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# winona post

sunday, february 10, 2019

volume 48, no. 12

winonapost.com

inserts: full circulation: ■ Mills Fleet Farm ■ Slumberland ■ Menards ■ Ashley Furniture ■ Volkman Appliance zoned circulation: ■ Sport & Spine ■ Shopko

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## Winona will seek new builder for 60 Main

by CHRIS ROGERS

Until recently, Winona city leaders were very excited for Minneapolis-based developer Sherman Associates' plans to build an apartment and commercial complex at 60 Main Street in

downtown Winona. Now city officials have given up on that proposal, but not the project.

Winona City Manager Steve Sarvi and other city officials reported that, in recent months, they were unsure whether Sherman Associates was still

interested in the project and the company did not respond to the city's inquiries. "He had a bunch of different ideas and rough, rough plans, and then he kind of went quiet," Winona Port Authority Commission Chair Mike Cichanowski said of Sherman Associ-

ates Principal George Sherman. Sarvi said he told Sherman Associates that if the city did not hear back by February 1, the city would move on without the company. "There has been no response," Sarvi stated.

The city will look for a new devel-

oper for 60 Main Street, but it is in no rush, Sarvi stated. "60 Main will be developed," he said. "There's plenty of time, and we remain committed to re-

see **60 MAIN** page 4a

## Behind the wheel: Drivers keep plowing

Photo by Chris Rogers



■ Winona County Highway Department Sign Specialist Jason Prondzinski is one of over a dozen plow truck drivers who work long hours to keep county roads as safe as possible.

by CHRIS ROGERS

Jason Prondzinski had been working for 11 hours already when he turned onto Gilmore Valley Road last Thursday and dropped the plow. His massive plow truck shuddered against the force of the snow, but it kept on pushing and threw heaps of snow to the side of the road like a motorboat's wake.

Plow trucks, motor graders, front

loaders, pickups, Bobcats, snowblowers, and shovels — it takes a small army of people and equipment to keep local communities running when heavy snows fall. Prondzinski is one of over a dozen Winona County Highway Department plow truck drivers who clear snow and spread sand on county roads, in addition to the state and city crews that plow state highways and city streets. Last Thursday, when the snow fell

almost all day long, Prondzinski and his coworkers kept plowing all day long, from 4:30 a.m. until around 9 p.m. That is a 16-and-a-half-hour-long shift. "It can make for some long days," Winona County Highway Engineer Dave Kramer said. The county plow truck drivers take short breaks, but other than that, they just keep on plowing, Kramer stated. Each driver has a route they cover, and when the snow keeps falling like it did on

Thursday, "They just keep plowing their route," Kramer explained.

Normally, Prondzinski's route stretches all the way from Winona to gravel roads in Wiscoy Valley and Hart Township near the county's southern border, but during major snowstorms such as last Thursday, the county focuses on the most travelled routes, and Prondzinski plows a

see **PLOWING** page 4a

## Surviving the inferno

by NATHANIEL NELSON

A little after 11 p.m. on Tuesday evening, the lights in Jeff Rothering's apartment began to flicker. "We were in a back room, and we noticed the electricity dimming out. There was a short of electricity in one of the plugs," Rothering recalled. His fiancé Serena Hanson went to check on it, and got an electric shock in the process. As they went to check on the damage, Rothering's roommate said something alarming: "Jeff, your couch is on fire."

On Tuesday night, a blaze engulfed the apartment building at 1224 Gilmore Avenue, and over the next few hours, the people who lived there had their lives shaken to their cores.

### Into the blaze

Once he realized his couch was engulfed in flames, Rothering began to act quickly. He, Hanson, and his roommate began tossing water on the couch with the hope of dousing the flames. But it wasn't working. "It was like tossing gasoline on it," he said.

The fire began to pick up, moving onto the wall and quickly spreading throughout the room. He told everyone to abandon it and get outside, and the apartment's residents rushed to safety outdoors.

It was then that Rothering realized something.

"I got out in front, and at this time the whole place was engulfed in flames," he said. "And then I thought: 'Oh God,

see **INFERNO** page 5a

## Does Winona need a new police station?

by CHRIS ROGERS

Two little packages of Narcan — the life-saving antidote to opioid overdose — sit on the cluttered counter of the Winona Police Department's (WPD) evidence room. It is there because the WPD conducts initial tests on confiscated drugs to confirm whether white powdery substances

found in searches are indeed methamphetamine or heroin, for example. However, there is a chance that heroin may be cut with the drastically more potent and more lethal fentanyl or — even worse — the elephant tranquilizer carfentanil. The U.S. Drug

see **STATION** page 5a

## WAPS' administrators ask for 5% raise

by NATHANIEL NELSON

The Winona Administrators' Association (WAA), the highest paid bargaining group of Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) employees, who earn between \$109,000 and \$147,000 annually, has asked the district for a

five-percent raise over two years. The groups had their first negotiation meeting last Tuesday, and it was apparent that the two sides had very different thoughts on what the district

see **RAISE** page 7a



Photo by Nathaniel Nelson

■ Karter Welker (right) and Miles Kelley build a tower of blocks during Washington-Kosciusko Elementary's Global School Play Day. Each elementary school in the district celebrated the occasion by having students learn through playing with their classmates at various stations across the schools.

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# Station

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Enforcement Administration has warned law enforcement agencies across the country that mere milligrams of fentanyl and carfentanyl can be deadly and can be absorbed through the skin or through accidental inhalation. Some police departments use fume hoods to mitigate the risk of inhalation, but the WPD does not have one. "In case there is fentanyl exposure to the officers, we have the Narcan right here," Winona Deputy Chief of Police Tom Williams said.

Winona city leaders have made a lot of plans for park improvements, economic development projects, and facility upgrades in the last five years, but they have not talked much publicly about the WPD's facility needs. The topic came up seemingly out of the blue last fall, when Winona City Manager Steve Sarvi talked with the City Council in closed sessions — tape recordings of the meetings were later made public — about the potential of buying Central Elementary School for use as a joint police and fire station. Although the topic has not gotten a lot of attention, Sarvi said that the WPD has been operating with limited space for years. Asked if he believes the department really does need more room, he responded, "Oh, I knew that from day one."

The evidence room is one of the biggest issues, Williams said. The WPD secures each piece of evidence from an investigation in its own individual locker, but sometimes all 24 of the department's evidence lockers are filled. It is not unusual for clothing to be part of the evidence in an investigation, but the evidence room lacks enough counter space to lay a pair of pants out on the counter to be

photographed. Officers use the floor, Williams explained.

The interview room is another top concern for Williams. "This is like a good-sized walk-in closet," Williams said as he showed the room to the Post. He was not exaggerating. Officers, sometimes two at a time, sit down with witnesses in the tiny room and talk about serious and sometimes emotional things. "Just think about the proximity of two cops and a witness," Williams said. He described it as "uncomfortably cramped."

Officers use other spaces as impromptu interview rooms, too, but it is not always possible to accommodate the video recording they need elsewhere, and the department is tight on space overall, Williams said. He opened the door to a room full of boxes and a hot plate. "This is our big storage closet and kind-of kitchen," he said.

Down the hall is the WPD's squad room, where shifts of patrol officers meet with their sergeants to get marching orders, where patrol officers call witnesses and victims and type up reports, and where officers take lunch. Sometimes, there are five officers on a shift sharing the four total computers, or sometimes two officers are tapping away at the keyboard while two others are trying to call witnesses, Williams explained. Following up on cases is an important part of good police work. It is not great if the officers cannot hear what people are saying over the phone, Williams said. At shift change, there can be eight or nine officers all looking for a place to meet and work at the same time, he added. "There is a lack of good, usable work space for the officers," Williams stated.

In addition to interior space, Williams said that garage parking for squad cars has been on the department's wish list. In winter, officers may have to

spend the first half hour of their shift scraping off squads and waiting for the squad-mounted laptops, videocameras, and other electronics to warm up and reach operating temperatures, he stated.

Asked if the issues he described were wants or needs, Williams responded, "I would say the evidence aspect is a need. The exhaust hood alone is a safety issue for officers." However, he added of getting more space, "I'm not saying we deserve it or we expect it. We make do with what we have, and we understand that any improvements are [made with] taxpayer dollars ... We want to provide the best service we can without breaking the bank."

In addition to the WPD's facility needs, the Winona Fire Department's (WFD) Central Fire Station has some, as well: more storage space for equipment, women's restrooms, larger garage bays to accommodate larger fire trucks, more room for firefighter training, fixes for the aging plumbing, and required handicap-accessibility improvements. City leaders have been planning on a \$1.5-\$3-million renovation of the Central Fire Station for nearly a decade at least, but they have been putting it off since 2013.

In the 2000s, the city bought several properties next to Central Fire Station and laid plans to expand the station and possibly collocate the WPD there, but those plans have not yet come to fruition. Last fall, Sarvi's suggestion of — and the City Council's support for — the idea that Central school could host a combination police and fire station has been the council's only discussion of a new police or fire station in recent years.

During that discussion last fall, Sarvi suggested that Winona County might not have room for the WPD out of the current law



Photo by Chris Rogers

■ Winona Deputy Chief of Police Tom Williams showed off the Winona Police Department evidence room. Space is at a premium, Williams said.

enforcement center (LEC). The city pays \$165,000 to rent space for the police station inside the county-owned LEC, and the county is currently planning the potential construction of a new jail next door to the LEC. Sarvi suggested that, during a jail project, the county might run out of room at the LEC site and the WPD might be forced to relocate.

That is not the plan, and the county would like to keep the WPD as a tenant, Winona County Administrator Ken Fritz said, while acknowledging that the county's space needs for a potential new jail are still unknown. "It's not in contemplation that they would lose space, but obviously that space is valuable to us," Fritz said. During any jail project, there might or might not be space for the WPD to expand its offices at the LEC site, he continued. "It really comes down to whether they want to stay or not," Fritz stated. "I think the county's po-

sition is that we want to have as much synergy and cooperation with the WPD as we can, and I think collocation helps that."

Sarvi and Williams have said there are potential benefits from collocating the WPD and WFD together. Firefighters and police officers could share training and workout facilities, for example. However, there are also benefits from the WPD's current location, Williams acknowledged. It's in the same building as the Winona County Jail and Winona County Sheriff's Office and a few feet away from the Winona County Attorney's Office and Winona County District Court-house. That makes it easy for officers to drop off arrestees in jail or make it to court hearings, and it's convenient for officers to talk with prosecutors and sheriff's deputies about cases, he said.

City leaders have no immediate plans to build a new police and fire station or do anything to renovate the existing facili-

ties. The council has pencilled in a \$1.9-million renovation for the Central Fire Station in 2021 in its long-term financial plan, but that project has been pushed back in the past. Sarvi said that the city will likely wait and see what happens with the Winona County Jail before making any big decisions. The County Board is slated to decide whether to build a new jail this spring, and if it does opt to build, more detailed designs for the LEC site would follow.

"We're aware of the issues that we have at Central Fire, and we're aware that the county is going through a process right now, and we're aware of the issues for the police station for Winona," Sarvi said. "There are an awful lot of issues that need to be considered going forward." He added, "You don't build new fire stations and police stations every year, so we really have to think through that."

Chris@winonapost.com

## Correction

In its February 6 edition, a Winona Post headline incor-

rectly stated that a suspected CWD-positive deer was found in Cedar Valley. The deer was found in the neighboring valley, outside Pickwick.

## Inferno

continued from page 1a

there are people upstairs still inside."

Rothering sprang into action, running back inside through the smoke and flames and began banging on doors one by one. With the flames in his face, he kicked down the first apartment door, which was empty at the time. The next apartment also had no response, so he kicked that door down as well.

"There was a couple in there asleep, and they weren't waking up, so I go in and scream, 'Get up, get up, there's a fire!'" Rothering said.

Melody Kerns and her husband John were sound as her when Rothering burst into their room, and at first, they had no idea what was happening, but they quickly realized the severity of the situation. "Our first instinct was to get out. We called the fire department, grabbed my dog, and we headed out onto the balcony," Melody said.

According to Rothering, the flames had reached 30 or 40 feet high at that point, and were singeing the back of his hair. The three stood on the balcony and planned their escape, but there wasn't much room — the balcony was only a few feet wide. And, it was on the second floor.

"The neighbors brought out a mattress, so we went to jump," Rothering said.

Melody said she was afraid of how she'd get out. After all, a two-story jump is nothing to scoff at. "In my 50s, I didn't think I'd be jumping two stories," she explained. "When the fire started coming out of the top, my husband had to push me over the [balcony] so we'd all survive."

Rothering slipped down a nearby pole, and the group connected with firefighters, who had just arrived.

Melody and John had made it out with minor bumps and bruises, but their dog was less lucky.

Coco, a seven-pound toy poodle, landed on cement and broke his leg in three places — an injury that's not easily fixed. "My dog had to have its leg amputated," Melody said, as she sat in the waiting room of the veterinary clinic while the operation took place.

But even by then, people had already begun to step up to help: according to Melody, the surgery was covered by the apartment's landlord, Bernie Mcguire, and the vet.

"We are thankful that we walked away with our lives, and everyone in the building walked away with their lives," Melody said. The apartment wasn't so lucky — the building was a complete loss, and the residents lost everything they owned.

"We're just rebuilding, that's all. We just pick up where we left off and do what we have to do," Melody said.

Rothering, who took it upon himself to launch into the blaze, explained that facing death is something that he has to do every day.

"I'm dying of pancreatic cancer. When something like that happens, you don't think about getting burned or dying. I was just worried about them making it out," Rothering said. "Who cares if we lose anything? What you own is replaceable, lives aren't."

Rothering denies any claim to fame from the act, explaining that what happened was just common sense. He knew there were people inside, and knew he had to act, so he did.

"Some people call me a hero or whatever, but I call it a selfless act. There's human life up there, and I'm not going to let someone die," he said. "I couldn't imagine myself right now if they died. I would be a wreck right now."

However, with the blaze, there was one place he couldn't reach. "The girl on the other side was pregnant. Thank God she wasn't in there," he said.

### The twins

At 11:15 p.m. on Tuesday, Josh

Deppe was working at Perkins. He had to spend his time in Winona working while his girlfriend, Briana Roth, stayed in La Crosse, Wis., looking after their newborn twins at the hospital.

Jerome and Mason were born on February 1 in an emergency C-section at Winona Health. "It was a scheduled C-section, but Mason's heart rate dropped, so it turned into an emergency C-section that day," Deppe said.

The two boys were born prematurely, and because their breathing was difficult, they were sent to Gundersen Health System in La Crosse to be cared for and put on CPAP machines. After a few days of treatment following the surgery at Winona Health, Briana left to be with her boys until they could be taken home.

In the meantime, Deppe remained in Winona working and visiting whenever he could.

That Tuesday night, however, he got a call.

"Bri called me at 11:36 crying because she didn't know if I was at home, at work, or where I was," Deppe said. "She told me she got a call from our landlord that there was a fire."

He was stunned.

"To be honest, right away I just kind of sat down. I was up until 6 a.m. the next morning just processing it all. We have to move on, and we have to get everything going again," Deppe said.

Deppe's apartment was on the opposite side of the building from Rothering and the Kernses, so it wasn't hit as hard by the flames, but the smoke had done its work.

"Anything that was even touched by smoke we can't bring home or use with the babies. [The fire department] told us that we can assume that nothing is usable," he explained.

They lost everything, including couches, a bed, a chair, TVs, and everything they had prepared for their new infants.

Instead of sleeping babies, their two cribs would only hold soot.

"Right now, we're just worrying about the babies," Deppe

said. His brother and sister-in-law offered a room for them to stay until they can get a process on their feet, but it will be a process. The two now have to start again from scratch.

### The community comes together

In the aftermath of the blaze, residents of the fated apartment talked about how members of the community have already begun to reach out and help. Rothering explained that the night of the fire, emergency personnel were caring and responsive, checking in on everything and making sure they were alright.

"The firemen and the police were awesome. Everything they could do to make the transition work, they did. My hat's off to them," Rothering said.

It wasn't only those there that night, of course.

A fundraising campaign was launched by Deppe's sister-in-law to help the couple rebuild their life and prepare a new home for their two newborn boys.

"People have already been stepping up to help, giving donations. People have been talking about dropping off donations of baby clothes," Deppe said. "They've already stepped up as a community to help my family and it is so great."

Deppe explained that the outburst of support has done more than just help his family in the physical sense — it has also helped curb the pain of losing important mementos in the freak accident.

"Bri has seen how much our families have come together to help. It's making the shock, awe and sorrow go away a little easier because of the love and support that people are willing to put out there for us," Deppe explained.

A GoFundMe campaign has been launched to help the displaced renters. To donate, visit <https://www.gofundme.com/fire-recovery-for-winona-renters>.



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**SATURDAY**  
Cloudy

High 16°  
Low 11°

**SUNDAY**  
Snow

High 22°  
Low 12°

**MONDAY**  
Cloudy

High 26°  
Low 22°

**TUESDAY**  
Snow

High 29°  
Low 11°

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