volume 49, no. 41

winonapost.com

Official newspaper of Winona Area Public Schools

WAPS directs committee meetings be posted, public given and a request from the Winona Post as the DEC, which consist of WAPS staff

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

The Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) Board directed staff members to have committee meetings open to the public and posted on the district's calendar following public notice of a June Diversity and Equity Committee (DEC) meeting not being for greater transparency and access to such district committees.

The shift to posting more meetings on the calendar and ensuring they are open to the public is a reversal from a prior position stated by WAPS Superintendent Annette Freiheit. District-wide committees such members, community members and a board member, were not open to the public, Freiheit told the Post earlier this month, though she said committees could make them open if members elected to do so. Other committees composed of mostly School Board members are subject to laws requiring they be open, she argued at the time.

Previously, public notice of district-wide committee meetings had been given for years through the district's open meeting calendar, for example, and Winona Post reporters had attended such committee

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Small health depts. respond to big crisis



Photo by Chris Rogers

Melanie Tatge is Winona County's new public health supervisor. Across the area, small county health departments are playing a crucial role in one of the biggest public health crises in over a century.

by CHRIS ROGERS

It can be easy to imagine government as a vast bureaucracy with bottomless resources and armies of employees. Some governments are, but in rural Minnesota and Wisconsin, small county public health departments with limited staff are playing a crucial role in the biggest public health crisis in over

"It's a very difficult situation," Trempealeau County Health Officer Barb Barczak said flatly. Barczak's department has to contend with both infections and misinformation spreading among the county's citizens. "We've seen obviously the number of communicable diseases that the health depart-

see **CRISIS** page 4a

Winona County Public Health shrank over decades

Winona County's public health department is a fraction of its former size. Following cuts in state and federal funding, Winona County's public health office shrank and consolidated over decades and its workforce is now one-quarter of its former size, according to for-

see **HEALTH** page 4a

Who will be Winona's next mayor?

by CHRIS ROGERS

Grab a lawn sign, the four-way race to be Winona's next mayor is underway. Sitting City Council member Michelle Alexander, former Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) Board member Ted Hazelton, downtown business owner Jovy Rockey, and Trinona co-owner Scott Sherman are all competing to replace retiring Mayor Mark Peterson. On August 11, a primary will cut the field in half, and two candidates will advance to the November general election.

"For me, it's always budget that's at the

top," Alexander responded when asked what issues are most important to her. The city is fortunate to have a diverse and expanding tax base, but raising property taxes can really impact how affordable it is to live in Winona, she stated. "It's really a balancing act in understanding what the budget can and cannot handle, how our tax rate affects homeownership and businesses here, and how we can leverage some of our growth in tax base to help some of the projects happen," she stated, referring to projects on the city's wish list. In addition to the budget, Alexander pointed to the city's response to the COVID-19 crisis as a key issue. "How are we as a community going to address some of the concerns that are in the making right now — loss of jobs, loss of business?" she asked. The new mayor will need to work with many partners to try to mitigate the damage and position

see MAYOR page 8a

WAPS' equity group tries to define purpose

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Following two settlements with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights (DHR) on discrimination, Winona Area Public Schools' (WAPS) Diversity and Equity Committee (DEC) has been tasked with overseeing implicit bias and cultural competency staff training, along with guiding equity work district wide. Last week, the committee struggled to agree on its focus: should the student group

see **EQUITY** page 5a

Student group ties to WAPS up in air

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

For about three years, student group Our Voices has served as an outlet for Black students of all ages to speak freely and support one another. The group was organized by local parent LaShara Morgan, who has funded Our Voices out of her own pocket and bought students everything from food to art supplies to

see **STUDENT GROUP** page 5a

by CHRIS ROGERS mer county leaders, current county staff, and financial records. Like communities across the U.S., From a staff of around 30 in the

1970s, the public health department grew to a peak of roughly 60 staff members in the 2000s, Winonan Lynn Theurer, who served as the director of Winona County Public Health from 1978 to 2010, re-

Uncertainty, planning amid school opening



File photo

Jaclyn Buege and Jessica Rislov helped keep Central Lutheran Church Child Care Center in Winona up and running during the shutdown this spring.

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

With the COVID-19 pandemic continuing, questions abound about schools possibly opening in the fall, from how to keep students and staff members safe if they are on-site to how to support students if they are back in the classroom after months of distance learning and summer break. How to support students' families is a question as well, particularly in relation to families who are not able to have their children remain at home due to their work obligations. Feelings on school in the fall from local school administrators, teachers and parents are tinged with some anxiety, some hope and a wish for students to continue learning, however that may look.

As local schools await further guidance on opening that will arrive from the state later this month, they are preparing for three scenarios: in-person learning at school buildings, hybrid learning consisting of in-person learning and distance learning, and entirely distance learning. They are also reviewing what went well with distance learning last spring through surveying stakeholders such as students' parents and getting a sense of how teachers are feeling about returning to school. They are working on improving internet access for all students to help with potential distance learning in the fall, applying what they have learned from providing some child care this summer to planning social distancing, health check and hygiene protocols that could be used during the school year and determining how to rearrange classrooms to adhere to guidelines for limiting building occupancy as

Bluffview Montessori Head of School

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COVID numbers climb across both sides of river

by CHRIS ROGERS

Winona, Trempealeau, and Buffalo counties continue to report some of their fastest rates of new COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began. In a trio of sad milestones, Trempealeau and La Crosse counties each reported their first COVID-19 deaths last Friday, and last Thursday Winona County reported its first death from the virus in months.

New fatalities in Trempealeau, Winona counties

"Our public health team sends our deepest sympathy and condolences to family, friends, and all those impacted by the loss of this individual," Trempealeau County Health Officer Barb Barczak said in a statement. "We continue to urge our residents to recognize the severity of this virus and follow all recommendations from the health de-

The deceased Trempealeau County citizen had been hospitalized prior to passing away from COVID-19, according to the statement. In a decision that differs from their neighbors in La Crosse County and Winona County, Trempealeau County health officials said they would release no further information on the deceased citizen to protect their privacy. Other counties have released what decade of life people who died from COVID-19 were in e.g. La Crosse County's first COVID-19 fatality was a man in his 70s. Trempealeau County Public Health Officer Kaila Baer explained the county's small, rural nature made officials especially cautious about sharing information that could potentially identify the deceased patient.

A person in their 80s was the first Winona County citizen to die as a result of COVID-19 since April, bringing the county's total death toll to 16. The individual was hospitalized in an intensive care unit prior to passing away and had underlying health conditions, according to county public

Infections rates still climbing; Tremplo 6th highest per capita in Wis.

Winona County reported 40 new infections in the last week or an average of 5.7 per day. Its total number of cases reached 193 as of press time on Tuesday. That a significant uptick from mid-June, when the county reported just two cases a day on average. "Just because there's less restrictions on where you can go and what you can do does not mean the virus has gone away," Winona County Health and Human Services Director Karen San-

Trempealeau County reported 48 new infections in the last seven days or 6.8 per day. That's on par with last week, and nearly double the amount in late June. Its total number of cases stood at 243 as of press time.

On a per capita basis, Trempealeau County's infection totals now rival the worst-hit counties in Wisconsin. On Tuesday, it had the sixth highest per-capita infection rate in the state, only trailing metropolitan areas such as Racine and Milwaukee counties. "This is serious," Baer said. "It may seem like it's a small number, but really if you look at the case rate, it's spreading pretty rapidly here, and we need to do something to slow it down.

Infections are also increasing in Buffalo County, which reached "severe risk" for COVID-19 spread. Health officials recommended citizens refrain from non-essential errands and that restaurants discontinue dine-in service. Buffalo County reported 13 cases in the past seven days and reached a total of 29 infections as of Tuesday.

Winona City Council affirms mask order; moves minimum age to 10

On Monday night, the Winona City Council affirmed Mayor Mark Peterson's mask order, which required all Winonans to wear masks in indoor, public settings with limited exceptions.

Council members Pam Eyden, Eileen Moeller, and Paul Schollmeier praised Peterson's decision. Schollmeier said he noticed a marked increase in the number of people wearing masks afterward. In a 5-1 vote, the council affirmed the mayor's order and raised the age for children not required

to wear masks from two years old to 10. City Council member George Borzyskowski voted against the mask order, saying, "Winona people know where and when to wear a mask ... I feel the Winona people do not need to be legislated as to where and when to wear a masks."

The YMCA also announced a staff member has tested positive.

Got symptoms? Get tested

Across the region, health officials urged citizens to stay six feet apart from others, avoid large indoor gatherings, wear a mask, wash their hands, cover sneezes and coughs, and stay home when sick except to seek medical care, and seek testing if they develop any symptom of COVID-19.

Symptoms of COVID-19 include cough, shortness of breath or difficult breathing, chills, muscle pain, sore throat, and new loss of taste or smell.

In Winona, COVID-19 tests are available at the Winona Health Urgent Care clinic at 855 Mankato Avenue and at the Gundersen Health System Winona campus at 1122 West Highway 61. More information is available at www.winonahealth. org or www.gundersenhealth.org or by contacting Winona Health's COVID-19 nurse line at 507-

In Wisconsin, a free, drive-through COVID-19 testing clinic is scheduled for July 24, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., at the Omni Center in Onalaska, and another free, drive-through clinic is scheduled for July 28, from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., at Blair Taylor High School in Blair, Wis.

More information on COVID-19 and recommendations for how to protect yourself and your community is available at www.health.state. mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/index.html, https:// www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/index.htm, and co.trempealeau.wi.us/departments/health_depart-

ment/coronavirus_covid-19/index.php. Chris@winonapost.com

Equity

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Our Voices and the allegations of racial discrimination aired at last month's rally be continually addressed, or should the committee broaden its work to include other topics - such as special education and teacher resources - in order to create actionable change?

DEC's purpose

The DEC has historically helped steer efforts to improve equity throughout the district, particularly on items related to race. DEC member Marci Hitz asked about items that were not on DEC's July 15 meeting agenda – Our Voices; an equity plan, such as the plan including a comprehensive needs assessment and climate survey that was previously approved by DEC but ultimately not funded in the 2020-2021 budget; and a community liaison position that the WAPS Board did not approve for the 2020-2021 budget in a split vote at its June 18 meeting. The aim of the role would be to connect the Black community of the Winona area with WAPS. The question about items that were not on the agenda prompted discussion of DEC's purpose.

DEC member Dwayne Voegeli inquired whether Our Voices and the community liaison position would be talked about at the committee's next meeting. "I think if not here, where else?" Voegeli said. "To me, we're the group that should be talking about those." It's a topic, he said, that must be addressed, even if it makes powerful people in the district uncom-After the WAPS Board terminated the

district's school resource officer (SRO) contract with the Winona Police Department at its June 18 meeting, Superintendent Annette Freiheit was directed to research what WAPS could implement in place of an SRO. A community liaison position is being considered, she said. "I do feel that this group really needs

to move forward in its planning district wide," Freiheit told DEC members. "Some of the Department of Human Rights disparities group [work] is also what this group needs to be doing.'

One WAPS' goal is to have a diversity and equity group at each school in the district to address inclusivity at every site, DEC Chair Angela McQuinn noted, and the diversity and equity group at Winona Senior High School could discuss Our Voices in collaboration with its advisor and members, as the student group meets at the high school, she added.

Director of Learning and Teaching Karla Winter expressed her concerns with regularly discussing Our Voices during DEC meetings and feeling as if DEC is not taking enough action to improve students' educational experience overall. She stated that perhaps another group was needed to discuss those topics. "The last two or three meetings we haven't been able to have any discussions about actionable things with kids and moving forward, or systematic things," she stated, "because we heard at the rally things that needed to be improved." She continued, "If we keep having these same conversations about Our Voices, and I know they need to be addressed," Winter said, "but I'm not sure, is that our purpose, is that our focus? ... We're not going to move forward if we continue like this."

Voegeli shared that he also feels as though DEC is "spinning [its] wheels," though he clarified that this feeling did not come from committee members having frequent conversations about Our Voices. "I agree, but I don't think it's because we're talking about Our Voices too much ... Is it fair to say that this group [DEC] has been kind of dysfunctional for awhile?" Voegeli said.

Equity is a substantial matter to tackle, DEC member Rose Carr shared, but she added that saying it will take a long time to implement changes to make people's experiences more equitable due to the large scope of inequity is overused. "And that means dealing with it now," Carr said. "And I don't think it's fair to say we'll do baby steps.'

As committee members discussed DEC's purpose, committee member Maurella Cunningham said in a message sent to the group through Zoom that Our Voices itself has a direct effect on students. "It should be on this, and every DEC, agenda," Cunningham stated. "The equity plan proposed by the Minnesota Equity Alliance should be on the agenda. Why are we avoiding race?'

The topic of Our Voices' future association with the district being in question was brought up by DEC member Tova Strange. "I don't think that they have a desire to be a part of WAPS any longer," Strange stated. "I think the bridge has been burned. In the idea of looking for funding, I don't think they're looking for future funding" from WAPS, but rather to receive donations that had been made by community members for the student group's use and are currently in a district student activities fund, Strange told the

"Laws won't allow us to release those dollars because they were donated to WAPS," Freiheit responded (see sidebar

A broader mission

The conversation regarding Our Voices widened into a discussion of how DEC could define equity and complete its work as a diversity and equity committee.

There is a significant population of students in the special education program at WAPS, Winter noted, adding that effort should go toward closing the achievement gap for students in that program. She also said other districts have committees specifically centered on racial equity.

"If we're looking at all of our kids and all of our subgroups and closing the achievement gaps, we have to do that,"

Developing an equity plan was raised as a point of discussion and slated for the committee's next meeting. Winter also mentioned a free three-year climate survey, including a survey for parents and students and walk-throughs at WAPS' schools, in which the district may be able to participate through a Minnesota Department of Education Regional Center of Excellence.

WAPS conducted a school climate survey in 2019, and in that survey, 48 percent of parents surveyed stated that their children were not comfortable with reporting harassment or racial abuse to school officials.

Hiring practices were also discussed by DEC members. For years, the district has talked about how to recruit and retain teachers of color. WAPS' Human Resources department is collaborating with employees from Winona State University

and Saint Mary's University on recruiting and retaining teachers of color, in addition to recruiting students of color for teacher preparation programs, McQuinn told the group.

Cunningham said she appreciated that hiring practices were being examined, and added that many resources had been shared with the district over the last few years on the topic. "We need to make this a welcoming environment, and I think word has gotten out that it's not really a welcoming environment for people of color," so WAPS could aspire to improve in that area, Cunningham said regarding recruiting and retaining teachers of color.

Additionally, a student advisory team at Winona Senior High School is in the works. The team will be representative of the school's demographics.

Recording meetings Committee members discussed whether

would not be recorded, though meeting minutes would be available for those unable to attend. This practice would be reminiscent of Native American talking circles not being recorded, McQuinn Several committee members objected

meetings should be recorded following

McQuinn stating that future meetings

to the meetings not being recorded and wondered why recording would not take "But ... if somebody can't be here, to

be able to look at the recording is sometimes more informative than just reading the minutes," Cunningham said. "The minutes are informative, but I don't know that this is the equivalent of a talking cir-

Particularly sensitive items that people may not wish to discuss aloud but want to share with the committee may be placed on an anonymous DEC form that was recently added to the group, Strange noted. "I highly agree that these be recorded and saved, just for documentation purposes ... This isn't necessarily a talking circle where we're sharing our deepest, darkest secrets," Strange stated.

Other members did not object initially to meetings not being recorded in the fu-

"I just got word they don't need to be recorded," Winter shared.

Hitz agreed with several other committee members who questioned why meetings would not be recorded. "This is just a really charged issue right now," Hitz said. "It might just be to the district's benefit ... The question should just be, 'Who is really opposed to it?"

Voegeli also wondered about the reasoning behind not recording future meetings. "If the questions is, 'Are we legally required?' ... that isn't the question," Voegeli noted. "I would hope it would be a group discussion, not talk to just one

Committee members ultimately seemed to agree to discuss the matter of recording at DEC's next meeting. They then ended the meeting by stating what they had taken away from it and what they could offer as the committee moves ahead with

"I'm taking away that there are a lot of building blocks that we have to work with, and that change is very possible," Strange shared. "I think what I need and the community needs going forward is accountability with what could have been done and wasn't and how we're going to right that wrong going forward."

Student group

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rides home from the group's meetings at Winona Senior High School. Funds donated by community members to bolster Our Voices are in a Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) account currently. Our Voices' future ties to WAPS are uncertain at the moment as well, Morgan said.

Morgan has been reimbursed for some of the items she bought for students, she shared. She has

provided them with, among other things, food, paint, notebooks and Lyft rides when her vehicle, which

she uses to transport student to and from meetings, broke down and remained unrepaired for over a year as she held off on fixing it so she could continue funding Our Voices, she explained. She still has receipts she could turn in for further reimbursement, she said. Morgan has received \$585 as reimbursement, and about \$1,900 was donated to WAPS for Our Voices, WAPS Superintendent Annette Freiheit explained.

A number of community members sent money to WAPS to support Our Voices this past winter. That money is now in a WAPS student activities account. Morgan said her understanding is that she is only able to access those funds by turning in receipts for reimbursement for items she has purchased for students, and she could not be written a check as reimbursement, for instance.

"We were never funded by the school. That was never funding that came from the school," Morgan said. "It was funding that came from the community that was intended to go to me for Our Voices or reimbursing me because of what I've been doing out of my pocket. Once the school realized

money was involved and other people in the community were made aware of Our Voices, that was when the school

decided to jump in and I guess have people thinking they supported us."

Accounting regulations dictate that once donated funds are at the district, they cannot be distributed except as a refund, and they have to be used on items for students, Freiheit shared. "If the person working with that group were to say, 'I'm not going to do it anymore, I'm taking the group out [of the district],' those funds would not fol-

low that group," Freiheit said. Morgan said she is unsure whether Our Voices will be associated with WAPS in the future because of past unfavorable experiences the group has had with the district. "Right now, the part of being connected to WAPS, I really don't know," Morgan noted. "I honestly, this is truly how I personally feel, and that is they only chose to recognize Our Voices once the community found out about Our Voices and found out that I was single-handedly supporting and funding my group out of my own pocket. I honestly believe if no one had ever heard about Our Voices, the school would've continued to ignore us." Morgan would say Our Voices was never

officially recognized by WAPS as a WAPS group, she shared. "Our Voices has always been a part of

WAPS and will continue," Freiheit said. 'We support the program.'

The group is meeting in a space downtown this summer, and Morgan has been offered the use of several other places at which Our Voices could meet, she noted. She said Our Voices may end up meeting in one of those places, and the members of the group will make the decision on where to meet moving forward. Freiheit said she would like to work with

Morgan on Morgan potentially being a paid advisor of Our Voices through WAPS. Typical hiring procedures to identify the best candidate would be undertaken, Freiheit said, adding that Morgan has been the person advising Our Voices since she start-

Morgan said she is uncertain whether she would accept a paid position at WAPS to advise Our Voices there. "I don't know. That all depends," Morgan explained. "Because so far, what has been presented to me, I've never been offered a position at

WAPS."

Morgan served on a trial basis as an unpaid liaison discussing grades and behavior with certain students at WAPS earlier this year, she said. "They let me know right off the top, 'If all goes well with the trial, we'll work for someone to hire a liaison," Morgan shared. "So they never had any intentions of having me there as a paid any-

As work to be further reimbursed may continue and Our Voices' members sort through whether to have connections with WAPS, Morgan said she is grateful for everyone who has shown the group support, and she is thankful that community members have offered to mentor students in Our Voices. She added that she aims to put on an Our Voices event soon, and the event would feature group members showcasing their talents from poetry to art.

'These kids, if they have the right mentors and are given the true support they need, they will all accomplish their goals," Morgan said. "Because they are beyond great at what they want to do. I mean, yes, you have to go to school and get the paperwork, but still, these young people are already there. They just need people to believe in them."

Reward offered for info on stealing, defacing Trump signs

The Republican Party of Winona County has reported a rash of Trump signs being stolen or defaced in the Winona area. Citizens should be aware that this

behavior is against the law and is subject

to criminal prosecution. The committee is offering a \$500 re-

ward for information leading to the arrest

of anyone stealing or defacing Trump campaign signs. Call 507-961-3851 if

you have information.