

Scores of barns collapse under heavy snow

by CHRIS ROGERS

The same blizzard that trapped hundreds of motorists on February 24 dumped such heavy snow that scores of barns collapsed in Winona, Buffalo, and Trempealeau counties. Habitat for

Humanity Winona-Fillmore Counties Executive Director Amanda Hedlund said her agency heard from three families searching for housing after their mobile homes collapsed under the snow. Farm Service Agency (FSA) officials in Wisconsin said the damage

may lead to a disaster declaration. At Clark Farms' dairy outside Altura, the roofs of two separate barns collapsed and killed 14 cows, farmer Mark Clark reported. "We worked for quite a few hours to find anything that was still alive and looking good. Some

of them we had to put down to put them out of their suffering," he explained. Other cows had been trapped by the falling debris but were unharmed, he said. Now the Clarks have made space for their cows as best they can, brought in engineers to check the barns' struc-

tural integrity and place braces to shore up the remaining roof, and cleaned as much snow as possible off the roofs in preparation for this weekend's storm.

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WSU goes green for mental health



Photo by
Nathaniel Nelson

■ Winona State University junior Taylor Juresh walks across campus with a green bandana tied to her backpack. The bandanas symbolize solidarity with those suffering from depression and anxiety.

by NATHANIEL NELSON

Walking around the Winona State University (WSU) campus, occasionally, bright hints of green can be seen on students' backpacks. Hundreds

of students have become part of the Green Bandana Project, a new initiative at WSU show support for those struggling with depression and anxiety throughout the community. The program, which first began at

the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, was brought to Winona by WSU student Taylor Juresh after she began experiencing depression herself. Last year, Juresh explained that she knew something was off.

"At the beginning of this [school] year, I began getting sad and I didn't know what was happening," Juresh

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WAPS argues over lawsuit silence

by NATHANIEL NELSON

Karl Sonneman was the attorney for the Save Our Schools (SOS) Committee, the community group that has appealed WAPS' closure of Madison and Rollingstone schools. Then, he decided to run for a seat on the WAPS Board, resigned as SOS' attorney, and won the election. Today, WAPS is embroiled in two separate court cases: the SOS appeal before the Minnesota Court of Appeals, and a lawsuit filed by WAPS against SOS over a notice on Madison's title that could hinder the school's new owner from taking out a construction loan.

During a contentious meeting on Thursday, Sonneman claimed he'd received a threatening letter from WAPS' own attorney over the litigation. "I was attacked in a letter by the attorney," he said, adding that after he responded, he received a second one. Voices escalated, board chair Nancy Denzer called

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'We're at a critical point' for CWD

by CHRIS ROGERS

For Minnesota, the threat of chronic wasting disease (CWD) is starting to get real. Winona County had its first confirmed case of the deadly deer disease this winter near Pickwick, and an ongoing outbreak near Preston in Fillmore County may be slowly spreading. Far from Southeast Minnesota, the recent discovery of a CWD-

positive wild deer north of Brainerd, Minn., got the rest of the state's attention — not to mention University of Minnesota (U of M) experts raising alarms about the potential for CWD to someday spread from deer to humans. Now state officials want to get serious about CWD.

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Winona eyes \$600K to jump-start new trails

by CHRIS ROGERS

When they approved the Bluff Traverse plan this winter, Winona City Council members Paul Schollmeier and Pam Eyden said they wanted the city to get cracking on finding money and building new trails. Now they are getting their wish.

Last week, Winona city staff said

they will soon propose a \$600,000 local investment in the Bluff Traverse project and will ask the state this summer for an over-\$3-million Legacy Amendment grant to fund the remainder.

The Bluff Traverse plan calls for the city to overhaul its bluffside hiking

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Feast brings together Native families



Photo by
Nathaniel Nelson

■ Jaxsin (left) and Donovan Cortez play on hand drums during last Wednesday night's American Indian Parent Advisory Committee Feast.

by NATHANIEL NELSON

On Wednesday night, the Winona Senior High School (WSHS) library was filled with the sounds of traditional Native American drum and dance as parents, students, and staff came together to honor Native heritage.

The American Indian Parent Advisory Committee (AIPAC) hosted their first event, a feast, to bring together the school district's Native families under one roof.

Earlier this year, the district received a grant of \$23,000 as part of the Min-

nesota Department of Education's Indian Education Program Plan to help American Indian students succeed in school. According to Maurella Cunningham, director of learning and teaching at Winona Area Public

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Trails

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and mountain biking trails from Sugar Loaf to Holzinger Lodge. The project would decommission old, eroded trails; create miles of new trails; improve Sugar Loaf’s rock climbing areas; connect Sugar Loaf, Garvin Heights, and Holzinger Lodge; and construct new trailheads and trailhead parking lots. The City Council approved the plan last December and tapped the Bluff Traverse project as one of the city’s top priorities for its entire park and recreation system. The original plan estimated the project would cost \$3.2 million in total.

Last Monday, Winona Park and Recreation Department director Chad Ubl announced that he would ask the City Council later this spring to approve a \$606,000 investment in the Bluff Traverse project. “The city is going to need to allocate some dollars to show the state that we’re serious about this project,” Ubl told the council. Ubl and Winona Outdoor Recreation Coordinator Ross Greedy described the \$600,000 proposal as a pilot project to show state granting agencies that Winona is invested in the Bluff Traverse plan and has skin in the game. Later this summer, Ubl and Greedy plan to apply for over \$3 million in Legacy grant funding from the state to fund the rest of the Bluff Traverse project. Other cities have won millions of dollars in Legacy grants for similar trail projects, but it requires an upfront show of local commitment, Ubl stated.

Not all of the \$606,000 would necessarily have to come from tax dollars, Ubl told the Post — it could include local donations. However, Ubl let the City Council know that he would likely ask them to contribute significant city funds.

The \$606,000 would pay for archeological and biological surveys to check the proposed trail routes for Native American burial sites or other archeological sites, as required by city code, and sensitive ecosystems. It would also provide some funding for the city to buy land or secure easements from property owners — parts of the proposed trails run through private property. The largest chunk of money — \$270,000 — would go toward building the first four trails: a hiking-only trail at the base of the bluff near Holzinger Lodge, a beginner-mountain-biking and hiking trail also near the lodge, and a pair of intermediate-mountain-biking and hiking trails switchbacking up the side of the bluff east of Holzinger Lodge. Greedy said of the proposed new trails, “It shows our community what high-quality mountain-bike trails can be like, and it gets other people in our community out on the trails.”

Finally, Ubl’s proposal would fund a skills course, a sort of obstacle course/practice course for mountain bikes; a pump track with berms and rollers for mountain bikes and BMX bikes; and a faux bouldering rock for people to try their hands at rock climbing. Ubl and Winona Outdoor Recreation Coordinator Ross Greedy said locations for the proposed pump track, skills course, and bouldering rock have not been identified, but they would likely recommend some location downtown to act as both a downtown attraction and as a sort of hands-on advertisement for Winona’s biking and rock climbing opportunities. Greedy said the skills course, pump track, and bouldering rock would all be designed to be inviting to novices while offering more challenging options for experienced riders and climbers. He showed the council slides of young children on Strider bikes rolling around on pump

tracks in other cities. Kids love them, he stated. Greedy added of having a skills course or bouldering rock within the city core, “Those facilities are more easily accessible and provide learning opportunities for people to take those skills to the bluffs.”

Ubl said the city may seek a \$3.2-million Legacy grant. Together with the \$600,000 local investment Ubl proposed, that would add up to a \$3.8-million project — more than the original \$3.2-million cost estimate. Ubl and Greedy explained that is because there are several items in the \$600,000 proposal that were not included in the original estimate, such as the skills course and bouldering rock.

Ubl has not yet formally asked the City Council to approve his proposal; he said he likely would within the next month or two. City staff also have not identified where exactly the funding would come from, though Ubl mentioned the prospect of an inter-fund loan that would essentially bankroll the first phase of the project with city reserve funds.

City Council member Eileen Moeller was the only one to raise concerns about the proposal at last week’s meeting. How much is the city going to invest in amenities that are not accessible to people with limited mobility? Moeller asked. “I am concerned if we’re saying that only people of certain abilities can use these things,” she stated. Ubl and Greedy responded by saying that the Bluff Traverse includes some paved, fully accessible trails that would be built if the city wins grant funding and it includes less strenuous trails designed for beginners, but many of the proposed trails would simply not be handicap accessible and some would be designed for to be more challenging for experienced hikers and bikers. Ubl added that the city was committed to working on other trail projects, including a riverfront bike path, that would be accessible; however, that project will likely take a few years to reach implementation.

Last month, the City Council approved a smaller grant application seeking \$112,000 from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for another part of the Bluff Traverse: broad shared-use paths, hiking-only trails, and a mountain-bike-specific downhill trail near Sugar Loaf. The council pledged a \$37,250 cash match from the city’s reserves for that grant application.

“My question is ... by committing to this, does that mean that other funds will be lessened by the requirement?” City Council Al Thurley asked at last month’s meeting. The city reserve fund from which the cash match would be taken typically funds repairs to city buildings and other park amenities. The city has delayed some park projects — such as resurfacing the Sobieski Park tennis courts — in order to minimize tax increases. Thurley was particularly concerned about the DNR’s requirement that, if the city wins the grant, the city would have to maintain the trails for 20 years. “Will this impact any other programs in the next 20 years?” he asked. He later said the question was rhetorical — of course it would. Earlier this winter, Thurley expressed skepticism that the majority of Winonans support the large investment in trails that the Bluff Traverse plan recommends or that the Bluff Traverse would truly be their top priority for the parks system. Nevertheless, Thurley voted for the Bluff Traverse plan, and he voted with the rest of the council to approve the DNR grant application.

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Chris@winonapost.com

Argues

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Sonneman out of order and said the meeting was “not the time or place” for this conversation, but Sonneman continued, decrying the board’s alleged apprehension over speaking about the lawsuit publicly.

After the meeting was adjourned, board member Steve Schild confronted Sonneman, before the two were separated by superintendent Rich Dahman, and Sonneman quickly left the room.

“He was not attacked; don’t put that in your paper,” board member Tina Lehnertz told the Post.

The board has said little publicly about the two court battles, and was slated to meet on Tuesday night in a closed session to get the three new board members — Sonneman, Denzer, and Michael Hanratty — up to speed. However, the meeting was abruptly cancelled on the morning of at 8:15 a.m. Denzer said of the reasoning for the cancellation that the board was “unable to have a privileged attorney-client conversation” over the cases, but declined to elaborate.

Tensions over the court cases came amid troubled times for WAPS: the district must grapple with a \$2.25-million deficit in next year’s budget — the largest budget reduction in recent history, Dahman’s recent announcement that he would not complete his contract and instead will leave the district this summer, and the Minnesota

Department of Human Rights’ intervention over the district’s disparity in disciplinary action against black students. Additionally, following the closure of Rollingsstone and Madison schools, the district has experienced a mass migration of students to other districts and schools. At last count, WAPS is 200 students under its budgeted projections.

The road to court

As part of \$1.7 million in budget cuts, last year, the WAPS Board voted to close Madison and Rollingsstone schools and put the buildings up for sale, along with the formerly closed Central Elementary school. The SOS Committee, whose original members began meeting the fall prior to oppose the less-than-popular \$145-million referendum, challenged the closure and appealed the decision to the Minnesota Court of Appeals. The group first asked to delay the sale of the schools, a request that was denied, but the Court of Appeals decided to take up the case.

SOS repeatedly pled for the district to delay the sale of the schools until the court case was over and their closure was resolved, but the attempts were unsuccessful. However, SOS placed a court notice of lis pendens on the Madison and Rollingsstone titles, which provides notice that there is a pending court case involving the properties.

After WAPS sold the two buildings, according to Dahman, new Madison school owner Andrew Brenner complained

that the lis pendens notice could affect his ability to take out construction loans to make alterations to the property. On November 13, the district’s attorney Joseph Langel of Ratwick, Rozak, and Maloney sent a letter to SOS threatening legal action over the group’s court notice attached to the Madison title stemming from the lawsuit. “The notice serves no legitimate purpose; it only serves to cloud title ... If the notice is not discharged, the district reserves the right to pursue any and all appropriate legal remedies,” the letter stated.

In December, after meeting in closed session to discuss “potential litigation,” the WAPS Board in a split vote opted to take legal action against SOS in an attempt to have the notice removed from the title. Board member Allison Quam was the lone dissenting vote.

Members of SOS were “baffled” by the lawsuit, with member Gretchen Michlitsch stating that the lis pendens was simply a notice that there is a court case, and that there was no threat to the sale of any of the schools.

On Tuesday, SOS announced that the group would be removing the title notice from the Rollingsstone property, and will no longer seek a reversal of the sale. According to a statement by the group, the city of Rollingsstone, which now owns the building, informed SOS that it was aware of the pending litigation; does not intend to sell, subdivide, or otherwise alienate any part of the property; is not seeking mortgage financing;

and will seek to use the building as a school.

Therefore, Save Our School Committee will discharge the notice of lis pendens as to this property and has informed the Minnesota Court of Appeals that it is no longer seeking a reversal of the sale of that real estate,” the SOS statement to the district read.

The city of Rollingsstone has been pursuing a charter school at the former Rollingsstone School building since the building was first announced it would be closed, but due to a restriction placed on the building by the WAPS Board, the building was barred from being used as a k-12 school in the future.

Last week, Rollingsstone City Council member Rachel Larson explained that the city is planning to appeal to the WAPS Board to lift the restriction.

“It’s going to depend on a number of things. The deed restriction is in place, and that’s our next hurdle,” Larson said. “We intend to address it with the School Board. There’s nothing set at this point, but we plan to get together and make a plan. That would be the natural next step.”

SOS will still pursue a reversal of the closure of both Madison and Rollingsstone schools in the Court of Appeals, and the court notice placed on Madison is still subject to the lawsuit between WAPS and SOS. The appeal is still pending in St. Paul, Minn., while WAPS’ lawsuit over the title has been filed in district court and will be heard by Judge Lisa Hayne on March 20, 2019, at 9 a.m.

Green

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said. “I would cry every other week, and then every week, and then every three days, and eventually several times a day.”

She began to lose weight, and couldn’t sleep no matter how hard she tried. One day, she abandoned a workout at track and field practice — something she had never done before. “That’s not me,” she said. Afterward, she talked about it with her roommate and friends who told her coach, and her coach brought her to therapy the next day.

While doing some research about depression online, she stumbled across an article about the Green Bandana Project. This was the impetus for the project, she explained. “I was very ashamed about [my depression],” Juresh admitted. “I thought if I saw bandanas and support, it would mean a lot.”

She eventually showed the article to her friend Kari Schneiss, who had helped her find re-

sources to better handle her depression early on. When she saw the project, she told Juresh that they should try to bring the movement to their campus. “She didn’t really bring it to me like ‘let’s do this,’ but we did,” Schneiss said.

The program has a few steps to it, Schneiss explained. Individuals sign a pledge and receive a green bandana, which they tie to their backpacks to show their support. They are also given information cards detailing the warning signs of depression and where to get help, including crisis lines and counseling services.

Schneiss and Juresh began pitching the program to counselors and student groups to get it off the ground, and support was overwhelming.

“It just kind of tumbled since then. People have been coming on board each and every time we meet with them, and it kind of rolled into this huge thing,” Schneiss said.

More than 1,000 bandanas have been given out since the program started in January, and Juresh explained that the third

set of 500 is almost gone, so now, hundreds of students are displaying their support for the program.

But the program is more than just symbols, Schneiss said.

“It’s bringing everyone together and saying you’re not alone in this. It’s a big friendship, and we’re trying to show people that they have something, and they’re not taking it on alone,” Schneiss said.

The biggest aspect of the Green Bandana Project is outreach. While showing support is one thing, acting on that support is another and, for Juresh, that’s where the project comes into play — helping those suffering from depression find the support and help that they need.

“Most people don’t know how to get help. Even having someone go with you up to therapy is a huge help,” she said.

“Having this project brings everyone together and helps stop this stigma. That’s the most important thing,” Schneiss added.

In addition to the bandanas and flyers, Schneiss and Juresh also speak to many organiza-

tions on campus about depression to spread the word and recruit more supporters. “I tell my story, and we try to make the communication as open and authentic as possible,” Juresh said, adding that she hopes by telling her story, she can inspire more people to seek help.

While the project is centered at WSU, it’s not relegated to only students. “You don’t have to be in college to sign the pledge. Any community member can sign it,” Juresh said. After signing the pledge online, signees can pick up a bandana and handouts from the Integrated Wellness Center on campus and begin spreading the word themselves.

“I don’t think we talk about about depression and mental health as much as we should, and this is a great way to start talking about it and get people involved,” Juresh said.

For more information, or to sign the pledge, visit <https://www.winona.edu/wellness/green-bandana-project.asp> or visit the Integrated Wellness Center on the WSU campus.

Barns

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Local FSA agents said they expect more buildings could collapse during this weekend’s mix of snow, ice, and rain.

“This weekend, they’re talking another major weather event, so I hope people will be proactive in trying to reduce some of the snow that’s on these buildings right now, but hopefully they’ll do it safely,” FSA Executive Director for Trempealeau and Jackson counties Julie Dokkestul said. An Eau Claire County, Wis., farmer reportedly died last month after falling while trying to clear snow off a barn roof.

In Trempealeau County, Dokkestul reported that seven barns collapsed and at least 40 cows were killed. In Winona County, FSA agents reported that 16 agricultural buildings collapsed, though Minnesota FSA officials said they could not provide any information on

animal mortalities. Minnesota Milk Producers Association officials said they heard from eight farms in the Lewiston, Rollingsstone, and Altura areas that had suffered collapses.

“Thankfully we have not heard any reports of any injuries or even rumors of it,” Dokkestul said.

“There were no humans lost in the ordeal,” Lewiston area dairy farmer Duane Wirt said. “We can always replace buildings or animals, but not human beings.”

A 50-by-60-foot section of Wirt’s heifer barn collapsed overnight. When Wirt came out for morning chores, he saw the wreckage. It could have been worse, though. The barn holds 170 animals, but only two were caught under the debris. Only one animal died. “We were fortunate,” Wirt said. “We heard of people that lost a lot more than that.”

The collapses at local farms come at a tough time, when many farmers — especially dairy farmers — are under fi-

nancial stress after years of low prices for milk and crops.

“It’s, you know, one more thing — it’s like your car engine breaking down on you when you least expect,” Clark stated. However, he added, “I’ve farmed just my whole entire life. [Stuff] happens, and you deal with it. It’s not fun. It’s not good. It’s not anything. You just suck it up and deal with it.”

Even for the Clarks, however, it could have been worse. If their milking barn’s roof had collapsed at a different time, people could have been working underneath when it fell. “At least no one was hurt,” Clark said.

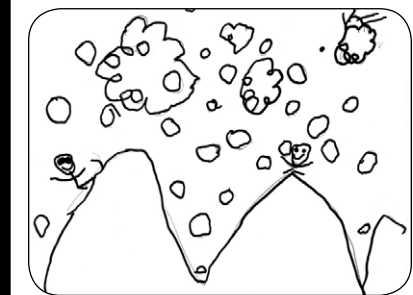
Many local farmers and FSA agents stated they had never seen anything like this. “I’ve been with the FSA since 1986, and, no, I’ve never had a situation like this with so many people affected throughout the county,” Dokkestul said. “You know, there are occasional barn collapses, but to be so widespread is unheard of.”

“Never,” Clark responded

when asked if he had ever had a barn collapse. “My dad hasn’t either. In all his years of farming, we’ve never had a barn collapse, let alone two of them. I would understand if these buildings were 100 years old and on their last legs, but these are relatively new buildings.”

FSA offers some programs to help cover farmers’ losses from extreme weather. Dokkestul encouraged farmers who have suffered collapses to call their local FSA office. “Our offices are ready to assist producers, so we encourage all producers who have been impacted by these winter storms to contact their local FSA office or stop in to learn more about how we can help,” FSA Minnesota Outreach and Public Affairs Coordinator Lindsay Mutegei stated. Local FSA offices can be reached at the following numbers: Trempealeau County — 715-538-4396, ext. 2.; Buffalo County — 608-685-4454, ext. 2; Winona County — 507-523-2173, ext. 2.

Chris@winonapost.com



WEATHER Forecast

SATURDAY
PM Rain/
Snow
High 37°
Low 30°

SUNDAY
AM Snow
Showers
High 32°
Low 13°

MONDAY
Sunny
High 30°
Low 12°

TUESDAY
Mostly
Cloudy
High 37°
Low 33°

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