

OUR VIEW

Trooper Elzen provides a sense of hope for arriving safely

He's known to tear up our highways, but it's done in a good way that benefits the safety of all Minnesotans.

Steele County native Mitch Elzen, who is a trooper with the Minnesota State Patrol, is considered a heavy hitter when it comes to snagging drunk drivers off our roadways.

Elzen was honored last week with the State Patrol's Eagle Squadron Award for arresting 135 drunk drivers last year alone. It's the most of any trooper in the state. And it's a highly unusual accomplishment for a trooper in outstate Minnesota. Elzen mostly patrols Dodge and Olmsted counties.

For Elzen, arresting drunks is more than a job. His father's crash with a drunk driver inspired Elzen to keep the roads safe from impaired drivers. Ron Elzen has been through 25 surgeries since a drunk driver struck him 37 years ago. He still struggles to walk.

Elzen is a true hero for his service to Minnesota. As his colonel stated, Elzen embodies exactly what public safety officials want troopers to do. "He doesn't just arrest drunk drivers to arrest drunk drivers," Col. Matt Langer said. "He believes in what he does because he knows he's saving lives."

Impaired driving is a serious threat on Minnesota roads, contributing to 72 deaths in 2017. There were nearly 35,000 motorists arrested for DWI in 2018, and one in seven licensed drivers has a DWI on record.

Although enforcement does act as a deterrent for those who might otherwise drive impaired, it's part of a larger, multi-pronged approach. Education, extra enforcement campaigns, advertising, media relations, DWI courts and Ignition Interlock are all weapons in our DWI-prevention arsenal.

We applaud public safety professionals like Mitch Elzen for tearing up our roadways in an effort to yank drunks off the roads. Drunk drivers have no business to be behind the wheel. And efforts like those from Elzen at least give some sense of hope at arriving safely to our destination.

Until every person who drinks in Minnesota makes a plan for a sober ride instead of getting behind the wheel, we can be grateful that strategies like Trooper Elzen snagging drunks remain firmly in place where we need it the most. Thanks Mitch Elzen for your hard work and dedication to keeping Minnesotans safe!

YOUR VIEW

Giving governor plus rating is premature

To-the-Editor:

It was no big surprise that the publisher of the Times came out with a glowing report on how great our newly elected governor is going to be.

You'd be hard pressed, these days, to find a newspaper publisher that touts a conservative politician. The reason given for Governor Tim Waltz being one of our greatest is that he praised the tremendous job of reporting done by the news media. Our president, on the other hand, was chastised for accusations of fake news.

I for one think giving our far left leaning governor a plus, plus rating a couple months into his term is a tad bit premature. I believe he will continue the tax and spend policies of our former governor. We are rapidly becoming the California of the Midwest. All of our major news organizations are owned by six corporations. When watching mainline television for example, one after another will have the exact same story and analysis. This is what our president calls fake news. Perhaps a better word would be biased or maybe unfair. It's certainly obvious nearly all reporting is negative in his regard. I give him credit for pointing out the biased reporting and promoting discussions. It's not surprising to have the news media fighting back.

Local newspapers concentrate mostly on local news so are not quite as guilty as say the Minneapolis Star Tribune. That doesn't mean they aren't biased in their reporting. Last fall, for example, a local paper published several accounts of Waltz campaigning in the area and giving him a chance to push his agenda. His opponent was only mentioned once and given a much shorter space.

This to me is blatantly unfair at best and blatantly trying to influence elections at the worst. A free and unrestricted press is inherent to a free society. It is their duty to stay completely unbiased.

David Nielson
Owatonna



ED FISCHER

builds: JAMSUN

Celebrating teenagers devoted to agriculture

There is probably not one organization more suited for the overall future growth of our region than high school chapters of Future Farmers of America.

This week is designated as National FFA Week. Nearly 670,000 members will participate in activities at the local, state and national levels. All four schools in Steele County—Medford, Owatonna, Blooming Prairie and NRHEG—have strong FFA programs.

We have dedicated a special section this week to highlight some of the accomplishments of our young people throughout the area. It's energizing to see what some of these teenagers are doing to strengthen the future of agriculture, which is part of our daily lives—from the food we eat to the clothes we wear.



Hot Pursuit
RICK BUSSLER

Members of the FFA chapters have a passion for agriculture, the backbone of the economy in southeastern Minnesota. This special week gives members an opportunity to educate the public about agriculture.

Agriculture is more than planting and harvesting. It also involves science, business and more.

Our local FFA chapters are helping to provide the next generation of leaders who will change the world. Today's FFA members are the innovators and leaders of tomorrow. They are our future leaders, our future food suppliers, our future innovators and so much more.

Through agricultural and hands-on learning, they are preparing for more than 250 unique career opportunities

in the food, fiber and natural resources industry.

The organization provides leadership, personal growth and career success training through agricultural education. FFA has played a key role in the development of agriculture's future leaders and the importance of agricultural education.

Sometimes the headlines get steered away and focused on negative aspects of what our youth are doing. But FFA is one of those shining examples of youth doing the right thing for the right reasons. It amazes me what some of the projects our youth are involved in through FFA.

Between FFA and the 4-H organization, the programs are churning out strong young adults who will go on to keep agriculture rooted in our communities for generations to come.

Let's go in hot pursuit of keeping the FFA community strong. The quality of life we enjoy depends on it.

Lowest income residents will suffer under DFL tax proposals

By JOHN PETERSBURG

As a member of the Minnesota House Taxes Committee, we have a number of interesting conversations regarding how we go about taxing people in our state.

We'll question and discuss the merits of proposals before us – such as whether or not we should provide Social Security relief to all senior citizens in Minnesota – but sometimes we'll drift into whether or not certain Minnesotans are paying too much or not enough.

Last week we talked about various tax rates on Minnesotans and how they compare to other states. Ultimately Republicans made note that Minnesota has the highest tax rate for the people who earn the most, while the Democrats pointed out that the tax rates on our lowest wage earners is a little

bit below the average in the United States.

I found that statement a little misleading. If you compare what's been proposed by Governor Walz and House leadership already, the poorest of the poor might not be taxed more on their incomes, but they'll sure be losing more of their paychecks in other ways.

Regressive taxes hit low-income residents the hardest. Take the gasoline tax for instance. If that is raised, you'll be paying more to fill up regardless of your income.

Then there's Minnesota's expiring provider tax – otherwise known as the sick tax – which forces patients to pay an extra two percent of their cost on things like doctor visits, dental appointments and emergency room visits. According to state law,

the sick tax will expire on Dec. 31. Just when the public was going to get a 2 percent reprieve on health care they want to reinstate it.

Implementing these two provisions alone would raise the overall tax rate of the lowest Minnesota tax bracket above the US average, and increase the burdens of every other tax bracket as well.

That puts Minnesotans at a disadvantage, and leads to people leaving the state for economic reasons rather than redeveloping and reinvesting back into our communities. According to one testifier, more people above minimum wage levels are leaving Minnesota than are coming in. Four of the top five states they are moving to are the four neighboring states; certainly not for better weather.

It's ultimately up to the Taxes chairman and the committee whether to approve any of these proposals. But I do find it disappointing that some lawmakers praise the fact that low-income Minnesota residents currently pay slightly less in taxes in comparison to the U.S. average, and then are actively pursuing ways to force them to pay more.

On our side, we're doing everything we can at the Capitol to make ourselves very economically competitive with the other states, and will continue to do so moving forward.

John Petersburg is a state representative for District 24A, which covers Steele and Waseca counties. He lives in Waseca.

GUEST COLUMN

Evidence based programs should be prioritized throughout government

By PEGGY BENNETT

Trial and error. It's a part of the process nearly every inventor has gone through, and a process government does not go through often enough.

As the story goes, Thomas Edison failed thousands of times before he finally succeeded at electrical illumination. Edison realized he could not be stubborn; if the evidence in his experiments showed the plan was unworkable, he scrapped the idea and tried another.

I think it's very important that government also operate in an evidence based way - in other words, focus our funds on programs that work and don't fund what is not working. Too often, government layers program after program on top of each other without ever determining what is working and what isn't.

I am authoring a bill this year that would help work toward this aim for the millions of dollars we spend every year on educational pre-K-12 grant programs. I believe this is important to make sure our students are benefiting from the best programs that are shown to be the most effective, and to assure that government is being accountable with taxpayer money by focusing those dollars on programming that is proven to work.

We have a large number of educational entities, including school districts, non-profits, and others, that receive grant money from the state. Many of them come back every two years for more funding. I believe it behooves us as a state to have the information needed to make sure we are funding the most effective

programs - both for the sake of our students, as well as the responsible use of taxpayer money.

Under my bill, each program that receives grant funding awarded by the Minnesota Department of Education must provide an educational goal; a summary of the strategies used to meet the goal, data collection process; and a short report summarizing the data and the effectiveness of the strategies in a report to the commissioner of education. The report would also be submitted to the majority and minority chairs of the education committees.

The bill would serve as a tool for legislative committees to help make better informed decisions when funding educational programs; encourage groups and organizations to think in a more evidence based way; and help determine the successful

programs that should be duplicated throughout the state.

But why stop with K-12 Education? My goal would be to eventually start addressing other areas as well, as government should be responding to the best and most effective ways so use your money. If programs aren't working, change the strategy.

Some of you may recall I'm co-authoring legislation that would require hands-free driving in Minnesota. I believe laws like this should also operate on an evidence based model; either produce evidence of success or else not continue. I plan to offer an amendment to the hands-free bill that requires the law to sunset after five years so we can assess at that time whether or not it's been effective in reducing distracted driving deaths and injuries. Again, government should be thinking

in an evidence based way, and if it turns out the evidence doesn't show improvements in this area - or that the technology has changed or improved - we should look at new ways to address the issue.

Evidence-based legislation should be nonpartisan. Government should be in the results business, and should never operate with its feet in cement. If there are programs out there that aren't working, let's find them and replace them with ones that are effective.

Peggy Bennett is a state representative for District 27A, which includes almost all of Freeborn County and portions of Steele, Dodge and Mower counties, including the City of Blooming Prairie. She can be reached by phone at 651-296-8216 or by email at rep.peggy.bennett@house.mn.

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