

In the know

SPORTS

Sara Scalia and Alexis Pratt each score 27 points, but the sixth-ranked Stillwater girls' basketball team falls to No. 2-ranked Wayzata in overtime.
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Sophomore Will Whittington sets two pool records and contributes to two first-place relays as Stillwater boys' swimming and diving team prevails at Bengal Invite.
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Isabel Bartosh finishes second in the all-around as Stillwater gymnastics team tops strong field to win the St. Cloud Tech Invitational.
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INSIDE



History — The moving of houses in Stillwater is the subject of Brent Peterson's "Back in Time" column.
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Your Voice — Stillwater local Marguerite "Margot" Rheinberger reflects on her mother's love for Christmas and what the season means to her now.
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Police — Stillwater police collect three truck loads of toys for Toys for Tots.
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FROM THE GAZETTE FILES

Dec. 18, 1918 — For the first time, Stillwater city officials considered establishing a municipal dump. Administrators also discussed the outfitting wagons specifically for city garbage collection.

PUBLIC NOTICES

Legals — Keep up on the latest notices in your area.
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‘Together We Fly Higher’ Zach Sobiech benefit Dec. 22

BY HANNAH BOARDMAN
THE GAZETTE

Five years after his death, Zach Sobiech is still making his legacy. Diagnosed at age 14 with a childhood bone cancer called Osteosarcoma, Sobiech quickly became an inspiration for not only people in the Stillwater area, but for people around the world.

Through his hit song, “Clouds” and his story, “Fly a Little Higher,” a book written by his mother Laura Sobiech, Zach Sobiech has inspired more than \$1.6 million to be donated to the Children’s Cancer Research Fund. Sobiech’s friends will be hosting a fundraiser “Together We Fly Higher: A Benefit for Zach Sobiech’s Legacy” 7-10 p.m.

Dec. 22 at Maple Island Brewing Company in Stillwater. The event will feature live music from Sobiech’s friends. There will also be leading researchers from the University of Minnesota speaking about the advances they have made through the donations to The Zach Sobiech Osteosarcoma Fund. Those who are unable to attend

the fundraiser are able to donate can do so at the website z.umn.edu/togetherweflyhigher. Even though the event is scheduled for Dec. 22, the online fundraiser has already reached \$7,165 of its \$10,000 goal as of Dec. 20. “Consistent with the things Zach values, the night will

See Sobiech, Page A8

Santa’s Stillwater toyland



Stillwater local Jim Schaefer, known to locals for over 30 years as Santa Claus, has a toys collection that includes over 3,000 Hot Wheels toy cars. (Photo by Kim Schneider)

Long-time local Santa Claus has his own love for toys

BY KIM SCHNEIDER
THE GAZETTE

’Twas’ the month before Christmas and all around the St. Croix, a Stillwater Santa listened to children’s wishes for toys. Little did they know, as they sat on his knee, Santa wished for Hot Wheels toy cars under his own Christmas tree.

By the looks of him, Jim Schaefer, age 80 of Stillwater, is Santa Claus. He has a white beard, rosy cheeks and the red and white suit to match.

Although he’s spent the last few decades taking on the part of Santa Claus, asking children what they want for Christmas, Schaefer has a love for toys all his own. “But I mean me: what kind of toys does Santa like?” Schaefer said. “I got more Hot Wheels [cars] than Target or Walmart.” He estimates he’s collected about 3,000 Hot Wheels, among other collectors toys he has on display in a large room at his house. Schaefer also has a love for life-sized hot rod cars; He’s owned and flipped a handful of them.

See Santa, Page A7

Stillwater sets 6.8 percent levy increase

BY ALICIA LEBENS
THE GAZETTE

Stillwater residents can expect an increase in their city property taxes next year, after the city council approved the 2019 budget and tax levy. The 2019 property tax levy was set at about \$13.7 million, up about 6.8 percent from 2018. The city’s general fund tax levy was set at \$9,914,425, with the city’s total operating revenues set at \$16,133,238. Other city revenues for from fees, licenses and permits, fines and forfeits and intergovernmental revenues.

The city’s debt service tax levy is set at \$3,773,801 - an increase of 9.788 percent. City administrator Tom McCarty told the city council Dec. 4 that some of the significant increases to the budget include employee costs. The city saw a 15 percent increase in health insurance costs and saw a 3 percent contractual increase in wages. Midway through the year in 2019, the city will need to hire a full-time human resources specialist. The city council tabled the final tax levy approval until the Dec. 18 meeting. During the Dec. 18 meeting, McCarty told the council that

ten former city employees have opted to a change to their retirees’ health insurance plan - a savings of \$112,000 for next year. That saving, McCarty said, was included in a reduction to the city tax levy. For a median-value home in Stillwater the savings would be \$12.62 compared to the preliminary proposed tax levy. For taxes due in 2019, the median-value home in Stillwater is valued at \$272,300 and would see its city taxes increase by approximately \$95.31 next year, for a city tax bill of about \$1,389.17.

See Stillwater, Page A11

School board approves 2019 tax levy, cuts \$1 million in budget for 19-20

BY ALICIA LEBENS
THE GAZETTE

Many homeowners in the Stillwater Area School District will see a slight increase in their school property taxes paid in 2019, according to District 834 executive director of finance and operations Kristen Hoheisel. During the Dec. 13, school board meeting, Hoheisel presented a 3.65

percent — about \$1.7 million — increase to the total local property tax levy payable in 2019. Due to an overall increase in property values in the district of 4.57 percent, Hoheisel told the board that the average homeowner in the district — with a home valued at \$275,000 in 2018 — would see a tax increase of \$32.12 in the school district portion of property tax. Hoheisel also said that

there was a significant amount of growth in new construction residential in the district — increasing the amount of the total residential market value of the district. If a home did not increase in value, the school district portion of your tax levy could go down. The portion each property is taxed is based on the individual property’s assessed value. If your home value did not increase, but the values of homes around you increased and there was an increase in the number of homes around you, your taxes would decrease. According to the district’s tax levy presentation, the total increase to the referendum market value — the value of the property in the entire district — grew by over \$680 million.

See School, Page A8

County receives \$2.1 million grant for adult mental health support

BY KIM SCHNEIDER
THE GAZETTE

Washington County will receive \$2.1 million in state funding over the next two years to provide adult mental health services.

At the Dec. 11 meeting, the Washington County Board officially accepted the \$2,162,826 from the Minnesota Department of Human Services Adult Mental Health Initiative Grant Agreement to support community mental health services at the Dec. 11 board meeting. Kathy Mickelson, Washington County community services division manager, said the funds come from an ongoing state grant that helps the county build up its support services for individuals who face severe and ongoing mental health issues. These community-based services include housing subsidies, support for the homeless, in-home skills development, community-based nursing services, crisis intervention training, psychiatric services, expenditures for traditionally non-reimbursed client needs, residential crisis stabilization services, mobile crisis services and support for the Mental Health Alliance. In addition, the Adult Mental Health Grant Award supports adult mental health case managers. “It keeps individuals from needing hospitalization,” Mickelson said of the services. The boost in funding also allows the county more creativity in how they approach treating and assisting residents who struggle with mental health, said Kristi Gullett, Washington County senior social worker. Gullett said the county will place more of a focus on vocational services in the next two years by helping individuals find employment in the community. Therese Gilbertson, clinical supervisor with Washington County, added the grant allows the county to offer clients a team approach through psychiatric, case management and social services support. “The initiative grant really allows us to support the needs of our clients in non-traditional ways,” Gilbertson said, “[through] those services typically not reimbursed through insurance.”

Contact Kim Schneider at kim.schneider@ecm-inc.com



Jazz Concert

The Beacon Hill Jazz Ensemble will host “A Stillwater Christmas” Saturday, Dec. 22 from 8:30-11 p.m. at The Zephyr Theatre, 601 N. Main St. in Stillwater. Tickets are \$20 online at stillwaterzephyrtheatre.org or \$25 at the door.

Artists include: Suzi Mueller on vocals, Phil Kadidlo on piano, Greg Keel on saxophone, Nathan Norman on drums and Greg Stinson on bass.

Quaker Worship

The St. Croix Valley Friend’s will host

“Quaker Christmas Worship” on Sunday, Dec. 23 at 10 a.m. at Boutwells Landing, located at 5597 Norwich Parkway N. in Oak Park Heights. At their annual Christmas worship, they will have silent meditation alternated with songs, writings and stories. Bring your own to contribute or just enjoy

those brought by others. For more information call 651-413-1081.

Swedish Dinner at Christ Lutheran Church

Christ Lutheran Church will host a traditional Swedish Din-

ner Thursday, Jan. 17, 11 a.m. – 6 p.m., with continuous seating. The dinner includes hand-rolled meatballs, lutfisk, white sauce, melted butter, boiled potatoes, Swedish gravy, cranberry sauce, rice pudding, coffee and Scandinavian cookies. Tickets are \$20 for adults and available at the door. Children

16 years and under eat free. All proceeds support local, national and international mission projects. For more information visit clcmarine.org or call 651-433-3222. Christ Lutheran Church is located at 150 Fifth St. in Marine on St. Croix.

SANTA

(Continued from page A1)

When he’s not spreading holiday cheer, he works at Jerry’s Auto Body in Oak Park Heights, where he’s been for almost 30 years, he said.

Joe Schoenecker, Jerry’s Auto Body manager, said Schaefer is a fitting Santa down to his nature. He’s friendly, jolly and loves entertaining, Schoenecker said.

“He shares a passion of collector cars, antiques, toys and more than any Santa Claus. He is quite a spit fire for being over 80 years old and may never grow old,” Schoenecker said. “Jim is a friend and longtime coworker not just to us but many around town. He is better known to most as Santa rather than Jim Schaefer.”

Schaefer’s love for toys started long before he became the St. Croix Valley Kris Kringle. Schaefer grew up in California and he served in the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Today he lives in Stillwater with his wife Susan, who is somewhat of a Mrs. Claus herself. She hand-made Schaefer’s Santa outfit and accompanying holiday vests, Schaefer said.

After Schaefer’s salt and pepper beard turned white, the owner of a former Stillwater Christmas tree farm asked him to be the farm Santa.

So he bought a \$20 suit at Walmart, he said, and handed out candy canes. He got a kick out of crashing Christmas parties too, he said, and he eventually started working annual parties through word-of-mouth.

Ken Wolf, owner of Wolf Marine in Stillwater, said Schaefer has been part of the Wolf fam-

ily Christmas tradition for more than 30 years, playing as Santa for several generations of the family.

“For my mother, that is what Christmas is all about,” Wolf added. “That’s what makes her smile.”

Schaefer has also been Santa at Maplewood Mall, the Grand Garage in Stillwater and Nordstrom at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minn. He landed at the Woodbury Lakes Mall in 2005 and has been there since. They didn’t have a Santa at the time, Schaefer said, because it’s an open mall.

“I said I’ll stroll. I’ll be a strolling Santa,” he said.

According to his fit-bit, Schaefer walks about six miles per work day as Santa, he said.

“It’s really fun to relate to everybody,” he said. “I just think it’s making people happy.”

His love of toys easily translates to his seasonal job. In fact, it helps him play the part.

On his front porch in Stillwater, Schaefer has an 1800s John Deere Webber sleigh, painted red and green. It’s “pulled” by a reindeer made of wood and branches. Schaefer spruces up his Santa suit with a glitzy green wreath brooch, a “Santa” pin and the “key” to the toy factory. His red boots are made musical with two anklets of reindeer bells.

“Jingle bells don’t ring like reindeer bells,” he said.

Interacting with kids is the best part of being Santa, Schaefer said. He enjoys answering questions about being Santa, going above in beyond in how he responds. If a kid asks how he gets to every house in one night, he shows them how he can stop time with his “magic” watch in order to deliver everyone’s pres-



Stillwater local Jim Schaefer, known to locals for over 30 years as Santa Claus, has a room in his home devoted to his role as Santa. (Photo by Kim Schneider)

ents in time for Christmas day.

He’s also not a typical tubby Santa, he said, which kids frequently point out.

“They say, “You look fatter on television,” he said. “The kids are so funny.”

Occasionally he gets the one question some parents dread: is

Santa real?

He asks them what they think: he has the beard, the suit and balding head. He tells them what they believe matters most, he said.

“Then they go ‘Mama, this is him!’” Schaefer said. “I’ve never told a child I’m Santa, ever, but

I do a good job of convincing them.”

Contact Kim Schneider at kim.schneider@ecm-inc.com

WORSHIP SERVICES

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490 N. 4th St., Bayport
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(651) 439-7238

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11194 36th St. N., Lake Elmo
(651) 777-2881

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150 Fifth Street, Marine on St. Croix
(651) 433-3222

COMMON GROUND CHURCH

1024 N. Stillwater Blvd., Lake Elmo
(651) 748-7984

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9125 Newgate Avenue N. Stillwater
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(651) 430-9950

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(651) 439-4511

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(651) 436-8691

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(651) 363-9797

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(651) 439-5970

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