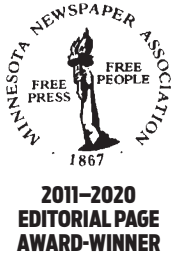


OPINION



PILOT EDITORIAL

Schools returning to normal a good sign for everyone

For many of us, the COVID-19 pandemic became really real on March 15, 2020 — the day Gov. Tim Walz announced a statewide school closure.

Wrapped up in that were the cancelation of all school-related events and activities, including winter and spring sports, band and choir concerts, FFA awards banquets — even foreign exchange student programs and state standardized testing.

So perhaps nothing is more welcome than news out of our local schools that many of those events and activities we lost last year are returning. Winter state tournaments recently took place and spring sports teams are practicing, the first band and choir concerts of the year just wrapped up, the Jackson County Central FFA Chapter will host an awards banquet of sorts this Sunday and officials at both JCC and Heron Lake-Okabena schools have announced plans to host foreign exchange students next year. Even word from JCC and HL-O of plans to administer the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments standardized tests this spring generated a twinge of excitement.

Excitement that this long pandemic may be nearing an end.

Excitement that things may finally be returning to normal.

Excitement that life may no longer be filled with so much excitement.

With vaccines open to all adults, it's a good time to get your dose

The state government recently made COVID-19 vaccinations open to all individuals over the age of 16.

Sanford Jackson Medical Center is offering appointments to anyone over the age of 16 who wants to be vaccinated. Des Moines Valley Health and Human Services is providing vaccination clinics every Friday, and anyone over the age of 18 who wants a dose can stop by the Jackson Economic Development Corp.'s spec building in Industrial Park and get one.

There are a number of misconceptions about the vaccines. I think it's worth knocking a few down.

It's understandable to have concerns about a vaccine; whenever you're making a decision to take a treatment or put something in your body, there's going to be a bit of hesitancy. We shouldn't

stigmatize those who have concerns about the vaccine.

I want to address a few concerns I've heard about the vaccines in conversation with others.

First, none of the vaccines approved for use in the United States are known to cause long-term deleterious side effects. While the second shot of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines sometimes involves a side effect of feeling unwell for a day, this resolves quickly.

These vaccines have been widely tested, with studies involving thousands to tens of thousands of people demonstrating their efficacy. Some of these studies are much larger than those done for ordinary vaccines. There's an enormous amount of scrutiny in these studies.

Getting the vaccine even if you've already had

COVID-19 — like I have — or if you're at a very low risk for complications from COVID-19 is still important.

Even if you're low risk, uncontrolled spread among the young could lead to the development of COVID-19 variants — through viral mutation — that are deadlier or cause more problems for those of us in those age groups. This may be the case with the variant of the virus present in Brazil, which has some association with higher hospitalization rates for those between the ages of 40 and 60.

We also don't know how long natural immunity lasts and, while the vaccines have been shown to be effective against all variants currently present, we still don't know if that's the case for natural immunity.

A third reason is getting vaccinated can help protect others in

the community who, for medical reasons, are unable to get vaccinated. Those people have just as much right to go about their days without fear as others do, so getting vaccinated is a way to keep them safe.

Finally, Jackson County is experiencing a rise in cases that has caused disruptions to bus routes for school and other aspects of life. If more people get vaccinated, those disruptions will be less frequent and our caseload will go down.



JUST JOSHIN'
Joshua Schuetz

Watershed board slow to hire new staff

On Friday, March 12, the Heron Lake Watershed District Board of Managers met to discuss an array of topics, one of which was to include the job title and description of two currently vacated watershed positions. It was surprising the board left this topic untouched as it seems incredibly important to maintaining the HLWD's conservation initiatives and water quality monitoring. These programs are the cornerstone of the organization's mission to protect and improve water quality. Yet down two employees, the board lacks any urgency to fill these positions. This is cause for much concern as conservation work is certainly being left undone.

On Feb. 1, HLWD Administrator Jan Voit announced her resignation, effective Feb. 15, ending a career of 38 years with the district. Similarly, district technician Catherine Wegehaupt announced her resignation on Feb. 9, effective Feb. 23. Therefore, the managers have known they need to hire staff for two months. Despite this, they still have yet to have a job title or description prepared for either

position. I cannot begin to understand why board members would drag their feet in this way. Considering all board members are involved in farming, why would this discussion item be left until the April meeting when they would rather focus on planting?

When I raised concern about falling behind on conservation work at the March meeting, board members said they were trying to get things in order by making phone calls and spending time at the office sorting through documents and looking for information. Would it not be better to have two employees working 40 hours per week on these same tasks while getting a feel for their positions? It seems only logical filling the vacant positions quickly would result in a more efficient transition with less pressure on the board to complete the duties of two missing staff.

Voit offered to fill in with interim duties at a rate of \$30 per hour and also prepared a detailed job description, but both her offer and the job description were ignored by the board. Instead, a special meeting took place on March 2 at which the board hired interim staff member Lacey

Smieja of White Bear Lake at a rate of \$125 per hour plus \$375 for travel time. The plan is to have her work remotely as much as possible. Factoring in the high cost of a transitional employee who will largely work many miles from the office is all the more reason to hire a new technician and administrator quickly. Taxpayer money would be better spent filling the two vacant positions with individuals who can continue work on HLWD conservation programs at a more reasonable rate.

The critical issue with two vacant positions is it is the start of water sampling season. Each spring, stream monitoring equipment is installed on Jack Creek, Okabena Creek and the Heron Lake Outlet to collect stream elevation measurements and rainfall totals. Additionally, water samples are taken after rain events and during the rise, peak and fall of streamflow these events cause. This is important, as runoff and flowing tile lines move the sediment and nutrients that affect water quality. Samples are tested for a series of nitrates — total suspended solids, dissolved ortho phosphorus, total

phosphorus and E. coli. These parameters tell us where we are in terms of water quality and how the creeks and lakes have benefited from conservation work.

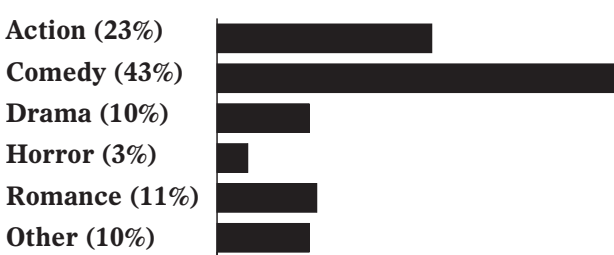
In addition to water sampling, the cover crop program has shown incredible results that allow farmers to more effectively crop wet soils without the need for tile. Likewise, the septic loan program, rain garden installation, educational events and other programs are all in a period of neglect due to a lack of administration. Worst of all, staff members are not there to write the grants that provide funding for conservation projects and programs that provide public benefit by improving water quality. Each day that passes without staff is cause for more concern as to what will become of the HLWD and its previously exemplary reputation for securing grant dollars and putting conservation on the ground.

(About the author: Lloyd Kalfs has a degree in natural resources from Northland College. He lives in Okabena.)

GUEST COLUMNIST
Lloyd Kalfs

LAST WEEK'S ONLINE POLL

Q: What's your favorite type of movie to watch?



Source: Jackson County Pilot Website

THIS WEEK'S ONLINE POLL

Q: How closely are you following the Derek Chauvin trial in Minneapolis?

Vote online at jacksoncountypilot.com.

READERS WRITE

Stand up for children this month and every month, for every one matters

To the editor:

Jackson County Commissioners proclaimed April as "Child Abuse Prevention Month" at their April 6 meeting. They encourage all citizens to participate in efforts to help prevent child abuse and neglect thereby helping to strengthen the communities in which we all live.

This is a time to reflect on what we are doing as a community to support children and families. Remember to stand up for children, for every child matters. Children don't come with instructions and too many parents face the challenge of raising their children without the knowledge and support they need and deserve. We all have opportunities to reach out to parents in our own families, neighborhoods, places of worship and places of employment.

If you see a stressed-out parent in public:
· Offer assurance through a smile or a positive comment;

- Show empathy — imagine yourself in the other person's shoes;
- Offer encouragement — say something positive about the child or adult; or
- Distract and redirect attention away from the stressful situation.

In recognition of April as Child Abuse Prevention Month, Jackson County's Addiction Prevention and Safety Coalition, along with the Jackson County Commissioners, ask for your support for children. Be a positive parent/adult in their lives. Stand up for children, for every child does matter.

Thank you for your support.

Bonnie Traetow
On behalf of
Jackson County's Addiction Prevention and Safety Coalition
Jackson

EDITORIAL POLICY

The Jackson County Pilot welcomes letters to the editor. Letters must include the writer's name, as well as address and phone number for verification purposes. Letters should be brief, up to 300 words. The editor reserves the right to determine whether material submitted for publication shall be printed and the right to edit as needed. Submit letters in person at the Jackson County Pilot office, mail them to 310 Second St. in Jackson or email them to editor@livewireprinting.com. The deadline for letters is Monday noon. All submissions become the property of the Jackson County Pilot and may be published or otherwise used in any medium.

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