

IN LOCAL & STATE, B1
SHELTER SEEKS NEW HOME



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DAKOTA STORIES

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MAVERICKS WIN IN OVERTIME

TODAY'S OBITUARIES

- Dennis Benda
- Terrance F. Larson

MORE ONLINE

Motive behind Jan. 6 hard to pin down

BOSTON — There's little doubt the Oath Keepers were planning for something on Jan. 6. The question at the heart of the criminal case against its members and associates in the attack on the U.S. Capitol is: What, exactly, did they intend to do?

Authorities suggested for weeks in court hearings and papers that members of the far-right militia group plotted their attack in advance in an effort to block the peaceful transition of power. But prosecutors have since said it is not clear whether the group was targeting the Capitol before Jan. 6.

"The plan was to unlawfully stop the certification of the Electoral College vote ... and the plan was to be prepared to use violence if necessary," Assistant U.S. Attorney Kathryn Rakoczy said during a hearing this month.

Read more at mankatofreepress.com

LOTTERY

Saturday's Daily 3
4-0-8

Friday's Gopher 5
2-5-30-39-44

Saturday's Powerball
6-14-38-39-65 and 6

Saturday's Lotto America
3-23-35-50-51 and 10

Saturday's Northstar Cash
10-21-23-27-28

Friday's Mega Millions
4-25-37-46-67 and 15

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WEATHER, PAGE B10

Partly sunny

High around 50. Low around 42.



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Mankato, Minnesota

STRONG FINISH

2020 a surprisingly good year for much of the local economy



Pat Christman

Ted Evans, general manager at Mankato Ford, said the bottom fell out of sales last March but steadily increased beginning late summer. While overall vehicle sales in Mankato were down 8% last year, dealers see a strong 2021.

Lots of building going on, vehicle sales rebound

By Tim Krohn

tkrohn@mankatofreepress.com

MANKATO — Despite the blow to many businesses in 2020 — particularly those in entertainment and leisure — the regional economy held up surprisingly well by many measurements.

The city of Mankato's local sales tax collections were down slightly compared to 2019, but the drop was less than the city was bracing for. And the valuation of all building permits issued by the city was up — \$107 million compared to \$106.5 million the previous year.

Total vehicle sales in Mankato slipped more than 8%, as the pandemic stay-at-home order last spring put a pause on buying before sales began rebounding in late summer.

As expected, the local tax the city collects on lodging and on food and beverages dropped sharply.

Parker Skophammer, director of administrative services for the city, said the food and beverage tax collection was down nearly 20% while the lodging tax was down 49%. He said the final figures were in line with projections city staff made last summer after the pandemic hit.

But he said the 2.6% decline in local sales tax collections last year was better than anticipated. The city collected \$5.2 million in sales tax in 2020.

"We were pleasantly surprised at the end of the year," Skophammer said.

He said that as staff kept updating projections and informing the

Please see ECONOMY, Page A5



Pat Christman

Mankato Ford and other dealerships are seeing better sales but are still dogged by shortages and delays in parts and vehicles.

Mankato vehicle sales

	2019	2020
January	1,033	1,039
February	896	925
March	833	638
April	1,156	801
May	1,077	913
June	1,168	1,112
July	842	1,032
August	1,492	1,249
September	1,065	1,057
October	912	1,033
November	1,001	989
December	1,219	860
Total	12,694	11,648

Source: city of Mankato

Township puts hold on arrays

By Mark Fischenich

mfischenich@mankatofreepress.com

MANKATO — A surge in solar arrays just north of Mankato has prompted Lime Township to put a moratorium on the green power developments.

Impact Power Solutions gained approval of a pair of 1-megawatt community solar gardens in Lime Township last month and also purchased land for a third within Mankato city limits on the city's far north side. The latest proposal is another 1-megawatt community solar garden in the township near the junction of Lime Valley Road and Third Avenue/Blue Earth County Road 5.

Township Supervisor Rick Resch appears to be reaching his solar limit.

"I'm a believer in solar, but I'm not a believer in solar on every single parcel in every single place," Resch

Please see ARRAYS, Page A5

State hits new vaccine record

The Free Press and MPR News

Newly reported coronavirus cases dipped slightly Saturday across south-central Minnesota as state health officials reported the highest ever daily number of vaccine doses administered.

Data released Saturday by the Minnesota Department of Health included nearly 78,000 additional vaccine doses. That's the highest single-day total yet as the state prepares to open vaccine eligibility to anyone age 16 and over.

State health officials say they are racing to get shots into arms before new variants of the virus cause a surge in cases. They believe as many as half of recent infections are from the U.K. strain.

Please see COVID, Page A5

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ECONOMY: 'A number of new investments coming in 2021'

Continued from Page A1

City Council last year, budgets were adjusted to account for less revenue coming in, and he doesn't foresee having to make any significant adjustments this year.

Investments strong

John Considine of Greater Mankato Growth said he was pleased to see that the amount of investments by the region's primary sector — manufacturing, distribution, logistics — doubled in 2020 compared to 2019. "It is good to see that primary sector doing well. They're typically producing something and selling it outside the community. The primary sector generally brings new money into our community and it circulates into the community."

GMG is just finishing up its Pipeline Report, which measures investments made, including new or expanded buildings, utilities' expansions, solar arrays and infrastructure. The report compiles data from Mankato, North Mankato, St. Peter, Lake Crystal and Eagle Lake. (The report will be available on GMG's website.)

There was nearly \$12 million in primary sector investments last year, compared to more than \$5 million in 2019. Some big investments came from a \$6.6 million expansion by MTU Onsite Energy and a \$2 million addition at Creative Company in North Mankato.

While overall investments in the region slipped in 2020, to \$80 million, Considine said it was still a strong showing.

While restaurants and many retail businesses saw revenues hit last year, there was still a lot of investments in buildings, Considine said.

"The retail economy (investments) actually doubled as well. There was new construction and some retail establishments took time to do remodeling," Considine said.

A new \$2.1 million Kwik Trip on Monks Avenue, a \$2 million Store It building on Bassett Drive and a new \$3.5 million Comfort Inn in North Mankato helped lift investments in the retail sector to \$12.4 million last

year, compared to \$5 million in 2019.

Considine said he's hearing promising things for the coming year.

"The public partners have all said they're expecting 2021 to be substantially better. People have a lot of great ideas and they have a number of new investments coming in 2021."

He said GMG is aware of at least eight development projects in the pipeline that could start this year or next. They include a plan for a new downtown Hy-Vee that could include apartments above, a plan to turn the former downtown post office into mixed-use space with a new hotel built adjacent, a plan to reuse the former Shopko building along Madison Avenue, as well as other potential projects downtown and near Old Town.

Vehicle sales rebound

The sale of cars, trucks and SUVs fell 8% in Mankato in 2020, but sales built steadily late last year and into this year.

"A year ago at this time the bottom fell out," said Ted Evans, general manager at Mankato Ford. "March and April were tough months and then things started to tick up on the sales side. Through the rest of the year it really kept growing and growing."

He said this March looks to double sales from last March at Mankato Ford.

Evans said the service and quick oil change business stayed fairly normal throughout last year.

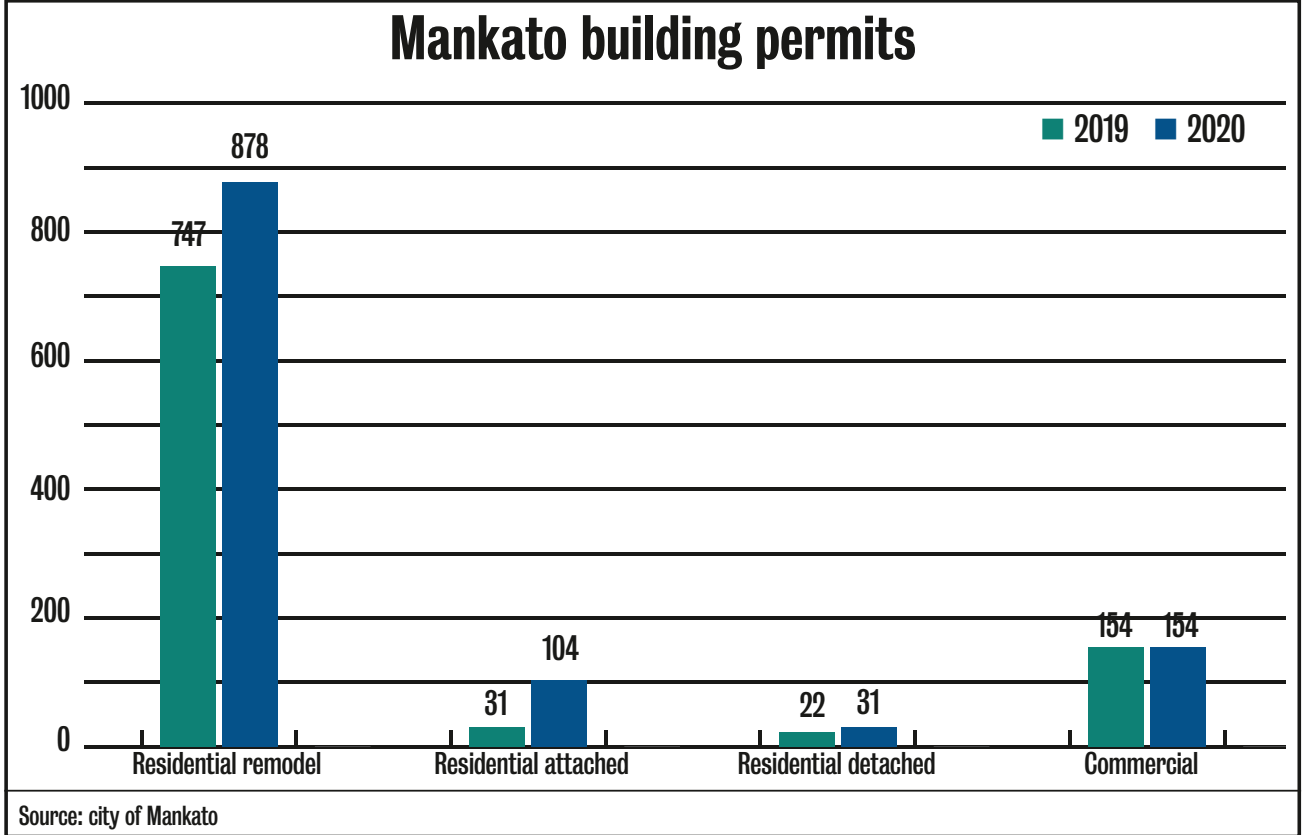
He said things look strong moving forward. "People's attitudes are really good and we're getting more people vaccinated. It's quite a different story from a year ago."

Auto dealers continue to be dogged by shortages and delays in getting parts and new vehicles as manufacturers try to catch up.

"We may be feeling that for a while," Evans said.

He said they are having people pick the exact vehicle and options they want and they put in an order with the manufacturer. "We're having pretty good turnaround time with that."

Evans said cars continue



Source: city of Mankato

to be a diminishing part of sales, with the F150 pickups very strong. "And the super-duty trucks we can't keep in stock."

Build, build, build

Based on the number and value of remodeling and construction permits issued, Mankato saw surprisingly solid growth during the 2020 pandemic.

The total value of all permits issued by the city was up just a bit in 2020.

While the total number of commercial permits issued by the city was steady from 2019 to 2020, the number of permits for residential remodeling and for new home construction was up significantly.

Randy Dinsmore, project coordinator for Goodrich Construction, said they couldn't keep up with remodeling jobs.

"We had more work than we could handle. That's been true for quite some time. There was some interruption last spring so there was some drop (in sales), but we came out of 2020 pretty well. Certainly better than those in entertainment."

Goodrich focuses on residential remodels along with some commercial renovations.

"The average size job was down slightly last year but not a lot," Dinsmore said.

"With the warmer weather this spring we're seeing the sales start a little earlier than usual."

Major projects permitted in 2020

Multiple family dwellings:

- 81-unit multiple family dwelling building (Ecumen, Mound Avenue) — (\$13,929,436) market rate, memory care
- 62-unit multiple family dwelling building (Pondview apartments, Adams Street) — (\$10,000,000) market rate
- Studio 5 commercial/19 rental units (507 N Riverfront Drive) (\$2,365,000) market rate, mixed use
- Club house for apartment complex (Tailwind, Timberwolf Drive) — (\$1,320,000)
- Roosevelt apartment footing/foundation (\$400,000)
- Colonial Square remodel, parking lot (300 Ramsey Street) (\$4,622,747) affordable units

Commercial:

- Dance studio (APX, St. Andrews Drive) — (\$550,000)
- Convenience store (Kwik Trip, Monks Avenue) — (\$2,100,000)
- Bridge Plaza tenant buildout (\$775,000)
- Hyland dental clinic (Independence Prairie Winds) (\$1,170,328)

Industrial:

- Office expansion (Big Land, Summit Avenue) — (\$500,000)
- Community solar garden (Sakatah Industrial Park, 175 Sakatah Drive) (\$1,400,000)
- MTU America, Inc. (100 Power Drive) \$6,600,000

Medical/educational/government:

- Mayo Health Systems remodel radiology desk area (\$600,000)
- Mayo Health Systems remodel radiology area (\$1,878,607)

Source: city of Mankato

Total permits issued and valuation of permits

	2019	2020
Total permits issued	1,921	2,253
Valuation of work	\$106,461,873	\$106,989,970

Source: city of Mankato

Ag rebounds

The agriculture sector, which fuels a large part of the region's economy, started 2020 on shaky ground but began coming back strong late last year as exports increased and corn and soybean prices have

risen to their highest point in six years.

The annual State of Ag report released this week by GreenSeam, a division of GMG, shows optimism among farmers and other agribusinesses.

An overwhelming 92% of those surveyed said they

believe the state of agriculture is headed in the right direction, up from just 16% the previous year.

Forecasting the change of their business in the next year, 60% reported they foresee growth, while only 12% think their business will decline.

COVID: Nearly 17% of Minnesotans are now fully vaccinated

Continued from Page A1

The percentage of Minnesotans who are at least partially vaccinated has climbed another point to 28%.

Regional rates of at least partial vaccination vary from under 26% in Le Sueur and Sibley counties to over 34% in Brown

County.

Nearly 17% of Minnesotans are now fully vaccinated.

The daily average vaccination number over the past week has climbed to more than 42,500 — the highest that's been in nearly two weeks, and a welcome change from days of relatively flat vaccination

numbers.

But the seven-day rolling average of new COVID cases reported each day also went up, to about 1,374 — the highest that number has been since Jan. 18. The number of active cases in Minnesota also is the highest it's been in more than two months.

There were over 1,700

more confirmed and probable cases across the state, bringing the total since the start of the pandemic to nearly 514,000.

The nine-county Free Press coverage area combined for 61 newly confirmed cases Saturday, down from 80 on Friday and 87 on Saturday. The state reported another

five suspected but not yet confirmed cases.

Brown County led the region in cases for a second consecutive day.

Confirmed cases by county were:

- Brown County: 13
- Blue Earth County: 9
- Nicollet County: 8
- Le Sueur County: 8
- Watonwan County: 8

- Waseca County: 7
- Faribault County: 4
- Martin County: 2
- Sibley County: 2

The region is nearing 22,000 known cases since the start of the pandemic.

There were no more COVID-19 deaths in the region and four across Minnesota to bring the statewide toll to 6,825.

ARRAYS: Latest IPS solar garden set for approval, not bound by moratorium

Continued from Page A1

said last week at a meeting of the Mankato Planning Commission, which also serves as the Lime Township Planning Commission. "So I just want to pause for real thinking and consideration of — does this fit the property?"

The latest IPS solar garden was already in line for approval when the Lime Township Board passed the interim ordinance shutting off any new community solar gardens as it decides what sorts of permanent restrictions to put in place. Because of that, the board stated that the pending IPS project would not be bound by the moratorium.

The Planning Commission agreed unanimously, recommending the Township Board approve the project, albeit with a lengthy list of conditions.

Several neighbors are

opposed to the solar array, which will be made up of about 3,800 photovoltaic panels placed on a portion of a 7.3-acre parcel owned by Tim Vetter.

The opposition centered on the appearance of the array, partly because the rows of panels will sit just east of the federally designated Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway, which follows Third Avenue/Blue Earth County Road 5/Le Sueur County Road 21 between Mankato and Kasota.

Cindi Baker, who owns one of the roughly 30 homes within a half-mile of the planned array, described the area as befitting a scenic byway designation.

"It's unique. It's beautiful. (A solar array) should not be there," Baker said. "... Go find a 40-acre parcel in the back where nobody can see it — not a national scenic byway."

Associate Director of Planning Mark Konz said the scenic byway designation doesn't carry any enforcement powers prohibiting what develops along it, although one of the conditions placed on IPS is that it submit "a viewshed analysis and provide a plan to minimize visual impacts" to the byway. Konz also noted that it might be difficult for the township to suddenly reject a proposed development because of the scenic byway designation after previously approving numerous residential, commercial and industrial projects along the route.

Patrick Wier of IPS said the Roseville-based company already has made significant changes to its plans that "go above and beyond" the two similar-size projects approved by the township in February near Highway 22 north of Mankato.

Black Hills spruce and Austrian spruce will be planted between public roads and the array — 26 on the eastern side near Lime Valley Road, 40 on the north side near the junction of Lime Valley and Third Avenue, and about 50 on the western side along Third Avenue. The trees were doubled on the latter side to address the concerns related to the scenic byway and homeowner views.

"On that side, you'll have a tree every 8 feet," Wier said. "So as they grow, you'd just have a continuous block."

Wier said Vetter, the landowner, also persuaded IPS to supply prairie grass seed for the area between the trees and Third Avenue, which Vetter has committed to plant and care for.

Vetter, who said the tall prairie grass also should

help block the view of the solar panels, portrayed the income from the solar project as important to his transition into retirement. But he pledged to continue to be a good neighbor.

"It's a little different view than what the people might be used to," Vetter said. "We've all been in the neighborhood long enough, they'll know I'll do everything I can to mitigate this project and the view as they drive by."

Baker wasn't placated by the promised plantings, which also will include pollinator-friendly wildflowers within the solar array itself.

"Plant the trees, plant the grass, but there's still a solar garden there," she said.

The Lime Township Board is expected to make a final decision on the project at its April 13 meeting. IPS hopes to start construc-

tion that same month with completion by December.

Along with the three rural solar arrays in Lime Township, a spate of arrays are popping up within city limits after the city sold nearly 80 acres of land on its north side in the past five years for a series of community solar gardens.

Community solar gardens, which were created by a 2013 Minnesota law, allow individuals and organizations to support solar energy even if they don't have the property or financing to install photovoltaic panels on their own. Under the law, solar developers are required to sell subscriptions to their solar gardens to individuals, local governments and organizations, and Xcel Energy is required to purchase the electricity produced by the arrays and reimburse subscribers via discounted utility bills.