

Paying homage to the fallen



David Samson / The Forum

Garry Kjelden from West Fargo places flags along the headstones for Memorial Day at the Fargo National Cemetery in Harwood on Thursday, May 27.

More travel anticipated this Memorial Day in Minnesota

By Matthew Guerry
Forum News Service

ST. PAUL — State health and safety officials are advising Minnesotans to drive and celebrate safely this Memorial Day, as members of the driving public hit the road and get together for the holiday weekend.

Minnesota is entering the high-travel period between Memorial Day and Labor Day as COVID-19 cases decline and vaccinations pile up. The remaining state-level restrictions on indoor capacity were expiring Friday, May 28, just weeks after a statewide mask mandate was rescinded.

If you're fully vaccinated, state Department of Health Infectious Disease Director Kris Ehresmann said this week, then this weekend will be your chance to "really kind of revel in that and have a great weekend with the rest of your family that's fully vaccinated."

Unvaccinated and partially vaccinated Minnesotans are still advised to wear masks and practice socially distancing, Ehresmann said, and will run the risk of catching the disease by attending large gatherings, especially ones held indoors.

It's difficult to predict how many Minnesotans will travel this weekend, whether by car or by plane. The coronavirus pandemic depressed Memorial Day travel somewhat last year and could do so again, though to a lesser extent now that vaccines against COVID-19 are available.

Statewide, there were 20% fewer cars on the road in Minnesota last Memorial Day weekend than would have been typical, according to the state Department of Transportation. In the Twin Cities metro area, traffic was down 40%.

While MNDOT doesn't publish official traffic predictions, spokesperson Anne Meyer said, it

does anticipate a bump this weekend over last year. At the same time, the state Department of Public Safety is warning residents with travel plans to drive safely.

The safety agency said Thursday, May 27, that 158 of the 394 traffic fatalities recorded in Minnesota in 2020 occurred between Memorial Day and Labor Day. That makes last summer the deadliest in a decade for drivers in the state, according to the DPS which noted road deaths are already up 39% over the year from what they were at this point in 2020.

"If driving behaviors don't significantly improve, Minnesotans may face a tragic repeat of last summer," the agency said in a news release.

Nevertheless, Minnesotans may already be planning to get out of town this weekend if state park camp reservations are any indication. "We are at all-time high or at least close to it for overnight occupancy rates," Minnesota Department of Natural Resources spokesperson Rachel Hopper said in an email.

Approximately 93% of park campsites and cabins were booked for the weekend of Tuesday, May 25, Hopper said, compared 89% at this time in 2019, which she said is more common. Being outdoors, at least, "for everyone is just a safer setting in terms of COVID," as Ehresmann pointed out this week.

Nationwide, AAA predicts that 37 million Americans will drive 50 miles or more this weekend, up 60% from last year. That's still 6 million drivers less than what was observed the weekend of Memorial Day 2019, the car insurer said, but represents a rebound from that of 2020, which was the least-travelled since it started keeping records in 2000.

The national average price for a regular gallon of gasoline was up one penny to \$3.04 heading into the weekend, AAA also reported this week, and is likely to fluctuate. By comparison, Minne-

sota averaged a per-gallon price of \$2.84 on Thursday, May 27, up nearly one dollar over the year.

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BRIEF

Fargo VA to host Women Veterans Telephone Town Hall

FARGO — The Fargo Veterans Affairs Health Care System will host a Women Veterans Telephone Town Hall on Tuesday, June 1, from 4 to 5 p.m.

All women veterans, their families and any organization or individual who works with veterans is encouraged

to participate. The town hall is intended to share information about the Fargo VA's services for women, collect feedback and answer questions.

To join the town hall, dial 1-872-701-0185 and enter code 644999623#.

The town hall is hosted by Fargo VA Director Dr. Bret Weintraub and Women Veterans Program Manager Irene Johnson.

For more information, call 701-239-3724.

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Courtesy of the Minnesota Department of Transportation Cars and trucks rumble over Interstate 94 east of Fergus Falls, Minn., on Thursday, May 27.

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