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**MARCH MADNESS:** Section tournaments prove rocky for area winter sports teams. **PAGES 9-10**

## ‘Never let a good crisis go to waste’

### Julia Lines reflects on interesting first year as Isanti County Administrator

BY BILL STICKELS III  
EDITOR@COUNTYSTAR.COM

To say Julia Lines has had an interesting first year as Isanti County Administrator would be the understatement of the century.

The North Branch Area High School graduate and former Human Resources Director for Cambridge-Isanti Schools took on her new position in January, 2020, excited for the challenges this new position would entail. Those challenges, however, quickly escalated to unprecedented heights as she found herself doing on-the-job training in the middle of a global pandemic.

“It has been quite a year. Last early February I was at the Legislative Conference and I was just so excited to be learning what it is county administrators do,” Lines said during the North 65 Chamber of Commerce’s virtual ‘State of the County’ address as she showed a self-professed “dorky selfie” from the conference. “I was down there meeting our Senators and Representatives and

just really making plans to move really slowly and get to know everyone at the county and kinda take things in.”

We all know what happened next. With the rookie administrator in the lead, the county took on all sorts of new roles and responsibilities associated with the pandemic, from distributing CARES Act funding to providing weekly COVID updates, to organizing the distribution of COVID vaccines.

**‘NEVER LET A GOOD CRISIS GO TO WASTE’**

“I do think a number of opportunities came along with the unfortunate pandemic,” she said.

Lines said the primary responsibility of the county is to be the public health resource for the county. “Public Health has worked really closely with the schools, the businesses, the residents of the county,” she said. “To get PPEs where they’re needed, to make plans for reopening.

“But one of the things that became clear to me while we were responding to this pandemic was that there was a

number of organizational challenges within the county,” she continued. “There was just a very old-fashioned, siloed approach to the way that the different departments operated. This is no one’s fault. I don’t want to be making it sound like I’m blaming anyone who previously worked here.”

Lines said she noticed the different departments didn’t really know each other, or what they did. So when they started having to collaborate, it just felt “unnatural.”

“It was glaringly apparent that we needed better collaboration and better experiences within county operations, which will then translate to better customer service for the residents,” she said.

Based on that observation, Lines suggested to the Board of Commissioners they initiate an organizational study. The recommendations from that study indicated the county should streamline their organization from 17 departments



STATE OF ISANTI COUNTY SLIDE PRESENTATION  
**Isanti County Administrator Julia Lines in a self-professed “dorky selfie” at the Legislative Conference in Feb., 2020. Lines had only been in her new position a couple months before the pandemic hit.**

SEE LINES, PAGE 8



BILL STICKELS III | COUNTY STAR

### Slightly modified smores

The Discover Downtown “Third Thursday” event for the month of March featured a slight variation of the old fashioned smores, featuring a roasted marshmallow between two chocolate layered cookies. As the weather gets warmer, future “Third Thursdays” will feature more activities on Main Street, including a couple bands performing as part of the City of Cambridge’s “Concerts in the Park” series.

## Vehicle, train collision results in minor injuries

STAFF REPORT  
NEWS@COUNTYSTAR.COM

Three juveniles are lucky to be alive after avoiding a full-on collision with an oncoming train at a local intersection.

According to a press release from the Isanti County Sheriff’s Office, on March 21 at 7:03 p.m., Emergency Communications received a 911 call of a car that was hit by a train on 299th Ave NE and Jackson Street NE, just north of the City of Isanti.

Upon arrival, deputies found a Chevy Impala that had been traveling westbound on 299th Ave. Accord-

ing to statements from witnesses, the vehicle stopped at the stop sign for the tracks and then proceeded across when it was hit in the rear of the vehicle by the train.

A 16-year-old, who was in the back seat, was transported by Allina EMS to Cambridge Medical Center for minor injuries. The driver and front-seat passenger, who are both 17 years old, were released to their parents with no noticeable injuries.

Because all three victims are minors, their names are not being released. The exact cause of the collision is still under investigation.

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# Lines: Need for reorganization of various departments became clear at start of county's pandemic response

FROM PAGE 1

to "four or five divisions."

## REORGANIZATION

Lines said the first actions taken based on the study's recommendations were to promote Penny Messer to Health and Human Services Division Leader. That division will now be a combination of the Public Health Department and Family Services Department.

"Those services will now be provided under one roof and under one team," Lines said. "We're finding we can provide a more holistic approach to a family in need by knowing these other services that are offered by that other former department."

Additional changes include merging the IT, GIS, and facilities departments into the Central Services Division, under the leadership of former IT Director Travis Martilla.

Chad Struss is in the process of being appointed to Chief Financial Officer - Property and Finance Division. This will be a merger of Assessor, some of Zoning, and Recorder, along with the licensing counter.

"Our hope is to provide more of a one-stop counter for someone who is going to be coming into the county and needing any kind of property services," she said.

Finally, Lines said that an Environmental Division, which will include such things as Parks and Recreation, along with other zoning functions, is in the preliminary stages.

"I'm excited that in the scope of one year, we're making these decisions to move forward and modernize the county services," Lines concluded. "Many of you know, things don't move quickly in government, but we are taking the opportunity to really push forward and take that next step to a mod-

ern process with better customer service at the end of the day."

## CARES ACT MONEY

Lines said the county received \$4.8 million in CARES relief. \$2.9 million of that money went to county infrastructure, including construction and technology upgrades to the courtrooms. \$1 million went to small business relief, with another \$500,000 going to non-profits. \$300,000 went to public schools, and \$100,000 went to individual housing relief through Lakes & Pines.

Included in the small business and non-profit relief were 37 \$10,000 grants in the first round, 41 \$5,000 grants awarded specifically to businesses that were shut down by the governor's order in the second round, and 77 grants of up to \$15,000 in the third round from the state.

Lines said that the county is estimated to get an additional \$7.8 million in relief from the American Rescue Recovery Package recently signed by President Biden. While the exact amount and specifically what this money can or will be used for is unknown, Lines said they will have until December, 2024 to spend it.

## VACCINE CLINICS

Lines said the vaccine clinics, which is currently the primary focus, started out small, in the lower level of the government center. It next expanded to some drive-thru clinics at the Sheriff's Office, and now to a larger-scale clinic at Cambridge Middle School. As of Wednesday, March 17, the county had vaccinated 6,700 people, which comes to about 57% of the population 65 or older. Lines said future locations for the clinics will be at the New Hope Church, along with at the fairgrounds once the weather gets warmer.



GOOGLE MAPS

An open house for those interested in hearing about the reconstruction project for a portion of Main Street in Isanti from Whiskey Road and Fourth Avenue is scheduled for Thursday, March 25, from 5:30 - 6:30 p.m. The city will also hold a public hearing during the April 20 council meeting. The project is expected to run from June through October.

# Isanti Main Street set for reconstruction this summer

BY JENNIFER KOTILA  
NEWS@COUNTYSTAR.COM

A major reconstruction of Main Street in the City of Isanti will take place this summer between Whiskey Road and Fourth Avenue Northwest after the council approved moving forward with the project at its meeting March 16.

A public open house regarding the project will take place Thursday, March 25, from 5:30 - 6:30 p.m., with a public hearing Tuesday, April 20 during the Isanti City Council meeting at 7 p.m. Construction is expected to take place between June and October.

Along with approving moving forward with the Main Street reconstruction project, the council approved moving forward with stormwater improvements at Main Street and Whiskey Road, where water tends to pool due to poor drainage.

The cost of the Main Street reconstruction project is estimated to be approximately \$674,000, according to city engineer Jason Cook of Bolton and Menk. The stormwater improvements are estimated to be approximately \$59,100.

Those living along Main Street where

the construction will be taking place will be assessed for their share of the reconstruction costs. The assessed amount is estimated to be approximately \$64.16 per assessable foot of property, with an average assessment of \$5,662 per property owner. The highest estimated assessment is approximately \$11,549, and the lowest approximately \$3,721.

Funding sources for the project will be state aid (\$674,000) and assessments (\$164,000), according to Cook.

Stormwater utility fund will be for the stormwater improvements at Whiskey Road.

## ODDS AND ENDS

In other business, the council:

- Approved site plans for the new municipal liquor, which will be located at 10 Sixth Avenue Southeast.
- Approved a 10-year street lighting in-fill plan, and the plans for 2021.
- Approved repair and maintenance for well house II.
- Heard the 2021 MS4 annual report.



## ANNUAL MEETING NOTICE FOR OUR MEMBERS

### VOTE IN ELECTION

Cooperative members watch for your 2021 Annual Meeting mailing in early April. Vote online or by mail by April 22. Election Passcode inside mailing needed to vote online. See mailing for eligibility for voting prizes.

### ATTEND VIRTUAL ANNUAL MEETING

Members encouraged to participate in the cooperative's virtual Annual Meeting on April 22 at 4:00 p.m. Go online to sign up at [connexusenergy.com](http://connexusenergy.com) (register by 5:00 p.m. on April 21).

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