

The Caledonia Argus

\$1.25 • Vol. 149 No. 29

www.hometownargus.com

Wednesday, July 21, 2021

Houston County ends COVID Emergency Declaration

By Craig Moorhead
The Caledonia Argus

On Tuesday, July 13, Houston County commissioners voted to formally end the COVID-19 Emergency Declaration that was made by the board chair on March 18, 2020, and extended by the full board soon after.

At the time of last Tuesday's meeting, the Minnesota Department of Health reported 71% of Houston County residents age 16 and older had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Those with at least one dose included 59% of the county's total population, while the rate for ages 12-plus stood at 68%. Those numbers are somewhat higher than statewide averages.

Another vote ratified a change order (No. 11) for the new county highway shop/headquarters facility currently under construction. The total added cost to "connect the new electrical and gas service to the new building and install a clean agent (dry) fire suppression system in the records room" was quoted as \$29,419.

But the board voted to withhold a 10% (\$2,200) contractor's fee from the change order subtotal,

since they contend that the construction manager was told that the records room required a "dry" fire suppression system before the bid documents were prepared.

Under their consent agenda, the board voted to hire Darlene Peter as a probationary deputy recorder, clerk tech1, effective July 26. Isaiah Bunke was hired as a probationary deputy sheriff on the same ballot, effective August 3. The latter action was conditioned upon the completion of medical and psychological examinations.

Board clerk/EDA director Allison Wagner also reported the Houston County EDA is seeking applicants for an opening on its board of directors.

The board also held extended discussions on reorganizing Houston County's Zoning/Planning Department, which also houses Environmental Services and has traditionally had a single director overseeing both areas.

The Zoning/Planning office is responsible for the enforcement of the county's zoning ordinance, including feedlots, septic systems, and permits for various forms of development in townships, floodplain and shoreland rules, and more.

The workload has increased as some staff have left the department - and not only because recruitment has sometimes been challenging - but also because La Crescent Township (which used to have its own zoning officer) has decided to have Houston County provide that service.

So even though the department is already short-staffed, it continues to field a wide range of responsibilities which are sometimes intertwined with Environmental Services.

Commissioner Eric Johnson repeated his call to shift the responsibility for feedlot and septic inspections to the Root River Soil and Water Conservation District, since the county has recently had to rely on Winona County to help with the former, and private engineering firm G-Cubed to provide the latter. Other commissioners disagreed, noting that Houston County is "ultimately responsible" to make sure those tasks are completed.

After more than an hour of discussion, the board reached the consensus that the place to start is to hire a full-time (not just an

COUNTY BOARD

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Jordan Gerard/The Caledonia Argus

Ice cream on a warm summer day

Nothing better than a cold treat on a warm and humid summer day. The small gathering on the courthouse lawn on July 13 was made even more special when the ice cream was donated by The Wired Rooster to help Houston County Public Health thank its staff and volunteers for their efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic. Pictured on the right is Jeremiah Ninneman and Liv Myhre, of The Wired Rooster, and on the left is Public Health director John Pugleasa and volunteer vaccinators Vicki Krukow and Lyn Van Den Boom.

See page 2 for more!

Houston welcomes new superintendent Mary Morem

By Jordan Gerard
Editor, The Caledonia Argus

Houston School District's new superintendent Mary Morem attended her first school board meeting on Thursday, July 15.

Morem is familiar to the area, having previously worked for Caledonia School District as principal. After moving away to take on roles at other schools, including Jackson County Central and Triton Public Schools, she has returned to Houston.

She's already gotten a jump start on the job, meeting with several staff and committees, communi-

cating with former superintendent Krin Abraham and talking to parents.

At the school board's regular meeting, Morem reported the board received a public comment from a parent new to the district, who asked about transportation for preschool age kids.

Covid-19 cancelled the availability of preschool transportation, and with current guidance from the state, kids will need to wear masks on public transportation. Morem said more guidance would be coming from the state.

Onsite instructional coach

A topic previously discussed by

the board and tabled twice, Morem said "instructional coaches are very valuable," but did not have enough insight of Houston yet to decide if the district needs one.

"It's very critical whoever we decide to hire, they relate to all grade levels," she said, noting that would be a unique hire. Instructional coaches are able to help teachers connect curriculum with state standards. The board did not take action.

Wednesday early outs

The board discussed early outs

HOUSTON SCHOOL BOARD

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Jordan Gerard/The Caledonia Argus

Houston School District welcomed new superintendent Mary Morem on July 15, at her first board meeting. Morem takes over from previous superintendent Krin Abraham. Pictured from left to right is Mary Morem, board members Mimi Carlson, Tom Stilin, Richard Erdmann, Mark Swenson and Gene Lundak. Not pictured is Arlin Peterson and Josh Norlien.

Houston Council receives second petition against OHV trail

By Jordan Gerard
Editor, The Caledonia Argus

The Houston City Council was presented with a new petition of about 400 signatures from people who are opposed to the proposed Off-Highway Vehicle Trail at its regular meeting on July 12.

Residents had questioned the whereabouts and effectiveness of the first petition, signed in October 2012, which had over 100 signatures. This petition was not kept on record at City Hall after five years and has not been found since, City Administrator Michelle Quinn stated at past meetings.

Presenting the new petition, resident Steve Westby said 368 residents signed the petition, in addition to 24 business owners, 24 non-resident property owners and 35 adjacent landowners to South Park also signing. Language of the petition says "We the undersigned are opposed to motor vehicles in South Park and adjacent city property and request the council cancel the Houston OHV trail proposed for this location."

He encouraged the city to create a committee to help figure out a way to exit out of the proposed trail and "negotiate a deal with the state."

Mayor Dave Olson said it was something the city could look into and they appreciate the help. However, the cost is still about \$516,523, the land could go back to the state and affect Houston's future ability to receive grants.

City Administrator Michelle Quinn added there was no bonding authority identified to finance an exit strategy. The only way Houston would be able to exit is by levying the cost, which would "more

"... the council wants to do what's best for the community and that they've heard residents' concerns about noise, erosion and the impact it might have on the community. They also appreciate the engagement and sharing of concerns and noted that the council has dedicated much time to people sharing their opinions at the meetings. The council is considering the next steps regarding the future of the project"

Summary of statement from
Houston City Council

than double" the city's current levy. Residents who want to see the trail stopped voiced their support for levying the cost.

Quinn also reminded residents the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) helped fund other projects such as the bike trail, Mission 66 Playground, archery range, Houston Nature Center and some fire department equipment.

After more discussion and a bit of back and forth, the council agreed to create a committee that is charged with the task of finding a way out of the proposed trail. Specific details of that committee were not discussed.

Before this portion of the meeting, Olson read a short statement about the trail, stating the council wants to do what's best for the community and they've heard residents' concerns about noise, erosion and the impact it might have on the community. They also appreciate the engagement and sharing of concerns and noted the council has dedicated much time to people sharing their opinions at the meetings. The council is considering the next steps regarding the future of the project, he concluded.

In other trail news, there are four spots available on the Citizens Advisory Committee. This is the committee that will decide things such as park hours, days, requirements and so on if the trail goes through.

The council also approved the sound study that has been on hold since this winter. The sound study will use OHVs on the proposed trail and measure the noise. The city was not sure how quickly the study could move forward, due to the acoustic company's schedule.

The council tabled a new archaeological study that was required for a grant. This one is proposed by the Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center for \$2,550, according to the proposal document. If the noise study happens, then the archaeological study will go forward.

The council also announced an open house on the proposed OHV trail on Aug. 10, with personnel present from the DNR and sponsor clubs. No place or time has been announced yet.

Finally, the council approved a Frequently Asked Questions document that answers many of the common questions raised in the past few months.

Donation of sound system

Resident Anna Benda proposed a temporary solution to the echo and noise problem at the city's new council meeting place at 111 Cedar St.

The size of the room and construction of the building leaves many residents unable to hear what is said during meetings, due to poor acoustics and a lot of echos, since the sound cannot be absorbed.

HOUSTON COUNCIL

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Caledonia Council
Potential bidders for WWTP

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Spring Grove 2030

New volunteer group looks to the future

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Community
Houston Hoedown
'We're back!'

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Fair Talent Show

Prepare your talent for the Houston County Fair!

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Sports
Softball
High school team awarded

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T-Ball, PeeWees

Young ball players enjoying summer season

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Spring Grove 2030 committee concentrates on the future

By Jordan Gerard
Editor, The Caledonia Argus

While 2020 seemed light years away just 10 years ago, Spring Grove is looking ahead 10 more years, to 2030.

The new Spring Grove 2030 volunteer committee held a series of three workshops on Wednesday, July 14, at the log cabin. Community members were invited to share and give input on values and needs for Spring Grove.

The committee is a volunteer-led group of people representing the school, local government, businesses, faith communities, nonprofit organizations and more, according

to the city's website, www.spring-grovenn.com.

Advisor to the group, Courtney Swanson said the effort started organically a long time ago, with people talking about what Spring Grove has to offer and what it needs.

The July 14 workshop day was the first in a series of three that started with big ideas. By the third workshop, the committee will have a few specific ideas and a community comprehensive plan.

Spring Grove 2030 partnered with RSP Architects from Minneapolis, who will give recommendations at the end of the workshops.

The first workshop focused on

values and needs of the community, with many participants pointing out such values as safety, cooperation, collaboration and community support that makes Spring Grove what it is today.

The next topic was needs. Spring Grove has a long list of amenities applicable for many ages, but participants also pointed out there is a need for a multi-activity building that can allow different generations to interact, a community theatre and more restaurants or more public spaces to be with friends and family.

The next workshop will be Aug. 16, with time and location to be announced.

Caledonia Pasture Walk to Feature Grazing of Goats & Stockers July 22

Rotational grazing techniques with goats, grazing stockers for added flexibility, organic transition, bale grazing, using the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to establish fencing, and finishing cattle on grass will be the focus of a pasture walk on Thursday, July 22, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., near Caledonia.

Wholesome Family Farm's Rachelle and Jordan Meyer (13930 Holty Ridge Dr.) will be hosting this Land Stewardship Project (LSP) event, which is free and open to the public.

Registration begins at 10:45 a.m. (rain or shine) and a taco food truck meal will be provided (free-will contributions accepted.) To

reserve a spot by July 20, register online at <https://landstewardship-project.org/events/item/1647> or contact LSP's Alex Romano at 507-523-3366 or aromano@landstewardshipproject.org.

DIRECTIONS: The farm is north of Caledonia off MN-76. Look for LSP signs.

HOUSTON COUNCIL

Continued from page 1

As an IT professional, Benda said the meetings would benefit from a microphone and speaker system. She also gave recommendations for carpeting, foam boards, a dropped ceiling and a microphone for each council member and one for the public.

The Save Our Bluffs group that has formed recently is willing to donate \$500 toward the new system, with the city's cost at about \$500.

If agreeable, Benda asked that it be installed before the August meeting, maintenance workers to help install it and her to train whoever would be managing it.

The council did not take action on Benda's proposal, but did decide to move the meetings back to the original location at City Hall. However, the location will be announced on the August agenda, Quinn clarified to the *Argus*. They are also looking into ceiling acoustic tiles that will absorb sound, but noted that one bid they received cost about \$18,725. The council agreed to wait on Benda's proposal until after they received a firm answer for acoustic tiles.

EMS personnel needed

In danger of losing its license, the Houston Ambulance crew is looking for more EMTs. A committee that met June 24 revealed the department needs 10 more EMTs to be comfortably staffed, Quinn relayed. Several EMTs are also looking to step back or retire.

Barriers to residents signing up often include full-time employees sometimes using Personal Time Off for calls, time commitment of the certification course (160 hours, plus drive time) and people working outside the community.

If the ambulance cannot hire more EMTs, the city could lose its license to have a full ambulance service and is reduced down to first responder, which leads to using services outside of the city and

EMTs not arriving quickly enough. The city needs 24 hours, 7 days a week, 365 days a year staffed in order to retain its license.

Quinn said the committee is meeting with local employers to foster relationships and reduce barriers for new members to join. Other communities have added paid positions or staffed different shifts, she noted.

Council member Cody Mathers said he learned a lot at the meeting, adding, "The word 'crisis' might be appropriate. We're very close to losing our compliance."

"As a community, we need to find ways to support them, or we're going to be in that first responder situation, waiting for an ambulance from Caledonia, Rushford, Tri-State, Winona and have to pay that."

He encouraged employers allowing employees to leave during the day for calls. He also noted that every call needs an EMT on the crew, otherwise they're considered out of compliance.

Quinn added the Minnesota State High School League requires an ambulance on site at sporting events and the cost could be up to \$1,000 per night. The council did not take action on the matter.

Electric Vehicle charging station

Kent Whitcomb of MiEnergy has been busy, visiting several cities around Houston County recently in order to notify them about a free level two Electric Vehicle (EV) charging station from MiEnergy.

The goal is to build a charging network across Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota. MiEnergy will cover the cost of the charger, up to \$5,100, with the city covering the cost of installation. The idea is for EV drivers to stop and charge their car (about 20-30 miles with a level two station) and visit the city.

The station will have a billing system set up, a QR code on the

pedestal for paying and city's choice to set up the fee for either a kilowatt charge, parking fee or time limit. The station comes with five years of warranty, five years of service and five years of connectivity. After that, the cost to the city would be \$325 to maintain. Each station can charge two vehicles at a time.

The council tabled the topic until August, in order to collect quotes for installation.

Other news

Matt Mohs, of Wapasha Construction, presented a gift basket to be used as the city wishes. He also noted that work on Lincoln Street was complete. The city approved pay application No. 3 for the amount of \$152,413.25 for the wastewater treatment plant.

Police Chief Brett Hurley was approved to temporarily hire Isaiah Bunke to provide overlap coverage for Houston Hoedown Days at a part-time rate of \$16 an hour.

The council approved a gambling permit for Cross of Christ Church to host Bingo at Hoedown Days.

The council waived a monetary limit on tort liability, as recommended by its insurance agent.

The council approved putting out a bid for quotes on seed collection.

Public comment

A resident asked Hurley if he could clarify the rules of golf carts and ATVs in the city, as he had seen several kids texting and driving while driving a golf cart. Other residents said they had seen kids younger than 16 operating such vehicles.

Hurley agreed and asked these incidents be reported right away, in order to immediately respond to them.

Next meeting

The next meeting of the Houston City Council will be Aug. 9, at 6 p.m., location to be announced on the August agenda.

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