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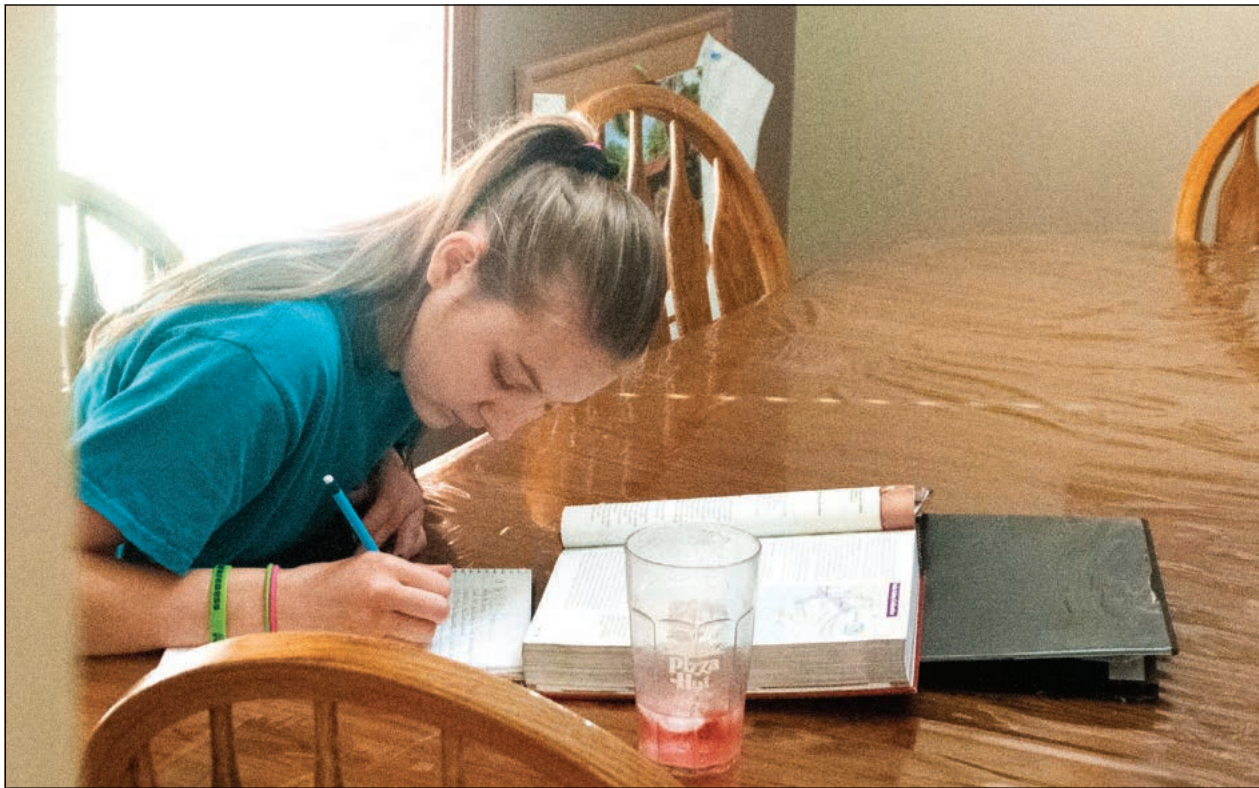


Photo by Hannah Davis

Forest Lake Area High School sophomore Natalie Rebelein studies at home on Thursday, Sept. 26. Rebelein stayed home due to a threat made against the school on social media the previous evening.

Students, parents spooked by social media threats

Police catch suspect in fabricated posts

Hannah Davis
Community Editor

Forest Lake Area High School's homecoming festivities were disrupted last week as a threat shut down a virtual scavenger hunt and caused many students to stay home from school. Threatening messages posted on Goose Chase, an app used by students for a homecoming-related scavenger hunt, raised

alarm among students and parents on Wednesday, Sept. 25. Screenshots of the posted threats on the app seemed to suggest a threat to the school, with one circulated picture reading, "I have nothing to live for. This is the best way for me to go down. Down with everyone else."

Forest Lake Area Schools Superintendent Steve Massey was alerted to the messages shortly after they were posted and immediately called the Forest Lake Police Department to investigate. Police

contacted the student whose name matched the username tag on the app and determined that the student did not write the posts. Police Captain Greg Weiss said police quickly determined the threats as non-credible based on a variety of factors. Besides the knowledge that the poster shared them under a false name, he said, they were posted on an app that was being frequented by a large percentage of students. That action seemed

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Farewell to a Forest Lake advocate

Swanson was long-time YSB director, tireless volunteer

Ryan Howard
News Editor

A memorial service has been set for next month for Barb Swanson, the former longtime Forest Lake resident who graced many local causes and organizations with her creative, hard-working spirit. Swanson, who was living with her husband, Bruce, in Ft. Myers, Florida, died Sept. 4 after a brief hospital stay. She was 80.

Barb had a hand in a variety of community organizations in and around Forest Lake over the years, but perhaps her most notable work was as the Youth Service Bureau's executive director from 1986 to 1999. During that time, she got to know Doug and Barb Goerss, two of the board members on the bureau, and she and Bruce remained friends with the couple over the

next few decades. Doug said he and his wife had visited Barb and Bruce in February and had been planning to return to Ft. Myers for Thanksgiving when they learned of her death.

"She always had friends, people who didn't have relatives in the area, [and] she would invite them over for [Thanksgiving] dinner,"

Goerss said. All who spoke with The Times about Barb remembered her the same way: as a generous, creative person with a heart for kids.

Linda Madsen, executive director of Lakes Center for Youth & Families – the organization formerly known as Youth Service Bureau until it was renamed in 2017 – first met Barb in the 1980s, when Madsen was still a junior high teacher in Forest Lake

Swanson see page 3

Pep in high steps






Photos by Hannah Davis

Pedro Castillo and Sydney Schmidt took the title of king and queen at Forest Lake Area High School's homecoming coronation on Sept. 27 during the high school pep fest. Other members of the royal court were Jack Makelke, Luke Jordan, Lucas Wallinga, Cole Carpenter, Kate Gemuenden, Angelina Rachie, Grace Sieber, and Ally Thompson. Other activities during the annual pep fest included an all-sport captain's race on inflatable balls, a dance by teachers, a limbo contest, and dance routines by the Forest Lake Dance Team and football team. See more about the Ranger football homecoming game on page 12.

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Proposed Anoka County tax levy up for 2020

Peter Bodley
Contributing Writer

A preliminary property tax levy for 2020 approved by the Anoka County Board Sept. 24 is 4.97% higher than this year's levy.

The proposed certified levy totals about \$143.3 million, up from the 2019 figure of \$136.5 million, which was 4.94% more than the approved 2018 levy.

According to Patti Hetrick, county budget director, the board was originally looking at a staff-proposed 8.99% levy increase before reducing it over a couple of work sessions.

But County Board members, in unanimously approving the preliminary levy, indicated they would likely look to make further cuts before approving the final levy and budget at their Friday, Dec. 6, meeting following a public hearing at 6

p.m. Thursday, Dec. 5.

Under state law, the final levy cannot be more than the approved preliminary levy, but it can be less.

Commissioner Matt Look said he would vote against the final levy if it was not less than the preliminary amount.

"We need to get costs down as much as possible," he said.

The board has approved new staff positions this year that may have been budget neutral for this year, but the full impact and cost increases will be felt in 2020, according to Look.

New development has added \$1.5 million to the county's tax base for 2020, but the proposed levy increase is a lot more than that, and the county tax is not the only increase taxpayers will face when city and school district levies are factored in, Look said.

"For some, that will be too

much to bear," he said.

Moreover, the property tax burden has shifted to residents from commercial/industrial properties because residential values have increased at a faster rate than commercial/industrial, Look said.

According to Cory Kampf, county division manager for finance and central services, overall residential values increased 8.6% for 2020 tax purposes, while commercial/industrial values only went up 3.2%.

While she would like to see the tax levy go down or remain flat, Commissioner Robyn West said she supported the levy because the County Board has unanimously approved important safety and infrastructure programs and projects this year, including improving cybersecurity, partnering with the state to deal with erosion

problems on the Rum River, keeping Chomonix Golf Course open and upgrading 30-year-old infrastructure.

Commissioner Julie Braastad said she hoped the board would be able to "whittle the levy down," but there has been a focus on public safety in the past year with hiring more 911 dispatchers to deal with the overwhelming number of calls, increasing the number of detention deputies in the county jail to reduce overtime and address overcrowding and adding a new public health nurse to deal with jail inmates' mental health issues.

In addition, the county has a 9.9% increase in health care premiums for 2020 and a 3% salary increase for its employees, its "biggest asset," she said.

"Our employees are on the front line delivering the services," Braastad said.

According to Braastad, the county also has higher costs in human services caused by unfunded state mandates that have totaled \$12 million over the past five to six years. "The money has to come from somewhere," Braastad said.

Commissioner Mandy Meisner said county staff works hard to provide services to the public in a "lean" manner, and she supported the proposed levy.

Commissioner Mike Gamache did not like to see a levy increase but said "it is a part of life" and necessary to pay for needed programs and staff costs. "We have to be competitive," he said.

This is a status quo levy that addresses the county's priorities, according to Commissioner Scott Schulte, board chair.

"This is a responsible, reasonable levy," Schulte said.

Threats

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engineered to cause fear and increase caution the following day at the school, which he pointed out is not the way someone intending to commit a large scale violent act at a location would typically act. Though the threats were not believed to be credible, the school district worked with police to have a heightened police presence at the high school and Forest Lake Area Middle School for the rest of the week. "We received word almost immediately from FLPD that they did not feel the threats were credible. We take their lead, as well as our own information and knowledge of the situation. Their guidance was is that they did not feel this was a credible threat, and given that guidance and that lead, we felt it was appropriate to continue to hold school," Massey said.

The Goose Chase smartphone app was being utilized by the high school for a photo scavenger hunt in coordination with homecoming festivities. The app has two different access levels: one that is open for anyone to join, and one accessed by a pre-set code. Those who have the code can join the game but must set up their name and profile by themselves. Prior to homecoming week, FLAHS students were each emailed an entry code to access the scavenger hunt, with each grade being assigned their own code. Weiss said that those who log on to the app pick an identifying tag of their choosing. The person who made the threats created a tag identifying themselves as another student. Police worked with the developers of the Goose Chase and caught the student they believe is responsible for making the threats around 10 a.m. on Friday, Sept. 27, just hours before the homecoming pep rally took place. An email to parents on Friday said that the person who made the threats is no longer in the school. The person is a juvenile and therefore was kept anonymous by



Photo by Hannah Davis

The Forest Lake Area High School's homecoming pep rally on Sept. 27 was one of multiple homecoming events that saw a heightened police presence last week after fabricated threats appearing to relate to the high school were shared on social media.

law enforcement, though Weiss did report the alleged culprit was booked for making violent threats and disorderly conduct.

Weiss told The Times it was regrettable the way the posts and subsequent rumors spread like wildfire across social media, sometimes exaggerating the scope or circumstances of the threats. At one point, he said, before police knew the identity of the alleged culprit, there was a social media rumor that police did know who was behind it and that they were engaged in some sort of manhunt.

"That is absolutely false," he said of this rumor.

District response

Some parents were frustrated over what they considered as a lack of information and poor communication in the aftermath of the threats. Massey said that communication was given no later than 6:30 a.m. on Thursday to every principal across the district and

said the district communicated as often and with as much information as it could throughout the investigation.

"We're limited in what we can say, and I know that that's frustrating, but we have to honor the investigative process and data privacy," Massey said. "We felt as we started school on Thursday that it was safe to hold school. Withstanding that, parents always have the choice of keeping their kids home. We're going to work with the parent."

Massey also noted that the new safe and secure entrance system at the high school is huge upgrade to security, noting that in the past, each door would have to be locked by hand. Now, all the doors are locked by default.

"Unfortunately there are moments of vulnerability in any public building," Massey said. "But we are far more secure than we have been in the past and other schools, and that gives me a large de-

gree of assurance that we are providing a high degree of safety and security for kids in our schools."

Parent response

Though schools across the district remained open on Thursday and Friday, Massey said roughly 150 parents across the district opted to keep their children home from classes on Thursday, and a number more students decided to leave school in the middle of the day. Both groups of students will have an excused absence for the day.

Curtis and Beth Rebelein agreed that there were too many unknowns and that it was safer to keep their three kids, one each in high school, middle school, and elementary school, home for the day.

"With the number of investigations I've gone through, with the risk factors and how this all this works, it's just better to keep my kids home," said Curtis, who has worked in the security industry for 30 years.

"It's one day off of school. If nothing happens, and we hope and pray that it doesn't, I can get my kids caught up," Beth said. Beth also noted that while last week's threat was a unique instance, every day she sends her kids off on the bus there is always a small fear.

Chris and Linda Soderlind also discussed the pros and cons of attending school on the 26th with their freshman son, Isaac. They were nervous, but Linda said their strong faith helped them decide that Isaac would still attend. Isaac said that the added police presence helped ease his fears.

"Some kids seemed nervous, but I wasn't that much. I was being watchful," Isaac said.

The sentiment was also shared by Tia Houseman, whose two sons are in ninth and sixth grades. Before they attended school on Thursday, she talked with them about being aware of their surroundings and letting somebody know if something didn't seem right.

"It was a little bit nerve-racking trying to

make the decision, but at the same time, we knew police were involved, and they said that there wasn't a major threat," Houseman said. "I do definitely feel like it's something you think about every day as your kids go to school. It's important to give them a hug and tell them every day because you don't know."

Wyoming City Councilwoman Claire Luger said that while her daughters did attend school, she had to have a conversation with them beforehand, one she said had to happen due to the national trend of gun violence.

"It was an appalling conversation to have with my kids," she said. "To have to point out that three extra police vehicles [are] in the back parking lot, and drive home my point to say, 'Look, it's safe, and we've upped the law enforcement.' No parent should have to have a percentage of a doubt that would be an unsafe

situation. That was my anger for the morning. I think it's heart-breaking for parents to have to even consider. We've been able to kind of function with a 'Yeah, but it's not in my community' perspective, and now I think it's hit home just a little bit harder, regardless if it was just a hoax, where we have to really evaluate why this is happening."

Superintendent Steve Massey said it's a concern he shares.

"The potential of a threat or violence in the school are things that keep every superintendent up at night. It's a reality of our times, and it's incumbent upon us to learn everything we can to provide all the measures we can to provide a safe place for our kids to go to school," Massey said.

- Ryan Howard contributed to this story.

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