



contact us: 507.452.1262 fax: 507.454.6409 email: winpost@winonapost.com P.O. Box 27, 64 E. 2nd St., Winona, MN, 55987

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Final hearing on Winona taxes, budget

by CHRIS ROGERS

On Monday, the Winona City Council will hold a public hearing before taking a final vote on the city's proposed 5.4-percent property tax levy increase and its \$46-million budget for 2019. The proposed tax levy increase fol-

lows a seven-percent hike in 2017 and a 10.5-percent increase in 2017. "It's 5.4 percent more than we'd like, but I think the number is what it is," Mayor Mark Peterson said. "It reflects a budget that meets the needs for the city." He added, "It's more than any of us would like to pass, but I think it's what

we need to pass."

Winona City Council member Gerry Krage cast the lone vote against the tax hike during a preliminary vote earlier this fall, saying he wished the city would have aimed for a lower tax increase. Krage was defeated in this fall's election by Eileen Moeller, who

has said the city should be more willing to borrow money to fund projects that will help Winona grow.

The proposed budget includes funding for a new police officer position, which will enable the Winona Police Department (WPD) to launch its proposed community outreach officer

(COO) program. The program will take two veteran officers off patrol and make community engagement their full-time job. WPD officials said it will allow officers to build relationships with citizens and take a more proac-

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Will historic dredge be scrapped?



Photos by Sarah Squires

- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Project Manager Marc Krumholz showed off the inner workings of the Dredge Thompson in 2011 before it made its voyage from Fountain City to Prairie du Chien, Wis. The historic dredge was sent to become a museum but it may be scrapped.



by NATHANIEL NELSON

After decades of traveling the Mississippi, carving sediment out of the riverbed and reviving one of the most important commercial channels of the Midwest, the famed William A. Thompson Dredge of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) St. Paul District has been resting dormant off the coast of Prairie du Chien, Wis., for the past five years. Next June, unless its owners can find the \$1 million needed for its transformation into a museum, the 267-foot-long vessel may be making its final voyage — to the scrap yard.

The Dredge Thompson was in operation from 1937 to 2008, creating a nine-foot-deep navigation channel down the Mississippi River. At the time, it was the single largest piece of equipment in use by the USACE

and the first dredge of its kind, able to dredge up to a 23.5-foot depth. It helped maintain 850 miles of the Upper Mississippi, and almost single handedly helped the region recover from the destructive Dust Bowl and Great Depression. In the process, the boat became a loved staple along the river near its home harbor in Fountain City.

The Dredge Thompson has been grounded since 2012, after the Prairie du Chien nonprofit Community Development Alternatives (CDA) purchased the boat from the federal government for \$19.37 to turn it into a museum. That summer, it was towed from Fountain City to its current resting place, moored in a harbor on the north side of St. Feriole Island. Since then, CDA has been

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Citizens, developer discuss Central

by CHRIS ROGERS

Winonans recognize that Central Elementary School is valuable. It is a full city block right next to downtown, and the historic school building is full of architectural gems, including stone columns and a marble fountain gifted by the Watkins family. Some Winonans feel it is a sensitive spot, too, on the border between more dense development and quiet neighborhoods. Last week, citizens let city officials know what they hope does — and does not

see **CENTRAL** page 5a

Do city leaders still want to buy Central?

by CHRIS ROGERS

The city of Winona is conducting a reuse study on the future of Central school, but does the city want to buy the former Central Elementary School property itself? The developer, Shawn Beier of Central Square, LLC, said he is open to selling to the city, and city leaders in the recent past expressed interest in buying the property, but

see **LEADERS** page 5a

WAPS: Paid parking used as 'bargaining chip'

by NATHANIEL NELSON

The negotiations between Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) and the Winona Education Association (WEA) are over, with the district awarding teachers \$814,000 in raises over the two-year contract. Audio recordings of private strategy meetings reviewed by the Post that were just made public reveal the WAPS Board discussed the use of a forced paid teacher parking permit as a "bargaining chip" in the negotiating process.

According to Minnesota law, school boards are allowed to meet privately to discuss contract negotiation strategy. However, those closed sessions must be recorded and, on the signing of the contracts, released to the public. The Winona Post reviewed more than eight hours of audio from closed sessions between May 4, 2017, and October 26, 2017, and found that

the district had discussed using the recently approved \$120 parking permits as a "bargaining chip" in the negotiation process. The union cried foul and threatened litigation over the proposal.

The paid parking permits were part of 2017 budget cuts, where the WAPS Board worked for several months to cut \$1.5 million from the district's budget. The proposal was one of the suggested ways that the district could generate revenue, with WAPS Finance Director Sarah Slaby estimating that the initiative could generate \$35,280 a year.

Different positions in the district would have received different rates, depending on where they worked, how many hours he or she worked and when the permit was purchased. For a full school year, an administra-

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CWD found near Winona County

by CHRIS ROGERS



Photo by Chris Rogers

- This spring, Winona officials feared deer at the Prairie Island Deer Park had been infected with chronic wasting disease (CWD). They hadn't, but this month state officials detected the disease just south of Winona County.

When initial results from this hunting season showed that Winona County was clear of chronic wasting disease (CWD), Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Wildlife Research Manager Lou Cornicelli warned, "Everything could change in a day." He was right.

There have still been no cases of CWD detected in wild deer in Winona County proper, but new test results from late-season hunts found that the disease is on Winona County's door step. Earlier this month, DNR officials confirmed that a deer harvested just south of the Winona County-Houston County line was infected with CWD. The infected deer was harvested on November 17 approximately one mile south of Winona County, near Silver Creek, Looney Valley, and Houston County

see **CWD** page 7a

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Central

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— happen with the property, and the developer spoke with the Post about his plans, including his willingness to work with the city on making Central the city’s new senior center.

“We want to make sure it fits,” developer Shawn Beier said of any future use at Central school. Asked specifically what he plans to do, Beier responded, “It’s just too early to say. We’re just waiting for the reuse study to come back and hear what the community has to say, get some input from them, and then go from there.” He added, “At the end of the day, at an economic level, it’s got to make sense.”

Beier and Dan Nisbit — of the Winona barge-loading company CD Corporation — own Central Square, LLC. They purchased Central school from Winona Area Public Schools for \$250,000 in October. After a previous deal to redevelop both Central and Madison schools met stiff resistance from neighbors and city zoning officials — especially Madison neighbors — the city launched a pair of “reuse studies” to solicit citizens’ concerns and wishes for the future of the two former schools. The previous development proposal for Central called for converting the school building into condominiums and apartments and constructing townhomes on the schoolyard. City leaders said that if future developers want zoning approvals from the city, they should take cues from the forthcoming reuse studies. A reuse study report for Madison school is currently being drafted. Last week, the city held its first public input session on Central school.

Don’t tear the historic school building down, neighbor Bob Anderson urged. “There’s too much history in there,” he said. “I’d definitely hope that they don’t destroy that historic building,” neighbor David Stoltman echoed, adding that, “Any building structures that are built on the block should compliment the existing building.”

“We love the architectural design of the building, we love the historic pieces of the building, and we want to keep those intact if at all possi-

ble,” Beier stated. “The outer part of the building — I don’t see anything being changed on the outside of the building ... On the inside of the building, there’s a lot of beautiful art in there from Watkins. And we want to keep that in place and keep that intact because no matter what we do with the building, that keeps the uniqueness there.”

Many Winonans believe that housing would be the most economically feasible reuse of the Central school property. After all, the previous developer proposed housing at the site, and the former middle school (now Washington Crossings) was redeveloped into housing. However, citizens and neighbors had varied opinions about whether housing development would be welcome and what kind of housing would be welcome.

“We don’t want student housing in that building. We’ve had enough,” Stoltman told city officials. Central is right next to Senior Living at Watkins and near Winona State University’s (WSU) childcare center, neighbor Susan Zeller pointed out. “To keep it quieter in that area, I think is of upmost importance because if they do something like apartments, traffic and safety would be a concern,” she said. Jane Cowgill spoke of the damage college students walking through the neighborhood on their way home from the bar cause. “Don’t put more students in there. We have plenty. I love them, but not in great lumps,” she said. A WSU student helping the city took notes on the concerns the neighbors expressed so they can be included in the reuse study.

It would be great to see condos or co-op housing, several Winonans said. “There are a lot of people in Winona who want to downsize from their home to an apartment like me, but I don’t want to move out to Willow Brook because I don’t want to have to drive everywhere,” Debi Niebuhr said. “It’s within walking distance of so much,” she stated. It would be terrific to have multi-generational housing there, perhaps with a shared garden or cooking space, Niebuhr suggested. “I’m of the age where I’d love to downsize to a condo or co-op living situation,” another woman said. “It would be nice to have something not quite as expensive [as the River’s Edge condos] and owner-occupied.” She

added, “We love the accessibility of walking to Midtown.” Anderson suggested senior living apartments.

Winonan Cooper McCormick talked about the affordability of any housing development. Winona is building a lot of upscale housing for young professionals, McCormick noted, specifically referencing the \$1,000-plus-per-month apartments at Beier’s Island City Properties and the luxury apartments under construction at the Main Square Community. But where are the young professionals that can afford those high-end apartments? McCormick asked. “There is not a lot of cheap, affordable housing for people in their upper 20s or 30s unless they’re looking to buy a house,” he stated.

Jovy Rockey said housing development would not be her first choice, but, she added, “If they do that, it would be nice to see them do what they did with the middle school, where it’s some low-income [housing]. It’s mixed. It’s focused on single-family.”

Future development at the site may include not only repurposing the existing building, but constructing new buildings on the large, open schoolyard. “I’d be concerned with a very large apartment building or something taking up the whole site,” John Howard said. “That would really change the visual.” Cowgill stated, “I’m really concerned that they’re going to put some horrible commercial building there or a huge parking lot — something ugly that I don’t want to look out my window and see.” Others encouraged developers to include green space on the site. Anderson talked about how Watkins Manor residents enjoy strolling around the Central school block. “They could have benches and flowers there for people to enjoy,” he suggested.

Engage Winona, an organization the city hired to gather public input for the reuse studies, will prepare a draft summary of public comments from last week’s meeting and hold a second public input meeting at 5 p.m. on January 22 for citizens to review and critique that draft summary. Following that, city staff and the Planning Commission will draft an actual reuse study report for Central school. Keep reading the Winona Post for more information.

Chris@winonapost.com

Leaders

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last week, city manager Steve Sarvi demurred.

“We’d love to work with the city on a senior center if it was something they were interested in,” Beier told the Post last Thursday. “We feel whether we own the building or didn’t own the building, it’d be a great location for it.”

Is the city interested? “I can’t answer that right now,” Sarvi told the Post last Friday. “We have to have a conversation with the council.” Mayor Mark Peterson responded, “We have not talked about it, other than when we talked about putting in an offer [earlier this fall].”

A couple months ago, the City Council tried to buy Central school. In September, the City Council offered the Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) Board \$175,000 for the property, with hopes of turning it into a new senior center, police and fire station, private development, or all of the above. Then in October, just before the School Board was set to accept an offer, Sarvi tried to get the City Council to increase its offer. The council declined, and the School Board went with a higher offer: Beier’s \$250,000 deal.

Immediately after that sale, Sarvi said that it might still be possible for the city to buy Central school and make it into a new home for the senior center. “Maybe the developer would reach back to the city and we would want to have a conversation with them to see what would work for us,” he suggested.

At public input meetings on the Madison and Central schools reuse studies, citizens expressed support for the city using either site as a community center or senior center. “The senior center needs a new home. It would make sense to put it next to our retirement community,” Jovy Rockey suggested at last week’s meeting on Central. Central school would make a great community center, said Chuck Toulouse, a Friendship Center member whose been part of a Friendship Center Task Force studying potential options for the senior center.

However, last week, Sarvi and Peter-

son’s comments about the city’s interest in Central were noncommittal. Asked if his comments meant the city might be interested, Sarvi replied, “It hasn’t been discussed since our offer was rejected. There will be a time in the very near future I would expect we’ll talk about what our next step would be with the Friendship Center.” “We have options — options other than Central, too,” Peterson stated. Peterson listed renovating the Friendship Center’s current home at the Masonic Temple, moving the Friendship Center to the East Recreation Center (ERC), or moving the senior center to some other property in Winona as options. The Winona Area YMCA leaders have also said that the new Y building they are constructing could be expanded to accommodate the senior center, but Sarvi has said Friendship Center members did not favor that option in past discussions and the city does not appear to be pursuing it.

Sarvi said that the City Council will discuss what to do with the Friendship Center soon, starting with a brief conversation this Monday at 5:45 p.m. in the council chambers at city hall. That meeting is open to the public. “The first thing is we need to have some guidance from the council, what are the parameters?” he stated.

Sarvi said the Friendship Center Task Force will also help guide the city’s decision making. The task force may not be subject to the same transparency laws that the City Council and most city committees are. Most committee meetings must be open to the public. Sarvi allowed the Post to attend one of the task force meetings earlier this fall, but then barred the press from meetings following WAPS’ decision to sell Central to Beier. “I just wanted to have that meeting after we got formally rejected by the School Board to just go over some things with them,” Sarvi explained. “When the group formally gets together again, you will be invited,” he promised.

Keep reading the Winona Post for more on this story.

Chris@winonapost.com

Parking

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tor or principal would pay \$120 per year, while teachers and licensed staff members would pay \$90 for a yearlong permit. Other staff members who work more than four hours a day would pay \$60.

The cost for implementation was estimated to be a “couple thousand dollars,” according to former WAPS Human Resources Director Pat Blaisdell, which the district spent on new signage despite not moving forward with the proposal.

In June 2017, the board voted 5-2 for the proposal, with board members Ben Baratto and Alison Quam voting against the motion.

However, in August, the board

chose to delay the permit for a year after two union groups — the Winona Educational Assistants Education Minnesota and the WEA — considered the vote a change in their compensation subject to negotiation and threatened legal action. During a June meeting, Blaisdell also said that purchasing a permit wouldn’t guarantee a staff member a spot and staff members would not be refunded for days they couldn’t find a spot.

In the audio recording of the August 2017 closed meeting for negotiations strategy, board members and district administrators discussed the paid parking proposal after the WEA sent a letter opposing the new rule.

Dahman explained that he had met with Janet Lutmers and Scott Halvorsen of WEA to talk about the new rule, and said he had told them how “displeased”

he was with the formal letter and how they handled the situation. “I told them it left a sour taste in my mouth,” he said.

He explained that Lutmers and Halvorsen stated that based on what they had heard from teachers, very few would actually purchase the passes and most would choose to park on the street, which would limit the revenue the district would actually realize. They had told him that the parking rule would have been a change in their compensation and subject to negotiation, which he told the board the district could use as a bargaining chip in the process.

“That would allow the teachers to bring that to the bargaining table if they want, allowing them to have a chip ... a relatively inexpensive chip that would make it seem like they’re getting something from the district,” he said.

“My feeling is that this might be a valuable tool for us to give on something that isn’t a big money item for us.”

He also said that there was a chance that it would make the negotiators dig in even harder. “[New contract raises] have a potential to cost us a lot more than \$35,000. Not just in the first year, but for every contract forever,” Dahman said.

Baratto, who voted against the initial motion, explained that he was involved with many retired teachers in the area and in surrounding districts, and having teachers pay for their parking spot is unheard of. “Not one of them has a district that charges teachers to park,” he said.

Blaisdell added that she could not find “even one” district that charges teachers to park, and that it wasn’t only teachers who were against the pass, but all

staff members in the district.

“Maybe we could be the leader in that,” said board member Tina Lehnertz of the paid parking proposal.

Lehnertz said she didn’t understand why teachers and staff members were against the passes because the school charges students for the same thing.

“They can’t pay the \$100 or whatever but we expect our kids to pay and there are kids who park in the street who can’t afford a parking permit,” added Lehnertz.

Board member Steve Schild stated that the district has no other option than to keep moving with the permits, particularly because of WAPS’ budget woes.

“We’re going to be in a position real quick where we say this is the bottom line, and that’s where we’ll have to stick to,” he

said.

Blaisdell put forward the notion of holding back the permits for a one-year period, which would allow the district to negotiate the option with WEA over the 2017-2018 negotiation period. She also said WAPS had already spent \$2,000 on new signage, but it could find new ways to use them in the meantime.

The board later voted 6-1 approving the delay of the permits, with Schild as the sole dissenter.

The WAPS Board will begin another round of budget reductions in January, as it works to balance the budget for the upcoming year, but it is unclear whether the parking passes will return to the table.

Dredge

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pursuing help in renovating the vessel into a museum centered on the Upper Mississippi, but it has come up empty handed.

“We have been attempting to find the money from either barge lines, foundations, federal agencies, humanities councils, and we have been unsuccessful in finding any funding for the maintenance and renovation of the vessel,” explained CDA Executive Director Dale Klemme.

In 2011, Homer Township resident Dave Belz and Winonan Bob Harris formed the nonprofit William A. Thompson Dredge Museum, and they too made a proposal to purchase the vessel. At the time, the organi-

zation was too new for the federal government to accept the proposal, but over the next five years, they planned to purchase the boat from CDA.

Klemme explained that CDA accrued more than \$50,000 in costs from storing the vessel over the years, with no money coming in, so it had proposed that cost as the purchase price last summer.

“We needed that [\$50,000] to cover the costs, and [Belz and Harris] would have been responsible for moving it. And we just never felt there was a commitment to do that,” Klemme said.

Harris and Belz eventually moved on to a new vessel: the Minnesota Centennial Showboat, a floating theater created by the University of Minnesota to celebrate the state’s centennial anniversary in 1958. The

group purchased the boat earlier this year, and plans to bring the boat to rest in Winona sometime next summer.

Belz explained that they had still hoped to obtain the Dredge Thompson, but following years of attempts and a survey of the boat earlier this spring, they decided to move on.

“Bob went down to inspect the dredge in late spring and realized that it probably was not going to work out,” Belz said. “It had deteriorated to a point where it’s probably not even worth salvaging.”

In the meantime, the Dredge Thompson continued to sit idle.

According to Klemme, the vessel has lead paint and asbestos that must be dealt with before the public can enter or any renovations can make to turn it into a hallowed museum. And with museums, there’s also the

worry of not making enough to cover the costs in the first place.

“Seasonal museums like this are not self-sufficient or self-sustaining. You need foundations and donations every year to feed it,” Klemme said.

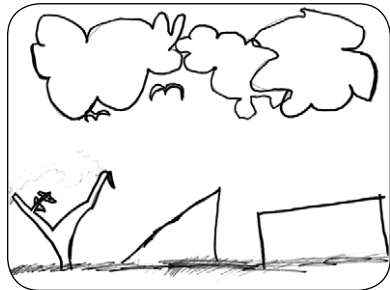
Those costs have made the project prohibitively expensive — Klemme explained that CDA would need \$1 million to move the project to completion. With the past five years coming up empty handed, Klemme explained that for the dredge, the writing may be on the wall. “When you keep running into financial dead ends, you realize this is not going to happen,” he said. “It’s just hard to assume responsibility of it much longer if there isn’t any light at the end of the tunnel here.”

Despite the poor outlook, Klemme explained that there was one last effort to be made

— contacting the major barge lines directly. The organization has done it before, with little success, but with a deadline coming up soon, this is the dredge’s last option.

“They have deep pockets, and collectively they could do this in minutes. One-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars from each of them is chicken feed,” Klemme stated.

The Dredge Thompson, which for generations housed river workers as they traveled up and down the Midwest, is for many an icon of river life. When she was first moved from her home in Fountain City, dozens gathered along the shore at the corps headquarters, donned in T-shirts honoring the dredge, waving a farewell. They hoped that CDA could, in fact, preserve one of the most important river vessels to travel the Upper Mississippi



WEATHER Forecast

source: weather.com

SATURDAY Sunny High 37° Low 27°	SUNDAY Partly Cloudy High 38° Low 22°	MONDAY Partly Cloudy High 30° Low 21°	TUESDAY Partly Cloudy High 38° Low 29°
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