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Saturday, October 19, 2019

# A SLIP IN STUDENTS

## BSU follows statewide trend as enrollment dips

By Jordan Shearer  
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Enrollment at Bemidji State for the 2019 fall semester is down from the year before, officials reported this week.

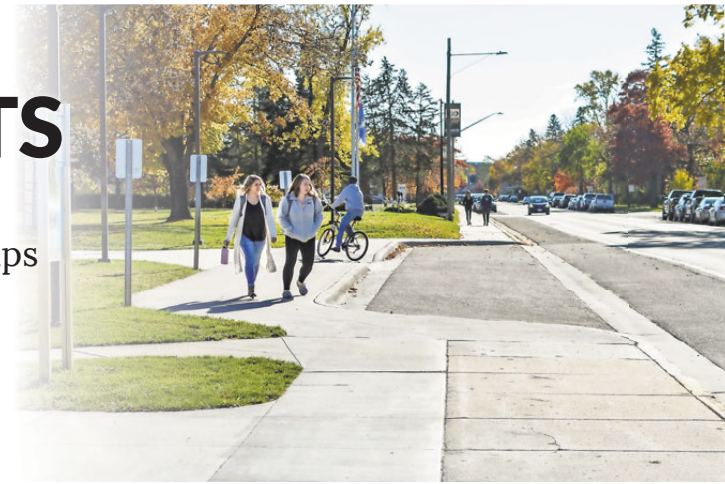
The university compiles its yearly fall enrollment numbers based on the 30th day of classes after the semester begins. For the 2019 fall semester, there were a total of 4,898 students enrolled in the university, BSU announced Tuesday. That number consists of 4,504 undergraduate students and 394 graduate students.

The total counts for both categories were down from the same time last year. Undergraduate enrollment declined roughly 4.7 percent from the 4,727 students in the

fall of 2018, and graduate student enrollment declined roughly 3.7 percent from the 409 recorded in the fall of 2018. The total headcount declined by 238 students.

In spite of the decline in student enrollment, BSU is attempting to bolster its numbers. The school has hired an out-of-state recruitment specialist for the admissions office as well as an outreach specialist for the American Indian Resource Center within the past year.

“From the standpoint of recruitment, the expansion of staff in this area allows us to tell more students about BSU by reaching more students across the nation and the world,” Michelle Frenzel, executive director of enrollment management,



BSU students walk on campus on Thursday afternoon.

Annalise Braught | Bemidji Pioneer

said in an email.

Frenzel said part of the reason for the decline in enrollment is that there is a high demand for workers. Because of that, students are able to enter directly into the job market.

Karen Snorek, vice president for finance and administration at BSU,

said the university had budgeted for a decline in enrollment between fiscal years 2019-20. Snorek said one of the ways they will compensate for the additional decline is with positions the university budgeted for but have not yet filled.

**ENROLLMENT:** Page A7

### BSU fall enrollment

Years	Undergrad	Grad	Total
2015	4,739	274	5,013
2016	4,795	325	5,120
2017	4,833	365	5,198
2018	4,727	409	5,136
2019	4,504	394	4,898

Source: Bemidji State University

Forum Design Center

### TRIP ON A TANKFUL



Bria Barton | Bemidji Pioneer

Built in 1958, the Big Fish in Bena was restored in 2009 and continues to attract visitors far and wide.

## Landing the ‘Big Fish’

### Roadside attraction, supper club a slice of Americana

Bena, Minn. Minnesota is a little weird. OK, it’s a lot weird – but in that quirky great aunt sort of way.

From a museum dedicated to an infamous canned mystery meat to an enlarged replica of the jolly green guy found in your grocery freezer aisle, this wonderful weirdness is responsible for the offbeat emblems that encompass a still-enduring dose of Americana on roadsides throughout the state.

And in the Northwoods along U.S. Highway 2 in Bena, the Big Fish lives – a testament to the rise and fall and rise again of the ubiquitous roadside attraction.



BRIA BARTON

Its red eyes, contrasted against an olive green paint job, stare at nothing in particular but watch over its neighboring Big Fish Supper Club only a few feet away. Its walk-in mouth, filled with wooden stake fangs, hangs in a seemingly comical gap, awaiting visitors to step inside and snap a photo.

The 65-foot-long, 15-foot-wide muskie replica is far larger than any day’s catch on nearby Lake Winnibigoshish, and 60 years ago it was the talk of the Leech Lake Indian Reservation and the tourists of northern Minnesota.

Built in 1958 as the Big Muskie Drive-In, the fish structure featured an inside lunch counter that served hamburgers and ice cream while a serving window could be found next to an eye fashioned out of a Coca Cola sign.

**BIG FISH:** Page A7

# Talking up a storm

## MPR Meteorologist discusses weather and climate change with Bemidji

By Matthew Liedke  
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BEMIDJI — Constant days of rain locally and across the region in the past few months are continuing a trend of 2019 being the wettest year on record in many Minnesota cities.

It’s one of the weather trends cited as an impact from climate change that was included in a presentation given to Bemidjians Thursday by Minnesota Public Radio’s chief meteorologist.

During an MPR Connects event, meteorologist Paul Huttner talked to an audience of more than 180 about the meaning behind trends residents can already see outside their windows. According to Huttner, the state is already on track to be wetter and warmer.

“There were 10 snowstorms in about five weeks and that wet signal has persisted throughout the year,” Huttner said. “This is the wettest year on record in many locations in Minnesota. Rochester has already beaten their annual precipitation record in September.”



Annalise Braught | Bemidji Pioneer

MPR Chief Meteorologist Paul Huttner speaks during his presentation on ‘The whys of weather and climate beyond the forecast’ at the Hampton Inn and Suites on Thursday evening.

According to Huttner, the state is trending to be about 5 degrees warmer and 5 inches wetter on average.

Huttner discussed the importance of communicating the science of climate and weather experiences. He also discussed the impacts climate change can have on energy, insurance and communities.

“We’ve just gone through the five warmest years on record globally, from 2014-2018,” Huttner said. “That’s unprecedented, we’ve never had the top five warmest years in a row. In a balanced climate system, you’d think we’d have a mix of warmer and

colder than average years. But the last cooler than average year was in 1976. That’s how far out of balance the Earth’s climate system is.”

Huttner, who’s been MPR’s meteorologist since 2007, speaks about the subject regularly on his weekly radio show the Climate Cast. Episodes of the Climate Cast are available at MPR’s website, mpr.org. MPR operates a 46 station radio network serving nearly all of Minnesota and parts of surrounding states. Huttner is heard on regular weather chats on MPR and also writes for the MPR Updraft Blog.

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



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# Council ponders special use tax request to state Legislature

**By Matthew Liedke**  
mliedke@bemidjipioneer.com

**BEMIDJI** — The city of Bemidji intends to request authorization from the state Legislature to create special use taxes to generate funds for infrastructure and the Sanford Center.

Before sending in its request to lawmakers in St. Paul, though, City Council members and staff still have to crunch the numbers.

A step forward was taken Tuesday evening, though, as the council came to a consensus on what sort of special use taxes to use for each need. Special use taxes can range from a sales tax to a hospitality tax on restaurants and hotels.

"The framework I got out of the council meeting was to use a proposed sales tax for public infrastructure costs," City Finance Director Ron Eischens told the Pioneer. "Those would

include water wells, the wastewater treatment center and possibly streets. Then, any hospitality tax on food and beverages at restaurants would go toward the Sanford Center."

According to a presentation given at the council's work session Tuesday, Eischens said hospitality taxes only need legislative approval according to state statute, while a sales tax needs a local referendum, too. Additionally, hospitality taxes have no sunset clause while a sales tax does.

While a framework has been established for the request, Eischens said the amount to be taxed has yet to be determined. For example, a 1 percent hospitality tax on restaurants and bars would generate \$584,000 annually, at 1.5 percent it would create \$876,000 and at 2 percent, \$1.16 million would be created.

Eischens' presentation also gave details on what a sales tax could generate, with \$600,000 at 1/8 percent, \$1.2 million at 1/4 percent and \$2.4 million at 1/2 percent.

If a sales tax is authorized by the Legislature and subsequently passed by a public vote, the dollars would likely go toward a new facility near the city's water wells east of the Bemidji Regional Airport, as well as new equipment at the existing wastewater treatment center. The more pressing issue for the city, though, is the new facility for water wells.

To address chemicals called perfluorocarbons, or PFCs, found near the water wells, the city is considering the construction of a treatment plant estimated at \$16.3 million. The city is already requesting the project be included in the 2020 bonding bill, but this could still mean a cost of

more than \$8 million.

Along with the water well facility, city officials say they are applying for a new permit from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency for its wastewater treatment plant. With a new permit, there's a possibility the MPCA could require ammonia and nitrogen to be treated, resulting in another project estimated at more than \$10 million.

At the city-owned Sanford Center, a 493,000 square-foot event facility featuring a 4,373-seat arena with attached conference space, Bemidji officials have two options with a possible hospitality tax. One is to direct the dollars toward the building's annual operating loss and the other is to appropriate the funds for the facility's capital needs.

For 2019 the council budgeted \$450,000 to cover operating losses at the Sanford Center

and authorized nearly \$860,000 for capital investment needs. For 2020, the capital investment needs are estimated at \$483,571.

While Eischens said how to use potential hospitality tax dollars is undetermined, he added it's not uncommon for communities to commit those types of funds to these facilities. In his presentation, Eischens said other cities with event centers such as Duluth, Mankato and St. Cloud all use special use taxes to support their respective buildings.

The council is scheduled to reconvene on the matter Dec. 9, with the expectation to submit the city's request to the Legislature by Dec. 15. The deadline is Jan. 31, but city leaders said Tuesday it's important to get a head start with more time before the Legislature begins its session Feb. 11.

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

## ENROLLMENT

From Page A1

The university released a statement that said the decline "reflects a system-wide trend amongst the seven Minnesota State universities." Overall, the universities in the system have seen a decline of almost 3 percent.

Minnesota State Chancellor Devinder Malhotra said in a statement that the "dip in enrollment is

consistent with economic and demographic trends that are impacting public higher education throughout the region and across the country."

The last few years have not represented a steadily declining trend, but this fall's enrollment numbers for BSU are the lowest they've been over the last five years when compared with the other fall semesters. In fact, it's the first time since before 2015 that the total

enrollment has dipped below the 5,000 mark in the fall semester. In 2018, the total enrollment was 5,136. In 2015, total enrollment was 5,013.

Except for last year, which only had 15 more graduate students than this year, enrollment for graduate students has been on an upward trend. In 2015, that number was 274, but in 2019, it was 394.

Although the undergraduate numbers

have jumped around a little from year to year rather than moving in a solid direction, the number of undergraduate students is the lowest number since before 2015. In 2015, undergraduate enrollment was just slightly higher than last year.

In spite of the overall decline, the university has seen stronger-than-usual retention rates. The release from the university said the

retention rate "measures the percentage of students entering classes during a fall term who return to the institution the following fall."

The school reported a retention rate of 72.3 percent for the fall semester. That number was down slightly from the 72.4 percent reported the year before. However, before the last two years, the last highest retention rate was in 2009 when the university reported

71.7 percent.

Frenzel said they attribute the increase in retention to having a number of services and initiatives that aim to support students.

Enrollment information for Northwest Technical College has not been released yet. However, the enrollment for fall 2018 was 1,021, which was up from the 928 reported in 2017.

Readers can reach Pioneer reporter Jordan Shear at (218) 333-9790.

## BIG FISH

From Page A1

But as the years went by and ownership changed, the drive-in closed and a new place to dine was opened next door.

leaving the Big Fish to serve as its storage shed.

With brutal winters and lack of upkeep, the fish began to rot as all fish made of flesh or wood do.

When the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota — now rebranded as Rethos — deemed the Big Fish "most endangered by demolition, neglect or public policy," the dilapidated structure garnered a spot on its 10 Most Endangered Historic Places list in 2009.

Yet within months of the list being published, Minnesotans jumped to action to restore the small town attraction that held a magnetic appeal.

**The visit**

If you're like me, you sung along to "Holiday Road" in the opening credits of Chevy Chase's "National Lampoon's Vacation" as travel-themed postcards flashed across the screen. And if you were paying close attention, you might recall seeing a big fish nearly taking a bite out of a house — just before Paul and Babe make their debut.

As a life-long sucker for the Griswolds and their antics, I couldn't resist checking out this Lamponian landmark about 30 miles outside of Bemidji.

When I arrived at the Big Fish Supper Club on chicken night, a.k.a. Wednesday evening, I had a more urgent matter to attend to before digging into a plateful.

Setting aside my dignity while cars passed by — as I know so many have done before me — I climbed into the mouth of the legendary Big Fish and had my photo snapped with this wonderful weirdness in the woods.

Each of its fangs was about the length of my arm, and for a brief moment, I imagined myself the Captain Ahab of this Minnesotan Moby Dick. But with leg still intact and hunger pains rather than scurvy, I ambled over to the adjacent restaurant — the modernized offspring of the once-thriving Big

**IF YOU GO**

**What:** Big Fish Supper Club  
**Where:** 456 US-2, Bena, MN  
**When:** Open Tuesday to Saturday at 5 p.m.  
**Weekly Specials:**  
**Tuesday** — Philly Steak Sandwich  
**Wednesday** — Broasted Chicken Night 2pc and 4pc  
**Specials**  
**Thursday** — 8-oz. Sirloin Steak & Shrimp  
**Friday** — Prime Rib  
**Saturday** — Special on 1/4 rack, full rack BBQ Smoked Ribs

where any word before chicken is "fried", I was intrigued. So, I ordered the special and was absolutely thrilled when I took my first bite of the broasted thigh. It was crunchy and seasoned on the outside and juicy on the inside — the secret to a good piece of chicken — and I had unintentionally discovered a place to satisfy my homesick cravings.

Throughout the evening, diners could be heard saying, "I'll have my usual," which struck a chord with me about something I once read by author Neil Gaiman.

He wrote that roadside attractions in America are "places of power" that people feel drawn to despite reason.

So, I asked myself the question: What lures people to drive miles and miles to take a photo of a big fish, maybe grab some dinner and then drive miles and miles back home?

Of course, the food is

delicious at the supper club, but perhaps, Gaiman's right: There is a bit of mysticism in roadside attractions.

Or maybe — for all those cynics — people just like big objects.

But whatever the case, that Big Fish is tempting you to climb into his slack jaw for reasons unknown. And one day, you might just decide to take a drive to Bena.

Bria Barton is a Travel and Tourism reporter for the Bemidji Pioneer and Forum Communications Co. She can be reached at (218) 333-9798.



On Wednesday nights, the Big Fish Supper Club features broasted chicken as its special.

Muskie Drive-In.

A rustic chicken interior welcomed my arrival as did the aroma of beer and fried fare accompanied by the bartender's encouraging call to sit anywhere I liked. My gracious server — who I later discovered was the owner — quickly explained that it was broasted chicken night, which came with two or four pieces plus a side.

As a native of a state

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