



The Bemidji Pioneer

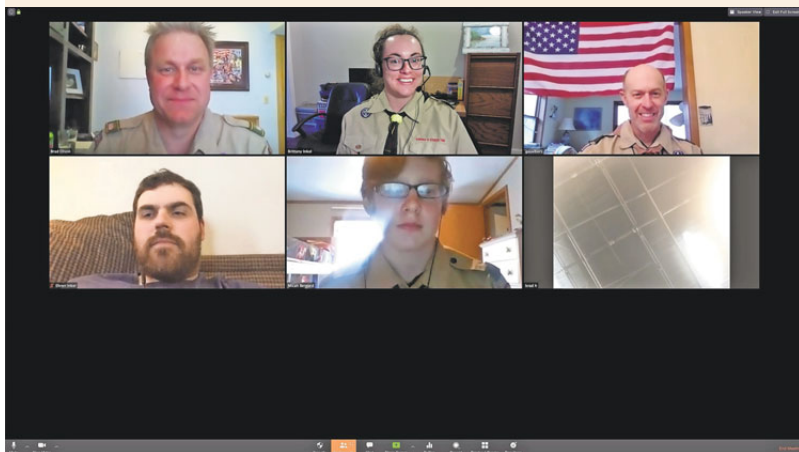
Wednesday, April 15, 2020

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SCOUTING AT HOME



RIGHT: Troop 25 Senior Patrol Leader Micah Bernard led Monday night's virtual meeting.
BELOW: Members of Boy Scout Troop 25 hold their fourth virtual meeting via Zoom on Monday evening.
Submitted photos



Boy Scout Troop 25 holds virtual meetings

By Annalise Braught
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Click link, unmute mic, say hello. This is the new order of operations for Boy Scout Troop 25 each Monday night. The troop held their fourth virtual meeting via Zoom on April 13, with around 30 people participating in the call.

"There is so much uncertainty out there with everything going on right now," Boy Scout District Director Brad Olson said. "But even in the midst of everything going on we are still meeting, we're still doing things, our kids are still getting together and getting things done."

Scoutmaster Greg Roberts said their troop members hail from Bemidji and surrounding communities including Bagley, Tenstrike and Blackduck.

"We're not allowed to do campsouts anymore, but we can still meet, it's just a little different," Roberts explained.

SCOUTING: Page A5



Submitted photo

Boy Scouts pose with Bucky the Beaver at a BSU hockey game during Scout Hockey Night at the Sanford Center in December.

Fewer calls and added deliveries

How COVID-19 looks for local law enforcement

By Hannah Olson
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BEMIDJI — With the stay-at-home order currently in place, the call volume for local law enforcement has dropped significantly. This is giving them more time to analyze how calls can be safely handled with less contact, sanitize equipment and offer services back to the community — like grocery and prescription pick-ups.

New way of handling calls

Bemidji Police Chief Mike Mastin said many calls that used to entail an officer dispatch are now handled over the phone.

Calls such as parking complaints, property damage, or reporting blight law infractions will all be handled in this way.

"There are some calls where we just have to respond," he added. "We've had some more significant assaults, domestic assaults, people with felony warrants — you have to respond, you have to deal with them, sometimes you have to take them into custody, and we rely on our officers to use their best judgment to use PPE (personal protective equipment) in those instances."

Mastin acknowledged that while handling many of these issues over the phone is efficient, it is rather impersonal.

"Really anything where it's not an immediate need for response, we've tried to morph into this call-in service," Mastin explained. "It works, but I don't think it gives that same personal feel as being in person. But it's still service and it keeps everybody safe."

Personal protective equipment

While law enforcement officers have always had personal protective equipment due to the nature of their work, Mastin said officers are currently not mandated to wear medical PPE, like gloves or face masks, at every call.

POLICE: Page A5



Mastin



Beitel

Finalized 2019 financial numbers presented to Bemidji council

By Matthew Liedke
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BEMIDJI — The city of Bemidji closed out 2019 in healthy financial shape.

According to a presentation given during a work session Monday, City Finance Director Ron Eischens said all revenue exceeded expenses by \$804,000 across all funds. Eischens also noted that the city's cash balances are at a "healthy" \$31 million, an increase of \$2.3 million from the year before.

While the city is running well financially, though,

Eischens discussed fiscal challenges ahead.

"It goes without saying that we're really anxious to see how the state bonding results work out, because we definitely need outside funding for the water treatment plant in particular if we want to avoid significant rate increases," he said.

The city is seeking \$8 million in bonding from the state Legislature to support the construction of a facility to treat chemicals known as perfluorocarbons, or PFCs. Located near the Bemidji Regional

Airport, the plant is estimated at \$16.3 million.

Along with bonding dollars, the city is also seeking authorization from the Legislature to put forward a referendum, which would create a 1/2% sales tax. Along with the treatment facility, the sales tax dollars would be used for two other purposes.

The city plans to make upgrades to its wastewater treatment plant, allowing the facility to handle greater capacity and meet potential new state requirements.

CITY: Page A5

Airport operations continue with COVID-19 precautions in place

By Matthew Liedke
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BEMIDJI — While the Bemidji Regional Airport saw its passenger numbers tick up in 2019, the trend is unlikely to continue as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

According to Assistant Airport Director Kyle Christiansen, despite commercial flights staying on schedule, less passengers are making their way through the terminal to board.

"There's definitely been a decrease," Christiansen said. "We don't get the results from the airline until the next month, so I think pretty soon we'll be getting an idea of how it really looked in March, but just from what we've heard nationwide, it's taken a big downturn. At our airport, most days before this we'd have a

lineup outside of our office with people waiting to go in, and that hasn't been the case anymore."

In the past two years, the airport has had more than 61,000 passengers coming through, with 61,430 in 2018 and 61,826 in 2019. For this year, the number will likely be lower not only because less people are traveling, but also because of some restrictions.

According to Delta Air Lines' website, the company is reducing the number of passengers on its flights, and is also changing its boarding process to accommodate social distancing.

The airport, meanwhile, has also taken steps in response to COVID-19, with additional sanitation efforts.

AIRPORT: Page A5



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SPORTS.....B1-B4
OBITUARIES.....A6
OPINION.....A4

CLASSIFIEDS.....B4-B5 WEATHER.....A2
OUTDOORS.....B6 PUZZLES.....B5

SCOUTING

From Page A1

"This allows us to do some of the scout programs that we would normally do - even though it's not as interactive as it would be - it has been great, and so much better than doing nothing."

Olson explained how with so many cooped up at home during the coronavirus pandemic, the meetings have been a great way for the scouts and their adult leaders to get some social interaction, and keep up with learning many of the same skills they typically would in person.

"One of the main things we try to do is to train youth to be leaders, and in the order to do that we put the scouts in charge and have them lead," Robert said. "They help us plan meetings and events and help put a lot of things together."

Life Scout Micah Bernard, 14, is a senior patrol leader for Troop 25, and was the guy in charge on Monday.

"It's been a little bit weird," Bernard said of the new meeting format.

"But I think it's also been a good opportunity because we've been able to plan some things that haven't really been able to do in physical meetings. Even though it's been a little bit different, I've kind of gotten used to it."

Bernard explained that they have been doing many of the same things they would do during a typical meeting.

"We go over scout requirements, discuss things like different merit badges, do team building exercises," he explained. "We've been playing games too, so far we've done hangman, and we've done Pictionary and Cahoots."

The troop meets each week all year long, and Olson explained it's a great way for youth around the community to find things to do even in wintertime.

"Our organization is built on being outside and spending time outdoors," Olson said. "So for people who are looking for something to do this might be a great opportunity for them, even if it's later on down the road."

The timing of the pandemic hasn't put a major dent in their usual routine. At this time of the year they generally are doing a lot of indoor activities anyway, due to the colder weather. But soon they will begin prep for more outdoor related things.

One thing the troop has had to call off due to the stay-at-home order is their annual pancake breakfast fundraiser, and at this time they are unsure of when that will be able to be held.

"It's all been an interesting transition,"

said Brittany Inkel, chair for the troop training committee. "We do a weekly planning meeting to plan out our Zoom meetings now."

She said the leaders are holding the planning meetings on Friday evenings to get things together for their Monday night troop meetings. Before the pandemic began, their in-person meetings were planned out primarily via email. "I almost feel like this is easier somehow," she added. "It's kind of cool to have a scheduled time to come together and plan the next meeting this way."

The meeting

Around 6:45 p.m. the scouts started trickling into the meeting and the call became a buzz of activity as everyone said their hellos and worked out any technical difficulties.

Once the boys had checked about who they had new haircuts, and how they were faring with, as one scout put it, "the world being canceled," Bernard called the meeting to order.

To kick things off, he requested the troop join him in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, which was followed by a slew of virtual reciting in attempted unison - as everyone ended up a little off thanks to internet lag.

This was then followed by the group reciting the Scout Oath: "On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country, to obey the Scout Law, to help other people at all times, to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight."

Lastly, they all said the Scout Law together in choppy harmony: "A scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent."

Now the meeting was ready to begin. Once announcements were made and new business had been discussed, the scouts were then assigned to their respective breakout groups along with their adult leaders.

Inkel noted that during a typical in-person meeting they would all divide up into smaller groups, with Zoom allowing them to still operate in similar fashion by her assigning the troop members to five different breakout rooms within the call.

"It's kind of fun, because I have to pre-assign them all beforehand," Inkel said. "So when I get the signal from Micah that we are ready to break out into the rooms, I just open the rooms and the scouts all disappear into them, which is a really exciting part to me."

She explained that on this particular evening two of the rooms were dedicated to helping

some of the newer recruits work on scout rank requirements. This includes things like memorizing the oaths and explaining the four steps in the scout advancement process.

Two other rooms would be going over first-aid related topics such as how to handle burns, cuts, bleeding control, and other things they might encounter on campouts.

The last group was specifically for older scouts to discuss options for merit badges. Inkel said that even though a lot of times they pursue merit badges as a troop, there is also the opportunity for them to pursue them individually.

"Because of this online forum, it has actually opened up quite a few opportunities for us to connect with merit badge counselors across the country in addition to the ones here in our community," Inkel said.

Her husband, Ehren, was on the call Monday evening as a counselor for topics such as geology, mining, aviation and orienteering.

Skills for life

Olson explained there are a total of 135 merit badges that scouts can earn. Though some are required - citizenship in the community, first-aid and personal management - there are also lots of other badges they can work toward based on personal interests.

"A lot of times merit badges tend to be gateways for some who realize it could be a possible career path or maybe a hobby for them," Olson said. "So it's kind of an exploratory type thing in most cases."

He said the wide variety of options allows them to pursue different badges that can help motivate them to try things they maybe wouldn't otherwise.

"It also sets them up to learn a lot of life skills," Olson said. "Even from a peer standpoint, when we get to the meetings it's the kids who are running it. There's leadership positions as they go through the rank advancement where they can gain senior patrol or patrol leader, the program allows them to gain that confidence to talk to somebody and to lead a group."

As so many are stuck at home and spending a lot of time on computers and phones, Olson is said he is glad they have been able to continue their work and teach the scouts skills he believes will last them a lifetime.

"It's like a little family," Olson said. "People get along and as new people come in they take them under their wing and help them along the trail of life, and that's really fun to watch and be a part of."

Annalise Braught is the managing editor at the Pioneer. She can be reached at (218) 333-9796.

POLICE

From Page A1

This is primarily due to the lack of supplies, he explained.

"If we did (mandate PPE), we would run out of PPE within weeks, so the reality is we can't wear them at every call," he said. "We leave it up to the discretion of the officer."

Officers are currently required to wear masks at medical calls and death scene investigations.

In some rapidly changing emergency situations, there isn't always time to put on PPE, Mastin added.

"You're trying to be there to help somebody and provide that service immediately, and you know, this is still pretty new. You don't think to put on a pair of latex gloves to go into a domestic (call)," he said. "That's something we've never done, we're having to create new habits."

Wearing gloves all day long is also not an option, Mastin said, because just as many germs are transferred if the gloves aren't touched between every new surface touched.

Call volume

Calls for service have significantly decreased since the implementation of the stay-at-home order.

"Now, we still do have a handful (of calls) and we still do have some significant calls that have happened, but overall the number of calls has decreased," Mastin said. "I think that's just a product of people obeying the stay-at-home order, and with fewer people out and about doing things, there's just less going on."

While the call volume for service has decreased, call volume for COVID-19 information and clarification on the executive orders is still at an unacceptable level.

"Don't call 911, call 211, if you have general questions," Mastin reiterated. "It's an information source, it's not an emergency number."

Beltrami County Sheriff Ernie Beitel said there are aspects of the executive orders that aren't crystal clear for law enforcement either, and he encourages the public to read the orders fully and look online for answers before contacting law enforcement.

"There's a lot of what's being put in (the executive) orders that we as law enforcement even don't know what the true intent was," Beitel said.

AIRPORT

From Page A1

"We've put up postings that have been sent to us about stopping the spread of germs and CDC recommendations," Christiansten said. "We've taken steps in our cleaning. We have a cleaning crew that goes through and scrubs things more likely to be touched, like handles and chairs. We're also providing the recommended hand sanitizer and have blocked off areas of the terminal. There haven't been gigantic steps, but we're doing what we can."

To assist with any potential lost revenue from declining passen-

ger traffic, the airport is also one of many across the country benefiting from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security, or CARES, Act. Included in the bill is an airport grant program, which has made \$1.12 million available for the Bemidji facility, according to a release from the Federal Aviation Administration.

Ongoing business

At Bemidji Aviation Services, a full-service fixed base operator at the airport, operations are continuing with added cleaning efforts.

"We're cleaning and sanitizing things the same way everyone else has been and we're following social distancing

"Everybody is really, really doing a nice job of rolling with all of the punches of this thing," he added.

Beitel had the idea to offer a grocery and prescription delivery service to those who need it with the extra free time the officers may now have. Currently, the Bemidji Police Department, Blackduck Police Department, and Beltrami County Sheriff's Office have teamed up to offer this service.

"The demand for officer time has been reduced, so we are able to provide that," Mastin explained. "Now if things turn around and we start going back to the call volume we once had, we would have to severely limit the amount of those deliveries we could do."

Need to stay well

Both Beitel and Mastin emphasized how devastating it would be for any officers or deputies to be sick, because the departments are already short-staffed.

Beitel said the biggest thing he has learned so far throughout this situation is the grave importance of keeping staff healthy because there are not enough staff to continue operations if officers get sick.

"If we get sick during a pandemic like this, it's going to wipe out a lot of law enforcement," he said. "What if it gets into my dispatch center? Who is going to answer the 911 calls?"

Local law enforcement is beginning to cross train employees to help cover other positions if needed, Beitel said. For example, a bailiff at the courthouse may be trained to be a 911 dispatcher or a corrections officer.

"This is not a perfect solution, because training is time-consuming. 'There's a lot of work involved in that,' he explained. "It takes us a year to train a dispatcher."

"We're a 24/7 operation, we can't just say, 'well, we don't have any deputies today because we are sick,'" Beitel added.

"The reality is," Mastin said, "if we start losing officers to an illness, we are really going to be struggling to provide service to the community, so we really need to keep our people safe and healthy."

He said he is often reminding officers to "make sure that you're continually cleaning that duty belt, cleaning your car, not just for you but for those that we come in contact with."

Hannah Olson is a multimedia reporter for the Pioneer. She can be reached at 507-676-1101.

CITY

From Page A1

The city-owned Sanford Center, now 10 years old, also has an estimated \$750,000 in capital needs on an annual basis.

"Once we know what the wastewater treatment plant's license requirements are, we will have a water and sewer rate study done, to see what we need to do with those rates," Eischens said.

Another section of Eischens' presentation focused on the city's municipal liquor operation. According to his data, Eischens showed that Bemidji was 13th in statewide sales, including metro area stores.

Despite the impact of constructing

the new store, Eischens said sales in 2019 increased by 7.8%. Additionally, the liquor stores have had a 25% increase in March.

Eischens said profits from the store contribute \$451,000 to reduce property taxes, which equates to 7.4% in tax levy savings. The operating profit in 2019 was \$679,838, up from \$544,394 in 2018.

Bemidji's new liquor store, First City Liquor, was completed in 2019. Located at 500 Paul Bunyan Drive NW, the 16,300 square-foot, \$4.1 million building replaced Discount Liquor.

The city operates two stores as part of its operation, with the other being Lakeview Liquor, housed in a 25-year-old building at 510 Paul Bunyan Drive SE.

Readers can reach Pioneer reporter Matthew Liedke at (218) 333-9791.

STAY WELL.

Stay home.

Having COVID-19 symptoms? Complete an e-visit, the fastest way to determine what's next. For everything else, request a video visit with a Sanford physician to stay home and stay well.

GO ONLINE FOR A VIRTUAL VISIT. sanfordhealth.org/covid19-care

SANFORD HEALTH



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