

FRIDAY'S  
FORECAST▶▶ LAST WEEK'S  
WEATHER  
INSIDE, A18

50¢

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# GUNNISON COUNTRY TIMES

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## Party in the yard

Who doesn't like a good party — especially when the purpose of that party is to benefit a good cause? A Funkyard Party this past Saturday sponsored by Gunny Love and Salvage & Such raised \$2,000 through a silent auction to benefit Habitat for Humanity. Auction items were provided by local craftspeople. And the Funky Bob Show provided the music for the gathering at the headquarters of Salvage & Such on South Main Street. For more about the fundraiser, see B10.

Photo by Matt Burt

## Slopes see jump in skier visits

CBMR, Monarch  
both report  
increases

Will Shoemaker  
Times Editor

Local ski areas followed a statewide trend of more visitors this past season.

Officials at Crested Butte Mountain Resort (CBMR) and Monarch Mountain both reported this week posting gains over previous years in the number of skiers and riders who flocked to their respective slopes.

The news comes on the heels of industry trade group Colorado Ski Country USA announcing that a new state record of an estimated 12.6 million skier visits was reached during the 2013-14 season. Statewide, that's a gain of 10 percent over the 2012-13 season and an increase of eight percent over the five-year average. A previous record of 12.56 million was set in 2006-07.

A skier visit represents a person

participating in the sport of skiing or snowboarding for any part of one day at a mountain resort.

Monarch's previous single-season record of 181,000 visits (2011) was broken this past season.

Spokesman Greg Ralph said the ski area near Monarch Pass recorded 186,500 skier visits for 2013-14 — up from 156,000 the previous winter. Season pass sales and visits by those pass holders were up "slightly" over the previous season, he added.

"The snow fell at the right times and we drew more destination skiers to the area from Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas," Ralph indicated.

He also noted that Monarch opened Nov. 23 last year. Drought conditions kept the slopes from opening until Dec. 14 in 2012.

Still, snowfall fell just short of the ski area's longterm average in 2013-14. Monarch received 340 inches of snow this past season, compared to an average of 350 inches.

For CBMR, on the other hand,

## RE1J to pursue tax increase

Board opts  
for maximum  
amount allowed  
by law

Chris Rourke  
Times Staff Writer

Leaders of the Gunnison Watershed RE1J School District are planning to ask voters in this November's election for the maximum mill levy override

allowed.

The RE1J School Board voted Monday to proceed with a ballot initiative asking voters to approve a \$2.5 million tax increase with no sunset provision.

Only one board member — Don Hagar — voted against the action.

During the discussion prior to the vote, Hagar recommended options be explored to fully fund the district other than a mill levy override.

Earlier this month, a committee tasked with exploring the possibility of a proposed mill

levy override recommended the \$2.5 million question be posed to voters.

RE1J Superintendent Doug Tredway concurred with the committee's recommendation, saying the maximum increase would put the school district on solid footing financially for years to come.

Committee member Ian Billick offered that he also supports the mill levy increase, although he acknowledged that more money

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## Prairie dog study proving fruitful

Plague-controlling  
tactics working  
near Gunnison

Times Staff Report

Like them or not, Gunnison's prairie dogs play a vital role in the ecosystem.

As a keystone species, wildlife managers say their survival is critical to the success of many

organisms within our valley as animals of prey. A keystone species is an animal that has a disproportionately large effect on its environment relative to its abundance.

As a result, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) has undertaken efforts to control plague within the species to keep population numbers from dropping. That work has proven successful locally over the last four years, and biologists are continuing their research to improve methods of

sustaining populations.

"In some situations, prairie dogs can be seen as pests, but they are critical in the environment and help to promote survival of numerous species such as burrowing owls, badgers and raptors," said Dan Tripp, a wildlife disease researcher with CPW.

In Colorado there are three species of prairie dogs. The Gunnison's prairie dog resides primarily in the southwest portion

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## Skiers

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spokeswoman Erica Mueller credited snow — the greatest factor in driving skier traffic, she said — for gains in visitors. The resort received 300 inches, compared to a longterm average of 275.

“But also we had a lot of additional regional marketing efforts, which drove drive traffic,” she said.

While Mueller declined to divulge specifics, she said skier visits at CBMR were up 19 percent in 2013-14 over the previous season.

CBMR’s all-time high for skier visits came in the late-1990s. However, Mueller noted that it was during the period of a “ski

free” promotion, which likely skewed results.

Days of operation at CBMR were identical to the previous season — with one exception. CBMR re-opened April 26 and 27 due to the amount of snow that still remained on the slopes.

The resort restructured passes this past season, unveiling a \$599 season pass aimed at competing with ski areas along the Interstate 70 corridor. Visits by pass holders (non single-day tickets) increased 16 percent for 2013-14.

“That’s why we’re keeping it around for next year,” Mueller explained. “Each year we continue to evaluate. Right now the structure is good.”

Additionally, CBMR changed

its methodology for surveying visitors this past season. Instead of “intercept” surveys, the resort e-mailed guests following their visits.

For the 2012-13 season, surveys showed that 14.2 percent of guests were from Colorado (excluding Gunnison County). This past season, the results indicated that 31.3 percent of visitors were from elsewhere in the state — what Mueller terms the regional, or “drive,” market.

“Overall, it was a fantastic season on all accounts,” she said. “There are lots of great things going on up here at the resort and the ‘vibe’ all winter long was extremely positive and upbeat.”

Colorado Ski Country’s 21 member resorts themselves

hosted an estimated 7.1 million skier visits during the 2013-14 season, while non-member Vail Resorts (Vail, Breckenridge, Beaver Creek and Keystone ski areas) drew 5.5 million visits.

The trade group noted that abundant early season snowfall and ideal snowmaking conditions last fall prompted ski areas to begin opening earlier than planned — and more terrain earlier than usual.

In January and February, snow storms continued and were widespread across the state.

Snowfall continued well into spring and bolstered Easter visitation despite the unfavorable late calendar date of the holiday, Colorado Ski Country reported.

Additionally, the group cited a

drought that impacted the Pacific region as likely playing a role in driving visitors to Colorado.

However, Colorado also saw the roll out of legalized recreational marijuana sales in the midst of this past ski season.

CBMR’s Mueller said she’s seen no indication that the new industry helped boost skier visits locally.

“I think we like to keep ourselves separate as industries,” she said. “I think people definitely came here and enjoyed the dispensaries, but we can’t attribute that to our increase in business.”

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

## Prairie Dog

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of the state and is the primary focus of research being conducted at the Miller Ranch northwest of Gunnison. The others are the white-tailed prairie dog, which lives mainly in northwestern Colorado, and the black-tailed prairie dog, which inhabits areas along the Front Range and eastern plains.

Sylvatic plague, caused by a non-native bacteria carried by fleas, has been identified as a threat to the stability of Gunnison’s prairie dog populations. Because prairie dogs are particularly susceptible, outbreaks of plague frequently kill every prairie dog in a colony. To combat the disease, biologists are dusting prairie dog burrows with an insecticide powder that kills fleas. Researchers are also evaluating the efficacy of oral vaccine baits which may prevent plague in the animals.

The bacteria that causes plague was transported to North America in about 1900 and was subsequently found in Colorado in about 1940. Because prairie dogs did not evolve with the bacteria, they carry little immunity to fight off the disease.

“We’re not attempting to upset nature’s balance with these treatments. We are working to restore balance in the environment and reduce the risk of major plague outbreaks in prairie dog colonies,” Tripp explained.

Controlling plague in prairie dogs may also help limit potential

exposure to people and their pets.

In 2010, CPW biologists started dusting burrows in the Gunnison Basin with the flea-killing insecticide. The experiment has worked. In some cases, nearby colonies that were not dusted were wiped out by plague, while colonies that were dusted remain healthy. Although the insecticide is not harmful to other species, applying it is labor intensive and expensive. For dusting to be effective, every burrow in a colony must receive an application annually.

According to Tripp, another potentially promising treatment is the oral sylvatic plague vaccine. Developed by the U.S. Geological Survey’s National Wildlife Health Center, the vaccine — still in the experimental stage — works well in the laboratory. It is administered in a cube flavored with peanut butter. The baits also contain a red dye that helps researchers track the prairie dogs that consume the cube.

In the Gunnison area, four prairie dog colonies are being used for vaccine testing. Two colonies are receiving the vaccine oral bait while two are receiving no treatment, acting as a control. In Teller County, the test is being conducted with two colonies.

The progress of the research, according to Area Wildlife Manager J Wenum, is thanks to members of the local community, who have allowed many land conservation practices.

Yet, this is only the second year that the vaccine has been tested in Colorado. Longer-term monitoring

will be needed to determine its efficacy.

“So far, we’re encouraged by the results and are optimistic that the vaccine will be effective in limiting future plague outbreaks,” Tripp offered.

The vaccine is also being tested in Arizona, Montana, South Dakota, Texas, Utah and Wyoming. The experiment will continue for another two years and is a collaborative effort among more than 30 federal, state and tribal agencies and nongovernmental organizations.

In Colorado, the vaccine research in Gunnison’s prairie dogs is occurring on public land—state wildlife areas, and BLM and National Park Service property.

J Wenum, area wildlife manager in Gunnison, explained that when landscapes are restored to a more natural condition, more uses can be accommodated. “If you have healthy, functioning landscapes you don’t have to be focused on limiting uses,” Wenum said. “A healthy landscape will accommodate agriculture, recreation and wildlife.”

The conservation work is aimed at preserving an’ ecological niche and preventing a listing of the Gunnison’s prairie dog under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). Tripp noted that ongoing research was one reason stated by U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials in a determination late last year that the species is not warranted for ESA protection.

According to Tripp and the

members of his research team, co-existence of prairie dogs and humans is possible.

“We won’t be able to prevent plague in every colony,” Tripp

acknowledged. “But this work will help to stabilize the overall population at its current distribution and benefit this important species.”



A Colorado Parks and Wildlife researcher holds a colored cube flavored with peanut butter that’s being used as part of a project aimed at preventing the spread of plague among prairie dogs.

Photo by Savannah Nelson

## Mill Levy

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does not necessarily mean better education.

“I just want to be clear that as a supporter of the override it’s not because I believe more money translates into better results,” Billick began. “But I’m not interested in waiting for a hypothetical fix in five or 10 years. ... I think it’s a local issue and I’d like to see a local solution and I think we have to take responsibility to figure out how to provide strong education for our kids if its not the mill levy.”

Hagar, however, suggested the increase would be a tough sell to voters. He said he prefers the committee’s alternative recommendation — a ballot initiative that would seek a \$1.9 million increase.

Hagar said he would have a hard time asking voters for more than what is being lost by the state’s underfunding of the district. RE1J

estimates in 2014-15 it will be underfunded from the state by \$1.9 million.

“Basically the \$1.9 million is to cover what we lost, not to make it better for the future, and I think that will go down a lot easier in light of these decisions,” Hagar said.

But committee member Ann Hausler countered Hagar’s comment.

“It does seem to the community that we’re going out there every 15 minutes with our hands out when it’s more like every 10 years. It feels like more often,” acknowledged Hausler, who was involved in the 2004 mill levy override and the passage of a school construction bond in 2008. “I think that the \$1.9 million is more of a bandaid, but the \$2.5 million is something that is solid that could go on for a substantial amount of time.”

Board Treasurer Bill Powell pointed to the need to build the district’s capital improvements fund, despite the fact that a \$55

million bond for districtwide construction and renovations was passed in 2008.

“We have \$75 million worth of building and equipment. The recommended fund amount is two percent a year for a 50-year period,” Powell explained. “That’s 1.5 million. We’re no where near that. ... We have to build it up and have a strategic plan and that cannot be used as a revolving fund.”

Powell also offered that if the state restores funding to the district after the passage of a tax increase, the district could use the excess revenue to repay the 2008 construction bond.

The board voted 4-1 to pursue the ballot measure with the condition that an oversight committee be appointed. The oversight committee would supervise the spending of the money.

If passed, the Gunnison County Assessor’s Office estimates the increase to cost residential property

owners an additional \$43 per \$100,000 of value, and commercial owners an additional \$157. Those estimates are based on the district’s assessed value in 2013.

The move toward the ballot measure came the same night that the board approved its 2014-15 budget — a budget that includes increased per pupil operating revenue, up 5.27 percent from the previous year. Student enrollment is projected to drop by six students next school year, and the district is expected to receive an increase in state funding of \$628,023.

Yet, the district plans to borrow \$200,000 from its cash reserves to meet next year’s budget.

Following the vote, board President Lisa Starkebaum said that funding the district’s education does not end with a possible override.

“As an advocate for public education, I think we should still be lobbying the state for funding and not just in our community,” she said.

Kirsti Hargrove, the co-chair for the override committee, said late Monday night that organizers will hit the ground running. Hargrove has begun meeting with individuals to draft the ballot language and structuring the campaign.

The Gunnison County Clerk must be notified by July 25 that formal action has been taken to participate in the general election.

The ballot language must be finalized by Sept. 5, according to county elections officials. Members of the override committee are expected to be part of the campaign.

“When we all sat down and figured everything out, there wasn’t anyone on the committee that didn’t concur that there was a need for the override,” Hargrove said. “All are committed. On what level? We’ll find out.”

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