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SECOND FRONT



Citizen photo by Dave Milne

COWBOY PRACTICE — Lakewood elementary school student Shawn Wagner, 7, throws his lariat over the horns of a haybale steer at the Bar K ranch north of Prince George during a school tour Wednesday. The students spent the day at the ranch learning about real cowboys, horses, cows, sheep and running a ranch.

HART TRIAL

Girl's story questioned

Citizen staff

A B.C. Supreme Court judge should acquit a man of sexual assault on a 10-year-old girl because there are too many inconsistencies in the child's story, the man's lawyer argued Wednesday.

Sandy Sinclair said there's reasonable doubt that Benjamin Corey Hart molested the girl. "The inconsistencies, the (circumstances) of the reporting, the lack of spontaneity and considerable questioning she underwent should lead the court to conclude there's a reasonable doubt," she argued.

But Crown counsel countered the discrepancies don't shake the girl's credibility, and some can be explained by the child's age.

Justice Eric Chamberlist is scheduled to hand down a decision this afternoon.

Hart, 23, is charged with sexual assault and sexual touching of a person under 14 years old in the alleged incident, sometime between February and June 2000. The girl, now 12, testified this week that she was sleeping on the couch at Hart's mother's house when she felt a "sharp pain" in her genital area and awoke to find Hart's hand under her buttocks, but that he left when she told him to go away.

Sinclair pointed out that some details in the versions the girl told her mother, two RCMP officers and her testimony in

court did not match, such as how much she could see in the dark, whether she had gone to the washroom after the alleged incident, and who had been in the home at the time.

The girl made the complaint two years after the alleged incident, and only after she was sent newspaper articles about Hart's 2002 trial for kidnapping and sexual assault, Sinclair said. The girl's mother also questioned her repeatedly for about a month before she said anything, she noted. She suggested that "what prompted the disclosure was apparently nothing more than the presentation of these articles to the complainant and her mother."

Crown counsel Shannon Keyes countered that the girl's evidence about the circumstances was corroborated by other witnesses, such as the layout of the home and a favourite game she played there. "These are details... that confirm the child knew a good deal that's accurate about the circumstances," she said.

There's no evidence that the girl's mother made suggestions that encouraged the child to say certain things, she argued. "There are no similarities between the newspaper articles and the details" of the incident, she added.

Keyes also argued the girl might not have told her parents for two years because she was embarrassed or didn't want to create tension.

Ferry protest slows traffic

Citizen staff

About 50 members of the Tsilhqot'in National Government First Nation staged a protest Wednesday against the province's plan to remove the Marguerite Ferry crossing by slowing traffic along the highway so they could pass out information to passing motorists.

A concern that the group would block traffic outright on Highway 97 near Quesnel did not materialize, and no arrests were made, said Quesnel RCMP Staff Sergeant Keith Hildebrand.

"Traffic was slowed down from about 1:30 to 3 o'clock as they handed out pamphlets," he said. "That was the only disruption and no incidents occurred." Tsilhqot'in (pronounced Chilcotin) National Government chief Ivor Myers accused the government of racism in its decision to remove the ferry which crosses the Fraser between Quesnel and Williams Lake.

"Are these people now expected to use the detour gravel road to go to work? Is this ferry being closed because the only people using it are Tsilhqot'in? If there were many non-native

people using this ferry, we would not be standing here today."

Transportation Minister Judith Reid introduced a bill April 8 that will close the Marguerite ferry, and the McClure and Little Fort ferries, which cross the North Thompson River at two points north of Kamloops.

The bill also calls for tolls and reduced service for 13 other inland ferry crossings that were previously free — including the Francois Lake ferry south of Burns Lake, which will operate a maximum of 17 hours per day instead of the current 20 hours per day.

Reid said the tolls should be in effect by the end of the year, and are meant to recover about \$10 million of the \$15 million they cost to operate.

The details of the rate structure have yet to be worked out and Reid promised to consult affected users before they are set.

The protest was staged on both Hwy. 97 and West Fraser Road at the ferry crossing.

The closure will make it necessary to travel further south along West Fraser Road to the Rudy Johnson Bridge to cross the Fraser River at Soda Creek.

School board walks through Telus building

Rumours about the Prince George school board's recent visit to the Telus building on Ferry Avenue contain inaccuracies, says board chair Bill Christie.

"All seven trustees and senior administrators walked through the Telus building," he said at this week's school board meeting.

"We did not bid on it," he said. "We are keeping our options open. We do want to find a new location for our administration building where we could centralize all our operations in one central facility and at the same time divest ourselves of some office space."

The current central district administrative offices at 1894 Ninth Ave. contain about 2,000 square metres of floor space that is comparatively expensive to heat and light, Christie said.

The utility costs for these offices are \$30,000 to \$50,000 a year, more than is reasonable for that amount of space, he said.

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Construction surging

Action on the construction front is way up. According to a city building report for March, permits for \$12.65 million worth of construction were taken out over the first three months of the year — way up from \$4.23 million over the same period last year.

Over March 2003, permits for \$5.3 million worth of work were taken out, led by one worth \$4 million for the new Canadian Tire store at the Westgate development.

Vacancy rate decreases

The vacancy rate in the city's downtown core witnessed an overall decrease in 2002 from the year before — which showed some of the highest vacancy rates recorded since 1983.

In a report to council, planner Susan Haley said the vacancy rate for space used for commercial and retail services dropped to 15.4 per cent from 19.5 per cent the year before.

And the vacancy rate in high-rise offices and bank buildings fell to 10.9 per cent from 13.2 per cent in 2001, 23 per cent in 2000 and 20.2 per cent in 1999.

Pub to expand hours

First Litre Pub owners Pauline and Cameron Thun won permission from council Monday to expand the establishments hours under the city's new liquor policy.

The Thuns will be allowed to keep the pub open from 9 a.m. to 1 a.m. seven days a week.

Under the city's liquor policy, liquor primary establishments within the downtown core can apply to stay open from 9 a.m. to 3 a.m. and those outside downtown can apply for the 9 a.m. to 1 a.m. hours.

Firearms permit granted

A firearms discharge permit was granted to the Prince George Golf and Curling Club to allow crews to be shot at the facility.

Coun. Brian Skakun, who lives nearby, voted against the move Monday after coming across three injured crows and two dead ones and hearing complaints from residents in the vicinity. "I do not believe we should be allowing this," he said.

The permit allows use of a .410 gauge shotgun from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m., May 1 to July 31.

Noise permit issued

Council issued a noise permit to the city Monday for the Third Avenue revitalization project that would allow work to continue after 10 p.m. and start before 6 a.m. from April 29 to Dec. 31.

In a report to council, bylaw services manager Ken Craig said its expected that no more than 15 per cent of the work would be performed outside regular hours.

Land exchange moves ahead

A bylaw to close a portion of the Old Cariboo Highway located just north of Hwy. 16 E. and just east of PGARA passed three readings Monday.

The closure is meant to facilitate a land exchange between the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal, and Women's Services, N.R. Motors Ltd. and the city.

Once the bylaw is adopted, the Ministry will vest title to the city for transfer to N.R. Motors.

COUNCIL IN BRIEF

Transit deal backed

Three readings were given to an 2003-04 annual operating agreement for the city's conventional transit system.

The agreement calls for a reduction of 1,650 service hours between September 2003 and March 2004 to make up a \$65,000 shortfall.

But in a report to council, development services director Bob Radloff said there may be changes to the funding formula that will allow the city to cover the shortfall with additional municipal funding. He also said that efficiencies may be found through phase two of the city's transit study, to which council gave the go-ahead in late March.

Projects passed

A general, water and sewer funds loan bylaw for \$8.7 million worth of work passed three readings Monday.

The money will be borrowed to pay for six items: road rehabilitation projects worth \$4.26 million, the Blackburn sewer treatment plant replacement at \$1.7 million, construction of the Foothills Blvd. trunk water main at \$1.1 million, improvements of the Exhibition Grounds facilities at \$916,000, phase one of 18th Ave. access improvements at \$475,000, and construction of the McMillan Creek watershed drainage at \$200,000.

The road rehabilitation projects are: 15th Ave. and Ospika intersection, paving 15th Ave. from Edmonton to Victoria, paving Second Ave. from Queensway to Ottawa, paving Fifth Ave. from Queensway to Ottawa, paving Carney St. from Second Ave. to Eighth Ave., paving Noranda road, paving Ospika Blvd. from Ferry to Dufferin, paving Ospika Blvd. from Massey to 22nd Ave., and phase three of the Northwood Pulpmill Road rehabilitation project.

Detachment loan set

A loan authorization bylaw for the new RCMP building passed three readings.

It would allow the city to borrow \$12.6 million to pay for a new building, a 53,000-square-foot facility that is scheduled to be completed by 2005 following on land acquisition and design this year.

It will replace the 31,000-square-foot facility police currently occupy, which is more than 35 years old.

Cemetery fees rise

A bylaw that provides for a 25-per-cent increase in cemetery fees was adopted Monday night. It will cost \$888 for flat markers and \$1,090 for upright monuments on the graves of adults, and \$659 to open and close a grave for the burial of an adult. The increases are expected to generate an additional \$40,000 to \$50,000 in revenue which will go into a capital reserve fund for work at the site.

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