

In brief

FROM STAFF & WIRE REPORTS

Man pleads guilty in cousin's death

RIVERTON — A man whose cousin was fatally shot while the two were re-enacting a gun scene from a movie faces up to eight years in prison after pleading guilty to involuntary manslaughter.

Erasmo Castillo pleaded guilty last week in a tearful court appearance. Sentencing will come later.

Castillo said he didn't realize the gun was loaded when he pulled the trigger at a motel in Riverton last August. Castillo and his cousin Cesar Perez Jr. had just arrived in town from Baytown, Texas, to work.

Castillo says Perez was the first to take a gun and point it at Castillo, and when Perez pulled the trigger, nothing happened. Castillo said he later took the gun but this time the gun discharged. The bullet killed Perez.

AARP seeks spelling bee entries

CHEYENNE — AARP is calling all spellers 50 years of age and older to take part in its 17th annual National Spelling Bee in Cheyenne.

This year's AARP spelling bee is scheduled for Aug. 10-11 at the Little America Hotel and Resort. Registration is now open online at aarp.org/spelling-bee through Aug. 6.

Spellers must be at least 50 years old on the day of the bee. The event kicks off with a workshop Aug. 10. A neurologist, gerontologist, nutritionist and exercise physiologist will take questions on brain health.

Competition will begin at 8:30 a.m. Aug. 11 with a 100-word written spelling test. The top 15 spellers advance to the oral spelling rounds that afternoon.

Registration is \$40 in advance and \$50 on the day of the bee.

Cody plans ice festival this weekend

CODY — The organizer of the annual Waterfall Ice Festival in Cody is expecting around 300 participants this year.

The 14th annual ice festival is scheduled to run today through Monday. It attracts ice climbers from around the country.

The event features climbers scaling frozen waterfalls in the Cody area that range in difficulty from beginner to expert.

Festival founder Don Foote said interest in the ice climbing sport is growing.

He said experienced ice climbers will hold clinics to teach ice climbing during the festival.

Moose move into developed areas around Jackson

JACKSON — People in Jackson Hole are keeping an eye out for moose, which have been moving into developed areas.

The animals have been spotted in some subdivisions and in town near the Snow King Resort.

Wyoming Game and Fish Department spokesman Mark Gocke said the animals get stressed out this time of the winter and they can be dangerous. He said people shouldn't feed them and should make sure bird feeders aren't accessible to them.

Victoria Hess said she gathered some children into cars after they got between a mother and her calf.

She said the animals reunited and the children got home safely.

Rough road ahead

Group warns that thin funding could result in more deteriorating roads, bridges in Wyo

By MEAD GRUVER
Associated Press writer

CHEYENNE — Wyoming risks seeing an ever-larger share of its roads and bridges deteriorate if the state doesn't pony up enough spending over the next decade, according to a report on the state's highway funding released this week by a research group.

The Washington, D.C.,-based group TRIP said that unless Wyoming allocates enough money to roadwork, the portion of Wyoming roads in poor shape risks increasing from 20 percent now to 37 percent in 2022.

The report warned of deteriorating bridges. Fourteen percent of Wyoming bridges are considered structurally deficient and that could increase to 22 percent a decade from now without adequate

funding, according to the report.

"That is not a criticism of the state Department of Transportation. We have found that they are doing a very good job with the resources they have available," said Frank Moretti, director of policy and research for TRIP.

"It's really just a simple function of having the resources in place that are necessary"

Moretti spoke Wednesday at a news conference at the Swan Ranch industrial park under construction just south of Cheyenne. The Wyoming Contractors Association selected the location to emphasize the link between road projects and economic development.

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MEAD GRUVER / AP

The recently built Interstate 25 overpass just south of Cheyenne is seen in this photo taken Wednesday. The overpass provides access to an industrial park, which remains under construction. The Wyoming Contractors Association says the overpass could be the last highway project of its kind in Wyoming for the foreseeable future without an infusion of state highway funding.



MARTIN KIDSTON / THE BILLINGS GAZETTE

A Park County sheriff's deputy leads Nicholas Meng, 26, into the courthouse Thursday.

Date-rape drug case goes to court

By MARTIN KIDSTON
The Billings Gazette

CODY — A Circuit Court judge found probable cause Thursday to send to District Court the charges against a man accused of manufacturing and distributing ecstasy and another drug often associated with sexual assaults.

Nicholas Meng, 26, appeared at 9 a.m. for the hearing before Circuit Judge Bruce Waters, who heard testimony from Sgt. John Beck of the Cody Police Department.

Meng's wife, Sara Meng, 24, who faces similar charges, was also scheduled to appear later in the day. Her hearing, however, was postponed until early next month.

Beck said the investigation into Meng began around Jan. 25 when Agent Scott Spieth of the Utah County Narcotics Task Force informed him that Meng was selling GHB and MDMA in the Salt Lake City area.

GHB is often referred to as a "date rape" drug for its ability to render unsuspecting victims helpless. MDMA, also known as ecstasy, can induce euphoria and feelings of intimacy while dissolving anxiety.

According to Spieth's informant, Beck said, Meng intended to ship ecstasy to a friend in Utah. The informant later learned that Meng intended to make the delivery himself.

Beck said he began surveillance of the Meng home in Cody while looking into Meng's frequent Federal Express shipments.

Beck told the court that Meng had made at least 11 overnight shipments to Utah within 30 days and also had sent packages to Colorado, Arizona and California.

Beck said that on Feb. 2, Meng left Cody with his wife for Utah County to deliver "a substantial amount" of GHB and ecstasy.

The couple was stopped by law enforcement officers in

Coalville, Utah, and found in possession of one gallon of GHB and about 1,000 pills believed to be ecstasy, according to court documents.

While Nicholas Meng declined to talk with authorities, court records state, Sara Meng admitted that the liquid was GHB and the pills were "party pills." She also said they were driving to Utah to deliver the drugs to someone who intended to sell them.

Beck placed the drugs' street value at around \$4,000. He said that Meng had initially told arresting officers in Utah that the liquid was windshield cleaner.

After the couple's arrest in Utah, Beck said, a search warrant was issued for the couple's residence in Cody. Investigators recovered a chemistry set, pills, a pill press, and roughly 100 ounces of liquid believed to be GHB.

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School district makes progress

By TOM MORTON
Star-Tribune staff writer

The Natrona County School District has made progress in some areas, but needs serious work in others, according to Superintendent Joel Dvorak.

"The state of the district is pretty good," Dvorak said. "It isn't great, but it's better than it's been."

The district continues to grow in enrollment with 12,047 students and an estimate of 12,180 for the 2012-13 academic year, Dvorak said in his annual "state of the district" report on Monday.

Administrators, educators and support staff members have garnered national honors, and 11 schools in the district have received national recognition for their excellence, he said.

Literacy has improved, as 80 percent of students read at or above grade level in the third grade as of spring 2011, up from 63 percent in spring 2007, he said.

"That's a good trend," Dvorak said. "The goal is to keep increasing."

However, schools in the district have not been performing as well in reading, writing, math and science, he said, citing a goal of matching or exceeding 90 percent of the other districts in the state.

Elementary school students generally performed better than those in middle schools, who performed better than those in high schools, Dvorak said. "This tells us we have to work on curriculum reform."

However, assessments such as the Proficiency Assessments for Wyoming Students are only a snapshot of student performance at one point in time, he added.

Dvorak also presented the results of surveys of students about how they felt about their well-being, engagement and hope.

In well-being, 67 percent of students reported they were thriving, 31 percent were struggling and 2 percent were suffering, Dvorak said.

Please see **SCHOOL**, A4

Parents settle with child care provider

3-month-old boy died in 2010

By TOM MORTON
Star-Tribune staff writer

The parents of a 3-month-old boy who died at a child care facility in October 2010 have settled with the owner, according to their attorney and court records.

Tom and Nichole Parker decided not to pursue a wrongful death lawsuit against Sara Whited, owner of the now-shuttered Sara's Day Care, for the death of their son Tyler, Mike Shickich said Thursday.

"They explored it [a lawsuit] and concluded this was the best way for them to heal

and go forward," Shickich said.

Terms of the settlement are confidential, he said.

On Oct. 11, 2010, Nichole Parker went to Sara's Day Care to pick up her son and found him unresponsive and cold. Tyler was pronounced dead later that day at the Wyoming Medical Center. The cause of death was determined to be asphyxiation, and the infant had been dead for about two hours when his mother arrived, according to the coroner's report.

The Department of Family Services investigated the incident and found the facility

violated requirements about supervising children, placing infants on their backs for sleeping and using portable cribs with unsecured mattresses.

Whited's facility had incurred multiple substantiated violations since the Wyoming Department of Family Services licensed it in 1996.

On April 7, 2011, Whited pleaded guilty to one count of child endangerment, and Circuit Court Judge Michael Patchen sentenced her to one year of unsupervised probation.

As part of plea, Whited will never be able to operate a child care facility again, according to court records.

Attorney Rick Koehnstedt

represented Whited's insurance company. He was out of town and could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Attorney John Robinson represented Whited. Robinson said Thursday he had no comment.

After the criminal case ended, the Parkers took preliminary steps toward a civil action against Whited.

In November, Natrona County District Court named the Parkers personal representatives of Tyler, which gave them the authority to pursue a lawsuit to recover financial damages for their infant son. Wyoming law allows those who file wrongful death lawsuits to recover payment for the

loss of care, comfort and society.

But the Parkers decided to settle the issue with Whited and avoid the pain of more litigation, Shickich said.

The Parkers want to push for better oversight of child care facilities, Shickich said.

"They're interested in seeing stronger enforcement so other families can see the deficiencies in a day care center," he said. "But for the grace of God this could have been any family."

■ Reach Tom Morton at 307-266-0592, or at tom.morton@trib.com. You can read his blog at trib.com and follow him on Twitter @GTMorton.