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DAILY INTER LAKE



February 27, 2009

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EPA official: Grace blocked cleanup of mine

Coordinator in Libby said firm made false claims

MISSOULA (AP) — An Environmental Protection Agency official says employees of W.R. Grace and Co. misled the government and obstructed efforts to clean up a mine site in Montana.

Paul Peronard testified Thursday in the federal environmental crimes trial of Grace and five former company officials.

Peronard was EPA's on-scene coordinator in Libby, where Grace operated a vermiculite mine.

He said Grace officials provided false and misleading statements during the initial phase of cleanup, when EPA was trying to gauge the scope of asbestos contamination in Libby.

PERONARD SAID he helped arrange sale of the mine site back to Grace, so that EPA could use it as a repository for asbestos-contaminated mine waste. He said that, one day after the sale was completed, Grace denied EPA access to the site. "It just threw a wrench in all the operations we had planned," Peronard said.

Peronard testified that he asked former mine manager Alan Stringer about the vermiculite concentrate at the various mine sites, and was told the material contained less than 1 percent asbestos and was not hazardous.

Company documents would later reveal that Grace's own product testing showed even low levels of asbestos caused dangerous releases of airborne fibers.

Grace told the EPA that it never provided asbestos-contaminated vermiculite to the general public; but Peronard said he would later learn that

See GRACE on Page A3

'You always walked away from her feeling better'



Karen Nichols file photo/Daily Inter Lake

SUSAN CHRISTOFFERSON, pictured in 2006 during a visit between a father and daughter at the Nurturing Center, died Wednesday.

Christofferson, longtime advocate for children, dies

Story by
KRISTI ALBERTSON
The Daily Inter Lake

Children and families in the Flathead Valley lost a longtime champion when Susan Christofferson passed away Wednesday.

Christofferson, 59, was the executive director of The Nurturing Center, a child-care resource and referral agency in Kalispell. She died from cancer Wednesday evening at her home.

With her unflagging commitment to children and families, Christofferson helped transform child care in the state. The Nurturing Center, which she helped found, has provided day-care referrals, hundreds of classes and other assistance to countless families in Northwest Montana.

She was simply passionate about children and believed they deserved happy, healthy lives, Christofferson's sister, Ann Goldthwaite, said.

"She was a firm believer that it begins with children, and the work is immediately to give them an opportunity to live their life to the fullest," Goldthwaite said. "Many, many chil-

dren don't have that simply because people are not educated. ... She was a strong advocate for changing that way of thinking and preventing [bad] things from happening before they occur."

Christofferson once told her longtime assistant Diane Clark why she fought so hard for children.

"She looked at me and said, 'It's a labor of love,'" Clark recalled. "She did it because that was her passion. It made her feel good to give in this way."

CHRISTOFFERSON'S PASSION for children probably began as a child, Goldthwaite said. Their mother was an advocate for early childhood education; she wrote articles on the subject and spoke to lawmakers, hoping to improve young children's lives. She also instilled in her children the importance of serving others.

Christofferson was working as a volunteer in the late 1970s when she first realized the need for a parenting resource center. In her position, Christofferson took calls from parents looking for day care — but she

See ADVOCATE on Page A3



“She loved everyone equally. I didn't feel lessened by that [as her sister]. I felt empowered. I will carry that with me.”

— Ann Goldthwaite
Christofferson's sister

Scalding suspect faces drug charges

By NICHOLAS LEDDEN
The Daily Inter Lake

A Whitefish man accused of forcing his girlfriend's 5-year-old child into a bathtub full of scalding water, severely burning the boy, has pleaded innocent to drug charges.

During an arraignment Thursday morning in Flathead County District Court, Juan Miguel Vasquez, 27, pleaded not guilty to fraudulently obtaining dangerous drugs.

ACCORDING TO court documents, Vasquez in November signed for three of his girlfriend's prescriptions in her name at a Whitefish pharmacy while she was at a Washington state hospital with her injured son.

The boy, who suffered second- and third-degree burns to more than 40 percent of his body, was treated for three months at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle.

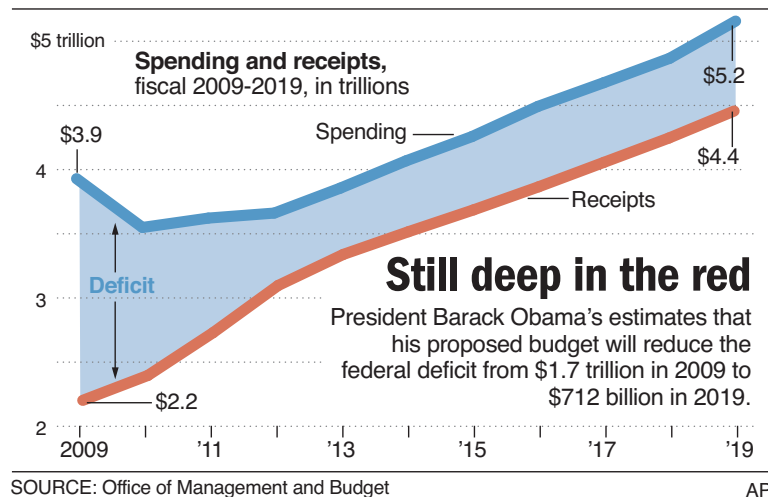
Vasquez's girlfriend told investigators she did not receive the prescriptions — which included painkillers and sleeping pills — nor were they found at their residence.

But Vasquez "vehemently" denied the drug charges in testimony given during a bond reduction hearing Thursday afternoon.

Vasquez, who has limited mobility from a serious back injury and has extensive family connections in Northwest Montana, is not a flight risk, argued his attorney, Carolyn Gill. She also argued that police reports in the abuse case indicate Vasquez's actions were more consistent with negligence than an intentional act.

Prosecutors, however, pointed out the severity of the charges and said Vasquez should remain in custody.

Flathead County District
See SUSPECT on Page A3



Budget: Mammoth deficits but headed lower

WASHINGTON (AP) — Trillion is the new billion.

No longer is it a billion here and a billion there that add up to real money. Swap a "t" for the "b" if you want a measure of what's at stake under President Barack Obama's first spending plan.

Obama charted a dramatic new course for the nation Thursday with



OBAMA

a bold but contentious budget proposing higher taxes for the wealthy and the first steps toward guaranteed health care for all — accompanied by an astonishing \$1.75 trillion federal deficit that would be nearly four times the highest in history.

Denouncing what he called the "dishonest accounting" of recent federal budgets, Obama unveiled his own \$3.6 trillion blueprint for next year, a bold proposal that would transfer wealth from rich taxpayers to the middle class and the poor.

Congressional approval without major change is anything but sure. The plan is filled with political land mines including an initiative to combat global warming that would hit consumers with considerably higher utility bills. Other proposals would take on entrenched interests such as big farming, insurance companies and drug makers.

OBAMA BLAMED the expected federal deficit explosion on a "deep

See BUDGET on Page A3

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100 YEARS AGO
Feb. 23 — Vancouver, B.C., Feb. 20 — It is understood that D.C. Corbin, the Spokane millionaire, who co-operated with the Canadian Pacific Railway in building the Spokane International line, the new link connecting Spokane with the Crows Nest Pass branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway, will start work early this spring on his proposed line through the Flathead River Valley in Southeast Kootenay, thus opening up a rich coal basin and fertile agricultural region.

— The Inter Lake, 1909

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FROM PAGE ONE

'We will honor her by continuing to support families'

ADVOCATE/From A1

often ended up as a sounding board for parents dealing with child-related challenges.

In 1978, she helped found the nonprofit Glacier 4C's (Community Coordinated Child Care), which became The Nurturing Center a decade later after merging with the Child Abuse Prevention Council. The organization originally provided meal support and referrals for child-care providers and has since blossomed into a multifaceted agency with a single purpose: to ensure that children are respected and have the opportunity to grow up in safe, secure, healthy relationships.

"That's what she wanted to see more than anything: to have the change begin at the beginning so that children could grow up to be whole, healthy human beings," Goldthwait said. That goal affected child-care services throughout the state, Clark said.

"She brought in a whole new industry, and she brought in a family support system that didn't exist before in the state of Montana," Clark said. "She did not do it alone, but she was an integral part of the spark that made it happen."

IN THE late 1980s, Christofferson and a handful of

other women went to Helena to ask the Legislature to bring child-care development block-grant funds to Montana, Clark said. Their pleas were successful, and the funds have since allowed the state to connect, regulate and train child-care providers.

"There were no real standards prior to these funds coming," Clark said.

Christofferson was a critical player in the movement to raise the quality of child care available to all families, regardless of income, Clark added. She believed that no matter what their parents did, children were entitled to grow up in safe, nurturing environments.

That commitment is clear in The Nurturing Center's mission, said Barbara Calm, a Kila veterinarian and president of the organization's board of directors.

"The services she provided were without regard to a person's social status or income status," she said. "She made it clear that even if you're a professional person like I was, kids still don't come with instructions."

Calm has served on the board of directors for about five years, but her involvement with Christofferson and The Nurturing Center began 20 years ago as a young mother raising a toddler and an infant. Christofferson directed Calm to

a parent share group and offered other suggestions and support to the new mother. She helped again several years later, when Calm needed advice about raising her now-teenage children.

"Susan always had answers, always had suggestions," Calm said. "With her knowledge and compassion, she was truly a role model — not only for how to parent but how to treat people. No matter what their circumstances, she really treated people with dignity."

THAT WAS true in Christofferson's personal life as well.

"Outside of The Nurturing Center, she was the embodiment of nurturing," said Chery Sabol, a former Nurturing Center board member. "She was a warm, loving person. You could tell she just genuinely cared about people."

"You always walked away from her feeling better."

Christofferson embraced cooking as another way to nurture people, Clark said.

"Next to her job, cooking was her passion," she said. "Many people would attend things just because she was cooking. She had such a flair as a hostess, such charm. Everybody loved her."

It was a mutual feeling, Goldthwait said.

"She loved everyone

equally," she said. "I didn't feel lessened by that [as her sister]. I felt empowered. I will carry that with me."

In addition to Goldthwait, who lives in Sheridan, Mont., Christofferson leaves behind two brothers, Jim Utzinger of Spokane and Charlie Utzinger of the Philippines; a daughter, Megan Menis, of Seattle; and a son, Conor Christofferson, of Sandpoint, Idaho.

SHE ALSO leaves behind numerous friends and staff members, who are committed to carrying on Christofferson's legacy and love of children.

"She left a strong organization," Calm said. "We have no intention of letting it fail in her absence. We will honor her by continuing to support families and continue to provide the services that we have been. We'll continue to grow."

"If people want to support Susan, support her memory, I hope they'll continue their support of The Nurturing Center."

People may send condolences to The Nurturing Center, 146 Third Ave. W., in Kalispell. At Christofferson's request, an outdoor service will be offered in June.

Reporter Kristi Albertson may be reached at 758-4438 or by e-mail at kalbertson@dailyinterlake.com

Statements were 'misleading'

GRACE/From A1

Grace provided vermiculite for the junior high school running track and the Plummer Elementary School skating rink in Libby.

Community residents also have said that Grace

provided vermiculite to the general public for a variety of uses, such as gardening.

Peronard testified Thursday that, by misleading the EPA about the scope of the contamination, the company delayed emergency response to homes and the general community, putting crews "in a big circle."

Man allegedly swiped meds

SUSPECT/From A1

Court Judge Stewart E. Stadler ultimately denied Gill's motion to reduce bail, and bond remains at \$120,000.

VASQUEZ IS awaiting trial in June on aggravated assault and criminal endangerment charges in connection with the alleged child abuse.

Whitefish police responded to the boy's Ramsey Avenue residence on Oct. 24, 2008 and discovered the injured boy. Vasquez, who was in a relationship with the boy's mother, was taking care of the child at her home.

In interviews with a detective from the Seattle Police Department, the boy said that Vasquez put him in the bathtub of scalding water and then

forced him to stay there, despite his screams.

According to court documents, a doctor and child-abuse expert at Harborview told investigators the pattern of burns on the boy's body is consistent with forced immersion.

The boy was released from the hospital in late January but is still undergoing extensive medical treatment and is experiencing some disability, prosecutors said.

If convicted of abusing the boy, Vasquez could face as long as 30 years in prison and a \$100,000 fine. He could face an additional five years in prison and \$50,000 in fines if convicted of the drug charges.

Reporter Nicholas Ledden can be reached at 758-4441 or by e-mail at nledden@dailyinterlake.com

Sen. Conrad predicts much of Obama plan will be revised

BUDGET/From A1

and destructive" recession and recent efforts to battle it including the Wall Street bailout and the just-passed \$787 billion stimulus plan. The \$1.75 trillion deficit estimate for this year is \$250 billion more than projected just days ago because of proposed new spending for a fresh bailout for banks and other financial institutions.

As the nation digs out of the most serious economic crisis in decades, Obama said, "We will, each and every one of us, have to compromise on certain things we care about but which we simply cannot afford right now."

Signaling budget battles to come, Republicans were skeptical that Obama was doing without much at all. "We can't tax and spend our way to prosperity," said House GOP leader John Boehner of Ohio. "The era of big government is back, and Democrats are asking you to pay for it."

Obama plans to move aggressively toward rebalancing the tax system, extending a \$400 tax credit for most workers — \$800 for couples — while letting expire President George W. Bush's tax cuts for couples making more than \$250,000 a year. That would raise the top income tax bracket from 35 percent to 39.6 percent for those taxpayers and raise their capital gains rate from 15 percent to 20 percent as well.

Thursday's 134-page bud-

get submission, a nonbinding recommendation to Congress, says the plan would close the deficit to a more reasonable — but still eye-popping — \$533 billion after five years. That would still be higher than last year's record \$455 billion deficit.

And the national debt would more than double by the end of the upcoming decade, raising worries that so much federal borrowing could drive up interest rates and erode the value of the dollar.

Also, to narrow the budget gap, Obama relies on rosier predictions of economic growth — including a 3.2 percent boost in the economy next year — than most private sector economists foresee.

THERE IS already resistance from Democrats who are upset with the budget's plan to curb the ability of wealthier people to reduce their tax bills through deductions for mortgage interest, charitable contributions and state and local taxes.

That tax increase would raise \$318 billion during the upcoming decade toward a down payment on Obama's high-priority universal health care plan. Cuts to the Medicare and Medicaid federal health programs would supply an additional \$316 billion, but that still wouldn't provide enough money to guarantee coverage for all, and Obama wants Congress to come up with hundreds of billions of dollars in additional hard-to-raise revenues

to pay for the rest.

Then there is the proposed clampdown on the Pentagon budget, which would get a 4 percent boost, to \$534 billion next year, but would then get increases of 2 percent or less over the next several years. Domestic programs favored by Democrats would, on average, receive a 7 percent boost over regularly appropriated levels — even as many agencies are already swimming in cash from the just-enacted economic stimulus plan.

TAKEN TOGETHER, Obama's plan contains so many difficult-to-digest ideas that it's virtually certain to be significantly redrafted during debates later this year.

"It's going to be a tough row to hoe, but he has large Democratic majorities and a lot of popular support and we're in times of crisis," said Robert Reischauer, president of the Urban Institute. "So his prospects of him getting much of what he is seeking, while not good, are higher than ... we've seen in the past."

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad, D-N.D., predicted Congress would pass much of Obama's plan, though with significant revisions. For instance, he's unimpressed with a proposal to reduce payments to farming operations with sales above \$500,000 per year and says the plan to curb tax deductions for the wealthy faces uncertain prospects because of opposition from lawmakers from high tax

states and universities whose endowments have shrunk.

A plan to devote up to \$250 billion to support as much as \$750 billion in increased spending under the government's rescue program for banks and other financial institutions landed with a thud.

REPUBLICANS SCOFFED at the idea that Obama's plan calls for much sacrifice on the spending front, citing the big increases for many agencies. They also pointed to tax increases and hundreds of billions in revenues from a contentious proposal to auction off permits for carbon emissions in a bid to address global warming.

Obama and top aides emphasized that they didn't make the financial mess.

Said the president: "We cannot lose sight of the long-run challenges that our country faces and that threaten our economic health — specifically, the trillions of dollars of debt that we inherited, the rising costs of health care and the growing obligations of Social Security."

"For too long, our budget has not told the whole truth about how precious tax dollars are spent," he said. "Large sums have been left off the books, including the true cost of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. And that kind of dishonest accounting is not how you run your family budgets at home. It's not how your government should run its budgets either."

Montana fugitive arrested in W. Va.

KEYSER, W. Va. (AP) — Authorities in West Virginia have arrested a man who's been a fugitive from Montana for more than eight years.

U.S. Marshals and police in Keyser, W. Va., arrested 30-year-old Walter Franklin Rich Thursday at a Keyser car dealership where he had been working as a vehicle salesman.

Deputy U.S. Marshal Dan Orr says Rich was

charged with escape in November 2000 for walking away from a pre-release center in Missoula after serving a 15-year sentence for forgery.

Rich is being held at a West Virginia regional jail awaiting extradition.



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State Senate leaders pick battles, call for caution

HELENA (AP) — Top Senate leaders are preparing to battle over children's health insurance and energy development, even as they promise bipartisanship and a careful meshing of stimulus and state budget funds during the session's second half.

Lawmakers from both parties announced their priorities going forward Thursday, when they began a short mid-session break.

While Senate Republicans say declining revenue estimates warrant tough choices, Democratic leaders

are gearing up to fight for expanding children's health care, even if it means dipping into the governor's requested \$200 million in rainy day funds. Republicans argue expanding the program would require cuts in programs for education or elderly care.

In November, voters overwhelmingly approved a \$35 million expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program, which receives funding from both the state and federal governments.

For their part, Republicans plan to charge forward with looser permitting standards for energy projects,

a change they argue will create jobs for unemployed Montanans and promote energy independence.

Transportation Commission Meeting

9:00 a.m. — March 4, 2009

Transportation Commission Room
2701 Prospect Avenue
Helena, MT.

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PUBLIC COMMENT

The meeting is open to the public. MDT attempts to provide accommodations for any known disability that may interfere with a person's participation in any department service, program or activity. For reasonable accommodations to participate in this meeting, contact Lori Ryan at (406) 444-7200 or PO Box 201001, Helena, MT 59620 at least two days before the meeting. For the hearing impaired, the TTY number is (406) 444-7696 or (800) 335-7592, or Montana Relay at 711. Alternative accessible formats of pertinent information will be provided upon request.

Montana Department of Transportation



For a detailed agenda go to www.mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/trans_comm/meetings.shtml or contact Lori K. Ryan at (406) 444-7200 or lryan@mt.gov.

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5:00 PM on March 16, 2009 late submissions will not be considered.

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