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# winona post

wednesday, february 20, 2019

volume 48, no. 15

winonapost.com

inserts: full circulation: ■ Hy-Vee ■ zoned circulation: ■ Blain's Farm & Fleet ■ Shopko

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## Despite ag slump, farmland values climb again

by CHRIS ROGERS

It might sound crazy, but farmland values are going up again. For the last few years now, commodity prices for corn, soybeans, and milk have been stuck in a slump and many farmers are facing financial challenges, but tillable

land keeps on selling for top dollar. That means cropland valuations — on which property tax bills are based — are going up again in 2020, despite many Minnesota farms posting declining incomes.

“With what farmers are making today, it makes no sense,” Winona County Assessor Steve Hacken said. Across the

Midwest, farm bankruptcies have been on the rise, some dairy farmers have been forced to sell their herds, and 70 percent of Minnesota farmers reported falling incomes in the final quarter of 2018, according to a recent Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis survey. “Every farm is unique. There’s a lot

of stress out there,” Winona County Farm Bureau President Glen Groth stated. “I think a lot of farmers are getting increasingly nervous. A lot of farmers with a good cushion have seen that cushion disappear. But at the same time, we’re optimistic.”

Despite the tough times for some

farms, Hacken explained, “The rules are, you have to value stuff at what it sells for,” and in 2018, there were several farmland sales that topped \$8,000 per acre. In Fremont Township, one

see **FARMLAND** page 5a

## Joelle's story: Back on the ice

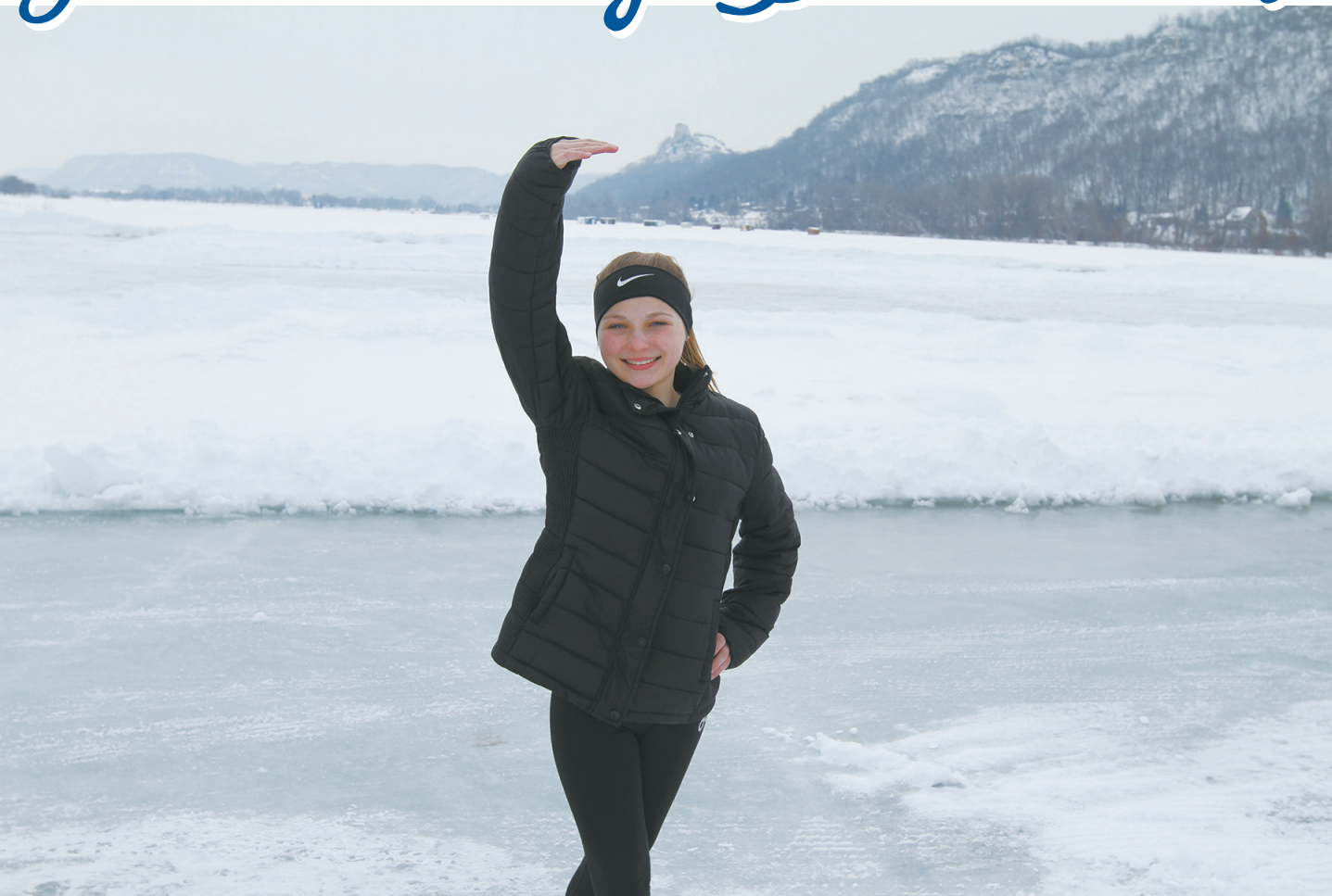


Photo by  
Chris Rogers

■ Joelle Hammann posed while figure skating on Lake Winona. The St. John's Lutheran School of Lewiston eighth-grader has a rare and serious heart condition, but after two years in and out of the hospital, she is about to compete in a figure-skating competition again.

by CHRIS ROGERS

Joelle Hammann fainted in the middle of church. The 12-year-old figure-skating lover had just gotten done singing in children's choir when she passed out in the pews. She did not want to go to the doctor. “Please don't take me. I'm fine,” she told her mom, Holly Jacobs.

Jacobs has some experience in emergency medicine, and she was not the type to rush her daughter off to the emergency room unnecessarily. “I feel like emergency medical services are a little overused sometimes,” Jacobs said. “I was hesitant to take her in.” However, Jacobs thought about the migraine Hammann had a couple days earlier and

how uncharacteristically sluggish and crabby her daughter had been. “I think Joelle and I noticed that she was tired at skating, but she didn't want to fess up to it,” Hammann's figure skating coach, Betsy Kiel recalled. “I better take her in,” Jacobs ultimately decided.

Doctors ran tests, and initially, things seemed OK, her mother re-

ported. But one of her cardiologists was not so sure; they ran one more test. A few weeks later, the doctor called back. Hammann had arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy (ARVC), a rare genetic disorder that causes the walls of the heart to grow weak and stretched thin; the

see **ICE** page 5a

## WAPS lags state averages

by NATHANIEL NELSON

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) has released testing data for the 2017-2018 school year separating students by grade, subject, and subgroups, including race and financial status. Of the 95 groups measured, 77 groups of Winona Area Public Schools' (WAPS) students tested below the state average, and 18 met or exceeded it.

The numbers can be analyzed in different ways to determine whether WAPS is making progress or declining. The same subject and grade level scores can be compared to previous years, and the same groups of students' data can be measured vertically as a class moves from grade to grade. Whichever way the data is cut, the majority of WAPS' proficiency rates declined from the previous school year, in some cases, by double digits.

There are also areas of student achievement to celebrate, including seventh-grade students in particular, whose reading proficiency rates were higher than previous years in all subgroups aside from African-American students.

The achievement gap between African-American students and their white peers has been a persistent problem at WAPS. All African-American sub-

see **LAGS** page 8a

## The doctor is online

by NATHANIEL NELSON

Winona residents no longer have to make the trip to the hospital for a simple check-up. With Winona Health's new SmartExam program announced today, patients will be able to use their smartphones, computers, or tablets to receive care at the touch of a finger. The program, which launches in

Minnesota today and in Wisconsin on a later date, begins with an online questionnaire of current symptoms, medications, and health history. There is also a self-examination portion, where patients can go through some tests on their own and report back what they find.

see **ONLINE** page 5a

## Where will Friendship Center members park?

by CHRIS ROGERS

Can the Historic Masonic Temple Theatre accommodate both Winona's growing senior center — the Friendship Center — and regular performing arts events? When Winona City Manager Steve Sarvi ran the idea past a group of senior center members last month, member Dorothy Duellman

saw one potential problem. “The big glaring one is if we stay here and there's a dual use, what do we do for parking?” she asked. City officials have not yet launched a study that they say will answer that question in detail, but they do have some ideas.

Downtown parking availability has

see **PARK** page 7a

## Healing anxiety through painting



Photo by  
Nathaniel Nelson

■ Surrounded by her artwork, Barb Halvorson puts the finishing touches on a wolf painting in her East End studio. In addition to making art herself, Halvorson teaches painting classes out of the small basement studio.

by NATHANIEL NELSON

In the basement of a small house on the East End of Winona, Barb Halvorson dips a paintbrush in a puddle of sky blue. Surrounded by art on all sides, Halvorson is doing what she

loves more than anything — painting, the same form that changed her life more than 30 years ago.

“When I was 18 I went down to the local hobby shop down by the mall. My counselor was leaving, and I wanted to make a gift for them,” Halvorson

recalled. “I saw a class sample of a landscape on the wall and asked the clerk, ‘If I paint that picture, will mine look like that?’”

It didn't, but that didn't stop her.

see **PAINTING** page 5a

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# Painting

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Halvorson began painting in earnest soon after she was able to cope with her health issues. Growing up, Halvorson dealt with depression and anxiety — things she still deals with today — as well as a strong stutter. In her book, “Sharing Gifts of Nature,” she recalls purposely not studying so she wouldn’t have an excuse to not answer her teachers and trying to find ways to fix her speech. “I know what it was like to be laughed at, imitated, and bullied. Looking back, I let it bother me way too much,” she writes. She dropped out of high school, but later she went back and eventually graduated from college with a degree in psychology. “I wanted to help people, but I didn’t feel I could be a stuttering psychologist,” she explained. However, in 1982, she found a way to use her hobby to help people the same way she helped herself. Her husband owned a restaurant downtown, and in the basement, Halvorson propped up a studio and began teaching painting lessons. “When you complete something, it makes you feel good about yourself,” she said. “It pushes you to do things that you don’t think you can do. People with depression and anxiety think they can’t do anything, but painting takes your mind away from your anxiety.” Despite teaching, she still wasn’t always comfortable. She had fears of groups, flying, bees, buses, elevators, and the dark, many of which hampered her ability to grow her career. “If I was going to do this for my living, I’d have to overcome them,” she said. It was when she was invited to a convention in Las Vegas, Nev., that her struggles were truly tested. This was the biggest opportunity of her life, but to do it, she would have to fly there, ride on a bus, take an elevator to the room, and give a speech to a large group of people — almost like a checklist. Above all, she was afraid of speaking and stuttering. She made it to the convention, and at the beginning of her lesson, she told everyone that she had a stutter and that

it could be difficult to follow her at times. But that day, she realized something. “I realized that as long as I have a paintbrush in my hand and I’m showing a step, the brush talks for me,” Halvorson said. The event was a hit, and over the next few years, Halvorson taught at conventions across the country while continuing her hometown lessons. She also continued to paint in her own time, developing pattern packets and designs for magazines, and published six books over the years. Over the last 35 years, she has taught more than 5,000 people, Halvorson said. “They’re absolutely thrilled to paint. Many of the paintings can be done in a class session, or maybe two. When they’re finished, they are absolutely astonished,” she explained. But painting is more than just a hobby, Halvorson said, and many of the people she has taught over the years have had their own problems with which to cope. She recalled one woman who came in after her daughter died, and used painting as a way to step away from her sadness. In a way, teaching has allowed her to be a psychologist — but instead of couches and clipboards, there’s easels and paints. As she gets older, painting isn’t as easy as it used to be, she explained. Halvorson suffers from arthritis, and has to keep her time in the studio to a minimum to give her hands and back some rest. She doesn’t always follow through, though — she explained she had been in the studio until 3 a.m. working on piece just days ago. She plans on continuing to paint and teach, focusing on fine art as well as expanding her portfolio and taking photos of new creatures and locales to draw, along with attending craft show whenever she can. More than anything, she said, “It gives me hope. Hope for the future. I will always be able to paint. I can still teach, and I have faith in a God and that has really sustained me.” Halvorson is offering painting lesson at her studio at 315 East Fourth Street, Winona, on the first and second Tuesday evenings of the month, and during the day on Saturdays. The cost is \$30 to \$45 per session and all supplies will be provided. For more information, call 507-454-7617.

# Farmland

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farmer bought a neighboring farm for \$8,566 an acre. How farmland prices can go up while the farm economy is struggling might be enough to make one’s head spin. “But one of my clients said the other day, ‘The rule of supply and demand sometimes trumps the rule of they aren’t making any money,’” Hacken said. Many of the farmers purchasing land at high prices are neighbors, and there are only so many opportunities in a lifetime to buy a neighboring farm. Hacken reported that one buyer told his staff, “I’ve been looking to buy that property for 40 years, and it finally became available.” Other sales are less easily explained. One piece sold for over \$8,000 an acre to a farmer who

lives near Northfield, Hacken reported. “Heck if I know,” Hacken said. The bottom line is that Hacken said his office has no option but to raise the valuations on farmland. For prime tillable land, valuations will go up from \$7,600 per acre for taxes payable this year to \$8,200 for taxes payable in 2020. Hacken stressed that only the best tillable land will be valued that highly. Most farms in the county have lower crop ratings and will be valuable somewhere between \$5,050 and \$8,200, depending on the quality of the land. Property owners should expect to get statements listing their properties’ new valuations in late March. Non-tillable land is going up, too. Partly because of an influx of metro-area buyers paying top dollar for hilly, Winona County hunting land, the valuations on non-tillable land is going up

from \$2,500 to \$3,250 an acre for prime parcels, Hacken reported. Asked whether housing development speculation was affecting non-tillable prices, Hacken responded, “No, I don’t think so. I think these guys like to hunt ... These properties people are buying, some of them are pretty rugged, and usually rugged properties, you’re not going to develop too much.” Hacken added of the sales, “When I’ve got seven of them, and all of them are over three thousand [dollars per acre], it’s out of my hands.” Winona County saw an even greater uptick in farmland values several years ago. Across the Midwest, soaring prices for corn and soybeans in the early 2010s drove up the price of cropland. Locally, a few sales topped \$10,000 per acre, tillable land property values rose 44 percent in one year in 2013, and Winona County property

tax valuations rose to a peak of \$8,000 for prime cropland. Valuations declined slightly to \$7,600, but cropland values — and property taxes — remained relatively high even as commodity prices plummeted. Will next year’s increase in farmland values lead to higher tax bills for local farmers? It is hard to say, Hacken responded. The value of other forms of real estate — including residential properties — is also rising quickly. That is especially true in St. Charles, where — like other Rochester, Minn., bedroom communities, the city’s housing market is hot, Hacken stated. Then, of course, tax bills are dependent on what budgets local governments set. “We don’t really know,” Hacken said of how rising values will affect tax bills in 2020. Chris@winonapost.com

# Ice

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disease can lead to fatal heart failure and, eventually, Hammann would need a heart transplant. “Things moved really quickly to the point where it was unsettling and scary, but I didn’t want to alarm Joelle because she’s very observant,” Jacobs recalled. Jacobs held it together and explained the serious news to her daughter. “It was really hard to process, not knowing what would come in the future ... But I felt like somehow, I knew everything was going to be fine,” Hammann said. There was more news: all of Hammann’s athletic activity had to come to “a screeching halt,” Jacobs said. No more volleyball. No more basketball. No more figure skating. Ouch. “I wouldn’t say I was upset, but I questioned it. ‘Why?’” Hammann said of giving up the activities she loved. “At the time, I didn’t have the best mindset that I do now.” That was 2017, and over the past two years, Hammann faced a rollercoaster ride of ups and downs and unknowns that would discourage most anyone. She did not lose her sense of humor. Today, nearly all of the workout machines in the cardio rehab room at Winona Health sport little tags with pet names Hammann has given them. Treadmills and stationary bikes have names like Carl, Samantha, and Frank. There is Eduardo, the NuStep cross trainer, and the arm crank machines, Lil’ Debbie and Lil’ Steve. “I love it,” Hammann gushed about going to rehab. It might help that Kiel, her figure skating coach, is also one of her cardiac rehab specialists. “We’re running out of equipment [to name],” Kiel said. In early 2018, doctors discovered a new problem with one of the valves in Hammann’s heart and faced a dilemma. The prob-

lem could weaken Hammann’s heart, but replacing the valve could cause complications with the heart transplant further down the road. Hammann’s lead physician, Dr. Michael Ackerman at Mayo Clinic, spent weeks discussing what to do with foremost experts around the globe. “There really seems to be no good sense of what the right next move is,” Jacobs wrote in a blog post at the time. Asked how she dealt with that uncertainty, Jacobs replied, “I’m kind of a take-it-as-it-comes person. The waiting game is tough ... however, we had heard repeatedly from people who work at Mayo or whose children have been treated that we were in the hands of the absolutely best cardiologist ... That made waiting easier.” She added, “I got weekly phone calls from Dr. Ackerman: ‘Here’s where I’m at. I don’t have an answer.’” It was not an answer, but Jacobs appreciated the steady communication. Ultimately, Hammann’s physician decided against the valve replacement, and that spring she got a implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD), a piece of hardware surgically implanted in her torso that would shock her heart back into pumping if it were to stop, can act as a pacemaker, and also helps keep track of her heart’s function. Hammann named the ICD Gertrude Buzz. “Because it can buzz my heart,” she explained. Most adults get ICDs implanted in their chest, but because young Hammann is so slender, she got it in her abdomen where it is less noticeable. Instead of six-pack abs, she joked, “I’ve got a one pack.” However, the ICD surgery was just the start of Hammann’s next ordeal. Her heart kept slipping into irregular rhythms that puzzled doctors and made Hammann exhausted, and the ICD surgery wound became seriously infected. It took months to correct the irregular heartbeats and for the wound to heal.

Essentially from April through November last year, Jacobs explained, “She was not her perky self.” “I felt out of it,” Hammann said. “I was very tired all the time — headaches, fevers ... All I wanted to do is lie and sleep. I didn’t want to do anything. I didn’t feel awake. It was so weird.” Caring for the infected surgical incision was difficult because all of the bandage and various adhesives nurses put on the wound irritated Hammann’s skin and left it raw. “Even paper tape — I would break out from it,” Hammann said. “So they had to find different things to protect it and yet not make me break out.” Hammann ultimately had to get a wound VAC, another piece of hardware that helped her ICD incision heal. She named it Sheldon. Throughout this whole experience, Hammann became unusually well-versed in cardiology for a middle schooler. She can pronounce arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy and summular cardiostegula to get her prothrombin time into the normal range without missing a beat. Turns out tweaking her vitamin K levels did the trick. “When I speak medical terms, it sounds like Spanish [to my friends at school],” Hammann said. “I have to say things to them so it makes sense.” Since her treatment, Hammann was able to start figure skating again at lower intensity levels. She was weaker than before, and she was supposed to be careful of hitting her ICD or getting cut — she was on blood thinners. “Do you remember when I fell down the first time?” Hammann asked Kiel with a chuckle. At one of her first skating practices, Hammann wiped out, crashed into the boards, and looked up at Kiel, a little shocked. Kiel remembered. “I was like, ‘Yeah, you’re fine. Let’s go,’” she said. Hammann was fine, and this spring, she is about to compete in a figure-

skating event in Eau Claire, Wis., for the first time in years. Last year, Hammann performed a figuring skating routine set to Weird Al Yankovich’s Madonna parody, “Like A Surgeon.” It was quite the hit with her surgeons, Jacobs wrote. Hammann had to chose only one sport to play because athletic activity could endanger her health, but she is managing her basketball team and helping out with volleyball. “That helped a lot because I was still involved,” she said. “I’m doing good right now,” Hammann said of her health. She is waiting to get a heart transplant someday. Currently, she is on the lowest tier of the transplant waiting list, but Jacobs hopes she might move up to a higher priority tier eventually. Asked what she looks forward to after getting a transplant, Hammann responded, “Doing sports again the way I used to. Being able to climb up stairs. Doing a double jump for figure skating again ... Competing how I used to.”

Hammann almost forgot that her mother had promised her a puppy after her transplant surgery. The doctors told Jacobs to give Hammann something to look forward to after the transplant so she would work hard on recovery. “So, I’m getting a puppy!” Hammann exclaimed, beaming. Hammann also got a wish from the Make A Wish Foundation. She is going to Germany with her family to visit Hannah, a German foreign-exchange student who lived with Hammann and her family. “She’s so awesome,” Hammann said of Hannah. Then there is normal teenager stuff Hammann has to look forward to, such as going to high school next year. “It’s kind of scary,” she said. Whatever comes next, Hammann learned one thing from her experience: “Having a good attitude is really important.” Chris@winonapost.com



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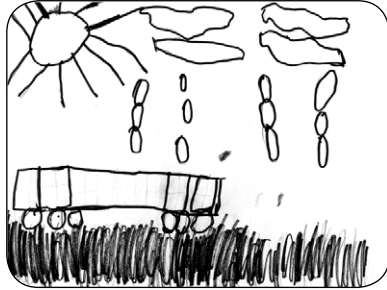
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From there, a provider at Winona Health will review the information and provide a diagnosis and treatment plan. Patients with common illnesses, like the flu, colds, allergies, rashes, urinary tract infection, pink eye, sore throat, and others will be able to be quickly diagnosed and move into treatment. In the case that the symptoms are more serious and require an in-person visit, they are referred for an appointment and the charge for the SmartExam is waived. “We don’t want to try to disguise this as something it’s not. It’s not an emergency room, and it’s not something people should be going to for an emergency,” said Chris Watras, chief of emergency and urgent care

services at Winona Health. “But this is an area where we haven’t been providing care, and this is a way for us to meet more people’s needs and provide better health care for the community.” “In total, the interview takes between 15 and 20 minutes, with doctors responding within the hour. The fast-paced nature of the program will help patients save time, Watras explained, allowing them to avoid disruptions to their work day, or the inconvenience of driving to the hospital for a common cold. “This will help a number of people, like parents with young children who would be heading going into the doctor’s office to be seen, elderly patients with mobility concerns, or college students who are on a health plan where Winona Health is not covered,” Watras said. It’s not only the speed that’s

a plus — the program is also hugely affordable. The virtual visits cost only \$39, and for the rest of this month, users can try it out for only \$20. Additionally, if there is no diagnosis made, the visit is free. According to Winona Health, by working through a digital format, doctors are able to cut down on the time needed for a visit and the savings is passed onto the patient directly. “The benefit with this, I think this is a cost-effective way to provide care that’s very convenient and low-cost,” Watras said, adding that many patients at Winona Health have high-deductible insurance, so having the low-cost option will prove invaluable. Patients can also get prescriptions through the program for birth control and support with behavioral health issues, so it’s not just for when you have the sniffles.

“Members of our medical staff researched this tool and found it to be an effective way to provide the care patients need for several types of appointments at their convenience and at a low cost,” Watras said. “This is an example of how Winona Health stays ahead of the curve in furthering our mission to serve our community.” The program will be available starting on February 20 for Minnesota residents being added later. According to Watras, the only thing holding back the service from being in both states is Wisconsin licensing for Winona Health’s providers. “Once we get enough people licensed and credentialed in Wisconsin, then we’re rolling it out in Wisconsin,” he said. For more information about Winona Health’s SmartExam, visit winonahealth.org/smart-exam.



**WEATHER** Forecast

source: weather.com

<b>WEDNESDAY</b> Snow High 31° Low 14°	<b>THURSDAY</b> Mostly Sunny High 28° Low 10°	<b>FRIDAY</b> Mostly Cloudy High 35° Low 27°	<b>SATURDAY</b> PM Light Rain High 35° Low 27°
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