



Mask mandate starts Saturday

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the Tower-Soudan **TIMBERJAY**



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U.S. CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION

Biological threats targeted at border

by DAVID COLBURN
 Cook/Orr Editor

Damaging wild rice and timber pests found in recent shipments

INTERNATIONAL FALLS - As northern Minnesota moves expectantly toward another wild rice harvest, there is a group of people working to insure that the tiniest of foreign invaders that could wreak havoc with the crop don't breach this

country's borders.

Agriculture specialists with the U.S. Customs and Border Protection service don't have the same visibility as their counterparts in immigration, but their effort to find and eliminate threats to agriculture production

and consumption is vital to the protection of the nation's food supply and agriculture-related industries.

Gene Krause oversees agricultural inspections at a number of checkpoints along the U.S.-Canadian border and

he works out of the operation at International Falls. Krause said a number of recent discoveries in foreign shipments coming through International Falls could have had big impacts on agriculture in northern Minnesota.

"Some of the insects we've

found have really been potential threats to either cultivated wild rice or the wild rice industry," Krause said. "In the last month and a half we've found brown plant hopper, and this really

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NORTHERN LIGHTS MUSIC FESTIVAL

Opera

moves to the outdoor stage



Annual music festival adjusts to pandemic

by JODI SUMMIT
 Tower-Soudan Editor

CHISHOLM - There were some mosquitos, a rogue red squirrel that scampered all the way across row eight during the

first act, and intermission views of the comet from the hillside to the north.

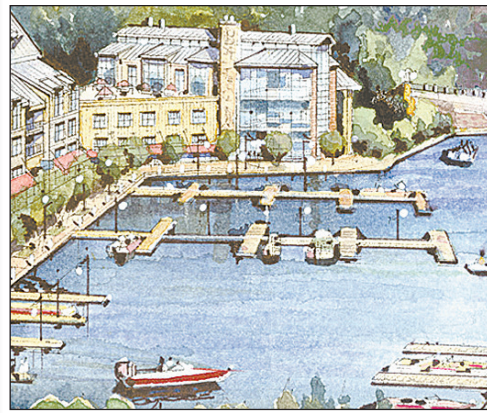
The orchestra players were evenly spaced, wearing masks if they

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Puccini's "Tosca," featuring Leah Crocetto and Rafael Davila, was performed at the Discovery Center in Chisholm last weekend. Performers and orchestra took COVID-19 precautions. photos by J. Summit



DEVELOPMENT



Tower Harbor: Where does it go from here?

by MARSHALL HELMBERGER
 Managing Editor

TOWER— There was plenty of optimism here 13 years ago, the last time the late Rep. Jim Oberstar paid an official visit to Tower. The longtime Congressman was on hand to help cut the ribbon on a new harbor project that city officials and residents hoped would represent an economic revival for this town of 500.

By restoring the historic connection between Lake Vermilion and the city's downtown, city officials hoped the project would spark new commercial and residential development along a newly excavated harbor, drawing both traffic and business from the lake into town. An artist's depiction from the time shows a busy hub of activity, with brightly-colored buildings, expansive docks, and dozens of pedestrians gathered

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SUMMER CELEBRATIONS

Operation Blueberry replaces annual Ely festival this year

by KEITH VANDERVORT
 Ely Editor

ELY - Concern over the COVID-19 pandemic has forced Ely Chamber of Commerce officials to offer an alternative celebration of the annual Blueberry/Art Festival that typically would draw tens of thousands of visitors to the area this weekend.

"Operation Blueberry" is underway, according to event coordinator Ellen Cashman, as a way to give exposure to local businesses through special sales and promotions in an attempt to attract customers who may visit the Ely area



this weekend despite the cancellation of the festival.

"In a summer of unprecedented event can-

cellations due to the worldwide pandemic," Cashman said, "Ely area businesses along with the Ely

Chamber of Commerce have come together to create some new summer activities for people. It is an answer to the many inquiries we received from those who did not cancel their reservations despite our needed cancellation of this wonderful event."

This year, with the cancellation of nearly all the usual events that normally take place this month, the Chamber of Commerce devised "Operation Blueberry," which runs from Friday, July 24 though Friday, July 31, as a way to still offer some of the fun vis-

See...**ELY** pg. 10



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OPERA...Continued from page 1

didn't need to blow into their instrument, and separated with plexiglass screens. The chorus members, who had pre-recorded their pieces prior to the show in small groups, wore masks on stage. But the principals, who had been quarantining in place with each other and wearing masks for the first few weeks of rehearsals, were in fine form on stage, with voices so strong they didn't need the special sound system that had been rented to amplify the singers into the back rows of the outdoor seats.

This wasn't your traditional venue for opera, but these are not traditional times.

"This is the first opera that has been produced since the March shut-down," said Northern Lights Music Festival Artistic Director and Founder Veda Zuponic. "It has garnered so much international attention."

The amphitheater at the Minnesota Discovery Center (MDC) in Chisholm had been suggested as a musical venue for the festival before, but Zuponic said they had always depended on the auditoriums at area schools.

"I had always steered away from it," she said. "I was worried about the mosquitos, the cold, and the rain."

But when local schools all closed to the public, Zuponic needed some options if the planned performances were to go on.

After a quick tour, she realized the stage could

'The Medium' at Ely

A second shorter opera will be performed at Ely's State Theater on July 26 at 4 p.m. and July 27 at 7 p.m. A maximum of 70 tickets are available for each show, but tickets, as of press time, were still available.

"This opera was supposed to be performed at Mesabi East," Zuponic said.

The Medium is one of the most popular American operas. It premiered in 1947, and later ran on Broadway. Metropolitan Opera Diva Barbara Dever is playing the lead, with students from the festival's Opera Apprentice Program taking other roles. The opera tells the story of Baba, a fortune-teller, who begins to believe in her phantoms. This is a short opera and runs about 50 minutes.

Tickets are available online at <https://www.northernlightsmusic.org/>.



work, there was adequate protection from any rain, and with social distancing guidelines followed, the venue would hold up to 250 audience members.

"There were a lot of changes needed though," she said. "More money was spent on the sound system and lighting."

Rehearsals began indoors at Mesabi East.

The school was able to host rehearsals, but not a public performance. But once they started working at MDC, they realized there was one other big problem - the sunset.

"The sun glare was so strong right at 8 p.m.," she said. "The conductor said we couldn't do it."

The start time of the opera was changed from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m., and Northern Lights board member Ryan Bajan figured out a way to string a large tarp across the back of the amphitheater, blocking most of the glare.

Tosca in the time of COVID-19

The cast was international, but the audience was mostly local.

"Attendance was a little less than ideal," said Zuponic, noting that in past years, many had driven from as far as Duluth to an afternoon performance, but weren't willing to come to an evening show with such a long drive home.

The festival had sent out an online survey, trying to see what options previous audience members were comfortable with. The top choice, she said, was an open-air setting.

"Most of the audience at the two shows came from within 30 miles," she said. And on the bright side, she said they saw more younger people in the audience than in past years.

The opera was also livestreamed to over

125 people from around the world, including the brother of the opera's stage director Chia Patino. He was able to watch the show from his home in Ecuador.

Chia Patino recently moved from Ecuador to Texas, teaching and producing opera at the University of Texas, Austin.

"Right now, the world is kind of closed," Patino said. "It would have been impossible for me to get here if I was living in Ecuador."

Patino got a real taste of the northwoods, spending a couple of weeks at a cabin outside of Biwabik, and then a week at a cabin on Lake Vermilion.

"I am completely in love with the nature up here," Patino said. "And the stars are so impressive." The bugs, on the other hand, were not a highlight.

Patino said there were some challenges with moving the opera outdoors, and it required a lot of flexibility from the singers and the crew.

"We needed to keep it dramatic, and keep the story clear, while still maintaining social distancing."

There were a lot of behind-the-scenes changes that the audience wouldn't notice, Patino said.

"There was no crossing on stage of the characters," she said. "Singers never went in and out of the same door together, and singers never shared the same prop. There was one prop for each character that would be switched behind the stage."

A dance scene was reworked to keep the singers at a safe distance. Rehearsals were done wearing masks, but during the performance, all the singers except the chorus sang without masks.

"The flight back home will be the most dangerous thing I've done the last three weeks," she said.

Social distancing was

also a challenge for the orchestra musicians, who are used to being seated close together.

In addition, the musicians stayed as isolated as possible during the three weeks up north.

"This was not the most social time," she said.

"It was hard to do," said Zuponic, "but we can do it."

The opera provided musicians and singers with some of their only paid work since March.

"One after another," Zuponic said, "all of their contracts were canceled, all the way into the fall."

Future plans

The music festival, which includes a camp for young musicians, was much smaller this year since the students needed to be housed in single rooms.

Luckily for the festival, this year's group of students was incredibly talented, and every one of them was able to be part of the festival performances.

Zuponic said plans for next summer's festival will depend on what level of grant funding they receive. The festival receives major funding from Explore Minnesota Tourism and the Minnesota State Arts Board. Zuponic said there might be some changes to these grant programs, to focus on smaller events, which would impact the festival.

"Everything we do depends on grant money," she said.

Zuponic said the festival lost out on some private foundations that shut down spending this spring.

But Zuponic is confident they will figure out a way to bring music to northern Minnesota in the years to come.

"I think we may be in a very similar situation next year also," she said. "But we will figure out a way to make it work."

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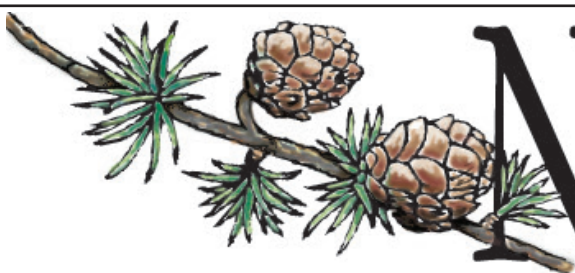
GREENWOOD TOWNSHIP RESIDENTS NEED TO KNOW

When the board changed the clerk's pay and hours, there is literally not enough time to finish ALL the work that the township clerk is responsible to complete.

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- Mike Ralston-753-3042
- Carmen Deluca-753-5966
- Byron Beihoffer-753-5626
- Larry Tahija-753-5500
- Paul Skubic-749-5700

If the township is in dire need to be fiscally responsible, they could do an overall 10 percent pay decrease, which would include the clerk, treasurer, supervisors, and four employees from the fire dept.



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PUBLIC RESPONSE

Ely's Harvest Moon Festival canceled for 2020

by KEITH VANDERVORT
Ely Editor

Decision comes as COVID-19 numbers increase in Minnesota

ELY – As anticipated, the Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors here officially canceled the 2020 Harvest Moon Festival. The “no-go” decision was made Monday morning during a special meeting.

“Board members shared existing concerns and restrictions that made moving forward with the event impossible,” said Executive Director Eva Sebesta.

“Current guidelines for events limit gathering size to 250 people. With the event drawing approximately 5,000 people per day in previous years, there is no feasible way to restrict attendee numbers within Whiteside Park.”

When the Blueberry/Art Festival was canceled back in April, Chamber Event Director Ellen Cashman pivoted to

create the virtual Blueberry/Art Festival as well as “Operation Blueberry.” The chamber is moving forward with similar events for the Harvest Moon.

Artists, crafters, and makers currently registered for the Harvest Moon Festival will have the option to participate in the virtual festival, which will run from Sept. 10-30. The chamber has notified vendors of

the cancellation and is working with them to create the virtual festival, according to Sebesta.

A second component of the revamped fall festival, “Business Harvest Days,” will run from Sept. 10-15.

“Similar to ‘Operation Blueberry,’ businesses can create their own sales, activities, or promotions,” Sebesta said.

The Chamber will organize

the business event, create a map and participant list, and share posts to social media.

“Businesses may choose to partner with other businesses to create a unique fall get-away package, host a music event, offer themed beverages or menu items, sales or discounts, or host a nonprofit at their location,” she

See **FESTIVAL...**pg. 2B



Above: Opera performers in “The Medium” participate in a séance that purportedly makes contact with the deceased children of distraught parents.

Left: Mezzo soprano Barbara Dever performs as Madame Flora, who claims to be a medium.

Below: Two other performers play their parts as Monica and Toby

Bottom: Conductor Gavriel Heine and members of the orchestra fine tune their pieces two days ahead of showtime.

photos by K. Vandervort



Ely's State Theater hosts “The Medium”

by KEITH VANDERVORT
Ely Editor

ELY –The Northern Lights Music Festival opened its 17th season this year with many challenges and obstacles. Organizers were faced with how to provide the popular events, including concerts and operas, across northern Minnesota while adhering to the public health protocols surrounding the coronavirus.

Coming off a successful outdoor event last weekend at the Minnesota Discovery Center amphitheater, where Puccini’s “Tosca” was performed before a properly socially-distanced audience, and plexiglass screens and face masks were in use by everyone, the trick here was to present a normal indoor opera in not so normal times.

“As far as we can determine, we are the first theater in the entire country to have a live opera during the COVID-19 period,” said David Wigdahl, president of the Ely State Theater board of directors. “This same opera company just performed in an outdoor arena, thus we are hosting the first indoor performances.”

He added, “This came about as (NLMF) was scheduled to perform at Mesabi East High School in

Aurora, but as the building was not open this summer, they came to the State Theater looking for a performance venue. We are happy to host as it fulfills part of our mission to support the performing arts and be a community entertainment hub for the area.”

The opera company moved into the State Theater last Monday and rehearsed all week. Just six actors and a 12-piece orchestra made up the small company because of space constraints on and in front of the stage.

A visitor to the one of the final rehearsals last Friday got a first-hand look at the challenges the company faced in preparing for the Sunday afternoon and Monday night performances.

Orchestra members not required to use their mouth to play their instruments donned light blue face masks. The area in front of the stage allowed for proper social distancing.

Gavriel Heine, resident conductor at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia, as well as music director of Northern Light Festival Opera here in Minnesota, seemed right at home giving an orchestra member an elbow bump (rather than a handshake or high five) as he took his conducting station.



MINING

High Court: Underground seepage from Minntac subject to regulation

by MARSHALL HELMBERGER
Managing Editor

REGIONAL— Polluted seepage from the Minntac tailings basin, north of Virginia, may now need to be regulated by the state’s Pollution Control Agency, or MPCA. The Minnesota Supreme Court made that possibility far more likely following an order issued late last week.

The six-page ruling, signed by Associate Justice G. Barry Anderson, came in response to multiple appeals of a Court of Appeals decision issued earlier this year, which had invalidated a water discharge permit issued by the MPCA to US Steel. In a mixed ruling that touched on several issues, the appellate court had found that pollution from the Minntac tailings basin that seeps underneath the basin’s dam and then enters surface waters, was not subject to regulation under the Clean Water Act, since the water seeps up from the ground.

But the U.S. Supreme Court, in April, found that pollution discharges into groundwater may be subject to the Clean Water Act if those discharges are the “functional equivalent” of a direct discharge to surface water.

The Minnesota Supreme Court, citing the April case, known as *County of Maui v. Hawaii Wildlife Fund*, determined that the state’s Court of Appeals had erred when it rejected the claim of environmental groups that the polluted groundwater emanating from the tailings basin was not subject to regulation. The high court also rejected a request by the MPCA for a voluntary remand, which would have allowed the agency to rewrite its permit to account for the Maui decision. While the issue will likely go back to the MPCA eventually, Justice Anderson said the case will remain in the hands of the state’s Supreme Court until all the outstanding issues are resolved.

Environmental litigants in the case had opposed a voluntary remand and Paula Maccabee, attorney for the group Water Legacy, said she was pleased that the court has officially recognized in a decision that the Maui case is controlling.

“Maui is having an immediate effect on Minnesota and

See **RULING...**pg. 2B