



'THE MINUTES'
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enters last weekend 1B

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THE Durango HERALD

Weekend Edition

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PREPARING to LAUNCH



The WonderLab Early Learning Center transition classroom will serve children ages 2½ to 3½ who are transitioning from toddler care to preschool.

WonderLab Early Learning to open in partnership with Powerhouse



JERRY MCBRIDE/Durango Herald photos

Anna Suazo, assistant director of the WonderLab Early Learning Center and lead teacher in the preschool classroom, looks around at all the new furnishings Aug. 13 in her classroom that will be soon filled with children. The WonderLab next to the Powerhouse will be Durango's newest childcare center to open with the first day of school scheduled for Aug. 31.

BY GABRIELLE WALLACE
HERALD STAFF WRITER

In just a week and a half, the WonderLab Early Learning Center in Durango will welcome its first students to its new museum-based child-

care program. The WonderLab Early Learning Center is located on the Powerhouse campus at 1333 Camino del Rio. It will serve about 45 children in its first year, but staff members hope to slowly ramp available child-care slots up closer to 60, which

the center is licensed for. The center offers a unique model with its proximity to the Powerhouse, allowing for museum-based learning and the opportunity for classes to recreate and learn at the science center. WonderLab will offer care

five days a week with different full-week and part-week enrollment options and extended hours. A third of its enrolled families is receiving financial assistance through WonderLab or the state. Families are offered

See WONDERLAB, 8A

Bear law sharpens enforcers' claws

But police, sheriff don't anticipate much impact locally

BY JESSIE BOWMAN
HERALD STAFF WRITER

New legislation allowing Colorado Parks and Wildlife and other law enforcement officers to more easily enforce bear-safe trash laws and reduce human feeding of bears went into effect this month.

La Plata County law enforcement doesn't anticipate the law impacting its current approach to bear safety enforcement.

House Bill 1342, co-sponsored by House District 59 Rep. Katie Stewart, is meant to reduce human-bear conflicts by lowering the threshold for when officers can take punitive action against people who leave food or waste accessible to bears.

The law lowers the standard from proving a person "intentionally" lured a bear with food or waste to "knowingly" placing food or edible waste in the open where there is a "reasonable probability of attracting a wild bear." It also removes the requirement that first-time offenders be given a warning and raised the fine for third offenses and beyond from \$2,000 to \$5,000.

"Now they (enforcement officers) have the fuel they need to deal with the trash," said Bryan Peterson, director of Bear Smart Durango.

He has been critical of what he sees as a lack of enforcement by the city of Durango and La Plata County. Both governments have largely relied on education to encourage residents to follow bear-safe practices, an approach

See BEARS, 8A

DURANGO

Former teacher gets 40 years for sex crimes against children

Federal judge ruled that Benjamin Smith will serve maximum time per plea deal conditions

BY JANE ROONEY
HERALD STAFF WRITER

Editor's note: This story contains details about a sexual abuser's coercion of minors for sexual acts that some readers may find

disturbing or upsetting. If you or a loved one needs help, call the Sexual Assault Services Organization hotline at 247-5400.

Benjamin Smith, a former music teacher at Escalante Middle School in Durango, was or-



Smith

He was sentenced by Federal District Judge Gordon Gallagher

dered Tuesday to serve 40 years in prison – the maximum sentence allowed by his plea agreement – for his sex crimes against 36 different child victims.

on three counts: production of child sexual abuse material; coercion and enticement of minors; and attempted coercion and enticement of minors.

For the first count of production of child sexual abuse materials, he was sentenced to serve 30 years in prison. For the second and third counts of coercion and enticement, he was sentenced to

serve 40 years in prison, with both sentences to be served simultaneously, Gallagher said.

Smith was arrested in July 2024 as a result of a police investigation after a child reported Smith hid underneath a sheet in the back of his vehicle, disguised as a teenage girl, and attempted to solicit a sex

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