a "compliance plan" could result in "escalated enforcement, including penalties," wrote Kelly Dixon, division director, Land Protection Division.

Bank of America notified city officials via letter April 30 that as of March 26 the Lawton Water Authority has been in "technical default" on its Series 2013 Supplemental Note Indenture. The Authority is required to submit an audited financial report no more than 270 days after the close of each fiscal year.

Scott Nash, senior vice president of Bank of America, informed the Lawton Water Authority and the Lawton Industrial Development Authority in a letter last July that they were "in default" on a condition of their loans as of March 27, 2023. Councilman Randy Warren described it as a "do better letter."

Tillman

from p1

contracts before shipping them to Tillman County. Due to the aggressive of the Tillman County Board of Commissioners.

"We currently have open beds in multiple counties. We will be redirecting our inmates to those counties and using Tillman County much less and as a last resort," he said. "I will not approve of or tolerate Tillman County Board of Commissioners taking advantage of Comanche County taxpayers any longer."

Powers said he can reduce the number of Comanche County inmates housed in the Tillman County Jail to zero without violating the contract between the two counties. "Whether intentional or not, this resolution blocks Comanche County and others from finding another solution for inmate housing," Powers said. "It holds Comanche County hostage and requires us and other counties to keep our inmates in their (Tillman County) jail," Powers said. "They are sabotaging our options."

Comanche County pays Tillman County \$42.50 per inmate per day to house CCDC inmates, according to the contract. However, the contract does not require Comanche County to send a certain number of inmates to Tillman County.

Krasser did not return a call seeking comment for this story.

Repurposing SWOJC

The state Office of Juvenile Affairs owned and operated SWOJC from 1995 until it closed in the early 2020s, Caldwell said. The lawmaker represents the 63rd District, which includes Comanche, Cotton, Kiowa and Tillman counties, in the Oklahoma House of Representatives.

Caldwell said he has spent several years looking for a way to repurpose the Manitou facility, which included asking the Oklahoma Department of Corrections to consider converting the site into either a juvenile detention center or a minimum-security prison. However, he said, the DOC passed on the project after concluding the state

did not need more prison beds.

Caldwell said he also explored other possibilities for reusing the site, such as partnering with a couple of the state's Native American tribes to turn the facility into a juvenile or adult detention center. But those endeavors were also unsuccessful. He then asked Powers if SWOJC would be a viable option to accommodate CCDC's ongoing overcrowding issue.

"That's when I was like, 'Well, I know of a facility that would perfectly meet that threshold to be able to achieve what you're trying to achieve, and you can save the people of Comanche County a lot of money by not having to build a \$25 (million) or \$40 million-dollar new jail,'" Caldwell said. "You could essentially convert that place into a long-term holding facility, due to its proximity."

Caldwell said he put Powers in touch with Mitch Jones, a member of the Town of Manitou's Board of Trustees, about the possibility of converting the Manitou facility, which now belongs to the town, into an adult jail. That was

the extent of Caldwell's involvement in the matter, Caldwell said.

"My thing was trying to find a common-sense solution that would be a net benefit for Comanche County, which is one of my counties, but also at the same time be a net benefit for Tillman County," Caldwell said. "And that's what I suggested to Commissioner Powers."

Caldwell said the state does not currently offer financial aid for jail conversion projects, but he thought lawmakers might be interested in funding such a program when they build the budget for fiscal year 2025 or 2026.

Preliminary steps

Powers said he talked with Jones about the possible conversion, and Jones seemed enthusiastic about it. Powers said the two men knew bringing the jail up to code would be a major project, but they weren't sure that was even feasible.

"If it was going to turn out to where it cost the Comanche County taxpayer more money, or even equal but more work, it was

clearly not going to be considered," Powers said.

He said his conversation with Jones was a preliminary step, and he has not presented that option to the other Comanche County commissioners yet.

Jones declined to comment for this story.

Visiting the Manitou center

Powers then contacted Weber, who assembled a small group of staffers who could help him evaluate the Manitou center. In early April the group sent blueprints of the building, a list of required upgrades and other information to Powers.

"We didn't have any pricing or anything at this time, but we had basic information," Powers said.

Weber confirmed that he visited the Manitou center with his chief of security and maintenance supervisor on April 5, and Jones took them on a tour of the facility.

As Weber inspected the center, he thought about its potential for helping CCDC solve its overcrowding problem, he said.

"There is definitely work and updating that would need to be done, like offices, kitchen and security equipment," he said. "I am not an expert on jail construction, so there could be more that needs to be done. And I really could not give an estimate on cost or how long it would take. But I do feel like it would fit our needs."

Powers said somehow the Tillman County commissioners found out about Weber's visit to Manitou. Powers added that he had not discussed the possibility of remodeling the facility with the commissioners yet because any agreement concerning the facility would be between Comanche County and the Town of Manitou, not Tillman County.

"It'd be no different than the City of Lawton not asking the county commissioners if they could build a Braum's down here on Sheridan Road," Powers said. "They don't get to ask me. I don't have any input."

Powers told the Ledger he has reached out to the City of Lawton and started preliminary talks with them about possible future inmate housing options.

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Lawton's wastewater treatment plant plagued with 1 problem after another

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

LAWTON – The Notice of Violation that the state Department of Environmental Quality issued April 18 against Lawton's wastewater treatment plant was blamed on a cascade of problems and an industrial user's discharge of effluent “in excess of typical concentrations.”

The City of Lawton “has been working diligently... over the past three years” to correct “issues” with the 47-year-old wastewater treatment plant, Public Utilities Director Rusty Whisenhunt wrote in a May 13 letter to David Mercer in the Municipal Wastewater Enforcement Section of the DEQ's Water Quality Division.

Those measures included an equipment replacement project that was completed in November 2022 and a construction project currently underway, Whisenhunt said. Those two projects have involved an investment of more than \$100 million “dedicated to the WWTP.”

Lawton's sewage treatment plant discharges treated wastewater into Nine Mile Creek, which merges with East Cache Creek, which in turn empties into the Red River. The discharge rate from the WWTP is “anywhere from 14 million to 16 million gallons per day,” the city's communications manager told *Southwest Ledger*.

What is emitted from the treatment plant is commonly referred to as “gray water:” wastewater from which bio-waste has been removed but is nevertheless unfit to drink. Treated effluent discharged into Nine Mile Creek is appropriately labeled as gray water.

The DEQ issued a Notice of Violation against the City on April 18 because of numerous “apparent violations” of the state Environmental Quality Code by the wastewater treatment plant.

The DEQ reported receiving a complaint Jan. 18 that Nine Mile

Creek “had the odor of sewage.”

Jeff Lawler, environmental programs specialist for DEQ, investigated the site and observed that the WWTP effluent “had the gray appearance and odor of sewage,” which indicated that the treatment facility was providing “only partial secondary biological treatment.”

Lawler visited Nine Mile Creek again on Feb. 26 and “again observed that the discharge” from the WWTP was “gray in color and had the odor of sewage.”

When he went to the site again on April 11, Lawler reported the wastewater was again gray “but had no sewage odor.”

Perhaps that could be explained, at least in part, by the City of Lawton having raised the dam gate at Lake Lawtonka spillway three inches on April 8, City Manager John Ratliff reported. “That significantly increased the flow and decreased the stagnation throughout the creek system.”

From Feb. 26 to April 10, the DEQ received six more complaints “regarding the ability of the WWTP to provide sufficient wastewater treatment and/or the adversely impacted state of Nine Mile Creek and/or East Cache Creek.” The complaints were made about locations in both Comanche and Cotton counties, wrote Shellie R. Chard, director of the DEQ's Water Quality Division.

A consent order the DEQ issued to the City of Lawton in May 2021 is one of two that are still active. The 2021 mandate requires the city to “take steps to make improvements/repairs to the WWTP to bring it into compliance with its Oklahoma Pollution Discharge Elimination System permit requirements.”

The city's monthly wastewater discharge monitoring reports are to include effluent monitoring results for ammonia, biochemical oxygen demand, E. coli bacteria concentrations,

total residual chlorine, and total suspended solids sampling.

In the April 18 notice the city was cited for 19 infractions that occurred between December 2023 and February 2024. Those violations involved ammonia concentrations, carbonaceous biochemical oxygen demand, total suspended solids and dissolved oxygen.

The notice informed municipal officials that the City of Lawton had been discharging pollutants “in excess of your OPDES permit limits...” Ammonia concentrations were three to five times allowable limits; CBOD, as much as five and seven times greater than permissible limits; TSS, 9.8 times higher than acceptable limits.

‘Significant challenges’ at WWTP

The “unanticipated equipment failures” in January “while the plant was in a vulnerable state” because of the construction project, and the industrial user's effluent that exceeds “typical concentrations,” created “significant treatment challenges over the last several months” that resulted in “the non-compliance” outlined in the NOV, Whisenhunt informed Mercer.

• Aeration basin blowers at the WWTP are “obsolete and no longer reliably serviced by the manufacturer.” After the blowers failed, the aeration basins “turned septic, thus compromising the performance of the activated sludge process.”

The manufacturer's inability to keep the machines operational led to a decision to replace three unserviceable blowers with four new ones, at a cost of \$1 million.

• Also during Phase 1, each trickling filter “is to be taken offline for cleaning and rehabilitation.” After one of the filters was taken out of service, the three remaining filters “struggled due to age and obsoles-

cence,” Whisenhunt lamented.

When they're operating “effectively,” the trickling filters reduce biochemical oxygen demand upstream of the aeration basin. “Their reduced performance compounded the issues experienced with the blower failure in the aeration basin,” he explained.

• One of Lawton's “significant industrial users,” Republic Paperboard, is experiencing failures at its pretreatment WWTP, Whisenhunt wrote. Consequently, the BOD concentration at Lawton's WWTP “has been more than four times the permitted concentration typically received” from Republic.

On Oct. 31, 2023, the DEQ issued a Notice of Violation to Republic Paperboard for exceeding biochemical oxygen demand and total suspended solids “from Oct. 17, 2023, onward.”

The City of Lawton sent a letter to Republic on Dec. 7, 2023, stating that the notice would “remain open until consistent compliance has been achieved.” BOD results for the last seven months have been elevated.

Because of these issues, the aeration basin at the WWTP “has not been able to maintain an adequate mixed liquor concentration to treat sufficiently,” Whisenhunt wrote. The combination of increased BOD loading and a compromised activated sludge process “is the greatest contributor to the recent non-compliance,” he said. “The quality of the sludge from the aeration basin upset the clarifiers, further resulting in a solids loading that was non-compliant.”

Another problem, according to a city report, is that sludge from Lawton's Southeast Water Treatment Plant is causing “overloading” at the wastewater treatment plant.

In addition, “numerous equipment procurement delays have presented themselves”

during Phase 1 of the WWTP renovation.

Temporary solutions

City staff initiated several temporary solutions, Whisenhunt reported.

• After an aeration blower failed in December, “We brought in two rental blowers in January at a cost of \$22,000 per month until new blowers can be installed,” said Caitlin Gatlin, the city's communications manager. The four new, permanent blowers have been ordered “and are expected to be installed and commissioned” by August 2025, Whisenhunt said.

• City staff made temporary modifications to improve operation of the trickling filters.

• Temporary chlorination and dechlorination “have been mobilized to bolster the ultraviolet disinfection system.

• The aeration basins have been “reseeded.”

In sewage treatment, the aeration basin is used to break down organic matter into simple elements like nitrogen gas and carbon through aeration of the wastewater to promote microbial growth.

On Feb. 16, city staff “augmented” the basins with 30 bags of supplementary bio-seed.

From March 28 through April 4, trucks containing 6,000 gallons of activated sludge from Fort Sill's WWTP were sent to Lawton's WWTP aeration basins. And since April 15, Whisenhunt wrote, city staff have transported three 6,000-gallon trucks loaded with waste activated sludge five days per week from Duncan's WWTP to Lawton's, to reseed the aeration basins.

City officials have requested “an in-person meeting” with DEQ officials “to discuss actions taken to date, the path forward on the Notice of Violation items,” and an extension requested on the Phase 1 project.

Lawton street repair, reconstruction projects underway

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

LAWTON – Mayor Stan Booker's “10 Wins for the Citizens” street repair program launched last fall quickly grew to 40 thoroughfares, and will continue to expand in the years ahead.

The City Council voted recently in favor of a minimum 2% increase from the previous years' allocated budget for the Streets & Traffic Control Division's Repair and Maintenance account for street mill-and-overlay and panel replacement projects.

According to City Manager John Ratliff, “We will take from other areas to fund the increases.” Each year the “payor” will be a different city department, he said.

City officials have adopted this approach because, “We're having to fix years of neglect and we don't want this to happen again,” Ratliff said.

“Not every street needs to be torn up and replaced,” said Councilman George Gill, chairman of the city's Streets, Roads and Bridges Committee. “We need to use cost-effective and life-extending measures to repair our roads and bridges.”

Chris Serrano, project manager with EST civil engineering firm, said resurfacing with asphalt will extend the life of the streets for perhaps five to ten years. “The subbase of these streets is still in good condition,” he said. “The integrity of the roads is good” but patching will be required at some locations,” he added.

The Streets, Roads and Bridges Committee selected “some of the worst streets in Lawton” for mill-and-overlay work, councilman and committee member Kelly Harris said. “We also looked at traffic counts,” which factored into the selection of the streets.

Booker said he wants those 40 street repair projects finished by Thanksgiving 2024.

The first 10 streets were completed 19 days ahead of schedule, at a cost of \$1.5 million, Gill said. Work on the next 15 is underway, in a \$5.1 million contract awarded to T&G Construction of Lawton. A \$5.1 million contract on the last 15 streets also was awarded to T&G, and that job is expected to start within the next 30 to 60 days, according to Caitlin Gatlin, the city's communications and marketing director.

The Streets, Roads and Bridges Committee was created last August to develop an eight-year plan for street and bridge improvements throughout Lawton. The concept was borrowed from the Oklahoma Department of Transportation, which periodically updates its eight-year plan for state bridge and highway improvements.

Lawton's streets have suffered from decades of inattention. Priorities established by the municipal committee are based at least in part on a pavement assessment that was completed in 2022. The evaluation concluded that 37.7% of Lawton's streets were rated “good” to “excellent,” while 62.3% of them were deemed to be in “fair” to “very poor” condition.

In a related matter, the City Council approved a contract May 14 for reconstruction of about 1.3 miles of Goodyear Boulevard: from the railroad crossing just north of Southwest Neal Boulevard and extending north to Cache Road.

The \$4.98 million contract was awarded to T&G Construction, the lowest of four bidders, and 200 calendar days were allotted for completion of the job. That project will be financed from the 2019 PROPEL Capital Improvement Fund, records reflect.

The council also approved an amendment May 14 to a contract for major construction work on nine roadways financed from the 2017 Ad Valorem Streets and Roads Program: Southwest 51st Street, Southwest Coral Avenue, Southwest 77th Street, Northwest Taylor Avenue, Southwest 43rd Street, Southwest Boyles Landing Road, Northwest Elm Avenue, Northwest Euclid Avenue, and Northwest 63rd Street.

That job includes paving, sidewalks compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, driveways, storm drains, water lines and other improvements.

The price of that contract increased to \$6,376,881. The 400-day job is not expected to be completed until sometime next year.

Street, bridge bonds to be sold June 25

Last September, Lawton voters endorsed an extension of the 2017 Ad Valorem Streets and Roads Program, authorizing a \$60 million bond issue for improvements

to Lawton's deteriorated streets and bridges.

The City Council voted May 14 to approve the sale of some of those General Obligation bonds. The \$6.3 million tranche is expected to be sold on June 25; the principal on the bonds will be retired with nine annual payments of \$700,000 each, starting Dec. 1, 2026.

The proposed street improvements listed in the \$60 million bond issue Lawton voters considered last September included:

Street Rehabilitation Projects

- Ferris Avenue between Northwest Second Street and Fort Sill Boulevard (eight-tenths of a mile).
- Southwest 52nd Street from Lee Boulevard to the railroad tracks (.45 mile).
- Cache Road between 67th and 82nd streets (one mile).
- SW 11th Street between Gore Boulevard and Lee Boulevard (one mile).
- Fort Sill Boulevard between Ferris Avenue and Rogers Lane (1.5 miles).

Estimated total cost: \$37 million.

Bridge Renovation Projects

- Replace bridges on 11th Street south of Interstate 44.
- Repair the Cache Road bridges west of 38th Street.
- Repair the East Cache Creek bridges on Gore Boulevard.
- Replace the Wolf Creek bridges on 11th Street and 44th Street.
- Rehabilitate the Numu Creek bridges on Park Avenue, 17th Street and Ninth Street.
- Repair/replace the Numu Creek bridge on Sheridan Road.
- Replace the Numu Creek bridge on 13th Street.
- Rehabilitate the Numu Creek bridge on Lee Boulevard.
- Repair the West Fork Wolf Creek bridge on Quannah Parker Trailway.

Estimated cost: \$23 million.

Lawton landfill to be enlarged with 2 new cells

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

A contract was awarded to construct two new cells at the municipal landfill, and the City Council listened to a report about bulk waste collection.

Two more cells will be excavated at Lawton's sanitary landfill under a \$3.84 million contract the council awarded to 4x Construction Group of Mansfield, Texas, the lowest of four bidders for the job. City Engineer Joseph Painter said construction should be completed within 260 calendar days.

The City of Lawton owns

760 acres for solid waste disposal, Caitlin Gatlin, the city's communications manager, told *Southwest Ledger* last November. The landfill currently occupies 243 of those acres and the remainder are for expansion, she said.

The new cells 6 and 7 will be individual waste-holding units inside the overall landfill, and each cell will encompass approximately 9.6 acres, Gatlin said.

Each cell will have a 2-foot compacted clay liner and will be covered with a 60-millimeter HDPE geomembrane and 250-millimeter geocomposite liner, then covered

with a minimum of 1 to 2 feet of protective cover, usually sand.

“With the addition of two cells, we will be required to perform additional semianual groundwater monitoring of wells located on the east and west sides of the new cells,” Gatlin said. The ODEQ requires this to be performed twice a year “to ensure there is no leaching into the groundwater systems that flow below the surface of the landfill,” she said.

In a related matter, Cynthia Williams, deputy director of the Public Works Department, told the council that 1,788,000 pounds of bulk

waste were collected in the past year.

The Solid Waste Division hauls off compliant bulk waste from approximately 800 to 900 Lawton residences each week, Williams said.

“We want to be on schedule every single week of the year,” she said. There were several occasions last year when bulk collection exceeded 72 hours, she said; those included storm debris clean-up operations, holiday schedules, equipment breakdowns, and employee shortages for various reasons.

The Solid Waste Division has five grapple trucks dedicated to bulk waste remov-

al, and three new non-CDL (commercial driver's license) trucks “are expected to be delivered soon,” Gatlin said.

“Providing a designated avenue for the proper disposal of bulky items reduces instances of illegal dumping,” Mayor Stan Booker said. Councilman Kelly Harris said the city needs someone designated to “go through neighborhoods in this town and write citations” to individuals who pile bulk waste at the curb ‘out of cycle’ (when it's not their designated week). “Maybe if we wrote more tickets, people would be more compliant with the rules,” he said.

For Hire: Seniors to outnumber younger workforce

By **Mindy Ragan Wood**
Southwest Ledger

The number of working older Americans has quadrupled since the 1980s and statistics show that trend isn't cooling down as the nation's workforce shortage heats up.

Oklahoma's labor participation rate of 52 available workers for every 100 jobs dovetails a nationwide trend. Employers are looking harder than ever for their next workers and statistics show that includes the senior workforce.

According to a Pew Research report last year, the burgeoning elder workforce is driven by those aged 65 and older, the last century's largest population boom. By 2030, the labor force of those aged 75 and older is expected to grow by 96.4%, while those aged 16-24 which is forecasted to shrink by 7.5%, according to the nonprofit Center for Workforce Inclusion, formerly the National Council for Senior Adults.

Beset by the rising cost of living, Medicare copay increases and zero or shrinking retirement funds, more seniors are choosing to delay, supplement or abandon retirement.

The trend is not surprising to 62-year-old Joyce Lindberg. The Oklahoma transplant was forced to sell her West Coast restaurants due to illness and moved here to be near family. Her health in tatters, depression set in as life in a wheelchair extinguished her optimism for the future.

"I woke up one day and said, 'I'm done with this,'" Lindberg

said. "I went on an investigation to find out how can I get back to work. I don't care what it is, but I've got to do something."

She worked hard to ditch her wheelchair for a walker and/or cane, and found a new career thanks to a federal program that puts older Americans back to work.

Today, one of Lindberg's jobs is a supportive services coordinator for senior programs through the Association of South Central Oklahoma Governments.

Often she encounters seniors struggling with the gap between social security benefits and the cost of living.

"You go to the grocery store and what used to be \$50 is now \$100," Lindberg said. "With Medicare going up to \$174.90, you know, that's a big chunk coming out of seniors' income every month."

A federal program helped her gain the skills and income she needed to rejoin the workforce. The Senior Community Service Employment Program pairs low income seniors with on-the-job, paid training with nonprofit or government employers. While working, they learn computer skills, new phone systems and other technologies that weren't required during their employment years, Lindberg said.

Why hire seniors?

Seniors often return to work to stay active, keep their minds sharp and have a social outlet, Lindberg said. She also

said employers are finding out that hiring older workers pays off.

"In my experience older people are trainable, very trainable," Lindberg said. "We are very reliable. We don't have kids. We have the social skills, and I'm not being hateful, but some in the younger generation...there's just a totally different mindset."

The reliability of the senior workforce in Oklahoma is high, said Larry Bartels, field representative for the SCSEP via the Oklahoma Department of Human Services.

Seniors and employers are tracked by the department to offer follow up assistance and gauge their success. The surveys show older workers are "more reliable," Bartels said.

"They miss less work, they come to work on time and those are just a few benefits for employers," he said.

Seniors who have struggled to gain new skills and find an employer to take a chance on them are more grateful and have more to lose than workers have other options, he said.

Technology is the most common barrier to employment for those with a long gap since their last job, said Jeromy Buchanan, director of Community Living, Aging and Protective Services for the Oklahoma Department of Human Services.

"A lot of the training they want is stuff like Outlook and Excel," Buchanan said. "Those programs, they just don't have experience with it. They may have experience with Gmail or Yahoo, but those may be

the only computer skills they have."

Things to consider

Employers who are interested in hiring older Americans should take care not to run afoul of age discrimination laws, which prohibits hiring or firing employees based on age.

The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 protects workers age 40 and older from hiring discrimination and harassment on the job.

Employment attorney, Frank Frasier, who serves the Lawton area, said the wording of advertisements and job descriptions is important.

"If you think a senior might be a good fit, then keep that in the back of your mind. If you're going to put (the job) on Facebook or Indeed or something like that then I would make it very broad. Seniors, disabled and minorities are welcome to apply."

As long as the wording is inclusive and hiring practice is not exclusionary, an employer can make the job opening known in places seniors might be looking, such as publications they read, Frasier said.

Employers have a right to expect an employee to perform the job, but Frasier said choosing to terminate an employee because of their age is a violation of their rights.

"You simply can't say, 'well you know, you've got this bad hip' or 'you're arthritic or you're too slow,'" he warned.

"If they're not doing their work, that would be grounds for termination."

Employers should also keep an open mind when it comes to the requirements of the job if they're interested in attracting applicants, including older Americans, said Erin Glass, business services manager for South Central Oklahoma Workforce Board. The board works with job seekers and employers to put more residents to work through free resources, including training and the job posting site, Okjobmatch.com.

The board encourages employers to shift to skills-based hiring instead of only education or specific years of experience to qualify an applicant. The requirement of five years on the job means someone who is qualified but has only four year experience often does not apply to negotiate for the position, Glass said.

"We're still seeing a lot of 'must have bachelors' and sometimes it will say, 'or relevant experience,' but really and truly we push skills-based hiring," Glass said.

She also said employers should be willing to "up-skill" new recruits of any age through the board's incumbent worker training program. The board pays 90% of the cost to train employees for employers with fewer than 50 employees.

Editor's note: This is the third installment in a series on the state's labor shortage that explores untapped workforce pools.

Employment Statistics

The following statistics show the demographics of Oklahomans aged 60 or older:

- 9% are employed.
- 58% are married, while 42% are divorced, widowed or never married.
- 56% live in family households, while 41% live alone.
- 32% have associate degrees or higher while 23% have some college, 33% are high school graduates and 12% did not graduate high school.
- 83% white; 9% American Indian/Alaskan Native; 5% Black or African American; 2% some other race alone, or two or more races; and 1% Asian.

The following data on the labor force participation rate by age is from the Center for Workforce Inclusion:

- For those aged 55 and older, the labor participation rate is projected to reach 25% this year.
- Nearly 10% of 55 year-olds were retired 20 years ago, but dropped to now 5%, while retirees aged 59 fell from 20% to 10%.
- Less than half of Americans aged 65 are now retired, against 58% who were retired in 2000.
- In 2000, more than 42% of 16-19 year-olds had a full or part-time job, but it dropped to 31% in 2022.

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Lawsuit filed over ‘insulin pricing scheme’

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – State Attorney General Gentner Drummond filed a lawsuit against major diabetic drug manufacturers and pharmacy benefit managers for “an unfair and deceptive pricing scheme that has cost Americans billions of dollars.”

Alleging violations of the Oklahoma Consumer Protection Act, Drummond said manufacturers have significantly raised the prices of their diabetes drugs in lock-step during the last 15 years despite the fact that the costs of producing the critical drugs have diminished. And he said manufacturers and PBMs – which are “at the center of the convoluted pharmaceutical payment chain” – coordinated closely to control drug prices and drug purchasing behavior.

The lawsuit, filed May 14 in Cleveland County District Court, names as defendants Eli Lilly and Co., Novo Nordisk Inc, Sanofi-Aventis U.S. LLC, Evernorth Health Inc. (formerly Express Scripts Holding Co.), Express Scripts Inc., Express Scripts Administrators LLC, Esi Mail Pharmacy Service Inc., Express Scripts Pharmacy Inc., Medco Health Solutions Inc., CVS Health Corp., CVS Pharmacy Inc., Caremark Rx LLC, Caremark-PCS Health LLC, Caremark LLC, UnitedHealth Group Inc., OptumRx Inc. and Optuminsight Inc.

Eli Lilly, Novo Nordisk, and Sanofi manufacture “the vast majority of insulins and other diabetic medications available in Oklahoma,” the lawsuit claims.

CVS Caremark, Express

Scripts, and OptumRx “collectively dominate the pricing system for the at-issue drugs,” according to the lawsuit. Their dominance “results from the reality that these three corporate actors are, at once (1) the largest pharmacy benefit managers in the United States and in Oklahoma (controlling approximately 80% of the PBM market) and (2) the largest pharmacies in the United States and in Oklahoma” (comprising three of the top five dispensing pharmacies in the U.S.). “These PBM conglomerates sit at 4th (CVS Caremark), 5th (OptumRx) and 13th (Express Scripts) on the Fortune 500 list ranking largest corporations by revenue.”

If the three primary PBMs do not include a drug on one of their standard formulary offerings, “it is not available to 80% of Oklahoma’s citizens,” the lawsuit alleges.

“It is despicable that these companies preyed upon Oklahomans who were desperate for life-saving medication to bolster their profits,” Drummond said. “The outrageous profits these companies obtained through deceptive business practices need to be paid back through restitution or rescission.”

It costs the manufacturers named in the lawsuit less than \$2 per vial to produce insulin, according to the filing. Yet the drugs, which sold for \$20 in the late 1990s, now range between \$300 and \$700. In the last decade, the manufacturer defendants have hiked the price of their insulin up to 1,000%, Drummond charged.

“A friend was telling me about the cost of insulin, especially if you don’t have insurance,” state Rep. Rande

Worthen (R-Lawton) told Southwest Ledger three years ago. “The cost is just terrible.”

“The current unlawfully inflated price stands in stark contrast to insulin’s origins: the discoverers sold the original patent for \$1 to ensure that the medication would remain affordable,” Drummond’s lawsuit states. “Today, insulin has become the poster child for skyrocketing and inflated drug prices.”

The Oklahoma Legislature passed a measure in 2021 that capped the price for a 30-day supply of insulin at \$30, and \$90 for a 90-day supply, for each prescription covered by insurance. Co-pays are based on individual insurance plans.

House Bill 1019 was authored by Worthen and former Sen. Frank Simpson (R-Ardmore), and was signed into law by Gov. Kevin Stitt.

Insurance companies “worked alongside us on this measure,” Worthen added. “We couldn’t have done it without their support.” The state Insurance Commissioner is authorized to enforce the price cap, HB 1019 stipulates.

All diabetics paying inflated insulin prices

“Whether insured or not, all Oklahoma diabetics pay a substantial part of their diabetic drug costs based on the false list prices generated by the Insulin Pricing Scheme,” Drummond charged in his 130-page lawsuit.

Uninsured diabetics “must pay the full, point-of-sale prices (based on the artificially high prices generated by the Insulin Pricing Scheme) every time they fill

their prescriptions,” the lawsuit notes.

Approximately 14% of this state’s population – or 575,000 Oklahoma residents – is uninsured, and approximately 18% of uninsured Oklahomans are diabetic, Drummond states in the lawsuit.

Insured diabetics, too, “often pay a significant portion of a drug’s price” in “exorbitant, indefensible out-of-pocket costs” and include including deductibles, coinsurance requirements, and/or copayment requirements “based on the artificially inflated list prices...”

“Approximately 200,000 Oklahomans have Type 1 diabetes, requiring daily usage of insulin,” Simpson said. Simpson has been an advocate for Oklahoma’s diabetic community since his granddaughter’s death from complications related to Type 1 diabetes.

Insulin, a hormone that helps convert food into energy, is critical to controlling blood sugar levels in diabetes patients. Type I diabetes is caused when a person’s body does not produce enough insulin, resulting in high levels of blood sugar or glucose. This puts them at risk of serious health complications. There is no known way to prevent or cure Type 1 diabetes.

“Unfortunately, because of continually increasing prices, many diabetics ration their insulin or go without, putting their health and lives at further risk,” Simpson said. HB 1019 is “a common-sense approach that has already been approved in several other states,” he said.

“Companies shouldn’t be allowed to profit from life-sustaining medicines such as insulin.”

“As a direct result of the Insulin Pricing Scheme, one in four Oklahoma diabetics can no longer afford their diabetes medication and are forced to ration and skip doses,” Drummond’s lawsuit alleges. “This forced lack of adherence leads to substantial additional healthcare costs.”

The total estimated cost of diagnosed diabetes in Oklahoma is \$6 billion annually, Drummond said. One of every four health care dollars “is spent caring for people with diabetes,” he wrote.

Oklahomans with diabetes have medical expenses approximately 2.3 times higher than those who do not have diabetes, research indicates.

Diabetes ‘an epidemic, and public health crisis’

Diabetes is “an epidemic and a public health crisis in Oklahoma,” Drummond related in his lawsuit. Approximately 450,000 Oklahoman suffer from diabetes, and approximately 1.6 million more have prediabetes, “which is when a person’s blood sugar level is higher than it should be and signifies that the person is at greater risk for developing” the disease.

Diabetes is the seventh leading cause of death in Oklahoma, giving this state the fourth-highest age-adjusted diabetes death rate in the nation. Diabetes is the leading cause of blindness, amputation, heart disease, kidney failure and early death – all of which are preventable with proper management.

Multistate theft ring leader sentenced to federal prison

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

A woman with a 20-year criminal record in three counties employed nearly two dozen individuals in a multistate retail theft ring that stole merchandise for resale out-of-state.

Linda Ann Been, 51, also known as Linda A. Gann and Linda A. Hargreaves, pleaded guilty in Tulsa’s Northern District federal court to 214 felony counts: one count of conspiracy, 165 counts of wire fraud, one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud, two counts of conspiracy to commit money laundering, and 45 counts of engaging in monetary transactions in property derived from specified unlawful activity.

U.S. District Judge Gregory Frizzell recently sentenced Been to five years and four months in federal prison and ordered her to pay \$43,197.76 in restitution.

Prosecutors said the crime ring Been directed stole an estimated \$9 million worth of merchandise and over-the-counter medications from retail stores and pharmacies over a period of almost three years, between January 2018 and November 2021, when she and 22 co-defendants were indicted in Tulsa’s Northern District federal court.

Been admitted hiring a band of “boosters” to steal goods and merchandise, particularly medications, from retail stores.

A federal grand jury learned that in 2016 Been was “introduced to the practice of purchasing and reselling stolen merchandise acquired from boosters.” She began using an ex-husband’s eBay account to sell merchandise she obtained from boosters.

Through her use of eBay, Been “became acquainted with various ‘fences’ and ‘fencing’ operations” throughout the U.S. “who were interested” in buying stolen merchandise in bulk quantities.

Thus, Been sold stolen merchandise in large quantities and “at prices below market value, to various fencing operations located throughout the U.S.,” who in turn sold it online. And to “keep up with

growing demand,” Been and some of her other conspirators recruited additional boosters “to help her obtain product.” One conspirator enlisted his ex-wife, his daughter, and one of his cousins.

Fences would send emails and text messages that “detailed lists of items and prices they would pay,” and they “generally agreed to pay Been half the retail value of any given item,” the indictment relates.

In turn, Been, also via emails and text messages, would provide her boosters with “detailed lists of the items she wanted and the amount she would pay for each item,” and instructed the boosters which stores to victimize.

Been’s boosters targeted Sam’s Club, CVS, Walgreens, Akin’s Natural Foods, GNC, Reasor’s, Sprouts, Target, Walmart and Costco stores in Tulsa, Claremore, Jenks, Owasso, Oklahoma City, Edmond, Norman and Moore. The boosters also committed thefts in Texas, Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, Colorado and others, prosecutors wrote.

One of the thieves’ tricks was “box-stuffing”: concealing high-value items inside a lower-valued item box, paying only for the lower-valued item and “absconding with the concealed items.”

After stealing merchandise and medications, the boosters delivered the products to Been at various locations, including her residences at an RV park in Tulsa and a mobile home park in Cleveland, a business warehouse in Sand Springs operated by two of the conspirators, and another conspirator’s residence in Sand Springs.

The conspirators assembled pallets of inventory and contracted with freight companies to deliver their stolen goods to fencing operations.

Been received approximately \$4.5 million in payments from fencing operations for shipments of an estimated \$9 million in stolen property, the indictment reported.

Boosters’ travel expenses, jail bonds paid by Been

When her boosters traveled out-

of-state on shoplifting trips, Been sent payments via mobile payment platforms “to assist with their travel expenses,” the indictment relates.

And when a booster was arrested for theft or larceny, Been “facilitated bond payments for their release,” thereby enabling boosters “to continue stealing in furtherance of the conspiracy.”

If she was unable to secure a booster’s release from jail by paying his/her bond, Been would send money to the booster’s jail commissary account and family members, in order to discourage their cooperation with law enforcement agencies.

A national investigation of the theft ring, “Operation Booster Buster,” began in 2019 after an organized crime investigator for CVS detected a trend in bulk thefts of items from Tulsa-area stores, officials said.

Items and products stolen by the boosters included Nicorette gum, Xyzal, Allegra, Abreva, Prevagen, Zantac, Mucinex, Rogaine, Zyrtec, Viviscal, Claritin, Culturelle, Flonase, Nasacort, Nexium, Zegrid, Prilosec, “and assorted vitamin products.” Two of the conspirators stole eight boxes of SeroVital dietary supplements and 88 boxes of Frontline flea treatment from a Costco store in Arlington, Texas, on Aug. 9, 2019.

Federal prosecutors have filed a forfeiture application to confiscate the proceeds from the gang’s operations, including \$70,000 in real estate, cash seized in a credit union account, six motor vehicles and a \$27,000 motorcycle, a travel trailer and a 2020 Jayco Pinnacle luxury fifth wheel owned by Been.

20 co-defendants have pleaded guilty

Twenty of Been’s co-defendants have pleaded guilty and have been sentenced, U.S. Attorney Clint Johnson said.

Among them was Billy Don Osborne, 50, who was Linda Been’s boyfriend at the time.

Osborne eventually “was involved in all aspects of the retail theft operation,” investigators discovered.

As Osborne’s role in the retail theft operation expanded, he enlisted the aid of his family and friends. Not only was his ex-wife a booster, but his daughter also assisted with maintaining inventory records and preparing shipping documents.

Osborne even recruited his cousin, Juston Paul Osborne, to receive and store stolen property at his Sand Springs residence and to pay boosters for the stolen products. (Juston Osborne, too, was indicted in the case.)

“While this operation was started by Been, its success was due in large part to Osborne’s involvement,” a court record states.

According to law enforcement and prison officials, Osborne, “has spent his entire adult life as a thief, in and out of the state prison system.” The number of his convictions for theft-related crimes is “astounding.”

His criminal record includes motor vehicle theft in McIntosh County in 2018, concealing stolen property in Osage County in 2019, and nine felony cases filed in Tulsa County as far back as 1995. In July 2022 Osborne was sentenced to four years and three months in federal prison and was ordered to pay a \$5,000 fine.

Been has a state criminal record that extends back 20 years.

In 2004 she was charged in Wagoner County District Court with possession of drug paraphernalia, tampering with surveillance equipment in order to commit a crime, and possession of a controlled dangerous substance with intent to distribute.

She was charged in Tulsa County in 2005 with possession of methamphetamine after former conviction of a felony, and was allowed to enter a drug court program.

Four years later she was convicted in Tulsa County of possession with intent to distribute a controlled dangerous substance, and was sentenced to four years in prison.

And in 2019 she received a two-year suspended prison sentence in Oklahoma County on a conviction for larceny of merchandise from a retailer.

Been was permitted to remain free from custody on bond and voluntarily surrender to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons by 2 p.m. June 19.

Have a new hire, promotion or work anniversary to announce?



Email us at info@southwestledger.news

Southwest Oklahoma Legislative Update

State Senate

By **Debi DeSilver**
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – Budget negotiations are still underway with about 10 days left in the legislative session. A major sticking point is that Senate Pro Tem Greg Treat (R-Oklahoma City) is staunchly opposed to any additional tax cuts above the state's portion of the grocery tax, which was approved by Governor Kevin Stitt earlier in the session.

Legislative action in the state Senate last week included unanimous approval to appropriate \$45 million to help counties devastated by recent tornadoes. The Senate gave final passage to House Bills 2912 and 2913 to help counties approved for Federal Emergency Management Assistance disaster aid. The governor approved both measures May 17.

HB 2912 creates a new revolving fund for the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management to provide "advanced financial liquidity" to local governments, a Senate press release said. The Department of Emergency Management will be able to offer loans to local governments that will cover the costs of temporary housing and shelters, infrastructure repairs and other unexpected costs related to debris removal and recovery efforts. FEMA assistance requires a local 12.5% match in funds.

HB 2913 will provide \$30 million to the new fund and \$15 million to the State Emergency Fund to cover the match the state must put up in advance to qualify for FEMA disaster assistance.

"The Senate fast-tracked this relief funding to help Sulphur, Barnsdall, Marietta and other cities and towns recover and rebuild as quickly as possible," Senate Majority Floor Leader Greg McCortney (R-Ada) said in the news release. To date, the counties of Carter, Hughes, Love, Murray, Okmulgee, Osage, Pontotoc and Washita have been approved for FEMA funds.

With the session closing on May 31, legislators are still working for passage of their bills before the final gavel.

Sen. Jessica Garvin (R-Duncan)

Three bills co-sponsored by Sen. Garvin were approved by the governor on May 15.

HB 2528 pertains to the Teachers' Retirement System of Oklahoma and specifically addresses application, procedure, options, liability, expenses, references and deleting terms.

HB 3190 pertains to health insurance and the Ensuring Transparency in Prior Authorization Act. The bill specifically addresses disclosure and review of prior authorization, adverse determinations, consultations,

reviewing physicians, utilization review entity, exceptions, retrospective denial, length of prior authorization, continuity of care, standard for transmission of authorization, failure to comply and severability.

HB 3035, which pertains the Allopathic Medical and Surgical Licensure and Supervision Act, specifically addresses licenses, investigator duties, physicians or surgeons, inactive status and executive director duties.

In addition, a bill authored by Garvin, addressing the police pension and retirement system, Senate Bill 102, was sent to the governor on May 15. The measure will increase the minimum employee contribution for certain members and also increase the computation of certain monthly benefits. It also increases the employer contribution and updates statutory language.

Garvin also co-sponsored HB 1349, which will create the Oklahoma Medical Marijuana Authority Advisory Board. HB 1349 was sent to the governor's desk on May 15 and is pending approval. The measure outlines who will be seated on the council.

Sen. Brent Howard (R-Altus)

Two bills co-sponsored by Sen. Howard were approved by the

governor on May 15.

HB 1547 pertains to conserving monies obtained for or on behalf of persons under 18 years of age in court proceedings or incompetent persons in court proceedings, and HB 3467, which pertains to establishing procedures for sealed bid auction for certain property and requiring execution and delivery of deeds by sheriff under certain circumstances.

Sen. Lonnie Paxton (R-Tuttle)

A bill co-sponsored by Sen. Paxton pertaining to controlled dangerous substances, HB 3567, was approved by the governor on May 15. It specifically addresses adding to the list of Schedule I controlled substances, revocation or suspension of registrations, written orders and repealers. More than 20 pages of the bill are dedicated to definitions and Section II of the measure addresses a lengthy specific list of opiates, opium derivatives, hallucinogenic substances and stimulants and depressants.

In addition, Paxton's SB 1943, pertaining to the Uniform Controlled Dangerous Substances Act, was sent to the governor's desk on May 15. The measure also addresses specifying registration requirements and announcing the rules for certain fees by the director.

Southwest Oklahoma Legislative Update

House of Representatives

By **Debi DeSilver**
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – Recent legislative action in the state House of Representatives included adding a financial literacy course to high school graduation requirements. The bill, House Bill 2158, was authored by Rep. Dick Lowe (R-Amber) and was approved by Governor Kevin Stitt.

Lowe said in a press release that empowering students to take control of their finances starts with education.

"Requiring students to master financial literacy before graduating isn't just about balancing budgets," he said. "It's about laying a good foundation as they begin the next chapter of their lives by equipping them with the tools they need to navigate financial decisions thoughtfully."

Students will now be required to complete a half unit of personal financial literacy coursework during high school, either in the 10th, 11th or 12th grade. The bill allows the coursework to be integrated into an existing class or taught by itself, although certain topics must be taught. They include retirement planning, investing, online banking features and credit scores.

The student financial literacy law will take effect July 1, 2025.

State budget negotiations are still underway between the House and Senate, with the current legislative session ending on May 31. This leaves about 10 days for an agreement in the regular session. Legislators are also still working for a final push on bills that are still pending and have not made it to the governor's desk for approval.

Rep. Brad Boles (R-Marlow)

House Resolution 1047 advocates for amending the Oklahoma Constitution to require proof of citizenship for voter registration passed and was enrolled, signed and filed with the Secretary of State last week. Rep. Boles was a co-sponsor of the resolution, which was authored by House Speaker Charles McCall (R-Atoka).

The measure is to recognize the importance of protecting the integrity of the electoral process by ensuring that only eligible citizens exercise their right to vote. It notes that the current provisions of the Oklahoma Constitution do not explicitly require

proof of citizenship for voter registration and that numerous other states have already implemented a similar requirement.

Two bills co-sponsored by Rep. Boles were approved by the governor last week.

HB 4012, which pertains to building the State Capitol Arch to honor the Oklahoma National Guard. The \$4.3 million price will be allocated from the Oklahoma Capitol Improvement Authority Legacy Capital Financing Fund.

HB 3190 pertains to health insurance and the Ensuring Transparency in Prior Authorization Act, and specifically addresses disclosure and review of prior authorization, adverse determinations, consultations, reviewing physicians, utilization review entity, exceptions, retrospective denial, length of prior authorization, continuity of care, standard for transmission of authorization, failure to comply and severability.

Rep. Trey Caldwell (R-Lawton)

The state House resolution advocating for amending the Oklahoma Constitution to require proof of citizenship for voter registration, HR 1047, was also co-sponsored by Rep. Caldwell. It was enrolled, signed and filed with the Secretary of State last week.

In addition, Rep. Caldwell, along with Rep. Boles and Sen. Jessica Garvin (R-Duncan) co-sponsored HB 3190, which pertains to health insurance and the Ensuring Transparency in Prior Authorization Act. The measure was approved by the governor on May 15.

A bill pertaining to schools and modifying graduation curriculum requirements, HB 3278, co-sponsored by Rep. Caldwell, was also approved by the governor on May 15. It modifies certain current statutes and specifies standards for individual subjects and how many units will be required for graduation. For example, the bill text states that for the subject matter standards for history, social studies and United States Government classes will include the content of the U.S. naturalization test. Three units will be required from a list of approved classes.

Rep. Toni Hasenbeck (R-Elgin)

A measure creating the Laser Hair Removal act, HB 2998,

authored by Rep. Hasenbeck and co-sponsored by Rep. Marcus McEntire (R-Duncan), was approved by the governor on May 13. The law now mandates education and training and will require certain credentials.

Rep. Hasenbeck was also a co-sponsor on HB 3190, along with other southwest Oklahoma legislators, which pertains to health insurance and the Ensuring Transparency in Prior Authorization Act. That measure was approved by the governor on May 15.

Rep. Gerrid Kendrix (R-Altus)

Rep. Kendrix was also a co-sponsor on House Joint Resolution 1047, along with other southwest Oklahoma legislators, which advocates for amending the Oklahoma Constitution to require proof of citizenship for voter registration. The measure was filed with the Secretary of State last week.

In addition, Rep. Kendrix authored House Concurrent Resolution 1014, which recognized May 10 as Military Spouse Appreciation Day. It was filed with the Secretary of State. The resolution recognized and honored the contributions and sacrifices of military spouses and expressed appreciation for military spouse service.

Rep. Marcus McEntire (R-Duncan)

Two bills authored by Rep. McEntire were approved by the governor last week.

HB 3376, which pertains to pharmacy benefit managers and the Patient's Right to Pharmacy Choice Act, was approved on May 15. The measure also addresses contracts, health information, fines and fees, definitions and creates a revolving fund. A section of the bill requires the Attorney General to review and approve retail pharmacy network access for all pharmacy benefits managers to ensure compliance.

HB 3351, which pertains to medical preceptorship training and provides for an income tax credit, establishes a revolving fund and addresses a license fee. In the health field a preceptor is defined as an experienced practitioner who supervises students during clinical practice. The measure was approved by the governor on May 16.

A bill creating the Laser Hair Removal act, HB 2998, authored

by Rep. Hasenbeck and co-sponsored by Rep. McEntire, was approved by the governor on May 13. The law now mandates education and training and will require certain credentials.

In addition, a bill co-sponsored by Rep. McEntire, Senate Bill 1670, was sent to the governor's desk on May 15 and is awaiting approval. The measure pertains to pharmacy benefits management and seeks to modify audit processes and requirements and also addresses modifying reimbursement rates.

Rep. Daniel Pae (R-Lawton)

Three bills co-sponsored by Rep. Pae were approved by the governor last week.

HB 3278 addresses schools and modifies graduation curriculum requirements. The bill, co-sponsored by Rep. Caldwell, was approved by the governor on May 15.

HB 3511, which pertains to special elections and modifying timelines for certain elections. In brief, it sets time limits for special elections to be held after already scheduled voting. It was approved by the governor on May 16.

HB 4148, which pertains to civil procedure regarding the collection of medical debts, civil actions, default judgments and procedures. It was also approved by the governor on May 16.

Rep. Dick Lowe (R-Amber)

Two bills either authored or co-sponsored by Rep. Lowe received legislative action last week.

HB 2185, which pertains to agriculture and specifically addresses pesticide application and modifying the requirement to receive an aerial license, was sent to the governor's desk and is pending approval. The bill, authored by Rep. Lowe, also seeks to modify some rules and standards and create uniformity between the requirements of Oklahoma and those prescribed by the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act.

Rep. Lowe also co-sponsored HB 4012, along with several other southwest Oklahoma legislators, which pertains to building the State Capitol Arch to honor the Oklahoma National Guard. The \$4.3 million price will be allocated from the Oklahoma Capitol Improvement Authority Legacy Capital Financing Fund.

State regulators approve Fort Cobb Fuel Authority rate hike

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – The state Corporation Commission has authorized Fort Cobb Fuel Authority to increase the base rate for its residential, domestic tap, and commercial customers to \$24.50 per month effective Jan. 1, 2025.

For residential customers in the FCFA Division in southwest Oklahoma, the increase will amount to \$7.62/month, or 45%. For residential customers in the LeAnn Division in northern and eastern Oklahoma, the increase will be \$9.17/month, or 37.4%. The monthly increase for commercial customers will be \$5.25 in the Fort Cobb Division and \$36.10 in the LeAnn

Division.

In addition, all residential, commercial, and domestic tap customers will pay \$3.44 per hundred cubic feet (ccf) for the first 5 ccf.

The new rates reflect continuation of a “move toward unification of the class rates and structures” in the Fort Cobb and LeAnn divisions, said David Scalf, Programs Manager-Rates with the Corporation Commission’s Public Utility Division.

The last time FCFA raised its rates was nine years ago, in 2015, and those rates were based on the company’s performance 11 years ago, in calendar year 2013.

The commission directed the company to file another rate case no later than December 2028 in order to “eliminate or mute ... cus-

tomers rate shock.”

Corporation Commissioners authorized FCFA to boost its annual revenues by \$799,214, which was 39% less than the \$1.3 million FCFA asked for when it filed the rate hike request 11 months ago.

The revenue increase excludes the cost of natural gas that FCFA buys from third-party non-affiliated gas suppliers and resells to its customers. (FCFA sold 30% more natural gas in January this year than it did during the same month last year, Oklahoma City attorney Ron Comingdeer told the commission on March 13.) It also excludes \$47,000 in rate case expenses that will be amortized over a five-year period, at \$9,400/year.

The company was allowed to impose an interim, temporary rate increase on Feb. 1 pending the final order in the rate case that was issued May 14.

Under the new rate schedule, Fort Cobb Fuel Authority is allowed a return on equity of 11.4%. Its current debt-to-equity ratio is 61.59% debt and 38.41% equity.

A document filed with the Corporation Commission in a separate matter three years ago reported FCFA provides natural gas to approximately 4,000 customers at various locations throughout Oklahoma.

Fort Cobb Fuel Authority is a privately held company owned and operated by Navitas Utility Corp., which is based in California. The

Navitas website says it serves 17 Oklahoma counties.

FCFA is comprised of two divisions. Its LeAnn Division serves Kay, Logan, Nowata, Osage, and Washington counties, and Pawnee County (including Jennings and Hallett). The Fort Cobb Fuel Authority Division includes Caddo, Greer, Harmon, Jackson, Stephens, Washita, and some other counties, according to Navitas.

Navitas Assets acquired the Fort Cobb Fuel Authority in 2007 and the LeAnn Gas Co. in 2009.

The Navitas website says it serves Alma, rural Carnegie, Eakly, rural Fort Cobb and the rural Fort Cobb Lake area, Gracemont, Lookeba, Sickles and Velma in southwest Oklahoma, as well as Rimrock (the Hollis area).

Fort Cobb Fuel Authority customers file protests

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – Several customers whose natural-gas service is provided by Navitas and its subsidiaries expressed to state regulators their displeasure with the utility company’s rate increase.

A couple of business owners, for example, related their concerns.

Navitas’ natural gas rates “are already substantially higher than other providers, and raising them any higher will alter the way our company does business,” Jordan Gunter of Gunter Peanut Co. in Binger wrote in an email to the Corporation Commission.

Dean Smith of SS Farms Operating in Hydro said he appreciates “the service” and employees of Fort Cobb Fuel Authority, a utility company that Navitas bought in 2007.

Navitas “has made a lot of improvements” to its gas distribution system, added Dale Boerwinkle, who works with Smith.

“We know that ... acquiring natural gas from a highly erratic deregulated market would be extremely challenging and potentially devastating to a utility business, as revealed in February 2021” during Winter Storm Uri, Smith said. In addition, “We know that delivering the fuel to homes and businesses in sparsely populated areas is more expensive than in towns and cities.”

Nonetheless, he asked the Corporation Commission to be “extra diligent in determining the validity” of FCFA’s rate increase application.

“Planning to relocate from Hinton to the country, we evaluated our residential bills on the house in town,”

Smith related. Comparing usage volumes from his 2023 bills, he calculated FCFA’s current residential rates to what he paid Hinton’s gas provider (Summit) last year.

FCFA’s average utility bill was 57.5% higher – and that was using existing rates, before the price hike approved May 14.

Propane “looks attractive” as an alternative fuel, Boerwinkle told Southwest Ledger.

SS Farms “raises and pre-processes (drying, cleaning and grinding)” hot peppers “in preparation for an extractor in the northern U.S.,” Smith told the Corporation Commission. The fuel bill for drying is “a large component in the cost of finishing the production,” and SS Farms “used 50 times as much natural gas as our house did,” he wrote.

The increase in the base rate “comes at a time when prices for specialty crops have stalled, prices for commodity crops have bottomed, and certain input costs (especially repairs and parts) have doubled,” Smith related.

Mysterious ‘tariff tax’ cost \$120 in January

After receiving a notice from Navitas that they applied for a rate hike, Sharon Sharp of Guthrie declared that the company’s rates are “absolutely outrageous already, along with their additions which include a mysterious ‘Tariff Tax’ ripoff!” The company uses inflation “as an excuse, but HELLO!!, inflation is killing all of us.”

Sharp said she received an increase in her Social Security benefit “and what is that going to get me with absolutely everything going up? I have two part-time jobs

in order to be able to keep my property and feed my animals.”

She said she has lived on her property for 12 years and Southern Star previously was their natural-gas provider. “After Navitas took over, my bills (and those of every other person I have talked with in my neighborhood) shot up 2-3 times more than we had ever paid for natural gas before – and that includes years of ice storms and below-freezing temperatures.”

Her gas bill in January “was more than 3 times what I used to pay... I thought I had a gas leak somewhere, but I did not. The ‘Tariff Tax’ alone was \$120.”

Sharp said she keeps her thermostat at 65 degrees, and wears “a lot of clothes” and uses a blanket “when sitting on my couch.”

Customers turn to electricity, wood

“A lot of the people around here have switched to electric heat because they cannot afford the gas prices,” said Jerry Gould of Ramona, 14 miles south of Bartlesville. “I can heat with electric portable heaters cheaper than using my furnace.”

Jamie Ready of Cleveland said he also opposed the rate increase “while my household is struggling to keep up with the cost of everything increasing (insurance, taxes, groceries, fuel) – except wages.” Navitas “would lose more money when I am forced to stop using natural gas and use my fireplace full-time.”

David and Cynthia Phillips of Bartlesville had a similar response. “We burn wood just to try and keep expenses to a minimum, but it doesn’t seem to be working,” they wrote.

Fix leaky gas lines

Jamie Ready said Navitas doesn’t need to increase its rates. Instead, “They need to fix their outdated, dangerous leaky lines and then they will profit from not losing natural gas into the air. We have had many leaks in my neighborhood and they never fix it correctly. It always smells so bad.”

The utility’s plastic distribution lines “are so close to the surface that our mower has struck them. We have called the company several times over several years and it still leaks. They can never seem to locate leaks, either so they leave and hope we will forget about it.”

During installation of a water line to Ready’s property, a gas line was struck “which the gas company didn’t even know was there,” he claimed. The company “needs to tighten their belt and take care of their leaky infrastructure...”

Ron and Cheryl Gallegos of Guthrie had a similar complaint.

One issue where “it is plainly evident that the costs attributable to domestic tap and non-domestic tap users are nothing alike, much less comparable, are the costs FCFA is permitted to pass on to its customers due to lost, used and unaccounted for gas.” FCFA’s “lost gas” arises from its plant infrastructure operations and pipeline distribution network, the couple told the Corporation Commission.

None of that infrastructure delivers natural gas to domestic tap customers, they noted. “The gas we receive flows directly from the Southern Star pipeline to the meter and to our house.” There is “no loss in

delivering gas to domestic tap customers,” they maintained, “and it is not ‘equitable’ to charge us for it.”

Customers contend FCFA rates too high

“I compared my gas bill with my son who lives in Skiatook” and is served by Oklahoma Natural Gas Co., Gould wrote. “My bill is always three times the price” for the commensurate volume of cubic feet of natural gas.

In the 41 years they’ve lived in their Bartlesville home, the Phillipses “have had many gas companies.” They said they were told that Fort Cobb Fuel Authority “did not want any residential customers on their gas lines, they wanted only companies.”

The couple wrote, “We didn’t ask for this company but we always pay our bills.” However, “many times” their gas bill “has been more than we could afford to pay” – \$515.83 on one occasion, \$329.38 on another, and one bill in 2022 was \$223 – and they turned to “outside sources” for financial assistance. “With the prior company our bill never got over \$60.”

Kristie Detwiler of Mulhall compared her family’s bills from FCFA with what Oklahoma Natural Gas charges for an identical volume of natural gas.

Her December bill from FCFA was \$362.27, compared to \$147.65 that ONG would charge for the same amount of gas: 189 cubic feet, she wrote. The FCFA bill for January was \$786.37 for 443 cubic feet of gas; ONG charged \$288.02 for the same quantity of gas, she told the commission.



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'Domestic taps' cause Corp. Commission flap

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – The state Corporation Commission approved Fort Cobb Fuel Authority's rate hike on a 2-1 vote. Chairman Todd Hiatt voted 'no' because the final order omitted a proposed six-year phase-in for customers who are served from "domestic taps."

During a March 13 commission meeting, Hiatt said there were 379 domestic tap customers in Fort Cobb and nearly 400 in all. Those customers constitute approximately 10% of FCFA's customers, Hiatt said.

When Southern Star was installing a pipeline, he said, they provided some property owners with a domestic tap (also referred to as a field tap) for residential service. These taps were not part of a distribution line. In exchange for granting right-of-way allowing the pipeline to be buried on their property, these residents were provided with a tap "and the opportunity to purchase gas at either

no cost, or wholesale cost, or some minimal cost of the gas," Hiatt said.

After Southern Star discontinued service to those customers, "They would not have had any service at all except for the fact that the Fort Cobb Fuel Authority bought the right to serve those customers," Hiatt said. FCFA is "trying to move them from the old field tap to a more normal charge for customers currently on the distribution system."

Most of the costs that FCFA incurs in its gas operations are attributed to "its plant and pipeline infrastructure, capital costs and financing related to this infrastructure, and costs associated with maintaining that infrastructure," wrote Ron and Cheryl Gallegos of Guthrie.

"None of these costs are attributable to FCFA's domestic tap customers," because they have a direct connection to Southern Star's pipeline. "The only infrastructure used by FCFA to deliver gas to us and other domestic tap customers is its gas meter," the Gallego-

ses said.

"Southern Star installed a new meter on our property, which we believe it sold for a minimal amount as part of the transition to FCFA." Southern Star "provides the tap, the few feet of pipe that runs from its pipeline to the ground surface. This pipeline is connected to FCFA's meter."

That pipeline extends to the Gallegoses' house. "Our understanding, based on our past dealings with other utilities, is that the 'house pipeline' is owned by us and is our responsibility." Regardless of whether it is or is not owned by them, "There has been no work needed on the 'house pipeline' since we have lived in our home."

Insofar as maintenance costs, "We are only aware of the monthly meter read and check," the Gallegoses wrote. "A service worker occasionally adds methyl mercaptan, a natural-gas odorant, to the cannister attached to the meter."

Nevertheless, "Like all FCFA customers, we pay a monthly service charge whether

we use any gas or not," they pointed out.

"I felt like there was a need to phase-in those customers, give them time to decide whether they wanted to pay Fort Cobb's new rates or transition to propane or electricity or some other source," Hiatt said during the commission's May 14 meeting. He previously told the other commissioners that he was concerned about "the abrupt change from a minimal cost per month" to \$500 or \$700 "for the same usage."

"I'm familiar with the term 'rate shock,'" Commissioner Bob Anthony said. However, the domestic tap customers "have had a really good deal for a long time," he said, and announced his support of the final order.

"They have not been getting this gas for free," Hiatt responded. "They gave up right-of-way across their property in exchange for that tap."

The commission's Public Utility Division "attempted to address" the concerns expressed by Hiatt and FCFA's domestic tap customers, but

the options "would only delay" the inevitable, a spokesman said. "The real culprit in this issue is the cost of gas, not the rates."

"I sympathize with the customers over this dilemma," Commissioner Kim David said. "It's going to be tough for these customers, but I feel like the final order before us is the best we could put together for them."

Under the settlement agreement approved last week, starting on New Year's Day 2025 domestic tap customers will pay a \$24.50 base service charge, \$3.44 per hundred cubic feet for the first 5 ccf, then 64.9 cents for each hundred cubic feet over 5 ccf.

Comingdeer told the Corporation Commission that Fort Cobb Fuel Authority has agreed to prepare a full cost-of-service study that will include analysis of the domestic tap, for inclusion in the next rate case. He said the company agreed to a minimal phase-in that would affect at least some of the domestic tap customers added to the gas distribution system.

Fraud incidents can now be reported online

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – Suspected incidents of fraud – such as the case of a Carter County woman who defrauded a victim of more than \$1 million – can now be reported via an online form.

A multitude of confidence schemes prey on senior citizens in scenarios that range from fake lotteries to tech support scams, and correspondence from individ-

uals posing as a grandchild, a government official or an interested romantic partner.

The senior fraud complaint form is accessible on the state Attorney General's website at oag.ok.gov by clicking on the "Complaints & Tiplines" tab at the top of the page.

"Far too often" older Oklahomans "are targeted by unscrupulous actors," Attorney General Gentner Drummond said. "These cases are particularly egregious and a form of senior abuse."

In one such case, Amber Nichole Pickelsimer, 45, was sentenced recently to three years and five months in federal prison and was ordered to pay restitution of \$1,050,000 to a retired acquaintance she scammed.

The Healdton woman was directed to self-report to a designated U.S. Bureau of Prisons facility on June 13 to serve a non-paroleable sentence of incarceration.

Pickelsimer admitted defrauding a victim of their

retirement savings through a blackmail scheme that extended for 19 months, between February 2019 and Aug. 12, 2020.

According to investigators, Pickelsimer created fake Facebook accounts, then used them to extort money from the victim. Pickelsimer initiated contact with the victim through one of the fake accounts, falsely claimed to possess damaging material about a family member, and threatened to release the dam-

aging material unless the victim delivered large quantities of money to a drop site. Soon after, Pickelsimer created an additional fake Facebook account and multiple false personas to send messages to threaten the victim into making additional payments.

A report by the FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center indicates financial scams reported by individuals over age 60 reached \$3.4 billion last year, an increase of nearly 11% over 2022.

Red Lobster closes Lawton restaurant

From staff reports

Struggling Red Lobster, the biggest seafood restaurant chain in the U.S., has abruptly closed dozens of its approximately 650 restaurants, including three in Oklahoma.

As many as 87 restaurants have been shuttered in at least 27 states and are listed on Red Lobster's website as

temporarily closed, according to various news reports. Employees at several locations told reporters they received no advance notice.

The restaurants include those in Lawton, Oklahoma City and Stillwater.

TAGeX Brands reported it is conducting an online auction of Red Lobster kitchen equipment, furniture and

other contents for at least 50 closing restaurants, according to TAGeX founder Neal Sherman.

Red Lobster did not respond to CNN's requests for comment.

The company reportedly is preparing to file a Chapter 11 bankruptcy petition (reorganization) before Memorial Day. The chain hired a

restructuring expert as its chief executive, an indicator of impending bankruptcy.

Red Lobster was a restaurant industry pioneer but has declined in recent years due to a range of factors, including corporate mismanagement, restaurant analysts and former leaders at the chain claim. One reason for its downfall was an all-you-

can-eat shrimp deal that executives hoped would turn the chain around but instead contributed to millions of dollars in losses.

According to The Wall Street Journal, market research firm Technomic ranked Red Lobster as the 41st largest U.S. restaurant chain by domestic sales last year, down from 24th in 2013.

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LEGAL NOTICE

COMMISSIONER PROCEEDINGS REGULAR MEETING MAY 13, 2024

THE BOARD OF COMANCHE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS MET IN REGULAR SESSION AT 9:00 A.M., MONDAY, MAY 13, 2024 IN ROOM 302 OF THE COMANCHE COUNTY COURTHOUSE, LAWTON, OKLAHOMA.

CHAIRMAN JOSH POWERS CALLED THE MEETING TO ORDER AND 1ST DEPUTY LYNN BENTLEY CALLED THE ROLL. PRESENT WERE JOSH POWERS, ASHLEY SANDERS AND JOHNNY OWENS. NONE WERE ABSENT.

ROBBIE TRAUGHBER GAVE THE INVOCATION AND JOSH POWERS LED THE AUDIENCE IN THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE.

PUBLIC COMMENTS. THERE WERE NONE.

OWENS MOVED TO APPROVE THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE MINUTES OF MAY 6, 2024. SANDERS SECONDED THE MOTION WITH OWENS, SANDERS AND POWERS VOTING AYE. NO NAY VOTES.

OWENS MOVED TO ACKNOWLEDGE LETTER DATED APRIL 26, 2024 AND RECEIVED MAY 9, 2024, FROM CINDY CONNER, WEST DISTRICT DIRECTOR WITH OSU EXTENSION, ADVISING THE COMANCHE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS THAT ALLISON THEIS, EXTENSION EDUCATOR, FCS/4-H, WILL SERVE AS COUNTY EXTENSION DIRECTOR FOR COMANCHE COUNTY, EFFECTIVE MAY 1, 2024, IN PLACE OF CAROL HART. POWERS READ A CORRECTION STATEMENT CLARIFYING THAT THEIS IS THE EXTENSION EDUCATOR FOR AG. SANDERS SECONDED THE MOTION WITH OWENS, SANDERS AND POWERS VOTING AYE. NO NAY VOTES.

OWENS MOVED TO APPROVE THE CONSENT AGENDA AS FOLLOWS:

APPROVE INTERLOCAL COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT BY AND BETWEEN BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS AND THE COMANCHE COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS TRUST AUTHORITY, TO UNDERTAKE THE SERVICES CONTEMPLATED BY THE AGREEMENT PURSUANT TO 19 OS § 339. THE TERM OF THE AGREEMENT SHALL BE FROM JULY 1, 2024 UNTIL JUNE 30, 2025.

APPROVE RENEWAL OF HVAC MAINTENANCE AGREEMENT #2024010 BY AND BETWEEN PIPPIN BROTHERS AND BOARD OF COMANCHE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS ON BEHALF OF COMANCHE COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT (CCHD) TO PROVIDE MECHANICAL PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE ON EXISTING EQUIPMENT AT CCHD IN THE AMOUNT OF \$13,260.00. TERM OF THIS AGREEMENT SHALL BE JULY 1, 2024 THROUGH JUNE 30, 2025.

APPROVE CONTRACT AND AGREEMENT FOR JUVENILE DETENTION SERVICES BY AND BETWEEN COMANCHE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS AND JACKSON COUNTY. THIS CONTRACT WILL ALLOW ACCESS TO THE COMANCHE COUNTY JUVENILE DETENTION CENTER FOR THE PURPOSE OF DETAINING CERTAIN JUVENILES WHO COME WITHIN THE JURISDICTION OF THE LISTED COUNTY'S DISTRICT COURT. AGREEMENT SHALL TERMINATE ON JUNE 30, 2025.

APPROVE RESOLUTIONS FOR DISPOSING OF EQUIPMENT OF FOUR (4) GOODFORM BLACK STRAIGHT BACK CHAIRS, INVENTORY #H-102-15, H-102-18, H-102-33 AND H-102-37 TO BE JUNKED BY THE ASSESSOR'S OFFICE. DECLARED SURPLUS BY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS ON MAY 6, 2024.

APPROVE RESOLUTION FOR DISPOSING OF EQUIPMENT OF ONE (1) 1978 FORK LIFT ATTACHMENT CONTECH, INVENTORY #D3-343.01, SERIAL #1258, SOLD BY GOVDEALS.COM ONLINE AUCTION TO CAREN CORTEZ FOR \$56.00, FOR DISTRICT #3. DECLARED SURPLUS BY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS ON NOVEMBER 20, 2023.

APPROVE ENCUMBRANCE FROM 2007 SALES TAX FAIRGROUNDS FUND IN THE AMOUNT OF \$28,271.75 TO THE COMANCHE COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS TRUST AUTHORITY FOR DISBURSEMENT OF FUNDS FOR ESTIMATED COST OF FAIRGROUND'S PAYROLL FOR MAY, 2024.

APPROVE OFFICIAL'S MONTHLY REPORTS.

JUVENILE BUREAU	APRIL 2024		
RESTITUTION			\$18,583.46
WORK RESTITUTION		\$133,980.82	
PROBATION FEE			\$95,906.25
DEFERRED PROSECUTION			\$24,904.95

APPROVE PURCHASE CARD (P-CARD) PAYMENT FOR (APRIL) BILLING STATEMENT ENDING APRIL 30, 2024 IN THE AMOUNT OF \$451.29 WHICH IS CUMULATIVE OF ALL COUNTY PURCHASES. PAYMENT WILL BE MADE TO BANK OF AMERICA THROUGH ELECTRONIC FUNDS TRANSFER BY THE TREASURER.

APPROVE REQUESTS FOR APPROPRIATIONS. THERE WERE NONE.

APPROVE TRANSFERS FOR APPROPRIATIONS.

GENERAL	\$550.00	FROM ASSESSOR M&O
		TO ASSESSOR TRAVEL
	\$550.00	

APPROVE TRANSFER OF FUNDS. THERE WERE NONE.

APPROVE BLANKET PURCHASE ORDERS.

245954, 245980 THROUGH 245982, 245992 THROUGH 245997, 246000 THROUGH 246007

APPROVE OVERAGES ON BLANKET PURCHASE ORDERS.

244965 - \$18.00, 245255 - \$12.00, 245259 - \$1.64

APPROVE CLAIMS AND PURCHASE ORDERS FOR PAYMENT.

SANDERS SECONDED THE MOTION WITH OWENS, SANDERS AND POWERS VOTING AYE. NO NAY VOTES.

THE BOARD ACKNOWLEDGED COURT SUMMONS. THERE WERE NONE.

THE BOARD ACKNOWLEDGED TORT CLAIMS. GONZALEZ, JOSEPH

GEIMSAUSADDLE, BOBBIE
GONZALEZ, AMAYA
GONZALEZ, DAVID

THE BOARD ACKNOWLEDGED OMMMA CERTIFICATES OF COMPLIANCE. THERE WERE NONE.

NEW BUSINESS: (CONSIDER ANY MATTER NOT KNOWN ABOUT OR WHICH COULD NOT HAVE BEEN REASONABLY FORESEEN PRIOR TO THE TIME OF POSTING THIS AGENDA.) THERE WAS NONE.

OWENS MOVED TO ADJOURN. SANDERS SECONDED THE MOTION WITH OWENS, SANDERS AND POWERS VOTING AYE. NO NAY VOTES.

THE FOLLOWING CLAIMS WERE ENTERED ON THE PURCHASE ORDER CALENDAR IN THE COUNTY CLERK'S OFFICE AND APPROVED FOR PAYMENT BY THE BOARD. EMERGENCY PURCHASE ORDERS HAVE DOCUMENTATION ON FILE IN THE COUNTY CLERK'S OFFICE. ASTERISKS* IDENTIFY EMERGENCIES.

ARPA 2021			
000042	COMANCHE CO JUVENILE DET CTR	\$ 842.00	ARPA-SUBRECIPIENT
000043	DOLESE BROS. CO	\$ 3,377.93	1" CRUSHER RUN
000044	DOLESE BROS. CO	\$ 898.02	1" CRUSHER RUN
000045	JOHN VANCE MOTORS INC	\$ 48,745.00	VEHICLE

CBRI			
000010	DUB ROSS CO LLC	\$ 1,872.40	PIPE
000011	DOLESE BROS. CO	\$ 2,262.71	RIP RAP
000012	H G JENKINS CONSTRUCTION LLC	\$ 8,553.68	PARKING LOT PROJECT

GENERAL			
002407	RESIDENCE INN	\$ 124.45	LODGING & MEALS
002408	GONZALES, MATTHEW C.	\$ 272.00	TRAVEL
002409	AMAZON CAPITAL SERVICES	\$ 107.23	SUPPLIES
002410	CLASSIC LAWTON CHEVROLET	\$ 86.85	OIL CHANGE
002411	PATS WASH TUB	\$ 24.00	CAR WASH SVC
002412	SAMS CLUB DIRECT	\$ 38.88	MISC SUPPLIES
002413	FIDELITY COMMUNICATIONS	\$ 317.36	SERVICE
002414	SOUTHWEST MAILING SERVICE	\$ 77.49	MAILING SVC
002415	AMERICAN ELEVATOR CO	\$ 415.00	ELEVATOR MAINT
002416	LOWES	\$ 437.59	EST OF NEEDS
002417	SOUTHWEST CHEMICAL OF LAWTON INC	\$ 300.35	EST OF NEEDS
002418	BENIGHT, JOHN	\$ 288.83	PARTS & REPAIRS
002419	PUBLIC SVC CO OF OK	\$ 118.87	SERVICE
002420	AT & T	\$ 5.43	SERVICE
002421	XEROX CORP	\$ 318.22	COPIER LEASE
002422	FIDELITY COMMUNICATIONS	\$ 290.88	SERVICE
002423	AT & T	\$ 40.77	SERVICE
002424	VALLEJO, GERARDO A.	\$ 36.00	REIMBURSEMENT
002425	HIGH TECH OFFICE SYSTEMS	\$ 44.95	COPIER MAINT
002426	COAST AUDIO VIDEO LLC	\$ 478.95	COMPUTER MAINT
002427	FIDELITY COMMUNICATIONS	\$ 230.39	SERVICE
002428	FIDELITY COMMUNICATIONS	\$ 410.14	SERVICE
002429	PUBLIC SVC CO OF OK	\$ 1,418.60	SERVICE
002430	THEIS, ALLISON	\$ 409.04	TRAVEL
002431	HART, CAROL	\$ 616.58	TRAVEL
002432	FILE THIRTEEN	\$ 36.30	SHREDDING SERVICES
002433	FIDELITY COMMUNICATIONS	\$ 245.88	SERVICE
002434	STANDLEY SYSTEMS GROUP INC	\$ 283.23	COPIER LEASE

HEALTH			
000568	OTA PIKEPASS-GOVT ACCT SVCS	\$ 1.80	TOLL FEES
000569	CLEMMER, KALLIE	\$ 100.23	TRAVEL
000570	FIRE PROS LLC	\$ 175.00	FIRE ALRM INSPECT
000571	FIRE PROS LLC	\$ 175.00	INSPECTION
000572	MCKESSON MEDICAL-SURGICAL	\$ 85.46	MEDICAL SUPPLIES
000573	AT & T MOBILITY	\$ 782.55	SERVICE
000574	FIDELITY COMMUNICATIONS	\$ 772.9	SERVICE
000575	STANDARD TESTING & ENGINEERING LLC	\$ 6,900.00	PROFESSIONAL SVC
000576	TELCO SUPPLY COMPANY	\$ 6,238.98	AGREEMENT
000577	SOUTHWESTERN MEDICAL CTR	\$ 236.00	XRAYS
000578	CLAYS SERVICES INC	\$ 157,725	LANDSCAPE SERVICE
000579	ATCHLEY, ADDYSON L.	\$ 918.00	RECORDS CLERK
000580	JUDY, SYLVIA	\$ 900.00	SWITCHBOARD OPERATOR
000581	JOHNSON, MIA PAIGE	\$ 558.00	RECORDS CLERK
000582	LLANO ALARCON, LAURA D.	\$ 1,120.50	RECORDS CLERK

HIGHWAY			
002040	BANK OF AMERICA	\$ 99.00	LODGING
002041	OTA PIKEPASS-GOVT ACCT SVCS	\$ 81.78	TOLL FEES

LEGAL NOTICE

002042	DOLESE BROS. CO	\$ 882.00	SCREENINGS
002043	DOLESE BROS. CO	\$ 3,750.82	1 1/2" CRUSHER RUN
002044	DOLESE BROS. CO	\$ 10,889.71	1" CRUSHER RUN
002045	AMAZON CAPITAL SERVICES	\$ 178.76	TOOLS, PARTS, SUPPLIES
002046	APACHE FARMERS COOPERATIVE	\$ 5.60	TOOLS, PARTS, SUPPLIES
002047	CINTAS CORP #628	\$ 888.99	UNIFORMS & SUPPLIES
002048	CINTAS FIRST AID AND SAFETY	\$ 131.36	RENTAL & SUPPLIES
002049	ELGIN ACE HARDWARE	\$ 77.73	PARTS & SUPPLIES
002050	FASTENAL CO	\$ 42.00	PARTS & SUPPLIES
002051	GEIGER, JR HENRY HERMAN	\$ 150.00	LSE AGREE
002052	HEAVY TRUCK & TRAILER PARTS INC	\$ 154.27	PARTS & SUPPLIES
002053	T & W TIRE LLC	\$ 245.80	PARTS, SUPPLIES, REPAIRS
002054	BRUCKNER TRUCK SALES INC	\$ 220.85	HOSE
002055	DUB ROSS CO LLC	\$ 26.85	PIPE
002056	KIRBY SMITH MACHINERY INC	\$ 1,729.60	PARTS
002057	KIRBY SMITH MACHINERY INC	\$ 20.00	PARTS
002058	DOLESE BROS. CO	\$ 16,600.34	1" CRUSHER RUN
002059	BRUCKNER TRUCK SALES INC	\$ 140.41	RODS
002060	DOLESE BROS. CO	\$ 1,767.80	SCREENINGS
002061	APACHE FARMERS COOPERATIVE	\$ 1,920.00	CHEMICAL(S)
002062	APACHE FARMERS COOPERATIVE	\$ 115.25	FENCE SUPPLIES
002063	CITY OF LAWTON	\$ 178.25	SERVICE
002064	T & W TIRE LLC	\$ 178.20	MOUNT TIRES
002065	HIGH TECH OFFICE SYSTEMS	\$ 19.41	COPIER MAINT
002066	T & W TIRE LLC	\$ 600.00	WHEELS
002067	COMANCHE CO RWD #1	\$ 30.00	SERVICE
002068	SUMMIT UTILITIES OKLAHOMA INC	\$ 154.43	SERVICE
002069	AUSTIN, AARON B.	\$ 30.01	REIMBURSEMENT
002070	STOCK EXCHANGE BANK	\$ 2,934.57	LSE PURCH PYMT
002071	STOCK EXCHANGE BANK	\$ 2,934.57	LSE PURCH PYMT
002072	OKLA DEPT OF TRANSPORTATION	\$ 1,614.59	LSE PURCH PYMT
002073	OKLA DEPT OF TRANSPORTATION	\$ 1,614.59	LSE PURCH PYMT
002074	OTA PIKEPASS-GOVT ACCT SVCS	\$ 36.90	EST OF NEEDS
002075	DOLESE BROS. CO	\$ 1,216.70	SCREENINGS
002076	DOLESE BROS. CO	\$ 19,917.56	1" CRUSHER RUN
002077	WESBROOKS INC	\$ 658.08	PARTS, LABOR, REPAIRS
002078	T & W TIRE LLC	\$ 853.75	MOUNT TIRES
002079	JOHN VANCE MOTORS INC	\$ 3,777.60	SAFETY LIGHTS
002080	CATERPILLAR FINANCIAL SVC CORP	\$ 183,645.00	EQUIPMENT PURCHASE
002081	STOCK EXCHANGE BANK	\$ 2,928.66	LSE PURCH PYMT
002082	STOCK EXCHANGE BANK	\$ 2,928.66	LSE PURCH PYMT
002083	OKLA DEPT OF TRANSPORTATION	\$ 1,549.34	LSE PURCH PYMT
002084	OKLA DEPT OF TRANSPORTATION	\$ 1,379.46	LSE PURCH PYMT
002085	AMAZON CAPITAL SERVICES	\$ 51.49	EST OF NEEDS
002086	ATWOODS / JOHN DEERE FINANCIAL	\$ 493.94	EST OF NEEDS
002087	BENNETT OFFICE EQUIPMENT	\$ 148.25	EST OF NEEDS
002088	CITY OF CACHE	\$ 149.05	SERVICE
002089	C L BOYD	\$ 2,364.77	EST OF NEEDS
002090	HEAVY TRUCK & TRAILER PARTS INC	\$ 611.7	EST OF NEEDS
002091	LAWTON COMMUNITY CORRECTION CTR	\$ 270.00	EST OF NEEDS
002092	LOWES	\$ 471.41	EST OF NEEDS
002093	O REILLY AUTOMOTIVE STORES INC	\$ 855.78	EST OF NEEDS
002094	PUBLIC SVC CO OF OK	\$ 365.75	SERVICE
002095	UNIFIRST HOLDINGS INC	\$ 236.48	EST OF NEEDS
002096	AMAZON CAPITAL SERVICES	\$ 75.12	EST OF NEEDS
002097	HILLIARY COMMUNICATIONS LLC	\$ 163.80	SERVICE
002098	LOCKE SUPPLY CO	\$ 199.75	BULBS
002099	T & W TIRE LLC	\$ 2,657.50	TIRES
002100	ATWOODS / JOHN DEERE FINANCIAL	\$ 128.44	EST OF NEEDS
002101	KIMBALL MIDWEST	\$ 188.88	AUTO PARTS SUPPLIES
002102	LOWES	\$ 326.70	BULBS
002103	DOLESE BROS. CO	\$ 2,288.02	1" CRUSHER RUN
002104	CINTAS FIRST AID AND SAFETY	\$ 253.07	FIRST AID SUPPLIES

HOME FINANCE			
000014	COLLINS, ZORN, & WAGNER PLLC	\$ 120.00	PROFESSIONAL SVC

JAIL DEBT-ST			
000011	COMANCHE CO FACILITIES AUTH	\$ 418,840.72	EST OF NEEDS

JUVENILE DETENTION CENTER			
000822	RUGGIERI, NICOLE L.	\$ 122.54	TRAVEL
000823	ATWOODS / JOHN DEERE FINANCIAL	\$ 29.94	MISC SUPPLIES
000824	FILE THIRTEEN	\$ 44.00	SHREDDING SERVICES
000825	SOUTH CENTRAL INDUSTRIES INC	\$ 411.16	CUSTODIAL SUPPLIES
000826	SOUTHWEST CHEMICAL OF LAWTON INC	\$ 489.00	MISC BLDG SUPPLIES
000827	ALLIED LAB INC	\$ 35.00	TESTING
000828	LOWES	\$ 296.21	MISC BLDG SUPPLIES
000829	ODP BUSINESS SOLUTIONS LLC	\$ 399.53	OFFICE SUPPLIES
000830	SHERIDAN EXPRESS PHARMACY	\$ 30.47	PRESCRIPTION
000831	SOUTHWEST CHEMICAL OF LAWTON INC	\$ 112.00	MISC BLDG SUPPLIES
000832	HILAND DAIRY FOODS COMPANY LLC	\$ 1,001.64	MISC FOOD
000833	SYSCO OKLAHOMA	\$ 3,863.71	MISC FOOD
000834	U S FOODS INC	\$ 2,964.91	MISC FOOD
000835	DUNCAN PRINTING INC, L W	\$ 34.00	SIGN(S)
000836	SMITH, ISRAEL L.	\$ 765.00	COMPUTER MAINT
000837	SOONER SECURITY SERVICE	\$ 50.00	MONITOR,MAINT FIRE ALRM
000838	SIFT FIRE INVESTIGATIONS LLC	\$ 150.00	FIRE & SAFETY INSP
000839	DUNCAN PRINTING INC, L W	\$ 109.00	PRINTING SERVICE

MTG CERT			
000050	FIDELITY COMMUNICATIONS	\$ 294.02	SERVICE
000051	SOUTHWEST MAILING SERVICE	\$ 88.50	MAILING SVC

RM&P			
000193	LOWES	\$ 74.42	MISC SUPPLIES
000194	CULLIGAN OF LAWTON	\$ 29.00	EST OF NEEDS
000195	AT & T	\$ 7.72	EST OF NEEDS
000196	CULLIGAN OF LAWTON	\$ 29.00	EST OF NEEDS
000197	BANK OF AMERICA	\$ 77.94	SUBSCRIPTION
000198	AMAZON CAPITAL SERVICES	\$ 208.66	OFFICE SUPPLIES
000199	FIDELITY COMMUNICATIONS	\$ 70.99	EST OF NEEDS
000200	MIDWEST PRINTING CO	\$ 1,196.11	CHECKS
000201	BANK OF AMERICA	\$ 274.35	STAMP(S)
000202	SUTHERLAND LBR & HOME IMPROVEMENT CO	\$ 99.84	MISC SUPPLIES
000203	COMANCHE LUMBER CO INC	\$ 100.00	SERVICE
000204	UNDERGROUND VAULTS & STORAGE INC	\$ 2,171.64	STORAGE/RECORDS

RURAL FIRE-ST			
000111	HILLIARY COMMUNICATIONS LLC	\$ 58.95	VFD - SERVICE
000112	COMANCHE CO RWD #1	\$	



Senate unanimously approves \$45M disaster relief package

From staff reports

OKLAHOMA CITY – The Oklahoma Senate unanimously voted Thursday to appropriate \$45 million to aid counties ravaged by recent tornadoes.

The Senate passed House Bills 2912 and 2913, which will help Oklahoma counties approved for FEMA disaster assistance to rebuild. The bills are on their way to the governor's desk.

HB 2912 creates a renewing fund for the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management to provide advanced financial liquidity to local governments. This allows the department to offer loans for temporary housing, infrastructure repairs, unexpected costs of debris removal and recovery efforts. Local governments can use these funds to offset revenue losses and help cover the local 12.5% match required to receive assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

HB 2913 grants \$30 million to the new fund and \$15 million to the State Emergency Fund, covering the state required match for FEMA disaster assistance.

Sen. Chuck Hall (R-Perry) and Rep.

Kevin Wallace (R-Wellston) authored the bills respectively.

"It's been heartbreaking to see the extensive tornado damage in communities across the state," Hall said. "These relief funds will immediately give Oklahomans the capital they need to recover and start over while also helping localities unlock hundreds of millions of dollars in federal aid."

Senate Majority Floor Leader Greg McCortney (R-Ada) said these funds will help Sulphur recover, which is in his district.

"The Senate fast-tracked this relief funding to help Sulphur, Barnsdall, Marietta and other cities and towns recover and rebuild as quickly as possible," McCortney said. "Working together to help our communities in times of crisis is part of the Oklahoma Standard. I'm proud to have played a small role in ensuring these localities have all the resources they need to build back better than before."

Currently, Carter, Hughes, Love, Murray, Okmulgee, Osage, Pontotoc and Washita counties have all been approved for FEMA disaster assistance.

Funds for plugging abandoned oil/gas wells dwindle

By **Jerry Bohnen**
OK Energy Today

With the end of Fiscal Year 2024 approaching for state government agencies, the Oklahoma Corporation Commission reports its funding for the state's expanded abandoned well plugging program is dwindling.

The agency recently notified pluggers and others that, "Unfortunately, both federal and state funds supporting the effort are now at minimum levels for this fiscal year, which ends June 30."

The Oil and Gas Division said that as a result, it was unable to take new bids on plugging projects. The agency plans to notify interested parties when funding is again available.

While remaining funds are at minimum levels, there is still enough on hand to respond to emergency plugs, officials said.

So far in the current fiscal year, Okla-

homa's well plugging effort involved \$19,883,652 in funding from the federal government's Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, coupled with \$6,926,058 in state funding sources.

The agency indicated the response in the past year was "tremendous" and the available funds helped finance 952 operations through the IJA well program and another 385 under the State Fund wells program. That total is more than the previous five fiscal years combined.

The Corporation Commission reported 119 participating well-pluggers from Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Arkansas, Colorado and Louisiana.

The commission indicated it is in the process of preparing a new IJA grant for the coming fiscal year.

Nationally, the IJA included \$4.7 billion invested in the plugging of orphaned oil and gas wells, and the Interior Department awarded the first round of \$560 million to 24 states to begin the work.

Congress passes 'robust' FAA Reauthorization Bill

From staff reports

If President Joe Biden signs House Resolution 3935, then Oklahoma City's Mike Monroney Center will be busy training new air traffic controllers. Congress approved the measure, the Federal Aviation Administration Reauthorization Act of 2024, last week by a vote of 387-26.

One goal of the bill is to hire 3,000 air traffic controllers. It may also add training simulators to more of the nation's air traffic control towers.

Oklahoma Congressman Frank Lucas urged the House to approve the measure.

"As Chairman of the Science, Space and Technology Committee, I've worked with my colleagues for over a year on this bill and I'm proud of the agreement we've come to with our Senate counterparts."

The bill includes language to improve training and set the air traffic controller hiring goal to the highest possible.

"The Research and Development title of this bill provides a comprehensive safety framework and integration of

emerging technologies into air travel," Lucas said. "By preserving and protecting the House provisions of this bill, we've ensured that this is the most robust Research and Development title we've seen in an FAA bill."

If signed by Biden, the bill will provide \$105 billion for the FAA and \$738 million for the National Transportation Safety Board over the next five years.

Of the 26 opposed, one vote came from Oklahoma Congressman Josh Brecheen, although he has yet to issue a statement explaining his opposition to the measure.

"This year's FAA reauthorization includes provisions which expand and protect the Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center, which trains about 20,000 air traffic control students every year," said Congresswoman Stephanie Bice. "This campus is a huge part of our community, and I am proud it will remain the primary training center right here in Oklahoma."

State DEQ updates plans for VW settlement funds

From staff reports

OKLAHOMA CITY – The Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality invites the public to view how it is spending millions of dollars in settlement money from Volkswagen.

The plan outlines how the state intends to use \$21 million to reduce nitrogen oxide emissions from the transportation sector.

Volkswagen previously agreed to spend \$14.7 billion to settle allegations over cheating emissions tests and deceiving consumers. The company offered a buyback and lease termination for approximately 500,000 vehicles made between 2009 and 2015 with 2.0-liter diesel engines. Volkswagen intends to spend \$10.03 billion to compensate consumers

under the program. Additionally, the company will spend \$4.7 billion to mitigate pollution and invest in green energy technologies.

The state DEQ is updating the beneficiary mitigation plan to prioritize counties based on the recent National Emissions Inventory data, and to reallocate the Reserve Flex Funding to our two best programs: the On-Road program for medium/heavy-duty trucks and shuttle/transit buses, and the Clean Diesel school bus program.

The updated BMP is open to public review and commentary until June 15, 2024. To review BMP changes visit <https://www.deq.ok.gov/air-quality-division/volkswagen-settlement/>. Comments can be submitted to vwsettlement@deq.ok.gov.

Energy/Business Briefs

From staff reports

• Crews continued to evaluate on Tuesday a controlled explosion aiming to dislodge the cargo ship Dali from the collapsed Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore. The Dali has been stuck in Baltimore for 50 days after losing power and ramming into a column of the Francis Scott Key Bridge, causing the structure to collapse.

• Utility companies have started construction on a contentious power line crossing in a Mississippi River wildlife refuge. ITC Midwest and Dairyland Power Cooperative are looking to string the final mile (1.6 kilometers) of the Cardinal-Hickory Creek transmission line across the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge near Cassville, Wisconsin.

• North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum emerges as a frontrunner for former President Trump's vice president pick, in large part because of his support for the oil and gas industry.

• An Indigenous advocacy group petitions the U.S. Supreme Court to block a proposed copper mine in Arizona that would destroy a site considered sacred by tribal nations.

• Democratic and Republican governors of neighboring western states are duking it out over high gas prices. Nevada Republican Gov. Joe Lombardo sent a letter Tuesday to California Gov. Gavin Newsom warning him against imposing a cap on oil refineries' profits that he said could affect his own state's fuel prices.

• Chinese car brands are missing from the U.S. market, but Chinese-made cars are still sold in the U.S. Americans bought more than 104,000 Chinese-made cars in 2023 and nearly 28,000 in Q1 2024. Buick, Lincoln, Polestar and Volvo all sell cars in the U.S. that are made in China.

World

• Chevron said it is set to launch the sale of its remaining UK North Sea oil and gas assets, in a move that would mark the U.S. energy giant's exit from the aging basin after more than 55 years. The planned divestment, confirmed to Reuters on Thursday, comes as Chevron prepares for the \$53 billion acquisition of rival Hess which it previously said will include \$10 billion to \$15 billion in asset sales around the world.

• Nigeria's new mega refinery near Lagos is seeking to buy millions of barrels of U.S. crude over the next year as it ramps up processing rates. The Dangote plant, built by Africa's wealthiest man, issued a so-called term tender for the purchase of two million barrels a month of West Texas Intermediate Midland crude for 12 months starting in July, according to a document seen by Bloomberg.

• ExxonMobil Corporation (NYSE: XOM), one of the world's leading oil companies, has struck oil at its Likembe-01 research well in Angola's offshore Block 15, marking a significant discovery after a two-year hiatus in the region.

Drummond, OG&E warn consumers of recent scams

From staff reports

OKLAHOMA CITY – Oklahoma Attorney General Gentner Drummond and OG&E have partnered up to combat scams involving solar energy equipment and services.

"Fraudsters are always finding new ways to separate unsuspecting individuals from their money, and this latest phone scam is no exception," Drummond said. "Oklahomans should be cautious with high-pressure tactics in phone or door-to-door solicitations, even when they purport to be connected to a reputable company. Always verify."

Customers alerted OG&E to a recent increase in automated phone calls. One call impersonated an OG&E representative, claiming to offer thousands of dollars in rebates under a new energy policy. Another claiming to be OG&E threatens to cut off the customers' service unless they make an immediate payment. Customers have also reported to OG&E an

increase in impersonators claiming to sell solar equipment.

"We never call our customers and ask them to pay their bills, nor do we go door to door to enroll them in special programs or services," said Aaron Cooper, manager of corporate communications. "Despite any claims, OG&E does not have any solar panel installation partners, nor do we recommend or partner with any company selling solar generation equipment."

"We understand the frustrations and impact of scams, and we want our customers to be aware and protect themselves from falling victim to the latest scam. We appreciate the Attorney General and his team for their work to protect Oklahomans from these types of scams."

Anyone who believes they have been targeted by a phone scam should contact the Office of the Oklahoma Attorney General at consumerprotection@oag.ok.gov or (833) 681-1895.

Rig Count Report

The latest Baker Hughes rig report released on Friday showed Oklahoma's number of active oil and gas rigs increased by one. The state's total is 44 rigs, compared to 51 rigs reported one year earlier.

Nationally, the count gained one to 604. The growth included one more oil rig for a total of 497 while the number of gas-drilling rigs was unchanged at 103. Over the past year, the rig count fell 116 from a total of 720 rigs. The decline included a loss of 78 oil rigs and 38 gas rigs.

Oklahoma's count of 44 compared to 290 in Texas where there was a gain of one rig. A year ago, Texas recorded 357 rigs. New Mexico's count in the past week dropped two to 107 rigs and North Dakota remained at 32.

Louisiana saw a gain of one rig to reach 40. The Red Top Rig Report in Kansas showed the state count fell one to 31 rigs. Colorado was unchanged at 14 rigs. Baker

Hughes listed other states with no changes in their counts—Ohio at 11, Pennsylvania 21, Utah 12, West Virginia 8 and Wyoming 11 rigs.

The Permian Basin activity, according to Baker Hughes, declined two rigs, leaving 312. The Eagle Ford count fell one to 51 while the Haynesville added a rig to reach 35. The Marcellus was unchanged at 29 rigs. The Williston stayed at 34.

The Ardmore Woodford added 2 rigs to reach a total of 4 while the Arkoma Woodford was unchanged at one rig. The Cana Woodford remained at 22. The Barnett play still recorded no drilling activity, based on the Baker Hughes report.

The D-J Niobrara remained at 10 rigs and the Granite Wash count fell by two to 4 rigs. The Mississippian's last active rig shut down operations so it is without any Baker Hughes reported activity. The Utica was unchanged at 11 rigs.



State's early May rainfall averages less than an inch

From staff reports

Rainfall totals in Oklahoma averaged 0.98 inches for the week of May 6-12, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service.

The May 7 U.S. Drought Monitor Report said drought conditions were rated 48% abnormally dry to exceptionally drought, down 13 points from last year. Additionally, 20% of the state was in the moderate to exceptional drought categories, down 32 points from the previous year.

Statewide temperatures averaged in the mid-60s to low 70s. Topsoil moisture conditions were rated adequate to surplus, and subsoil moisture conditions were rated adequate to short.

Here's a snapshot of how crops fared for the week of May 6-12:

Small grains: Winter wheat headed reached 95%, up 28 points from the previous week and 13 points from normal.

Canola blooming reached 95%, up 22 points from the previous week. Canola coloring reached 30%, up 14 points from the previous week and four points from normal.

Rye headed reached 89%, up 24 points from the previous week and 15 points from normal.

Oats jointing reached 74%, up 11 points from the previous week and eight points from normal. Oats headed reached 40%, up 17 points from the previous week and 14 points from normal.

Row crops: Corn planted reached 74%, up 23 points from the previous week and from normal. Corn emerged reached 49%, up 17 points from the previous week and 18 points from normal.

Sorghum planted reached 22%, up eight points from the previous week and nine points from normal.

Soybeans planted reached 15%, up eight points from the previous week but down six points from normal.

Peanuts planted reached 13%, up eight points from the previous week but unchanged from normal.

Cotton planted reached 12%, up seven points from the previous week but unchanged from normal.

Hay: The first cutting of alfalfa hay reached 5%.

Pasture and livestock: Rainfall continued across the state, which resulted in saturated conditions. In the southeast district, pasture was progressing normally. Pasture and range condition was rated at 85% good to fair. Livestock condition was rated at 89% good to fair.

Stitt signs 'lock the clock' bill

From staff reports

OKLAHOMA CITY – Oklahoma state Sen. Blake "Cowboy" Stephens (R-Tahlequah) recently gave an update on Senate Bill 1200, the Daylight Saving Bill, which he authored four years ago.

Following the passage of a federal law allowing states to opt out of biannual time change participation, the measure would have Oklahoma adopting permanent daylight saving time.

Stephens is excited that the bill has passed in the House of Representatives.

"Finally, we got this thing moving in a positive direction," he said. "And it is all about a matter of time."

"I was honored to have the Speaker of the House running the bill with me on Senate Bill 1200. I am very honored and blessed that the Governor signed that bill after we got through both chambers."

Stephens said Oklahoma is the 20th state to keep an hour of daylight in the evening during wintertime. He emphasized the benefits of "lock the clock" legislation, such as health and crime reduction.

"What has to happen now is the



Blake Stephens

Sunshine Protection Act has to be passed by Congress to allow us to lock that clock on daylight savings time," Stephens said.

Stephens believes that as more states "lock the clock," the idea's popularity will increase. He added that if the bill passes, 127 winter days will gain an hour of sunlight, while the rest of the year remains the same.

"We won't quit working on it until it is across the finish line once and for all," Stephens said.

Consumers dictate direction of strong beef cattle market

From staff reports

Stockman Oklahoma Livestock Marketing's Bob Rodenberger last week emphasized favorable conditions for a specific age group of steers, saying the market remains strong.

"This is still a good market," he said. "We were selling eight- or nine-weight cattle that none of us thought we'd have at a good figure. Our runs aren't extreme, but the percentage of the runs are kind of from eight- to nine-weight steers. Cattle have done well on wheat, and the market is

steady."

Rodenberger emphasized the consumer's role in the market.

"When it all comes down to the bottom line, it's going to be the consumer that dictates which way we go in this market," he said. "And right now, we're still moving beef. We're not moving the prime or the high-end cuts as quickly as we were, but it's a different time of year."

Rodenberger said his team anticipates larger runs of cattle in Oklahoma City soon due to increased recent rainfall and stubble grazing.

Thinner crop profits, tighter credit conditions in 10th District

By Nate Kauffman and Ty Kreitman

Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City

Farm income and credit conditions in the Tenth Federal Reserve District tightened in the first quarter of 2024. According to the Survey of Agricultural Credit Conditions, farm incomes retracted at a sharp pace, farm loan repayment rates declined at a modest pace and loan demand rose notably.

Conditions tightened comparatively more in states with greater reliance on crop revenues and less in more cattle heavy areas. As lenders entered the renewal period for annual operating lines, loan denials were limited but many reported an uptick in carryover debt and loan restructuring to meet liquidity needs.

Conditions in the U.S. farm economy have tightened alongside lower prices for many key products and higher financing costs. Many lenders highlighted growing concerns about deterioration in working capital as a result of low prices, particularly for crop producers. Strength in cattle prices, however, has supported incomes for many cow/calf producers.

A larger share of banks also reported higher loan demand following multiple years of subdued credit utilization, a sign that strength in farm finances built up in recent years has moderated. A continuation of subdued crop prices throughout 2024 would likely drive further tightening in agricultural credit conditions and elevated interest expenses could put additional pressure on farm borrowers.

Farm income and credit conditions

The pace of decline in farm income in the Tenth District continued to accelerate in the early months of 2024. The share of lenders reporting that farm income was less than a year ago reached 60%, the highest since early 2020.

The pace of decline in farm income was notably faster in states with more reliance on crop revenues. More than 70% of lenders reported lower farm income than a year ago in Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska, states with higher share of revenue from crop production. In the other Tenth District states where cattle account for higher shares of revenue, less than a third of banks responded that incomes were down from a year ago.

Capital spending slowed at a modest pace alongside lower incomes, but growth in household spending held firm. Capital spending by farm borrowers decreased at a gradually faster pace in the first quarter, typical during periods of lower farm income. Household spending, however, continued to rise at a steady pace alongside broad inflationary pressure.

Other key measures of agricultural credit conditions showed signs of modest deterioration. Farm loan repayments rates declined in the

Tenth District at the fastest pace since early 2020. At the same time, renewals and extensions increased at the fastest pace since 2020 and collateral requirements tightened at a modest pace.

Instances of carryover debt rose slightly alongside thinner profit margins during the past year. About 15% of farm borrowers, on average, had an increase in the amount of debt not covered by profits compared with the same time a year ago. Instances of carryover debt grew in all states in the region, but were particularly pronounced in Missouri.

Cases of restructuring to meet liquidity needs were also higher, but loan denials remained limited for most lenders. About 5% of farm loans in the Tenth District, on average, involved restructuring to meet liquidity needs which was slightly higher than previous years but well below the levels of 2016-2020. Loan denials remained minimal, staying below 2% on average throughout the region.

Interest rates and farmland values

While credit conditions softened and loan demand picked up, farm loan interest rates remained slightly above historical averages. Alongside relatively steady benchmark interest rates, average rates on all types of farm loans were largely unchanged from the previous quarter. Interest charges on agricultural loans remained slightly above the 30-year average, however, keeping financing costs elevated for agricultural producers reliant on financing.

Despite broad moderation in the farm economy and higher interest rates, growth in farmland values remained firm. The value of all types of farmland, on average, grew by 5% or more from a year ago throughout the Tenth District. Following tepid growth throughout 2023, cash rents on all types of land rose modestly in the first quarter.

Banker comments Q1 2024

"In our area, lower commodity prices are being partially offset by higher beef prices and more accommodating weather conditions for winter wheat." – Northwest Oklahoma

"Farm income in our area is up due to cattle prices, but increased costs for stockers presents concern going forward." – Southern Oklahoma

"Lower grain prices are causing cash flow shortages." – Western Oklahoma

Respondents

A total of 129 banks responded to the First Quarter Survey of agricultural credit conditions in the Tenth Federal Reserve District, an area that includes Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Wyoming, the northern half of New Mexico and the western third of Missouri.

