



COUNTY COACHING TREE

A host of former Jackson County wrestlers are coaching in and around Minnesota.
Story, B1



JACKSON COUNTY PILOT

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Five years after merger, county spending still up

Commissioners weigh cutting versus overhaul

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN
Publisher

Since the formation of Des Moines Valley Health and Human Services in 2014 — a merger of public health and human services departments from Jackson and Cottonwood counties designed to save each money — Jackson County's spending on public health

and human services has increased an average of nearly 5 percent annually. Jackson County Commissioners say they know changes need to be made; they just don't necessarily agree on how to go about doing that.

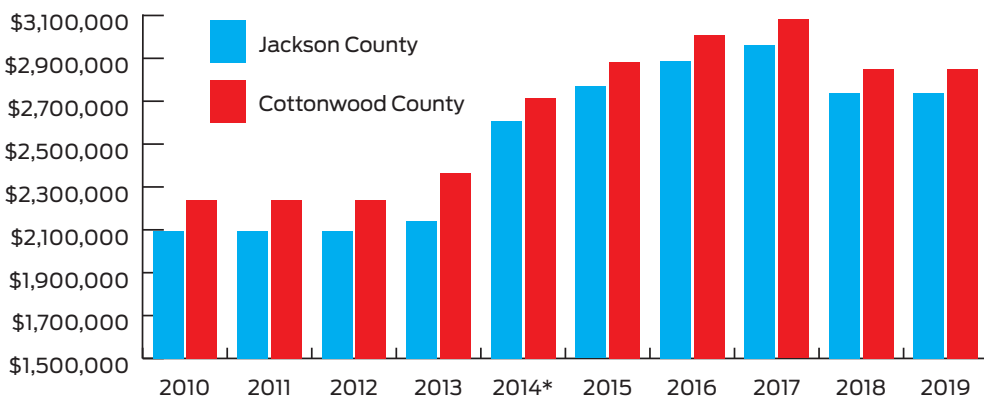
Increasing costs

In 2019, Jackson County will contribute more than \$2.7 million to DVHHS, close to \$600,000 more than its total expenditures for public health and human services in 2013, the year

prior to the merger. That's an increase of 28 percent. Despite projections the county would save money by merging its public health and human services departments with those of Cottonwood County, Jackson County has increased its appropriation to DVHHS three of the five years of its existence. In the three years leading up to the merger, local appropriations to public health and human services increased an average of less

See **COUNTY SPENDING** on A3

County appropriations to public health and human services



*DVHHS merger effective Jan. 1, 2014

Source: Des Moines Valley Health and Human Services



Roundup, parent nights next steps in 'grade-alike' transition at JCC

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN
Publisher

Administrators at Riverside Elementary School in Jackson and Pleasantview Elementary School in Lakefield are preparing to introduce their schools to a new group of students and their parents.

After for years both housing kindergarteners through sixth-graders, Riverside next fall will house all of Jackson County Central's kindergarten through third-graders, while Pleasantview will house all the district's fourth- and fifth-graders. It's part of the school district's transition to what officials term a "grade alike" approach to elementary education.

At present, Jackson area

preschool through fifth-grade students attend Riverside in Jackson, and Lakefield area preschool through fifth-grade students attend Pleasantview in Lakefield. The Jackson campus of the district's Discovery Place Preschool is set to remain at Riverside in Jackson and the Lakefield campus at Pleasantview in Lakefield next fall; the district's sixth through 12th grades already follow a grade-alike approach.

All incoming kindergarteners in the JCC district and their parents are invited to a districtwide kindergarten roundup event next Thursday, April 11, at Riverside in Jackson. The event runs from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Riverside Elementary School Principal Joel Timmerman said teachers and staff will be available that evening to answer questions, lead tours and introduce themselves.

Grade-level parent nights for parents of first-
See **GRADE-ALIKE** on A9



Joel Timmerman

THE FRONT MAN

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN
Publisher

How did a kid from Jackson go from just wanting to play the bass guitar to being the front man for one of the state's hottest variety bands?

Travis Christensen isn't sure. "I never wanted to be a singer," said Christensen, lead singer and guitarist for Minneapolis-based band Tugboat Rampage. "It just seems like every band I ever ended up in, nobody wanted to be the singer. I had the ability to sing, so I became the singer."

Christensen, a 2000 graduate of Jackson County Central High School,



PHOTOS BY JUSTIN LESSMAN
Jackson native Travis Christensen fronts Minneapolis-based band Tugboat Rampage, the featured entertainment at this past Friday's Fireman's Dance.

sang and played his heart out at the 126th annual Fireman's Dance

in Jackson Friday night, the latest in a string of recent homecomings for

the Jackson native and his four-man band.

"That was fun," Christensen said following the Friday show. "Jackson brought the party and we were glad to help keep it going."

Scratching an itch

Growing up, there was always music. Christensen's mom, Nita, operated Nita's School of Dance in Jackson for 33 years.

"I was always kind of around music," he said. "It was on the radio; it was playing down at the dance studio. I always liked dancing and performing; then I got the itch to play guitar."

See **DANCE** on A3

Local library set to celebrate big week

Fine forgiveness, family fun, photo contest all on tap

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN
Publisher

Fine forgiveness, family bingo and a fun photo challenge highlight the Jackson library's celebration of National Library Week next week.

The library will offer what local librarian Carrie Dose terms "fine amnesty"

April 8-13.

"Customers who have a fine on their card are encouraged to stop in or call their local library and ask that their fines be waived," Dose said. "In addition, all overdue items returned during the week will be checked in fine-free."

The library will host a family bingo night on Tuesday, April 9, starting at 6 p.m. All are invited to the library that evening for some bingo fun, chance

See **LIBRARY** on A9

Inside...

A7 Read all about the local commemoration of National Library Week, plus other special events planned at the Jackson library over the next several months.

Last month colder, wetter than normal

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN
Publisher

Last month was colder and wetter than normal.

The average high temperature recorded this past March at Federated Rural Electric headquarters in Jackson was 38 degrees, while the average low temp was close to 22 degrees, both lower than the aver-

Inside...

A2 See the full weather summary — including daily highs and lows, precipitation totals and historical averages — for the month of March.

age historical high for the month of 41 degrees and the average historical low of nearly 23 degrees.

Nearly 3.5 inches of precipitation were measured at Federated headquarters

last month, an inch-and-a-quarter more than the historical average precipitation total for the month.

An even 9 inches of snow fell last month, a bit short

See **WEATHER** on A2



PHOTO BY JUSTIN LESSMAN

STELLAR SPELLER?

Kendell Kaplinger, playing spelling bee contestant Olive Ostrovsky in this past weekend's performance of the Jackson County Central High School musical, struggles with a word, despite her literal tight grasp of Webster's Dictionary. For more photos, see B4.

BUSINESS BRIEFS

Jackson hotel open for business

The Jackson EconoLodge is open for business. After closing Feb. 2 because of a nonfunctioning fire alarm system, the local hotel reopened this past Friday.

The Jackson EconoLodge is licensed for 41 rooms. State building code requires any hotel with more than 20 rooms to have a functional fire alarm system in place. On Tuesday, owners Mahesh and Rosa Patel said that requirement has been met.

The Patels also said the restaurant attached to their hotel is still being remodeled, but will open again as soon as the work is complete.

The Patels have owned the hotel and restaurant since April 2015.

Business opportunities abound

Plenty of opportunities exist for businesses to be involved in the 2019 Jackson Town and Country Days celebration.

Dates of this year’s celebration are June 1-2.

Businesses are encouraged to help sponsor the festival, have an entry in the grand parade on June 1 or provide volunteers for various activities. Sponsorship commitments are due to the Jackson Area Chamber of Commerce office by April 12.

Money available to help local business owners fix up façades

The Jackson Business Development Committee is teaming with the Jackson Economic Development Authority to help downtown business owners spruce up their storefronts.

A full \$25,000 is available to Jackson business owners looking to fix up their building façades. The money will be made available as five-year forgivable loans to owners of eligible properties.

“This is something the JBDC thought could help improve the aesthetics of downtown Jackson,” said Tom Nelson, the city’s contracted economic development coordinator. “It will help property owners improve the appearance of their storefronts and make downtown Jackson a more inviting place.”

The minimum forgivable loan will be \$1,000; the maximum will be \$5,000. The money comes with a dollar-for-dollar match requirement.

Eligible properties include commercial buildings located within Jackson’s central business district. Eligible improvements must be visible to the public and may include façade materials and construction, brickwork, painting, windows and doors, awnings, signage, lighting and landscaping.

“These will be limited funds,” Nelson said, adding, “We want to target the needed areas in town.”

Jackson will transform into hub of curbside commerce later this year

Jackson will transform into a hub of curbside commerce later this spring as the city hosts its annual citywide garage sales in May.

Dates of the citywide sales are May 2-4. Details on how to register sales will be forthcoming in future editions of the Livewire, Jackson County’s largest circulation newspaper.

Festival planning committee asks businesses, others to host events

Local businesses, along with social and civic organizations, churches, nonprofits, groups and individuals are being sought to help organize and host events, fundraisers and socials during this year’s Jackson Town and Country Days festival.

Dave Schmidt, a member of the Jackson Area Chamber of Commerce’s Town and Country Days Planning Team, said any and all ideas are welcome as the committee looks to make Jackson’s 2019 summer festival bigger and better than ever.

Those interested in hosting an event are encouraged to contact the chamber office.

This year’s Jackson Town and Country Days festival is scheduled for June 1-2.

COUNTY SPENDING: To cut or to overhaul?

Continued from A1

than 1 percent annually.

The trends are similar for Cottonwood County.

Phil Nasby, the newest member of the Jackson County Board of Commissioners, said he is downright alarmed by this.

“It’s been five years,” Nasby said at the last DVHHS board meeting. “It’s time to look at how we do business.”

From 2010 to 2012, Jackson County appropriated a flat \$2.1 million to public health and human services. In 2013, it upped that amount by close to \$47,000, a 2.2 percent hike.

DVHHS was officially formed Jan. 1, 2014. That year, Jackson County’s appropriation to the newly merged entity totaled more than \$2.6 million — a year-over-year increase of nearly \$470,000, or 22 percent.

The local appropriation continued to increase — up to close to \$3 million in 2017 — until 2018, when it decreased by nearly 7.5 percent to around \$2.7 million, the same amount as in 2019.

A turning point

It was at a DVHHS work session in January 2018 that Nasby’s predecessor, then-Jackson County Commissioner Kim Hummel, presented the DVHHS board with results of an analysis she undertook to complete indicating Jackson County had the highest per-capita public health and human services spending — nearly \$273 per resident — of any of the 13 Minnesota counties she surveyed.

Next most? Cottonwood County, at close to \$247.

Commissioner James Eigenberg, who joined the board in 2017, said Hummel’s per-capita spending analysis was a turning point for him.

“We asked, ‘What’s going on?’” Eigenberg said. “That’s our job.”

Commissioner Don Wachal concurred.

“That per-capita number put the flags up,” he said, causing members of the DVHHS board to undertake an extensive review of all non-mandated services

being provided by DVHHS and supported financially by the two counties.

And the cutting began.

Last July, DVHHS discontinued providing chemical dependency evaluations. Its community-based support program ended shortly thereafter. The organization is also transitioning away from offering money management support services, said Craig Myers, executive director of DVHHS.

All three are non-mandated services.

And last week, the DVHHS board voted 8-2 to discontinue its home health care program, a move that figures to save the organization between \$375,000 and \$400,000 annually. Wachal said upon review of all non-mandated DVHHS programming, the home health care program quickly emerged as one of the top areas of financial concern.

“Here’s the big negative negative number,” he said of the home health care program’s bottom line.

Indeed, the home health care program in Jackson and Cottonwood counties has run in the red since DVHHS formed.

Wachal, along with Eigenberg and fellow commissioners Cathy Hohenstein and Scott McClure, voted to end the home health care program effective June 30.

But Nasby, who voted against ending the program, said he isn’t so sure cutting here and there is the way to get DVHHS on track.

“That’s a mark in the ledger that’s good to get rid of — a big red one,” he said of the home health care program. “But even with that out, I’m still startled at the per-capita spending. We need to start to address some of the other expenses.” That may extend to staffing, Nasby said, and even to management, oversight and beyond.

“We need,” Nasby said, “to take a hard look, after five years, at how we do business.”



PHOTOS BY JUSTIN LESSMAN

Jackson native Travis Christensen fronts Minneapolis-based band Tugboat Rampage, the featured entertainment at this past Friday’s 126th annual Fireman’s Dance at the Jackson National Guard Armory.



DANCE: From playing bass to leading band

Continued from A1

His folks, Troy and Nita, weren’t so sure about that.

“He begged and begged for a bass guitar, but he wasn’t keeping his grades up,” Nita Christensen recalled. “We told him if we get you a guitar, you’d better get those grades up. We did, and he did. It all worked out.”

He started playing bass guitar in seventh grade.

“I look lessons on bass for two or three years,” he said. “I also worked on things myself, mixing in some self-teaching, finding my style.”

A few years later, he decided to try his hand at electric guitar.

“That I basically picked up on my own,” he said.

He teamed up with some buddies from school to form a few bands. As always, he ended up as singer.

“It was all right,” he said. “We played high school dances and up at the golf club.”

After graduation, he moved to Minneapolis. There he helped form the pop punk rock band Handsome Deville.

And he got his first taste of the road.

“We were touring pretty regularly,” he said, and picking up quite a following, not only across Minnesota and the Upper Midwest, but across the country.

Among tour stops in Denver, Salt Lake City and San Antonio back in 2008, Christensen booked a gig for the band in his hometown of Jackson.

The group headlined the Rhythm of the River music festival’s Friday night that year.

After tiring of the grueling tour schedule — and starting a family — Christensen and his bass player, with whom he owns a cleaning company in Minneapolis, decided to take their musical passions in a different direction.

“A little over three years ago, we decided to slow things down a bit and start up a cover/variety band,” Christensen said. “We found Kyle, our drummer, and Alex, our lead guitarist, and we hit it pretty hard for about two months — working up songs, finding our sound. We’ve been out and about ever since.”

each — out for audiences.

“You kind of tailor the music to the crowd and to the venue,” he said. “It’s our job to keep the audience engaged.”

Christensen said the band got its start playing clubs in Minneapolis. Once word began to spread, he and the guys started taking their show on the road.

“We have a decent following in Minneapolis, but our intention was always to be self-sufficient, so we have our own sound equipment and lights that allow us to get out and take it to the people,” he said.

“We’re doing county fairs,

street dances, town festivals, weddings, big music festivals — you name it. We’re playing out of the Cities more than in the Cities now, which is just fine.”

Christensen said the band averages about four to five gigs per month — fewer than what it could have, he said.

“We’re to the point where we can kind of pick and choose, which is nice,” he said. “I’ve got a wife and kids, a home life and work. It’s a balance we’ve all chosen to strike.”

But picking and choosing a gig close to home is always a pretty easy decision, Christensen said.

“It’s always great to come back,” he said. “The hometown crowd is always supportive and great to play for. It’s fun.”



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ACCEPTING BIDS FOR MEMORIAL PARK SHED

The City of Jackson is accepting bids for the sale of a 36' x 24' wooden shed (formerly used by the Boy Scouts for their newspaper recycling project) located in Memorial Park. The successful bidder will be responsible for removing and transporting the shed off site by May 1st, weather and conditions permitting. The cement pad it sits on stays.

Sealed bids with "Memorial Park Shed" labeled on the envelope are due to City Hall by 4:30 p.m. on Friday, April 5th. Questions? Contact Matt Skaret, City Administrator, at 507-847-4410 or email mskaret@cityofjacksonmn.com. The City of Jackson reserves the right to reject any and all bids.

Coming to the Fairmont Opera House...

Blake & Co Show *Tickets: \$30 Showtunes!*

Friday, April 5th at 7:30pm

Executive Director of the Fairmont Opera House, Blake Potthoff, takes the stage again for the second Blake & Co. Show! This show is a fundraiser for the Launch the Legacy Capital Campaign with 100% of the profits going to restoring the Opera House and working to build the addition which will help with more bathrooms, larger community spaces, and an elevator! The theme for this year's Blake & Co. Show will be Showtunes. So come ready to hear some favorites from musicals new and old!

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