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REMEMBERING 2018

Stories, people who made impact in 2018

By Echo Press staff

(Ed. note: As a new year begins, the Echo Press news staff took a look back at 2018, reflecting on moments that stood out from a year's worth of stories.)

A weekend to remember

One thing I'll remember the most from my job in 2018 is the weekend of July 27-29.

I was on "scanner duty" — a responsibility that rotates among six of us on the editorial staff. Whoever is on it listens to the police scanner for breaking news stories, such as fires and crashes.

There can be weeks when the scanner is quiet. This wasn't one of them.

It started Friday night. I decided to go for a short run and was about a mile into it when the scanner, which I bring along with me wherever I go, said that a plane had crashed into Lake Winona.

I turned around immediately, bolted the mile back to my house, jumped in the car and went to Lake Winona, sweaty running clothes and all. Fortunately, the pilot was not injured. He was able to get out of the plane and stood on one of the wings until a firefighter, Bill Thoennes, came to the rescue in a paddleboat and took him back to shore.

I took some photos, wrote a quick story and put it on our website. Later, I updated it with new information.

Later that night, a two-vehicle crash on County Road 5 sent five people to the hospital. I got information from the sheriff's office and put the story online.

On the next day, as a weekend assignment, I covered Art in the Park. I enjoyed taking photos of art browsers and children painting at Art Bar 39's booth. It was a relaxing afternoon, mingling with friends and sources and meeting new people that I photographed.

A couple hours later, the scanner crackled again. Unbelievably, another plane had gone down. This one near Town Hall Road in LaGrand Township.

This time, however, it was bad. The plane had sheared off a power pole and landed upside down with the pilot still inside. You could tell from the scanner that the pilot wasn't going to make it. No ambulance was leaving the scene.

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Top left: The Herberger's store in Viking Plaza closed on Aug. 26, ending 55 years of business in Alexandria.
Top right: One person died in an early morning fire in a house with multiple apartments at 410 Fillmore Street in Alexandria Jan. 15, 2018.
Bottom left: Voters cast ballots at Lake Community Church on Election Day, Nov. 6, 2018. Voter turnout was fairly high in the county. Of the 24,838 registered voters, 18,166 cast ballots, a turnout of 73 percent.
Bottom right: Law enforcement agencies were at the scene of a fatal airplane crash near the intersection of Town Hall Road and 10th Avenue SW in LaGrand Township on July 28, 2018.

A year of surprises, success, changes

By Al Edenloff, Ross Evavold and Celeste Edenloff
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How will 2018 be remembered in the history books?

In Douglas County, it was a year filled with surprises, from the sudden closings of long-established retail stores to election shake-ups for county board and city council.

There were tragedies — deadly fires, a fatal plane crash, shootings, an assault that led to a death, and a fatal hit-and-run.

There were shining accomplishments — the opening of a new \$1 million visitor center at Rune Stone Park, the Alexandria boys hockey team's rise to the championship game at the state tournament, rapid progress toward building a Veterans Memorial Park, Alexandria being named Retail

Community of the Year and many more honors and awards.

It was a year for changes, from new, tighter regulations for the owners of vacation rental properties, to the Douglas County Hospital being renamed Alomere Health, to Alexandria police officers getting body cameras.

As it has done in the past, the Echo Press editorial staff took a look into everything the newspaper covered for the year and came up with a list of the top stories. Here they are, in no particular order:

Changes in retail

Alexandria's retail landscape changed dramatically in 2018, most noticeably when two of the anchors in Viking Plaza Mall, JCPenney and Herberger's, closed their doors.

JCPenney had been a fixture at the

mall for 40 years before falling victim to another round of store closings by the company. The 22,000-square-foot store employed 19 people. The closing was announced in February, and the Alexandria department store closed in May.

Then in April, the parent company of Herberger's announced it was going out of business, shutting down more than 250 stores under a number of brands.

Herberger's employed nearly 100 people in its 70,000-square-foot location at the mall.

The Herberger's loss was particularly painful because the entire chain got its start here in Douglas County, with George F. Herberger and his brother Frank opening the first store in Osakis in 1890.

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County hires new emergency management director

By Celeste Edenloff
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A new emergency management director has been hired for Douglas County.

Julie Anderson, who has been the deputy emergency management director for a little over a year, was officially hired as the full-time director at a special Douglas County Board meeting Friday, Dec. 28.

She is taking over for Douglas County Sheriff Troy Wolbersen, who, besides being the sheriff full-time, served as the emergency management director for the last 12 years.



Anderson

Wolbersen presented the idea of hiring a full-time emergency management director to the county commissioners. He felt — and the commissioners agreed — that the county would be best served by a full-time director because of the increased responsibilities, and expectations.

Besides her role as the county's emergency management director, Anderson will also take on the

responsibilities of being the county's public information officer, a position that serves as the communications coordinator or spokesperson for various governmental agencies.

Commissioner Charlie Meyer said that a public information officer is a valuable position in the county, and he feels it will lead to fewer misunderstandings, and improve communication within the county.

"We really have a great candidate in Julie," said Meyer, and the other commissioners agreed.

Anderson actually got her start in Alexandria, working as a reporter for the former Alexandria station KCMT-TV. She also worked for the Department of Public Safety for five years, where she was a public information officer and earned her emergency management certification.

Most recently, she worked full-time for Lakes Country Service Cooperative out of Fergus Falls.

She said she is looking forward to working with the county commissioners, sheriff's office and

other county employees in both of her new roles. And she is looking forward to helping make sure the county is ready to respond and recover if and when a large emergency strikes.

Anderson will begin her duties as the emergency management director and public information officer sometime in January. Her official start date has not been set.

Also at Friday's meeting, the commissioners approved forming a public information officer advisory committee.

The idea behind forming the committee, said coun-

ty coordinator Heather Schlangen, is to help Anderson in her new role and to make sure the correct messaging is being presented. Schlangen said Anderson will have to make sure that consistent messages are being delivered to the staff, as well as the public. It was under Schlangen's recommendation that the committee was formed.

The committee will include at least two county commissioners and Schlangen, and when it is deemed no longer necessary, the committee will disband.

