

FRIDAY'S
FORECAST



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WEATHER
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50¢

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GUNNISON COUNTRY TIMES

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Insurance debacle hits home

Plan folds, leaving Colorado entities with unpaid claims

Will Shoemaker
Times Staff Writer

A Colorado health insurance plan has gone belly up, leaving scores of small businesses and government groups — including the City of Gunnison — in search of new coverage and a means of paying for outstanding claims.

The city was notified Nov. 16 that the Centennial-based Rural Health Plans Initiative (RHPI), which provided health insurance for city employees, was ceasing operations and would be filing bankruptcy, said Finance Director Wendy Hanson.

The circumstances surrounding RHPI's bankruptcy are still largely unclear, but a lawsuit expected to involve numerous past clients of RHPI may help spur an answer.

Hanson said the city had known for most of this year that there were issues with RHPI — specifically, getting some claims covered.

"We continued to try to work through them and then about Oct. 1 we were aware that there were some more major issues," she added.

Gunnison leaders contacted Boulder law firm Caplan and Earnest, which represented two other RHPI clients, in mid-October.

Attorney David Olson of the firm indicated that a lawsuit was filed Oct. 19 against RHPI and its founder Gerry Rising.

Rising did not return a request for comment from the *Times* this week.

As of late Tuesday, Olson said he had been contacted by nearly 40 school districts or government or private sector groups that were clients of RHPI. While all of those entities are in Colorado, he understands that there are groups that were clients of RHPI in Nebraska, Wyoming and Oklahoma, as well.

"It is increasing by the day," said Olson, adding that it's yet to be determined whether those entities will join as plaintiffs in the original suit, or whether a

Insurance ▶▶ A5



Hip to be square (dancing)

Webster Hall was turned into a square dancing pavilion Friday night, as professional caller Ken Ashwood kept the crowd on their toes and doing the dosido. Front and center in this picture are Denise Mayfield and Al Caniff giving it a spin.

Photo by Chris Rourke



Gunnison resident Shuling Zou crosses Virginia Ave. in Gunnison Tuesday. The section of street to her left has been eyed in recent years for closure to create a downtown "pedestrian plaza."

Photo by Will Shoemaker

Council funds downtown plaza

Will Shoemaker
Times Staff Writer

The funding of a much-debated and perennially controversial project has led one Gunnison City Councilor to oppose the city's entire 2011 budget.

City Council approved the budget on first reading last week.

Bill Nesbitt was the lone councilor to vote against the ordinance on the grounds that he disagrees with spending as

much as \$250,000 on a pedestrian plaza downtown.

One possible location for the plaza would require the closure of half of the 100 block of E. Virginia Ave. — directly south of downtown's IOOF Park, and the current location of the Gunnison Farmers Market during summer months.

However, City Manager Ken Coleman explained that "the money's not set aside for the 100 block of East Virginia." Rather, he said, "it's for a downtown plaza," and that

location has yet to be determined.

"The intent is to have monies available for actual implementation if a plan is derived that's acceptable to the majority of folks," he said.

In 2009, grant funding sent representatives from the Department of Local Affairs and Downtown Colorado, Inc. to Gunnison to recommend ways for revitalizing downtown.

Plaza ▶▶ A8

City Market gets bad batch of gas

Cars curbed after fueling at Gunnison pumps Saturday

Will Shoemaker
Times Staff Writer

It didn't take Lucinda Lull long to surmise why her car abruptly stalled Saturday morning at City Market in Gunnison.

After re-fueling at the store's island station, the Pitkin resident's 1998 Ford Explorer died and wouldn't restart.

"It's not hard to figure out the problem when your car

Bad gas ▶▶ A12

County supports Hidden Gems plan

Agrees to endorse wilderness; inclusion of Whetstone expected

Will Shoemaker
Times Staff Writer

Neon green stickers adorned with two simple words conveyed a message endorsing more wilderness protection in Gunnison County.

"Gems YES!" the badges simply stated, in reference to the four-county Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign, which seeks to add more than 30,000 acres of additional public land protection in Gunnison

Gems ▶▶ A7

Gems

► from page A1

County alone. There are in total about 340,000 acres in central Colorado pursued for wilderness by the campaign.

A heavy turn-out of supporters lobbied the Gunnison County Commissioners to officially back the plan at a meeting Tuesday. While the commissioners acknowledged the supporters, it was for other reasons that they directed staff to draft a letter in support of the plan locally.

“There’s a split populace despite the fact that this meeting was dominated by the neon green stickers,” recognized Commissioner Hap Channell. “The reason why I want to move ahead with a support letter and ultimately a discussion and vote is because I think it is well overdue time that we think more eco-centric and less anthropo-centric.”

The commissioners received numerous written comments both in favor of and opposed to the proposal.

The 16,000-acre, stand-alone Whetstone parcel — which would designate an area including Carbon Peak, Whetstone Mountain and Mount Axtell as wilderness — has been most controversial.

In a meeting early this year, numerous mountain bikers and motorized recreationists who currently use the parcel voiced objection.

Gunnison Trails founder Dave Wiens echoed those concerns Tuesday.

“I don’t want this to be just one side or the other. I think there’s a middle ground,” he said, also speaking on behalf of the International Mountain Biking Association and Crested Butte Mountain Bike Association. “As mountain bikers we are for land preservation. We are not necessarily for only wilderness.”

It was for that reason that Commissioner Paula Swenson said she was “still chewing on the Whetstone issue,” but conceded to fellow commissioners on drafting a letter of support.

Among the approximately 30 people in attendance Tuesday, a dozen Hidden Gems advocates



Sue Navy, of Crested Butte, holds up a sticker worn by many who attended a county work session Tuesday supporting the Hidden Gems proposal for additional wilderness protection in Gunnison County.

Photo by Will Shoemaker

spoke in favor of the Gunnison County portions of the plan, while only two spoke against them — with the Whetstone parcel being the greatest cause for opposition.

“The proposed areas are and have been multi-use ... and I’d like to see it stay that way,” said Perry Anderson, director of community relations for Mt. Emmons Moly Co. “These proposed areas do not truly have wilderness characteristics if you compare them to the West Elks, Fossil Ridge, Powderhorn or Maroon Bells.”

He added that it does look “suspicious” when smack dab in the middle of the Whetstone proposal area is a private ranch owned by the two companies pursuing mining near Crested Butte — meaning that there could be anti-mine ulterior motives behind that portion of the plan.

Crested Butte resident and Hidden Gems supporter Jeremy Rubingh argued that “wilderness is a use.”

Likewise, Gunnison resident Mary Anne Tarr offered that she “would like to speak on behalf of (her) four grand-children, who would also like to have wilderness when they’re adults.”

Laura Yale, Hidden Gems coordinator in Gunnison County, noted that 14 adjustments to proposed wilderness boundaries were made in the county in recognition of recreation and indus-

trial development. That includes about 1,100 acres removed from the northeast corner of the Whetstone proposal area.

Yale added that ranchers who currently have grazing permits in the Powderhorn and Whetstone proposal areas have endorsed the plan.

Earlier this fall, Colorado Congressman Jared Polis introduced legislation for parts of the Hidden Gems proposal in Summit and Eagle counties, though parts of the proposal in Gunnison and Pitkin counties have yet to be introduced in a bill.

Yale said that the campaign is waiting for support from Gunnison County before approaching Third Congressional District Representative-elect Scott Tipton.

Pitkin County Commissioners last week endorsed the proposal areas within that county.

Colorado Congresswoman Diana DeGette has also introduced a bill proposing wilderness protection for roughly the same areas in Gunnison County pursued by Hidden Gems.

The commissioners forwarded a letter generally supporting DeGette’s bill in September. They’re expected to take formal action on a Hidden Gems support letter Dec. 7.

(Will Shoemaker can be contacted at 970.641.1414 or will@gunnisontimes.com)

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