



## HUSKIES SPLIT SOFTBALL OPENER

The Jackson County Central softball team split a season-opening doubleheader against Martin County West on Saturday.  
Story, B1



# JACKSON COUNTY PILOT

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SUBMITTED PHOTO

A silt berm — what some lakeshore property owners are calling an “island of sludge” — forms at the outlet of Judicial Ditch 8 in the northwest bay of Loon Lake. As questions swirl about who is responsible for the buildup, the problem only gets worse.

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC County still tabbed as a ‘hotspot’

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN  
Publisher

Jackson County remains a COVID-19 hotspot, and likely will for the next few weeks.

That’s the word from Mayo Clinic, which labeled the county as a “hotspot” for COVID-19 late last month based on its rolling average of daily cases over the week prior — a measure the Rochester-based health care system states is the “best sign of hotspots.”

On March 28, Jackson County’s average daily case count per 100,000 people was 61, the highest in the state. One week later, that figure was 93, still the highest in the state. This past Sunday, the county’s average daily case count per 100,000 people was 91, second only to Lake of the Woods County’s 93.

And Mayo Clinic doesn’t predict it’s going to get much better in Jackson County over the next two weeks either. In fact, Mayo forecasts average daily case counts per 100,000 ranging between 91 and 100 through April 25, with the average daily case

See **HOTSPOT** on **A3**

# QUESTIONS SWIRL AS LOON LAKE FILLS

There’s an issue, but no one’s sure who’s to blame, who should fix it

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN  
Publisher

Jackson County’s Loon Lake is filling up with silt, and it’s unclear who is responsible — either for why it’s happening or for fixing it.

The culprit appears to be Judicial Ditch 8, a sprawling network of open ditch and underground tile that drains more than 8,000 acres of land in south-central Jackson County. The ditch system outlets into Loon Lake, flowing in from the northwest. It’s precisely there where silt flows have built up over the last few years to the point there is more land in that portion of the lake than water.

In high-water years, lake levels in the northwest bay may be measured in inches; in low-water years, the bay is basically devoid of water, save for thin channels of water flowing around each side of the massive sediment berm.

See **LOON LAKE** on **A3**



2017



2019

**‘THIS IS THE COUNTY’S TOP LAKE IN TERMS OF RECREATION AND CAMPING AND SWIMMING, AND IT’S JUST FILLING UP WITH SILT.’**

Brad Sievert

## Was ditch cleaning to blame?

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN  
Publisher

Landowners — both of shoreline property on Loon Lake and of farmland within the Judicial Ditch 8 system — have alleged the county’s 2017 and 2018 “cleaning” of the ditch is to blame for the rapid and significant accumulation of silt in Loon Lake.

County officials disagree.

“I will not agree the cleanout caused the silt,” Jackson County Engineer Tim Stahl said.

The county is charged with maintenance of the local ditch system. Occasionally, maintenance includes what is known as “cleaning,” either as a matter of routine or at the request of landowners within the ditch system.

Stahl said a ditch cleaning involves the removal of accumulated sediment from the bottom of the ditch.

“We don’t dig the ditch deeper,” he said. “We dig it back to its original depth. And we do not widen the ditch. We don’t ever scrape

See **CLEANING** on **A3**



SUBMITTED PHOTO

“Sluffing” of the steep sides of Judicial Ditch 8 is likely the cause of at least some of the silt buildup in Loon Lake, though it’s unclear if a 2017-2018 “cleaning” of the ditch exacerbated the problem.

### Inside...



The problem in Loon Lake may even be too big for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to handle on its own.

### Online...



See aerial video footage of the Judicial Ditch 8 system and its outlet into Loon Lake online at [youtube.com/playlist?list=PLYioJWrxOYTWQX7MGJkspRkME3-t001-9](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLYioJWrxOYTWQX7MGJkspRkME3-t001-9).

## Local vaccination rate inches higher

Nearly 45 percent of eligible Jackson County residents have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine.

As of this past Sunday, 3,466 locals — 43.2 percent of the county’s population of those 16 years of age and older — had received at least one vaccination dose, up 159 from the week prior. Of those 3,466, 2,381 — 29.7 percent of the county’s population of those 16 years of age and older — have received the number of shots required for maximum efficacy, what the Minnesota Department of Health terms a “completed vaccine series.”

In terms of the county’s population as a whole, nearly 35 percent have received at least one dose, while just short of 24 percent have received a completed vaccine series. More than 71 percent of locals 65 years of age or older have received at least one dose; nearly 66 percent have received a completed vaccine series.

## Jackson, Windom city officials in the running for administrator job

Interviews set for Tuesday, April 27

by JOSHUA SCHUETZ  
Staff Writer

Jackson’s economic development coordinator and Windom’s city administrator are among the finalists for the position of Jackson County administrator.



Tom Nelson

Tom Nelson, a Jackson-

based community and business development specialist with Chatfield-based Community and Economic Development Associates, and Steve Nasby, who has been with the city of Windom for the last 15 years, will be interviewed by the Jackson County Board of Commissioners, along with three other candidates, for the position of county administrator at a special meeting on April 27. Other candidates include Hector City Administrator Andrea Aukrust, former Nicollet County Administrator Ryan Krosch and

former Mille Lacs County Administrator Pat Oman. Aukrust has been city administrator in Hector for nearly three years. Prior to that she ran a rental supply business in Sleepy Eye. She has also served as the coordinator of the Faribault, Martin and Jackson Multi-County Adult Substance Abuse and Family Dependency Treatment Courts. She holds bachelor’s degrees in sociology and marketing and a master’s degree in urban planning. Krosch served as administrator in Nicollet

See **ADMINISTRATOR** on **A3**

## Local FFA members gear up for virtual state convention

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN  
Publisher

Members of the Jackson County Central FFA Chapter are gearing up for a state convention unlike any other in history.

Beginning Monday and continuing over the course of the next 10 days, dozens of members of the JCC FFA Chapter will compete in career and leadership development event contests, receive the prestigious state degree and be honored among others across the state for excellence in FFA — all virtually, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter advisor Laura Bidne said while a virtual state convention will

See **FFA** on **A2**

PHOTO BY JUSTIN LESSMAN  
Mackenzie Henning is in the running to be named the Minnesota FFA’s star in agribusiness during next week’s convention.



## City's tax rate is lower than that of other local cities, though its taxes per capita are higher

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN  
Publisher

Though the city of Jackson's overall tax rate is about half that of other cities in Jackson County, its amount of taxes per capita is around a quarter higher.

In both respects, the city of Jackson is about right in line with other Minnesota cities its size.

The findings, what certified public accountant Layne Kockelman termed "key performance indicators," were discussed with members of the Jackson City Council during a review of the city's 2020 audit last week. The audit was conducted by Edina-based Abdo, Eick and Meyers.

The city of Jackson's tax rate in 2020 calculated to 64.4 percent, Kockelman said, up about 1.6 percent from the year prior when it was just higher than the average of similarly sized cities in Minnesota and almost exactly half of the average rate of cities in Jackson County. Taxes per capita in 2020 amounted to \$581, Kockelman said, up about \$26 from the year prior when the number came in around \$140 more than the average per-capita tax rate of cities in Jackson County and nearly \$20 less than that of similarly sized cities in Minnesota.

Kockelman said the city's tax rate and rate of taxes per capita have remained fairly steady in

recent years, an indication, he said, the city is experiencing growth in its tax base.

One thing to keep an eye on, Kockelman said, is the city's amount of long-term debt. On a per-capita basis, Jackson's long-term debt has been consistently higher than both that of cities in the county and similar-sized cities in the state and the city's measure of debt service expenditures as a percent of total expenditures tends higher than both groups of cities as well. Current expenditures per capita in Jackson also tend to be higher than that of cities in the county and similarly sized cities across the state.

That said, Kockelman added, city funds for the most part are carrying healthy balances, with many — the water fund, sewer fund and electric fund among them — generating significant cash flow.

"Overall, the general fund has very healthy fund balances," Kockelman said, "and, overall, you've seen healthy growth in cash."

Following Kockelman's audit presentation last Tuesday, council members approved the audit report on recommendation of Jackson City Administrator Matt Skaret.

"We are sitting pretty well financially," Skaret said of city finances. "We're pretty solid."

## HOTSPOT: County adds 56 additional cases

Continued from A1

count of 100 per 100,000 that day expected to be fourth highest in the state.

Mayo Clinic data scientists forecast future COVID-19 cases using a Bayesian Susceptible-Infected-Recovered model. Though the infection rate used in this prediction model can vary across locations and time due to the effect of changes in public behavior and different virus strains, Mayo scientists say, model parameters are updated with daily case counts every day and then use 500

simulations to produce a median forecast and uncertainty interval with a 90 percent probability of capturing future cases.

New weekly case counts in Jackson County have been elevated over the last three weeks, according to the Minnesota Department of Health. After adding 17 new cases from March 17-23, the county tallied 56 new cases from March 24-30, 64 new cases from March 31 through April 6 and another 56 over the course of the last week.

The cumulative COVID-19 caseload count in Jackson County as of Tuesday was 1,148, though around 1,020 of those cases are considered to be no longer infectious and don't require isolation.

While the new weekly case count in Jackson County has spiked in recent weeks, it still remains well less than weekly case counts that consistently ranged between 70 and 100 over a five-week period late last year. Jackson County notched 101

new cases the week of Dec. 2-8, 2020. Nine of the 10 COVID-19-related deaths recorded in Jackson County were logged in the five weeks following that period.

COVID-19 is a viral respiratory illness caused by a novel coronavirus first identified in late 2019. Since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Minnesota on March 6, 2020, the state has notched more than 544,000 cases of the illness and tallied nearly 7,000 deaths.

## LOON LAKE: Questions swirl as lake fills up

Continued from A1

This past fall, vegetation grew thick and tall on the berm where lake once was.

"That part of the lake used to be 4, 5 feet deep; people would bring boats up in there and it used to have some very good fishing," said Jason Rossow, who lives on the east side of the bay. "Now it's filled with an island of sludge."

And it continues to get worse. Aerial photos show a line of sediment pushing farther and farther out into the lake, threatening the water quality and aquatic life of the county's most-used lake from a recreational standpoint, and quality of life and property values of the county's most developed lake from a residential standpoint.

"This is the county's top lake in terms of recreation and camping and swimming," said lakeshore property owner Brad Sievert, "and it's just filling up with silt."

he said. "Stuff happens. But now somebody needs to step up and do something about it."

Exactly who that somebody should be is a point of contention.

### An imperfect solution

Lakeshore property owners — arguably those most affected by the silt flow — say they did not cause the problem and have no power to address it.

"I had nothing to do with that pile of sediment," Rossow said, "and lake property owners can't do anything about it anyway. It's the DNR's lake."

Kresko said lakeshore property owners are correct regarding jurisdiction of the lake. In terms of what can be done to address their concerns, he said the DNR would be willing to grant the dredging permit needed to remove the ridge of silt, but only if it can first be proven that sediment flows from the ditch have been greatly reduced.

"The problem needs to be addressed prior to dredging," Kresko said. "We would have to — likely through a number of years of water sampling — make sure the delivery of sediment is greatly reduced before a permit would be issued."

That goal could likely be attained through a remastering of the ditch system itself, Brandel said — ideally, a project involving the construction of a 2-acre oxbow and dozens of check dams designed to slow water flows through the ditch system and allow for the settling of sediment prior to water entering into the lake. Estimated cost of the optimal project is around \$1.2 million; a scaled-back \$800,000 project would also likely get the job done, Brandel said. Both estimates include the \$26,000 it will cost to dredge the bay.

Cost of ditch system improvements are borne by owners of benefiting property — in this case, the owners of land within the ditch system, most of which is farmland.

"All landowners in the system would be assessed based on the amount of benefit their property receives from the system," Brandel said.

But many landowners say the proposed costs of the projects seem to far outweigh any benefit to their land.

"It seems this is all for the benefit of Loon Lake," Anderson said. "I don't see how this benefits my land.

## Loon Lake problem may even be too big for the DNR to handle on its own

The problem in Loon Lake may even be too big for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

"The DNR exists to protect our waters," said lakeshore property owner Brad Sievert.

So, it was to the DNR a group of lakeshore property owners turned when they noticed the lake starting to fill up with silt.

"We had a meeting out here with the DNR, some county officials and people from the soil and water conservation district," Sievert said. "We were told at that time that it's going to take a grassroots effort to get something done."

Subsequent communications with the office of the DNR commissioner yielded similar results.

"They didn't seem to care a whole lot about it," said lakeshore property owner Ron Boetcher.

Branagan Powers, who owns both lakeshore property and land within the Judicial Ditch 8 system, said he can't figure this one out.

"All that silt pouring into the lake is no different than somebody dumping fill or rocks or even garbage into the lake," he said. "If that was happening, I bet the DNR would do something."

Tom Kresko, area hydrologist with the DNR, said he didn't disagree.

"If a lakeshore owner was found to be dumping material into a lake, the DNR would determine how much was put in and enforce restorative measures at the landowner's cost," Kresko said.

But the sediment dump into Loon Lake is a bit more complicated, Kresko said, involving multiple landowners, units of local government and more obscure lines of fault.

"In this case," Kresko said, "it's harder to imagine that path."

Maybe this is a Loon Lake sediment project and not a ditch system project."

Typically, a certain number of property owners in the ditch system have to agree to proceed with a project prior to it actually happening, Brandel said.

"There are some landowners who want to do the repairs and there are some landowners who don't want to do the repairs," he said. "We know this is a sensitive subject."

A wild card is the Jackson County Board of Commissioners, which acts as the local ditch authority board, and has final say on whether any ditch improvement project moves forward or not. "The ditch authority has the responsibility to ensure the ditch system is in repair," Brandel said, adding, in his opinion, "There are portions of this ditch that need to be repaired."

### Silt, frustration build

And so around and around it goes, with nobody sure who is responsible for causing the problem in Loon Lake or who should be responsible for fixing it, all while the problem continues to get worse.

"Here is one of the best lakes in the county and everybody knows what's happening to it and nobody is doing anything to stop it," Rossow said. "Meanwhile, the problem is only getting

worse."

Kresko said the issue is a true conundrum.

"I feel for the lakeshore owners," he said. "They didn't do anything wrong, but they have a long way to go to proving who did." He also feels for landowners along the ditch system, who are being asked to pay to fix something that's technically not even within the ditch system.

"The entire bay is outside of the ditch boundaries," Kresko said. "That complicates things."

In the end, it may require a consortium of all involved parties — lakeshore owners, landowners within the ditch system, the county — plus possibly a sprinkling of grant money, to get the problem fixed. "It may take a grassroots effort here," Kresko said. "Perhaps it's the work of a coalition of partners to come up with the money, all backed by a local government entity."

Sievert said he and many of his fellow lakeshore property owners are all about working together with involved parties to get things done, though he said efforts on their part to get and keep the ball rolling have met with apathy.

"We've only encountered inactivity on the part of everybody," he said. "It all comes down to doing the right thing, and that's not happening."

## ADMINISTRATOR: New

Continued from A1

County for more than eight years. Prior to that, he served as county administrator for Yellow Medicine County and as community and economic development director for the Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission. He holds a bachelor's degree in local and urban planning.

Prior to his tenure in Windom, Nasby served in multiple positions for the city of Iowa City, Iowa, including associate planner, community development coordinator and community and economic development coordinator. Nasby holds a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in public administration.

In addition to his duties in Jackson, where he worked since late 2017, Nelson also serves in the Army National Guard, as he has for the last six-plus years. He has also been employed as the executive director of the Minnesota American Legion Boys State program,

a position he has held for three years. Nelson holds a bachelor's degree in organizational communication.

Oman served as administrator in Mille Lacs County for six years. Prior to this, he was the city administrator in Moose Lake, where he also served as executive director of the city's housing redevelopment authority. He also has much experience in economic development, previously serving in leadership positions in Carlton County and Chippewa County. He holds bachelor's degrees in history and biology and master's degrees in manufacturing systems and business administration.

The successful candidate will be the first county administrator in Jackson County history, a position just recently created by the Jackson County Board of Commissioners. Steve Duncan, current county coordinator, has announced his resignation, effective May 7.

### Origins of a problem

There is disagreement about exactly when the problem started, or why.

Jackson County Engineer Tim Stahl said he's been hearing complaints about silt flows into Loon Lake for the last decade.

Tom Kresko, area hydrologist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, said the flow of sediment into lakes is a natural and constant process that has been taking place for millennia, though he added, in the case of Loon Lake, the flow has clearly accelerated in recent years.

Chuck Brandel, drainage engineer with Mankato-based ISG, blames "sluffing" of the sides of the ditch caused by the "tremendous rains" the county received in 2017 and 2018.

Rossow, Sievert and other lakeshore property owners say the issue began back in 2018, shortly after the county "cleaned out" portions of the drainage ditch — a process that includes removing sediment from the ditch bottom to improve flows.

Owners of farmland within the ditch system say it's likely a combination of things.

"The cleaning caused a bunch of the sluffing," said Brad Anderson, who owns land four miles due north of the inlet into Loon Lake.

And the heavy rains that followed made it worse, said Branagan Powers, who owns both land along the ditch system and the lakeshore.

"It was bad timing when the ditch was cleaned out,"

## CLEANING: Is the county's action to blame?

Continued from A1

the side slopes, just the bottom to get the flow re-established."

Responding to allegations at a meeting of ditch system landowners last month that the ditch had been "overcleaned," Dave Macek, county drainage supervisor, disagreed, adding crews charged with the work on Judicial Ditch 8 "didn't do hardly any side sloping."

Macek also said the cleaning, coupled with abnormally rainy years, made for a "perfect — not good — storm."

Chuck Brandel, drainage engineer with Mankato-based engineering firm ISG, agreed with that assessment, saying while a recently cleaned ditch and "tremendous rains" in 2017

and 2018 didn't help anything, he believes some of the "sluffing" of sediment

from the sides of the ditch would have happened with or without cleaning.

"There was a lot of erosion that happened after the cleaning from what I can see, but the ditch was built with very steep side slopes," he said. "That said, 2017 and 2018 were not kind to

ditch systems across the state."

Nor across the county, said Stahl.

"We're seeing sluffing — bank collapse — on many ditches across the county," he said.

"These old ditches were constructed with very steep slopes. The new ditches have much more gradual slopes." Many landowners remain un-

convinced.

"The cleaning caused a bunch of the sluffing," said Brad Anderson, who owns land four miles due north of the inlet into Loon Lake.

Ron Boetcher, who has lived on the lake for 20 years, said the silt flow into Loon Lake "only became an issue when they cleaned that ditch."

Tom Kresko, area hydrologist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, said he isn't in a position to assign blame.

"Some sediment is natural, though the difference here is it has accelerated greatly," he said. "How much is from the ditch system we can argue about. Some say not much, and some say 99 percent."

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