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SATURDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2020

North Dakota reports 17 COVID-19 deaths

By Jeremy Turley
Forum News Service

BISMARCK — The North Dakota Department of Health on Thursday, Dec. 24, reported 17 deaths from COVID-19 as the state continues to battle high fatality rates from the virus.

The deaths reported Thursday came almost entirely from the state's most populous areas, including six from Burleigh County, three each from Cass and Grand Forks counties and two from Morton County. The deceased ranged in age from their 60s to 90s.

The department says 1,260 North Dakotans have succumbed to the illness since March. The state is averaging nearly nine deaths per day in December, marking a drop from November when an average of more than 16 North Dakotans died each day. However, the state has the third-highest number of deaths per capita in the country over the course of the pandemic, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

At least 758 of the state's deaths have come in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities. There are 78 infected nursing home residents in the state, down more than 300 from the beginning of the month.

Over the last month and a half, active COVID-19 cases have steadily declined from more than 10,000 on Nov. 12. Now, 2,321 North Dakotans are known to be infected with the virus, down 68 over the last day. COVID-19 hospitalizations rose by four since Wednesday and now sit at 122.

Health care workers have begun receiving their first doses of the newly released COVID-19 vaccine, and nursing home residents will be eligible for their first shots next week. As of Tuesday, Dec. 22, nearly 5,700 doses had been administered and more than 14,000 others had been delivered to the state.

Public health officials have urged North Dakotans to refrain from travel and large gatherings for Christmas and New Year's festivities. The state didn't see

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Eric Hylden / Grand Forks Herald

Polaris employee Kris Ostby works on the ATV line in early October at the company's production facility in Roseau, Minn.

On border, business has been mixed bag

By Ann Bailey and
Brad Dokken
Grand Forks Herald

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is part of the Herald's "On the border" project, which includes multiple stories and a three-part video documentary that can be found at www.grandforksherald.com.

In the months before Gov. Tim Walz restricted indoor dining in Minnesota's bars and restaurants for the second time, Roxy Kulyk didn't need to worry much about social distancing customers at her diner in Lancaster, Minn.

On one chilly October weekday, Foxy Roxy's Diner was nearly empty — except for a small group of local customers — despite a lunch special of fried chicken with all of the fixings.

Foxy Roxy's was hurting, a casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of the U.S.-Canada border. The diner, which usually relies heavily on truckers driving through Lancaster, population 331, on their way to and from Canada, saw a dramatic drop in business since the pandemic prompted the border closure in late March, Kulyk said.

"This is what's killing us," Kulyk said. Kulyk is one of many business owners in northern Minnesota who have struggled from a one-two punch delivered by the closure of the international border and the coronavirus pandemic.

Herald reporters and photographers/videographers traveled

to Lancaster, Roseau, Warroad and the Lake of the Woods area in northwest Minnesota this fall to document the challenges business owners have faced during the first eight months of the pandemic. What the Herald found is that some businesses in that region have struggled, or had to adjust and adapt, due to the border closure. Meanwhile, some businesses there — including Polaris in Roseau and Marvin in Warroad, as well as resorts along the south shore of the lake and even some realtors — were seeing upticks in business as summer turned to autumn.

The pandemic has been especially unkind

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Some have fared well, but others are struggling with border closure



Sydney Mook / Grand Forks Herald

Roxy Kulyk is the owner of Foxy Roxy's Diner in Lancaster, Minn.

ON THE BORDER

The Herald spent time this fall traveling the northern border of northwest Minnesota to find how the pandemic and resulting U.S.-Canada border closure to nonessential travel is affecting business and everyday life. The series includes a three-part video documentary that is available to be viewed on grandforksherald.com, as well as three print stories, following this schedule:

Last Saturday: Life on the lake

Today: Border business

Jan. 2: Border life/hockey

With new info, state's colleges prep for spring

By Sydney Mook
Grand Forks Herald

As North Dakota's colleges and universities anxiously await the coronavirus vaccine, higher education leaders across the state are preparing to go into the spring semester with a wealth of knowledge and learning from the past nine months.

"We need to maintain playing defense, but we're getting ready to go on offense with the vaccine," said Nick Hacker, chair of the State Board of Higher Education, which oversees the state's 11 public institutions.

The state board made the decision in late April to bring students back to campuses for some form



Eric Hylden / Grand Forks Herald

UND President Andrew Armacost speaks to the Herald during an editorial board meeting in February 2020, a few months prior to the start of his presidency.

of in-person learning this fall. In

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Merry Christmas

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Eric Hylden / Grand Forks Herald

Nathan Hanson, director of operations at Polaris in Roseau, Minn.

Nathan Hanson, operations manager for the Polaris factory in Roseau.

As the Star Tribune reported, the Medina, Minn.-based company's earnings of \$166.8 million were up 90% over the third quarter of 2019, and sales for the quarter ending Sept. 30 increased 10% to \$2 billion.

Demand for Polaris products has been "extremely strong" since the shutdown, Hanson said, driven by an appetite to recreate outside.

"As we started back up, we saw just incredible demand for our product," Hanson said.

Speaking for Roseau specifically, Hanson said he didn't necessarily expect that demand, when Polaris reopened in April; recession certainly was on peoples' minds.

"I think your mind went back to 2008-2009, so we didn't know, and we were preparing for, kind of bracing for, what might be the worst and had that plan in place," Hanson said. "Ironically, we came out and saw the opposite. And really, we've been chasing that potential upside ever since that point."

During a mid-October interview, Hanson said Polaris in Roseau would like to hire another 60 employees to augment its workforce of about 1,400 in an effort to meet the continued strong demand for Polaris products.

"There's nothing better to socially distance than riding a Polaris four-wheeler or riding a Ranger or going out in the woods," Hanson said. "When you think about it that way, you can really understand why people are so interested in our products and using them in this environment."

Banding together

Throughout the pandemic, Hanson said people in Roseau have "banded together" to help each other, whether it be ordering takeout food to keep the restaurants going or encouraging residents to patronize small businesses.

Polaris, for example, has

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to Foxy Roxy's Diner. Besides a drop in the number of customers who used to frequent the diner each day, the pandemic and border closure has crimped Kulyk's ability to host the events, such as parties, she previously did to supplement her income.

Even if Gov. Walz rescinds or adjusts his order about indoor dining, it's likely Kulyk's troubles will remain until the border closure is lifted. That is, if it is lifted anytime in the near future, Kulyk said.

Since the border closure, even the morning coffee crowd has been a casualty of the pandemic. For years, tables of six to 14 customers sat at three tables shaking dice to see who paid for coffee. Now, because the dice would have to be sanitized after every shake, those coffee drinkers stopped coming.

Adding to the frustration, Kulyk has to buy disposable dinnerware and condiments, which must be thrown away whether used by a customer or not. Ordering food is a problem, too. Kulyk said she is limited in the kinds of meals she can prepare because some of the usual food she orders just isn't available.

Losses mount

A few blocks from the diner, Bergstrom Oil also has seen a drop in traffic. Pre-pandemic, the service station's convenience store derived half of its business from Canadian customers, said Charlie Bergstrom, who has worked in the family business since 1990.

Besides the reduction in convenience store customers, the family-owned company, which has been in business in Lancaster since 1936, also has lost sales of gasoline, mechanical work on Motor Coach Industries buses and no longer can deliver parcels to Canada.

The work of mounting

and balancing tires for the bus company in Winnipeg has been cut by about 50%, Bergstrom said. The border closure also stymied Bergstrom Oil's work on Canadian farmers' tractor tires this past summer.

The combination of revenue losses adds up, Bergstrom said.

"It pretty much stinks," he said "Everything is up in the air. I don't know when everything will end."

In October, Bergstrom said he had reduced hours to offset the service station's drop in business and used a \$39,000 PPP - Payroll Protection Program - loan he received for payroll. Keeping the nine full-time employees working at Bergstrom Oil was a priority, according to Bergstrom.

"I don't like to lay off; everyone we have here is valuable," he said.

Back on Lancaster's main street, Carol Johnson, Lancaster city clerk-treasurer, said limitations put on events in public places have put a dent in the town's revenue reserves.

The city, which rents its large meeting room to wedding receptions and other celebrations as a source of

income, had to stop doing that in February. Since then, groups of only 45 people or fewer have been allowed to gather in the city meeting room.

The city also has seen a drop at its city-owned liquor store as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and border closure. The city campground, where usually a dozen Canadian recreational vehicles park during the summer, also lost business as a result of the border closure, Johnson said.

The lack of Canadian customers didn't only result in reduced revenue for the city, but also some of its businesses.

"Those 12 families weren't here spending money at our grocery store and gas store," Johnson said, noting that Vintage Plus, another Lancaster small business that depended on the Canadian traffic, permanently closed its doors during the summer of 2020.

"It's been tough on a lot of businesses," said Lancaster Lumber owner Luke Nordin, adding that the challenge is getting the products he needs to get construction projects completed on time. The lead time for ordering supplies has

increased from two weeks to eight to 12, Nordin said.

Shingles, siding, windows and particleboard are among the products he sees being delayed.

A major siding provider is backed up for months, he said.

"Some of the stuff we ordered in August, they said they wouldn't produce until January," Nordin said.

The prices of building supplies also have risen during the pandemic. Nordin was fortunate that he ordered a lot of supplies in June.

Still, finishing his projects on time is challenging, and Nordin said he is grateful that most customers have been understanding about delays.

"So far, we've had a lot of projects going on, and only a few have decided to wait it out until spring," Nordin said.

Boom times at Polaris

Business remains strong for the region's largest manufacturers, such as Polaris Industries in Roseau, Minn. The factory weathered the storm of the pandemic and a three-week shutdown in mid-March and continues to seek new workers to meet demand for its products, said

WINTER CAR CARE

Pro tips for facing frosty roads

Winter tune-up checklist

This winter, consider asking your mechanic to provide a complete tune-up. This will help ensure that your car runs smoothly all season long. Though your specific car's servicing needs will depend on its model, features and age, mechanics generally inspect the following components during a tune-up:

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- Battery
- Spark plugs
- Belts
- Steering and suspension
- Filters
- Brakes
- Engine
- Fluid levels (engine oil, coolant, brake fluid, etc.)
- Headlights and brake lights
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given “Roseau Dough” promotional dollars to employees as a reward for quality work or safety records, Hanson said.

“We don’t want to lose any of our businesses in town,” he said. “I think as you drive through Roseau today, you see the Tractor Supply in the old Shopko building, you see the new Cenex and Burger King, which is just beautiful.

“So, there is a lot of positive growth in Roseau.”

Still, there is a lingering concern that the pandemic has permanently changed shopping habits in favor of online retailers such as Amazon, according to Mary Hoffer, promotions director for the city of Roseau.

That was apparent in mid-May, when Gov. Walz lifted the order that had required all but essential businesses to close during the first two months of the pandemic.

“When the stores were able to open back up in May, they expected people to be at their doors waiting to come in and shop, but that didn’t happen,” Hoffer said. “I think people have gotten in the habit of ordering online – I hate to say it.”

No doubt that’s hurt, Hoffer says, but it’s not all doom and gloom.

“I think the businesses in town have really done a good job of flexing and flowing after the initial shock of being shut down,” Hoffer said. “I think the majority of the businesses are like, ‘OK, we’re going to have to be creative here and think of ways.’”



Workers at Lake of the Woods Coffee in Warroad, Minn., wear face masks or face shields during working hours.

Positive signs in Warroad

In Warroad, Minn., 20 miles to the east on state Highway 11, Drew Parsley is seeing delays getting supplies for the 67-room Hampton Inn he is building with his partner, Jon Waibel, a Lake of the Woods County commissioner who lives near Baudette, Minn., and their project developer, JIJ Management.

The developers broke ground on the \$9 million Warroad hotel in October 2019, seeing a need for lodging to host the snowmobilers, hunters, anglers and hockey players and families who travel to Warroad, Roseau and Baudette for recreation.

The project hasn’t had to shut down because of delays in getting supplies, but the targeted date for completion was

delayed from October to December, Parsley said.

“We’ve had a very rough, rocky start to this,” according to Parsley, who said he has no intention of not completing the project.

“We’re going to plow through this thing and make it happen, no matter what,” Parsley said

Across state Highway 11, on a busy corner, Lake of the Woods Coffee owner Aimee Roberts is confident her new business, which opened its drive-thru in July, will be successful, despite the pandemic.

Roberts and her family have owned an online engraving business since 2015 and decided to expand it to include a brick-and-mortar location in two years. Roberts, with the help of Scott Marvin, her dad, bought and remodeled an old gas station into the coffee shop. Besides

the coffee, she sells beverages, food and specialty products that include laser-engraved items.

Opening the drive-thru in July allowed the business to work out the kinks and, at the same time, keep employees and customers safe, Roberts said.

“Opening the drive-thru only was a blessing for us,” she said.

Since opening the building earlier this fall, she’s been pleased with the traffic, Roberts said.

“We’ve seen great

success. We continue to add to our menu. We’ve added employees. We draw from a pretty large community, not just Warroad. It’s just been so well-received. We feel very blessed to be in this small community that always shows up and always supports,” she said.

Daisy Gardens cafe owner Khahn Duong also credits Warroad community members and the town’s Community Development

organization with helping his business survive the pandemic. Duong moved his restaurant, which serves American and Asian food, from a building along Highway 11 to its current location downtown during the pandemic.

“When I reopened, the community helped,” Duong said.

Funding from Warroad Community Development LLC, helped him pay for remodeling the downtown building, he said.

Besides Lake of the Woods Coffee, several other businesses – Sip Sap, Algoma Eatery and Tavern, Annie’s Trading Post, Vientiane Lao and Thai and Boba Cottage – opened in Warroad during the pandemic.

That’s a testimony to the support that community members and organizations, such as Warroad Community Development LLC and Warroad Community Development Hub, give to start-ups, said Cyndy Renfrow, Warroad Community Development LLC’s executive director.

The support from the two organizations gives entrepreneurs the confidence to open their businesses in Warroad, she said.

“I think they believe in the vision, that they really want to be part of it,” Renfrow said.

“The businesses and

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the community are pretty resilient” said Bob Marvin, Warroad mayor. “I think everybody pulls together.”

Going strong

Meanwhile, established Warroad businesses, such as Marvin, the window and door manufacturer, and Doug’s Supermarket, have maintained their strong presence in the community during the pandemic.

Marvin employs slightly more than 1,800 people in Warroad, about 1,500 of whom work at the factory in Warroad and the remaining 300 in offices in town. Though the company closed early in the pandemic, and April and May were rough months, the company weathered the storm, said Rick Trontvet, Marvin Windows Co. senior vice president, human resources.

Now, demand for Marvin products not only has recovered, but has improved, Trontvet said. The summer and fall construction seasons were busier this year than normal because “do-it-yourselfers” did projects during the pandemic.

It’s just another example of the strong manufacturing base that has helped northwest Minnesota withstand the pandemic as well as it has.

“The windows and doors industry has really done well,” Trontvet said. “Now we’re in the middle of needing lots of employees here. ... We need to staff up, not just here, but all over the country.”

Marvin has 6,180 employees in 12 factories in cities across the United States, including Grafton, N.D., Fargo and Northwood, Iowa.



Eric Hylden / Grand Forks Herald

Chuck Lindner, owner of Doug’s Supermarket in Warroad, Minn.

“The windows and doors industry has really done well. Now we’re in the middle of needing lots of employees here. ... We need to staff up, not just here, but all over the country.”

RICK TRONTVET, Marvin Windows Co.

The company has offered a variety of incentives to encourage people to work at Marvin.

“We have to think outside the box: plant pay increases, commuter bonuses at all levels,” Trontvet said.

As Warroad’s largest employer, a healthy Marvin company has a positive effect on the community.

“What’s good for us is good for the local economy,” he said.

As 2020 draws to a close, Trontvet is confident that, despite the pandemic, Marvin will have a profitable year and pass that on to its employees.

“We’ve already announced we will be sharing profits,” he said in October.

At Doug’s Supermarket, owner Chuck Lindner also has taken creative steps to maintain and grow his business during the pandemic. Lindner also owns a Doug’s Supermarket in Baudette and will open one in Pine River, Minn., in August 2021. He also owns a liquor store two miles west of Warroad.

“The way we did business had to change,” Lindner said, noting that the grocery store reduced hours and increased its sanitizing measures. It also started curbside pickup and, with the help of the local ministerial association, twice-weekly delivery to older customers who live outside of town.

Meanwhile, the grocery store sells specialty smoked meats, has a

Caribou coffee franchise and sells Kreative Kernel popcorn, made fresh in the store.

Lindner, who has owned the Warroad grocery store with his sister since 2004 and the Baudette store since 2015, constantly is searching ideas to increase market share. For example, the grocery store sells organic produce and natural foods.

“You kind of learn what works and what doesn’t,” he said. “When you’re the only store in town, you have to be something for everyone.”

Early in the pandemic, the number of customers visiting the store declined, but the sales per customer rose, Lindner said.

One of the challenges

he’s faced during the pandemic is a shortage of some products.

“We’re still struggling to keep our shelves filled with high-demand items,” Lindner said.

As a way to reach out to customers who don’t feel comfortable coming into his store to shop, Lindner is developing an app through which customers can order their groceries, he said as he sat at a desk under a plaque that reads: “Tough times don’t last. Tough people do.”

If the saying is true, Foxy Roxy’s Diner in Lancaster will be staying the course.

Kulyk, the diner’s owner, said that because of the loss of Canadian traffic, COVID-19 safety protocols and limitations on the food she can get, her business is “hanging on by a thread,” but she will continue working six days a week, 17 hours a day in an effort to keep the diner afloat.

“I just keep drinking coffee and keep going,” Kulyk said.

BRIEF

Man accused of smashing Hoeven’s Fargo office windows with ax

FARGO — Cass County prosecutors have filed charges against a man accused of vandalizing the Fargo office of Sen. John Hoeven, R-N.D., this week.

According to court documents, Thomas Alexander Starks is charged with criminal mischief for willfully causing \$2,000-\$10,000 of damage to property, a Class C felony.

On Monday, Dec. 21, the windows and an intercom system at Hoeven’s office in downtown Fargo were smashed. The smashed window was discovered Monday morning around 9 a.m. Security video provided by the Fargo Police Department shows a man walking up the stairs to the skyway before striking Hoeven’s office windows with what appears to be an ax.

The incident is under investigation by Fargo police and the U.S. Capitol Police, the federal law enforcement agency tasked with protecting members of Congress.

Starks’ age and city of residence were not immediately available Thursday, Dec. 24.

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