

BRAINERD DISPATCH

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Kelly Humphrey / Brainerd Dispatch

A parent keeps a watchful eye over a group of fluffy goslings Sunday, May 31, where the Paul Bunyan State Trail crosses over Excelsior Road in Baxter. Families of geese are often seen along the roadside in Baxter as they return to nesting spots. The young feed themselves. Their diet is almost entirely plant material. They can't fly out of the way of vehicles as it will be about two months after hatching before goslings try their first flight.

Minnesota launches civil rights investigation into Minneapolis police

By Sarah Mearhoff
Forum News Service

ST. PAUL — Minnesota's state Department of Human Rights has filed a civil charge against the Minneapolis Police Department, vowing to investigate 10 years of alleged civil rights violations by the state's largest police department. The investigation will be the first of its kind in Minnesota.

The charge was filed on Tuesday, June 2, just over a week after a white MPD officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man from St. Louis Park, for nearly nine minutes. Floyd died the night of Monday, May 25, and two autopsies have ruled his death a homicide.

Former police officer Derek Chauvin, who was kneeling on Floyd's neck, was fired from the MPD and charged with murder and manslaughter. The other

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Sarah Mearhoff / Forum News Service

A little girl walks by a mural of George Floyd on the wall of Cup Foods in Minneapolis on Monday, June 1, 2020.

Baxter teacher accused of racist comments

Petition seeks firing over social media posts by Forestview employee

By Theresa Bourke
Staff Writer

Thousands of people are calling for the termination of a Forestview Middle School teacher after she made Facebook comments many deemed racist and inappropriate.

Kara Hall, a visual arts teacher at Forestview in Baxter, appeared to make

the comments on a Facebook post by a former lakes area resident who detailed her experience taking part in protests following the death of African American man George Floyd, who died in police custody May 25. Hall's comments

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Baxter City Council votes to delay Inglewood railroad crossing project

By Gabriel Lagarde
Staff Writer

Improvements on Inglewood Drive will have to wait a bit longer, as the Baxter City Council unanimously voted for a one-year delay on the project hamstrung by limitations from COVID-19.

The Baxter City Council

convened via Zoom during its biweekly meeting Tuesday, June 2. During the meeting project supervisor Pete Lemke, of engineering-architectural firm Bolton & Menk, said planning was solid, the pieces were in place and

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Local lawmakers deliberate over \$2.2 billion COVID-19 funding

By Gabriel Lagarde
Staff Writer

As the Congressional battle over COVID-19 relief funds continues to simmer on Capitol Hill, similar arguments look to factor between Republicans in the Minnesota State Senate and their colleagues in the Minnesota House and executive branch.

One key issue of contention? Who will decide how the state allocates its slice of the \$150 billion Coronavirus Relief Fund, and how that money should be distributed.

According to the Governor's Office, Minnesota will receive \$2.187 billion as its share of a \$150 billion fund. Of that total, \$1.2 billion goes directly to the state and \$984 million will be distributed to local governments.

According to an analysis by the National Conference of State Legislatures, the money from the Coronavirus Relief Fund can cover expenses incurred due to the pandemic and the revenue declines that will result from the economic impacts. These expenses are not allowed to be included in each state's most

recently adopted budget, which — in the case of Minnesota — is the May 2019 two-year budget.

In addition to the money from the Coronavirus Relief Fund, money will flow directly to colleges, public school districts and transit agencies from different sources as appropriated in the federal law. Money will also be distributed to emergency management, food shelves, child welfare services, National Guard deployments and both state and local public health agencies.

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BRAINERD

City to halve liquor license fees for rest of the year

By Theresa Bourke
Staff Writer

Brainerd bars and restaurants that reopen their doors will pay 50% of their liquor license fees for the next nine months.

In addition, establishments that remain closed due to restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic will not be charged liquor

license fees, city council members decided during their meeting Monday, June 1.

In April the council agreed to waive liquor license fees from March to May, as bars and restaurants were not able to be open for much of that time. As liquor licenses run from July 1-June 30, instead of refunding busi-

nesses for the previous cycle's fees already paid, the city applied three months of credit to the July 2020 renewal fee. During Monday's meeting, council members agreed to reduce fees for the remaining nine months of the cycle by 50%. Finance Director Connie Hillman said this move follows precedent set by the Crow

Wing County Board, which previously waived four months' worth of county liquor license fees and last week agreed to reduce the remaining months by 50%. County Attorney Don Ryan, Hillman said, encouraged other cities in the county to follow suit.

Council member Dave Pritschet also suggested continuing to

waive liquor license fees for establishments that remain closed, as Gov. Tim Walz's most recent executive order pertaining to bars and restaurants allowed them to open only for outdoor service of no more than 50 people at a time.

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Aside from state government, the two local entities eligible for direct aid from the federal government — which is not subject to state level determination like the Coronavirus Relief Fund — were Hennepin and Ramsey counties, which received \$212 million and \$96 million respectively from the federal government, as they contain the core of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. County officials for both Ramsey and Hennepin have argued they should receive some of the Coronavirus Relief Fund monies as well to combat the health-related and economic fallout from COVID-19.

As of now, much of that authority rests with Gov. Tim Walz in determining where those funds are allocated, while Republicans have argued the state Legislature should have a role in the decision-making process.

As for Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka, R-Nisswa, he said Ramsey and Hennepin counties should make do with what they already have, or the alternative would be to shortchange the other 85 counties, many of which are in dire financial straits evidenced in flagging tax revenue and laid-off workers.

Gazelka said the \$2.2 billion should be distributed on a per capita basis that gives to each county as much as the fund can afford based on population.

“All that money should be dispersed based on a per capita basis. Ramsey and Hennepin counties already got their funding and the rest of the counties should get based on a per capita basis,” Gazelka said. “That is the struggle, but the Senate position is that all counties should be treated fairly.”

While not expressing as definitive a stance on how these allocations should be distributed, other Republicans in central Minnesota — which include state Sen. Carrie Ruud, R-Breezy Point, as well as state Reps. Josh Heintzeman, R-Nisswa, and Dale Lueck, R-Aitkin — agreed the state Legislature should enjoy an active role in the process.

Lueck warned that misplacement of these funds would be likely if the state opts to concentrate so much power and authority in Walz’s hands.

“That’s an example of a big picture item that needs to be dealt with,” Lueck said. “To simply drop that kind of money on the executive branch, with some general federal guidelines — that’s not appropriate. It just sets up everything for a bad situation. The Legislature needs to be directly involved in where those funds go and what they’re used for.”

In an email, Heintzeman seemed to point to ongoing friction between Republican lawmakers and the governor. Heintzeman has repeatedly declined to comment other than by email, citing a discomfort with face-to-face or phone interviews and expressed sensitivity with how prior statements were presented in the Dispatch.

Likewise, Ruud advocated for stronger, more cooperative partnerships between the Walz administration and Republicans in the state Legislature — especially for the issue of federal COVID-19 funding, but also a litany of issues on the table.

“The Legislature should have a say in how it’s spent, and I think that that’s the important piece that we forget to talk about — the governor should not have full rein to spend \$2 billion on anything he wants to spend it or wherever he wants to spend it,” Ruud said. “What is the right formula? I don’t know that, because we haven’t had those conversations. All we’re really looking for is input and cooperation and working with the Legislature on that issue — all issues really.”

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TEACHER

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called out black people for destroying businesses and included:

“Are you seeing what the blacks people are doing during this ‘protest?’” “They are destroying properties and businesses.” “Maybe you should be out there telling them to stop burning businesses if they are such good people? I know all I see are scary awful blacks people robbing businesses that don’t deserve this. They are making it worse for themselves.”

Another comment from Hall criticizing Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey and calling for law and order to be restored included: “The creepy, destructive, violent blacks we are all across America watching raid and ruin businesses across America need to be put in jail! This is no longer a protest. I watch black guys carry out cases of whiskey while they smile and laugh — that’s not ok and that’s not protesting — that’s opportunistic, theft and (sic) illegal.”

Hall’s Facebook profile is no longer visible, and she did not respond to an email or voicemail requesting comment.

Statement from the district

Superintendent Laine Larson issued the following statement Tuesday, June 2, via email, which was also sent to many others who contacted her with concerns:

“The administration of Brainerd Public Schools has been made aware of an employee’s social media activity discussing recent events in Minneapolis following the death of George Floyd.

“The District does not support or endorse in any way the views expressed in the social media posts that have been brought to the District’s attention.

“While the District supports and respects free speech, the social media posts in question contain inaccurate, disrespectful, and divisive statements about the race of individuals who have engaged in looting and other destructive conduct in the Twin Cities.

“The overall tenor and content of the posts is contrary to the basic educational mission of the District and is inconsistent with the District’s efforts to create a welcoming and supportive environment for students of all backgrounds.

“The District is currently working with legal counsel from the Twin Cities to conduct an independent and on-site investigation regarding the concerns raised.

“We cannot comment further on this situation for data privacy reasons.”

Larson declined to comment beyond her statement. Forestview Principal Jon Anderson did not respond to a voicemail or email requesting comment.

Taking action

Hall’s comments garnered much attention after a Facebook post by a district parent, who posted screenshots of the comments and asked other

parents how they felt. She included contact information for district leaders.

The post made late Monday morning has since gotten more than 200 comments and more than 300 shares. A majority of the comments on the post came from parents and district residents who said they were furious with Hall’s comments, which they deemed unacceptable and blatantly racist. Many commenters said they, too, emailed and called the school district to express their concern.

After seeing Hall’s comments, two Brainerd High School graduates wrote an open letter to school district leaders explaining why the comments were racist and how Hall’s employment in ISD 181 threatens an equitable learning environment for all students. In the letter, Hannah Kangas and Anna Gardner, Brainerd High School graduates of 2013 and 2015, respectively, called for Hall’s immediate termination. They refer to the Minnesota Human Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination based on race, sex, religion, creed, national origin, disability, sexual orientation and other protected classes of people.

“Ms. Hall’s derogatory comments demonstrate a reasonable threat to violating these human rights of not only students of a ‘protected class,’ but our community at large,” the letter states. “As someone who has gone through the ISD 181 system and received an excellent education, it is unjust to me that this education should be inequitable to all of the community members.”

The letter included a statement from a black community member who attended schools in the district and now has children living within the Brainerd School District. Kangas said this community member, who is a friend of hers, wished to remain anonymous because this isn’t just her story but the story of so many kids of color who have been through the same, or worse, situations. The community member said in the letter she was heartbroken that anyone would see her or anyone in her family as a “scary, awful black.”

“The number of the black community in Brainerd is growing and I’m hoping that it helps push people out of their comfort zone to at least get to know us to be able to tell we are far from ‘scary animals,’” the statement said. “No teacher will be teaching my children of color, if she reduces their lives to scary awful black kids.”

While recognizing educators as crucial factors in how students learn to think and engage critically in the world, the letter stated the district should not allow for an educator who imposes emotional duress on members of the community.

“We ask that Ms. Hall is held accountable for her failure to represent ISD 181’s values and that she is a reasonable threat to violating the Minnesota Human Rights Act within the public school system,” the letter stated. “We would implore that you

consider termination given the potential for future impact on Black, Indigenous, and students of color within ISD 181. Personal bias can bleed into professional bias, thus creating a toxic and discriminatory education experience, which is protected against by the MHRA.”

The letter writers said they believe Hall’s inflammatory comments are not isolated, meaning there needs to be structural change to prevent a similar occurrence from happening again.

Kangas and Gardner also started a petition at <https://bit.ly/2Y8tmR5> calling for Hall’s termination. As of Tuesday evening, the petition had more than 3,000 signatures.

Both the letter — signed by 14 Brainerd High School alumni — and the petition call for district administrators to take the following actions:

► Accountability for Hall’s remarks as a failure to represent the values of ISD 181, as well as being a potential threat to the rights provided to students in the Minnesota Human Rights Act, through her termination.

► Clearly stated within the ISD 181 handbook, hiring contracts and other relevant documents that discriminatory remarks are not tolerated under the MHRA and will result in a fitting punishment, such as termination or suspension without pay.

► Creation of an oversight board that can field internal and external reports of bias and discrimination. The members of this board would be democratically elected in a similar manner as the Board of Education.

► Add a code of conduct to the ISD 181 employee handbook in alignment with the Minnesota Human Rights Act and make this handbook publicly accessible.

The letter writers added they find the district’s current policy on handling complaints of this nature is inadequate in stating students’ rights and asserted the district should have a more democratic process for the complaints.

Hearing from the community

One district parent who wished to not be named but agreed to share her story said Hall is the exact reason she pulled her son out of Forestview Middle School. The parent, whose son is half African American, said Hall once allegedly made disparaging remarks regarding him and other black students.

The Dispatch submitted a public data request to the school district for information on any formal complaints made against Hall during her time in the district.

Shannon Porter, a Native American mom with children in the district, said her initial reaction to the comments was shock. She said racist remarks are never OK but are likely going to happen.

“But there’s certain career fields that you don’t really have the luxury of

thinking like that,” Porter said during a phone interview Tuesday. “You have to be open to different races that you’re going to encounter.”

Porter said she is concerned about her daughter — who will be in fourth grade next year — being in Hall’s class when she eventually gets to Forestview.

“How will that teacher perceive her?” Porter said. “... Will she get a fair shake in that class? Will she be treated fairly in that class?”

As a parent, Porter requests a fair investigation from the district. She said she doesn’t know the context of Hall’s statements and if they could have been made sarcastically, or if her account got hacked altogether. But if the investigation finds the statements were made in a hurtful and hateful context, Porter said she is not comfortable with Hall teaching her children and said Hall should not be employed with the district any longer.

But Porter noted she was pleased with district efforts last year, when Ojibwe studies professor Anton Treuer came to speak with staff, and for implicit bias training staff underwent with Sourcewell.

Another parent, Britanny Miller, said she is now concerned about sending her 10-year-old son to Forestview next year for fifth grade, as he is at such an impressionable age and questions everything.

“I can’t imagine what would happen if he heard a teacher talking like that,” Miller said Tuesday, noting she emailed district administrators with her concerns.

She added: “It’s putting these kids at a disadvantage to have someone with a closed mind teaching them.”

Miller said she isn’t sure what the correct recourse would be in this situation or if firing Hall is the way to go but said at the very least some sort of classes or training should be required.

“She can’t just go on with her life thinking that this was OK,” Miller said. “There are kids of color that are coming through those doors, and to have them know what she thinks, that can be really detrimental.”

Others who commented on the parent’s Facebook post said Hall’s statements seem to have been made out of fear and not racism, and they believed she should further her education on the topic and not be fired and lose her livelihood over comments that may have been misconstrued.

According to the Rev. Leslie Moughty, pastor at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Brainerd, more cultural education is key. Much of the time, cultural competency training, Moughty said, doesn’t necessarily go deep enough.

“We don’t really dig into the history of whiteness in this country and how that informs the way that we show up in the world and the long history of racism and the systemic nature of racism in this country and in the way the curriculum is defined, in the way that we discipline people. And so

to just teach cultural competency is not enough,” Moughty said Tuesday.

School district policy mandates teachers to provide “an inclusive curriculum for a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse student population that is consistent with state education diversity rule and the district’s education diversity plan.”

The school district’s handbook also states it is district policy to maintain a learning and working environment that is free from harassment and violence on the basis of factors including race, sex and religion. The police defines harassment as physical or verbal conduct including, but not limited to, electronic communications relating to an individual or group’s race, sex, religion, etc., that has “the purpose or effect of substantially or unreasonably interfering with an individual’s work or academic performance; or otherwise adversely affects an individual’s employment or academic opportunities.”

The policy states the district will act to investigate all complaints of harassment and “discipline or take appropriate action against any students, teacher, administrator, or other school district personnel who is found to have violated this policy.”

The bigger picture

Kangas said this situation isn’t about Hall personally.

“This is about getting an educator with these racist beliefs out of a position where she publicly demonstrated she is not capable of being,” Kangas said in an email Tuesday. “Because as I was blissfully doodling away in middle school art, a Black friend who I went through the public school system with was getting called the worst derogatory names by peers in the hallway. This discrimination started from the time she was in daycare, when a woman pulled her own children out because there were black kids there. My friend’s heart was broken then, and it’s broken today as she raises her own children. This is unacceptable.”

Kangas spoke of her friend, whose statements were included in the letter, and who shared further school experiences, including being called the N-word for the first time in second grade, and subsequently other names like “mutt” and “mud face” during her school years. She also detailed an event that sent her to the emergency room for self-harm when another student told her in front of half the class he would give her razors for her birthday so she could kill herself.

“I felt lost and alone in school,” the friend said in an email. “I felt like people just simply didn’t know how to communicate with me because of the lack of effort in socializing with people out of our comfort zone to get a better understanding of our neighboring races.”

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