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Volume 53, No. 12

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The Great Little Falls Dog Chase

Community comes together for week-long effort to reunite dog with her family

By ZACH HACKER
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Renee Kono sat underneath a shade tree on Sixth Street Southeast early Saturday afternoon, May 15. She had a Tupperware container full of food, which was slowly but surely enticing a large white dog to inch closer and closer.

Finally, she took the bait. When she slowly lowered her snout into the container for a bite to eat, Kono was able to hook a leash to her collar. With that, the Great Little Falls Dog Chase had come to an end.

"I think she's just so tired and so pooped out," Kono said, referring to the white German Shepherd named Mecha (pronounced Mee-kah).

Later that afternoon, May 15, Mecha was returned to her owner, Scott Feld, of Randall. It was a

happy conclusion to a situation that captivated many in the Little Falls community for more than a week.

The first post of a loose dog sighting that included a photo of Mecha was made on the "Rant n Rave Little Falls MN" Facebook page, Friday, March 7. Over the next eight days, there were about 35 posts on the community forum about what Little Falls Animal Control Officer Fred Tabatt jokingly referred to as the "ghost dog." On those posts — which featured everything from memes about the dog to reports of a sighting — there were more than 1,250 comments. It even inspired its own hashtag — "#lfdogchase."

"When you go through so many crazy things like we have, I think everyone just really wanted one positive outcome," said James Kowalczyk, who started the Rant n Rave page about three years ago. "I would have never thought the page would be where it is today; it has about 5,100 followers. But it's been a good tool for people to get the word out to the community when something like this is going on."

Feld only had Mecha for a few weeks, having recently adopted her from a home in New York



Photo courtesy of Dayre Kono

Mecha, a white German Shepherd, sits in the backseat of Renee Kono's, left, van Saturday afternoon as her owner, Scott Feld, meets up with them to get her back home after a week on the run.

Mills. He is still unsure about how she ended up in Little Falls.

When Feld left his home in Randall on Friday morning, she was inside the house. That afternoon, when he got home with his 14-year-old son, Jason, Mecha was nowhere to be found. It wasn't until Monday, when a coworker showed him a post from the Rant n Rave page, that he found out she was now 10 miles south.

"Somebody had to have took her out of the house," Feld said.

"I heard there was also some other dogs in this area and some of the counties around here — down by Holdingford and in that area — that were going missing. They all looked like Mecha. Anything that looks like a wolf, I heard."

He also heard someone had seen Mecha tied up in a yard in Fort Ripley on Friday.

"She didn't get from there all the way to Little Falls by herself," he said.

Tabatt said the dog was first

reported to him on Saturday, May 8. Someone had spotted her near St. Otto's Care Center, which is located on Fourth Street Southeast, close to CHI St. Gabriel's Hospital.

From there, she eventually made her way to the west side of the Mississippi River. She was spotted by the Minnesota Fishing Museum, Our Lady of Lourdes Church, the Pine Grove Zoo and even a few locations outside the

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Deal reached on state budget; special session upcoming

By ZACH HACKER
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A state budget deal has been reached, but there is still much work to be completed.

In the waning hours of the 2021 Minnesota Legislative Session Monday, House and Senate leadership and Gov. Tim Walz announced they had finalized terms on global budget targets. The agreement includes a roughly \$51.2 billion 2022-2023 biennial budget. That will set the stage for a special session next month.

The agreement came at the end of more than a week of talks between Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka, R-Nisswa, House Majority Leader Melissa Hortman, D-Brooklyn Park, and Walz. It includes no tax increases and exempts Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) Loans for small businesses and unemployment insurance (UI) for individuals impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic from state taxes. It also includes funding for summer school to help students catch up on lost classroom time because of school shutdowns.

The package, however, is a broad one. Policy decisions still have to be made on topics ranging from police reform to Walz's pro-

posed "Clean Car" rules, which would expedite the state's push for more electric vehicles.

"In January, we set out our Minnesota Priorities: Balance the budget without raising taxes, recover from COVID and support Minnesota families," Gazelka tweeted, Monday. "We have a budget that doesn't raise taxes with full PPP and UI conformity for tax relief for employers and employees."

One of the key sticking points that held up the agreement was how the state would spend the \$2.8 billion it received this spring in federal American Rescue Plan funds. Under the agreement, the Legislature will decide how \$2.3 billion of that sum is spent while Walz will have control of \$500 million.

How that \$2.3 billion will be allocated is yet to be decided. It will be one of several hurdles the Legislature will have to overcome when it reconvenes for a special session in June.

"We have agreed to put most of the federal funds under control of the Legislature to help recover from COVID," Gazelka tweeted. "And finally, we have broadband, transportation, education and health care funding to support

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Negotiations ended on plan to make St. Gabriel's part of Essentia Health

By ZACH HACKER
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A plan that would have made CHI St. Gabriel's Hospital and several other medical facilities in Minnesota and North Dakota part of Essentia Health will not come to fruition.

CommonSpirit Health — which owns the CHI brand — and Essentia Health announced Tuesday, that negotiations had ended on a plan for all of CommonSpirit's CHI facilities in Minnesota and North Dakota to join Essentia. The two companies entered into a letter of intent in January to

explore the proposition in greater detail.

"While we share a similar mission, vision, values and strong commitment to sustainable rural health care, CommonSpirit and Essentia were unable to come to an agreement that would serve the best interests of both organizations, the people we employ and the patients we serve," read a joint statement from the two companies.

On Jan. 8, CommonSpirit and Essentia announced the two were in negotiations for CHI St. Alexius Medical Center in Bismarck, North Dakota, and 13 critical access hospitals — including St.

Gabriel's — along with associated clinics and living communities to become a part of the Essentia network. The letter of intent was the first step in the process of reaching a formal agreement to transfer ownership of those properties.

CHI St. Gabriel's Health and the Alverna Apartments, both in Little Falls, were among the facilities that would be transferred. Facilities in Baudette, Breckenridge and Park Rapids were also included.

The hope, at the time the letter of intent was signed, was that CHI facilities would join Essentia by summer 2021, if everything went

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LF Council approves TIF district for apartments

By ZACH HACKER
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Little Falls will soon be adding a 49-unit apartment complex.

Eight people spoke in favor of the project during a public hearing Monday, on a proposed tax increment financing (TIF) district for the apartment building. A resolution to approve the development agreement — which included the TIF district — passed, 8-0. The

building will consist of one- and two-bedroom units and will be located on an extension of 14th Street Southeast, just south of the River Rock Townhomes.

Further discussion and a new investor yielded changes to what the Community Asset Development Group (CADG) was initially proposing for the district. Those changes made the issue more agreeable for the council members who had opposed the plan when it was first brought forward in Feb-

ruary and March.

Initially, CADG was asking for a 25-year, estimated \$1.1 million TIF district. Its initial investor was also requesting an up-front TIF, which would have required the city to loan the amount of eligible expenses to the investor at the outset of the project and be repaid through TIF funds over the length of the agreement. The new investor agreed to a 15-year, estimated \$554,000 pay-as-you-go TIF. That

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Aaron Colombe 320-630-8513

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Travis Johnson 320-630-3387

15600 268th Street, Fort Ripley
\$158,900 MLS 5741270
Nicely wooded 40 acre building site just east of State Highway 371 between Little Falls & Brainerd. Newer drilled well on the site, septic not compliant, ACUB easement in place with building site reserved. Close to recreation and main highway.

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Photo courtesy of Scott Feld

Mecha, left, sits next to 7-year-old Austin, on her way back to Randall Saturday, May 15, after eight days of running loose in and around Little Falls.

The Great Little Falls Dog Chase

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city limits just west of town. By early the following week, each post of a sighting on the Rant n Rave page often brought 15 - 20 people to the area in an attempt to catch the dog.

"She's very smart," Tabatt said. "We'd try to get her into a fenced-in area and she'd always figure out what we were up to. She'd walk right up to the gate, realize what was going on and turn around. The dog wasn't vicious or anything, she was just smarter than all of us."

Kowalczyk had a similar experience. He said at one point he and a small group of people got within 10 - 15 feet of catching her near the Hilton Road, just south of the Little Falls Golf Course. She wouldn't allow them to get any closer, so they attempted to drive her back into town, where she would likely be safer than out in the country.

He was part of many who organized on Facebook and went out to search for her. Others in the area where she was known to hang out left out food and water so she wouldn't go without.

Even Feld, who said he came to Little Falls every morning before work and every afternoon after work, was unable to corral her.

"One lady had called and said that she was right next to her yard," Feld said. "I went over there and called her and everything. She just calmly got up and walked away. Then (Saturday) morning, someone said they'd seen her over by the Sheriff's Office. By the time we got there, she had a couple people chasing her and she ran away. Then, when we found her, she just got up and calmly walked away again."

Tabatt said, throughout his interactions with Mecha, he enlisted the help of Kono and her husband, Dayre. Renee managed the shelter at the Morrison County Animal Humane Society for 10 years and had developed a strong working relationship with Tabatt.

He said she was "awesome" in the work she did in trying to get the dog back to her owner. Renee estimated she and her husband spent five to seven hours each day trying to catch her.

"(Mecha) just got shook up when she's got 15 people out trying to catch her," Tabatt said. "Renee did a great job. (Mecha) just seemed to be more relaxed around her. I had my catch pole with me, and I think that might have scared her a little bit. But I'm very thankful for the public's help."

Not long after Renee finally was able to get a leash on Mecha, the dog was in the backseat of Feld's pickup truck, sitting next to his 7-year-old son, Austin. As soon as she got home, she got a bath to wash away the dirt accumulated on her week-long adventure that covered a great deal of ground in Little Falls and the surrounding area.

Later that evening, Feld posted photos to the Rant n Rave page of Mecha, laying on the living room floor under a blanket with her head on a pillow, sleeping next to Austin. It was a much-deserved rest after an exhausting week.

"I feel great having her back," Feld said. "I'm happy she's home, the kids are happy she's home — we're all just really happy that she's safe and back home. I'm thankful to everybody that helped get her back for us."

Though Renee was the one who was able to finally catch the dog, she said it was much more than a one-person job. She was proud of how the community came together behind a common cause in trying to help a lost dog and her owner.

"This was about the whole community," she said. "The last time I saw the whole community get behind something like this, I think, was when Jeanine Greyblood was missing. When people saw this missing dog, I think they saw it as something the community could do together to try and help. I think the community needed this. I really do."

Legislative session ends

(Continued from Page 1A)

Minnesota families across the state at school, work and recreation.

"I remain committed to not passing anything that is anti-police or makes the job of law enforcement more difficult," he continued. "Since the emergency is over, the House and Walz should agree to the veto-proof, bipartisan eviction moratorium off-ramp, lifting COVID fines on businesses."

This will be the 13th time a special session has been called in Minnesota since 2001, so it's hardly an uncommon practice. It is, however, an expensive one.

On top of their annual salaries of \$46,500 per year, lawmakers can claim per diem expenses — \$86 per day for Senators and \$66 for Representatives. It is up to each member whether or not they choose to accept the extra payment.

In all, though it's impossible to put an exact dollar amount on how much per day a special session costs taxpayers, it is estimated to be between \$10,000 - \$20,000.

As the special session looms, Little Falls Mayor Greg Zylka, acting in his role as president of the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities (CGMC), released a statement Monday, urging lawmakers to "keep greater Minnesota in mind."

"The real work begins today," Zylka said. "Now that the governor and legislative leaders have reached an agreement on the size of the next two-year state budget, the Legislature can finally tackle the hard work of figuring out the details. As lawmakers buckle down and focus on specific budget areas, we urge them to keep the needs of Greater Minnesota in mind."

In the statement, Zylka said cities were still "reeling" from the hardships created and amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. He called on elected officials in St. Paul to address critical needs such as child care, housing, clean water infrastructure and transportation.

He added that the infusion of federal dollars created an opportunity for the Legislature to craft a budget that can help all of Minnesota both in its recovery from COVID-19 and as it heads into the future.

"We can accept a missed deadline, but we won't accept a missed opportunity," Zylka said.

Randall Fourth of July celebration all set for July 3

By ZACH HACKER
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Plans for Randall's 2021 Fourth of July Celebration are beginning to take shape.

Most notably, this year's festival will be a one-day event, rather than being stretched out over two. Also, the celebration won't take place on Independence Day itself. Instead, revelers can head to Randall on July 3.

Those plans were finalized Wednesday, during the Randall City Council's monthly meeting at City Hall. Two Fourth of July Committee members joined the Council to work through some of the details.

Having the event on July 3 will ensure activities in Randall don't conflict with celebrations in other area communities, such as Bowls and Hillman.

There are, however, still many details to iron out. The biggest of those is where exactly the street dance will take place.

Mayor Dan Noss said the Randall Lions Club is still trying to work out whether or not, financially, it will be able to host the street dance in the pavilion, as has been the case in the past. The cost of insurance to host a beer wagon has become more expensive since the event was last held in 2019.

One of the committee members suggested that, if nothing else, the dance could be held at the VFW.

Noss said he was going to work with the Lions Club and VFW to get that detail

"It's just so expensive that it doesn't make it feasible," Noss said.

The Fourth of July Celebration Committee is also still working with vendors to gauge their interest now that the event is just being held on one day, rather than two. They are still waiting to hear back from some concessions companies who had expressed interest in coming prior to knowing it was on a single day.

Those vendors will get the first opportunity to set up shop in Randall, if they're still interested, before the committee reaches out to anyone else.

Some details that have been confirmed are that there will be a parade in downtown Randall, tentatively scheduled for 11 a.m. July 3, followed by a 1:30 p.m. Randall Cubs home game against the Sobieski Skis.

Organizers are still floating ideas for an afternoon or early evening event to take place after the ballgame, such as an old-time band or games and contests. That will lead into the street dance, which will be hosted either in the pavilion or at the VFW.

Noss said he was going to work with the Lions Club and VFW to get that detail

worked out soon. If the Lions Club cannot feasibly get a beer wagon, one of the committee members said it would be best to have the street dance at the VFW.

Board Member Carrie Turner asked if there was going to be a fireworks show this year. Though that had previously been a part of the event, there was not a display in 2019.

Noss and the committee agreed the cost of having a quality fireworks show had become prohibitive.

One of the committee members at Wednesday's meeting said the group who used to put on the display in Randall had been bought out by a larger company. Another of which the committee is aware wants a "bare minimum" of \$10,000 for their services.

"Cost-wise, it's passed us by," Noss said.

The Council later voted unanimously to contribute \$4,500 to the event. Noss said that is the amount that was budgeted, as it has traditionally been the city's contribution.

"I just want to thank your committee for all you've done in the past and this year to keep things going," Noss said.

Randall City Council Briefs

In other business Wednesday, the Randall City Council:

- Heard an estimate on street and utility reconstruction and proposed assessment policies for upcoming capital improvement projects from Dave Reese of Widseth Smith Nolting. No action was taken;
- Accepted a \$300 donation from the Randall Cushing Lions Club for the Medallion Hunt;
- Heard initial insights on possible further development in the Brummer Addition from Reese;
- Approved a resolution to sell two city-owned parcels to Robert and Lidia Atkinson;
- Advised City Manager Matt Pantzke to continue research on the replacement of city street signs. It is estimated the project to replace 80 signs will cost about \$2,600;
- Approved the purchase of a Ricoh copy machine from Metro Sales Inc., of Minneapolis for City Hall at a cost of \$3,500;
- Agreed to hire Randall resident Phil Neisen to paint the Randall Municipal Liquor Store for \$4,158 plus additional costs to protect lettering on the building;
- Approved a \$2 per hour wage increase for the two full-time employees at the Randall Municipal Liquor Store;
- Discussed the Minnesota Department of Transportation's plans to do a reconstruction project on the city's U.S. Highway 10 crossings in 2024. There will be public forums held prior to the project; and
- Discussed the need to research and possibly revise the city's ordinance regarding mobile food units.

The next meeting of the Randall City Council is at 6 p.m. Wednesday, June 16, at Randall City Hall.

Ruby's Pantry in Little Falls, Monday

Ruby's Pantry will hold its monthly food distribution Monday, May 24.

It will be held at 609 13th Ave. NE, Little Falls, from 3:30 p.m. - 6 p.m. Guests

pay \$20 per share.

Guests can preregister and pay online at www.rubyspantry.org or pay on the day of distribution on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Those picking up food are asked to have clean trunks and to park along 13th Ave. NE.

This week's government meetings

The Royalton School Board meets at 6 p.m. Monday, May 24, in the Cafetorium (Door #3, Activity Entrance). It will also be broadcast.

The Pierz City Council meets at 7 p.m. Monday, May 24, at the Pierz Senior Center.

The Morrison County Board of Commissioners meets at 8:30 a.m. Tuesday,

May 25, in the Board Room at the Morrison County Government Center.

The Pierz School Board meets at 6 p.m. Wednesday, May 26, in the high school media center.

An open house regarding plans for the Pierz Park Complex is set for 6 p.m. Wednesday, May 26, at Horizon Health in Pierz.

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FRIDAY, AUGUST 27 | SATURDAY, AUGUST 28

- Craft & Vendor 12-9 p.m.
- Turkey & Sweetcorn 3 p.m. - gone
- Helping Veterans and Families Since 2010
- Craft & Vendor 9 am. - 10 p.m.
- Lighted Bike Parade
- Breakfast 7 - 10 a.m.
- Free will donation | Eggs - Sausage - Pancakes
- Campfires

TOUGH VEHICLE COMPETITION
7p.m. • \$10 Admission • 3 - Classes
\$1000 - 1st place
\$500 - 2nd place
\$250 - 3rd place
Powder Puff
DJ Music
9p.m. - Midnight
Contact Bob Kunz for information (320) 533-0226

DISPLAYS AND EXHIBITS
American Hero Display
1942 Harley Normandy Exhibit
Army Display and Veterans Dog Trainer

DEMOLITION DERBY
• 4p.m. • \$10 Admission
\$2500 - 1st place
\$1000 - 2nd place
\$500 - 3rd place
Prizes may vary per class.
DJ Music
9p.m. - 1a.m.

Contact Darrin Brown Motor Sports for information 612-404-5510

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• Thunder Lodge - Full Bar
• Flavor Shack - Osakis FLAVOR ½ SHACK
• Sweet Sisters - Concessions, Ice Cream
• Grumpies - Mini Donuts
• Canoe Paddle Kettle Corn
• Breakfast 8 a.m. - 12 noon
Free will donation | Eggs - Sausage - Pancakes
• Church Service Starts at 11 a.m.

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SUNDAY, AUGUST 29

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