

CHRISTMAS EVE FIRE IN HENNING

continued from 1

hours. They were assisted by the Henning Ambulance, Ottertail Fire Department and the Deer Creek Fire Department, many of whom showed extra compassion and care for the tragic fire that happened the day before Christmas.

No one was hurt and there's still no word on the cause of the fire. Investigators say it doesn't appear to be suspicious.

"We are definitely thankful for all of (their support). It was great to see the firefighters weren't just there to do their job they genuinely cared. They stopped by and said we are sorry (about the fire)," said Brittany. "It's a small community in a small area so everyone knows everybody so some of the firefighters are friends."

While the family still struggles with the thought of having to rebuild their

livelihood on the farm, Brittany said one of the most difficult parts of the experience was having to tell their six employees they would be out of work during the holidays.

"That's been one of the hardest things is the friendships you have with your employees and everyone," said Brittany.

She said the family is planning to rebuild the barn and farm, but how it may look has yet-to-be-determined.

"We have to (rebuild), it's our life. We built this farm from the ground up, it's not something we took over. We built everything," she said.

Several options for helping the family during this tragic time are available. A donation can be made to their Venmo account at Cornerstone-Farm or by visiting their website at www.cornerstonefarmmn.com.



Contributed photo

The barn that once housed Cornerstone Farm's goat milk operation was destroyed by a Christmas Eve fire.

HENNING SCHOOL AUDIT REPORT

The school district received \$5.1 million in revenues last year, or 9.6 percent more than it had in its budget, while spending nearly \$4.9 million, or 5.4 percent less than the district had in its

budget. The end result was a general fund increase of just over \$250,000 in 2020.

While the news was welcomed to the school district, Evanson cautioned the school board about rum-

blings from the state of Minnesota that could decrease the amount of money each school district receives during the school year. Currently school districts receive about 90 percent of its state aid during the school year, while 10 percent is paid the following year as a receivable.

With the state facing a projected budget shortfall, Evanson said there is a concern the state could hold more of the money back from each school district to try and balance its own budget. If that happens the school district could receive just 80 percent of its funding during the current school year and would need to tap into short term loans or its reserve fund to pay for needed expenses.

"There are talks funding levels may not be decreased, but it could be a cash flow tool for the state to withhold some of those payments they have typically gave you up front or during the fiscal year," he said of the district's reserves.

Currently, the district has about 33.8 percent of expenses in its unassigned fund balance, which is slightly higher than the district's overall goal of having 25 percent of expenses in reserves. That

money could come in handy if the state withholds some of its funding in the future.

Another reason for the increase in the general fund was due to money the district saved when students were taught distantly last spring due to COVID-19, as well as federal money like CARES Act funds it received in the fiscal year 2020, but had not been spent yet. That CARES Act money has likely been spent and will show up in next years audit.

The average daily attendance also grew slightly last year to 378 students in grades K-12, but was down from just two years ago when the district had an average ADM of 385 students in 2018.

Overall, Evanson commended the district and the school board for the past year and said even if the state withholds some state aid funding. The district's careful budgeting over the past few years will put Henning in a better position than a number of school districts across the state.

In addition to the audit, the Henning School Board finalized a plan to hire a new school superintendent. The plan will seek applications beginning as soon as the first of the year, while applications will be received

through the first part of February. The goal was to select finalists on Feb. 8 and conduct interviews shortly thereafter.

"I think it is pretty aggressive, but I think it is easily done," said Olson.

Olson said the timeline will allow the district to hire a superintendent earlier in the year, while also giving it time to reject all of the applicants and start over if a suitable candidate cannot be located the first time around.

Back to school plans

Henning students will be back in school as soon as Jan. 4, according to a plan laid out by Olson last week. The announcement was made earlier in December, which informed district families that beginning Jan. 4 all students in grades pre-k-9 will be in person every day and students in grades 10-12 will be in a hybrid model.

The goal was to bring all students back into the school building in January, but that is subject to change due to changes with COVID-19.

"Our plan is to go K-9 in person starting January 4 and our hope is we try to get everyone back in on the 19th. Now there is a lot of things going on, but that is

continued from 1

our hope." Olson said the COVID-19 numbers continue to decrease for the Henning area and now the district is attempting to build a return to school plan that follows an increasingly strict set of guidelines set forth by Governor Tim Walz. The guidelines are taking away some of the local control over what a school district can do throughout the day to safely educate students.

The plans are changing everyday, but now include requiring students to wear facemasks during phy ed class and even restricts how a district can have students eat during lunch.

In other news

- Approved the 2021 tax levy at Henning School. The tax levy will go down 8.64 percent next year.
- Approved changing the dates for the January and February meetings due to federal holidays. The January meeting will be held following the reorganization meeting on Jan. 11 and the February meeting will be held on Feb. 8.
- Approved the resignation of assistant speech coach Aleicia Claassen.

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