

Board of Education

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Creating butterfly habitat was just one example mentioned.

•Creating a Kerkhoven to Murdock trail further connects the two school buildings. “Towns thrive off of schools,” said Dave Barrett.

•The Trailblazers plan would fit right into an overall recreational plan, said Nelson, leading to ballfields, the swimming pool, golf course and library. Circumstances like that can lead to teacher retention. “It’s the kind of thing people look for in living here,” she said.

Wilts made the motion to support the letter of intent, and all members voted in favor.

Enrollment report

As was noted at the September board meeting, enrollment continues to climb at KMS. At Monday’s meeting superintendent Martin Heidelberg reports the count at the beginning of October was up by two more students, to a total of 781 in k-12. Additionally, he said there were 70 preschoolers, split between the Kerkhoven building and the Sunburg Community Center.

Wilts asked if there was a need for more resources in some of the larger elementary classes, those with 25 or more students. Heidelberg said that by the latter elementary grades the classes are starting to ‘section out’ to specialists in various areas of study. Larger

numbers in the primary grades are why the district brought in a full time interventionist this year. “We want a solid foundation there for sure.”

COVID questions

Wilts said he had gotten a few calls with questions he couldn’t answer. Specifically he was asking about the district’s COVID-19 policy. How does it work when one member a family has the virus?

Heidelberg explained that if there is COVID in a household, that person should be isolating while the siblings quarantine.

“There’s been some grumbling, but overall it’s been good,” he said about the policy. Quarantines are to last 10-14 days, but Heidelberg added that they are not out searching for cases, that parents are providing the information.

Further, if a ‘close contact’ has been established (letters are sent to parents), it is up to the individual families whether or not to quarantine.

Board chairman Jeremy Winter, noting some of the confusion around the district’s COVID-19 procedures, said communication is vital, and “challenged us all to do better.”

“We need to make sure school is safe for our teachers as well as for students,” he added.

In other business

•November 1 was set as the date for a board work session, from 6:00-9:00 p.m. There will be a third party facilitator, said Wilts, and the Strategic Plan will be on topic. Discussion may include the facilities, inside and out, a demographics study, and more. Like nearly all KMS board sessions, this meeting is open to the public.

•Heidelberg reported that a driver’s education accident had totalled out the school van. “It’s no longer drivable,” he said. There were no injuries.

Insurance will pay replacement value, but Wilts thought it might be more wise to look into a new vehicle considering the high price and lack of availability of used.

•High school principal Ted Brown was asked if it was difficult to find substitute teachers, and Wilts said the school might want to consider hiring full time teachers just to fill those slots. “Bring a plan,” Wilts said. “Think big.”

Heidelberg said that a statewide shortage of workers had affected schools as well, and that developing teachers from within the community would be a benefit. Elementary principal Jeff Keil said word of mouth has seemed to work best for finding teachers, and that it’s been challenging.

•KMS will host a flu and



KMS High School in Kerkhoven.

COVID vaccine clinic. “We’re not forcing anybody,” said Keil as he made that announcement. This clinic will be open to anyone 12 years of age and older. Carris Health will run the clinic, which will be held Wednesday, October 20.

Along the same subject, Wilts asked Keil if school nurse Jana Smith had been “buffered” from some of the nasty phone calls such as she had received last year over the COVID protocols. Yes, an-

swered Keil. “She says, ‘Jeff, can you take this one?’”

•The school dress code was addressed briefly, with Winter saying it should be updated and more equitable for both genders. “I’d like to see a group discussion.” That said, Wilts added that some of the sports uniforms may not be appropriate.

“Board member Sean Collins said he felt the dress code should reflect dignity for the person wearing the clothing

and for those around him or her. “They don’t need that distraction.”

“I’m not advocating for fishnet stockings,” Winter responded.

Wilts suggested that there should be some parent education to go along with the dress code. “The school shouldn’t be the parents,” replied Collins.

“We’re not here to parent,” answered Wilts, “but we are here to enforce the handbook.”

KMS COVID-19 protocols

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The 2021-2022 document is highly structured. Model 1 of the two pronged approach emphasized, “Create as much space between people as possible throughout the school day,” beginning with the arrival of students, hallway traffic pattern, and ending with bus departure.

It was natural for KMS schools to release a less restrictive plan ahead of the 2021-2022 school year; many schools across the U.S opened doors this fall with fewer restrictions, mainly due to the widespread availability of the vaccines.

Principal Keil said the plan has prompted some to believe the COVID-19 pandemic is over. This was not because of the plan itself--Keil said society has to move forward--but rather the response to the plan. “As much as we want to return to normal, we don’t know what normal is. We’re still in a pandemic, and I think some of the thinking and coherence has been lost. We’re not back to normal. Until we don’t put out a sheet, it’s not normal.”

While the 2020-2021 plan took a thou-shall-do approach,

the 2021-2022 model is based on trust.

“The district says to go take a test if don’t feel well. Mr. Heidelberg has bought a number of test kits in order to better serve the community,” Keil said. “I will sing Mr. Heidelberg’s praises. We are sending out emails, notifications about possible exposure.”

With cases rising in Swift County and in the schools, KMS schools released another sheet for the month of September. This sheet provides more information that will allow parents to better screen their children before the school day. In bold, the following appears: “It is important that everyone complete this screening every day.”

According to the September 2021 sheet, students are to be kept home if they have one ‘More Common Symptom’ or if they have come into close contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19.

Superintendent Heidelberg said the virus is still very much with us, citing the importance of parents cooperating with protocol and all

adjustments made, as the year continues. Parents have been supportive, and teachers have been great, according to the superintendent.

“Certainly we’re hoping for respite, a break. We keep pushing out letters. But we’ve sent out fewer letters in the last week or so. Hopefully that will continue,” superintendent Heidelberg said.

On moving from the 2020-2021 COVID-19 plan to the 2021-2022 plan, on establishing new routines, the superintendent said, “It’s been noted by teachers and students--that it’s been challenging at times. But learning can be hard work. I think teachers have done a nice job supporting students.”

The case numbers reported at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year correspond with the rise in cases in Swift County.

Case numbers

In early October, to find a corresponding date for case numbers on Countryside Public Health’s COVID-19 dashboard, one had to return to December of 2020.

Cases have trended upward

in Swift County since September 14th, when they hovered around 17 or 18, rising first to 61 during late September and then further to 81.

The last date cases were above 80 in Swift County was December 19th, 2020, according to the model. On October 6th of last year, Swift County had 30 active cases of COVID-19; that number would rise throughout that winter, eventually reaching an active rate of 223.7 on November 25th, when cases peaked in the county.

For the first time, more of those between ages 0-19 have the virus than any other age group in the five counties overseen by Countryside Public Health. In general, this statistic corresponds to case numbers within KMS Schools. As case numbers now begin to trend downwards in the county, school administrators hope to see a similar trend.

Exposure notifications

The KMS school district moved away from the six-foot circle at the beginning of the school year. The district notifies parents and students if a

student has shared a classroom with a student who has tested positive for the virus, according to contact tracing protocol. Those who receive this message have the option of self-isolating but it is not mandatory that they do so.

“If you have 24 students in a class and one tests positive, the other 23 students and their parents receive a notification saying they are at-risk no matter where the student was seated,” said superintendent Heidelberg. The district contract traces the entire grade of a student at the elementary school who has tested positive for the virus.

The Minnesota Department of Health recommends close contacts stay home for 7-14 days if the student has not completed the vaccination series. The district, however, leaves this up to parents and students.

If a student tests positive for the virus, they are sent home to quarantine. In this regard, households are also monitored, meaning that if a student whose tested positive for the virus has a sibling who attends KMS, they must also

remain isolated.

Additional tech supports have been added to assist those who have moved to virtual schooling. Because most teachers and students have experienced virtual learning in the last 16 months, this has not been as much of a challenge for educators and students this school year.

“The virtual option has been less of a change. This remains an effective way of bringing teachers and students into contact when being present physically is impossible,” Superintendent Heidelberg said.

The district has several hundred Bio-nex rapid test kits available for students and parents. The district has been offering these, a resource that will continue to be available in the service of preventing the spread of infections.

On October 20th, the district will host a vaccine clinic for KMS students and staff who would like to receive a first dose, second dose, or booster shot of the COVID-19 vaccine, in addition to the flu vaccine.

Kerkhoven butcher finds halal niche

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Gallardo and Tomas Zallidizar had been processing goat meat for the Somali community in Willmar before the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

Their butcher shop, a concrete, square building with green-treated wood on the inside, was recently completed.

One of the hurdles to introducing local halal meat into stores had been finding a reliable butcher willing to do halal slaughter in the Willmar area.

“When Giorgia and Tomas got their MDA E2, we knew we wanted to work with them,” Justice Walker said.

Because they are a relatively small operation, now with only two employees, Gallardo and Zallidizar had counted on processing goat meat for a certain portion of the year.

But as the price of goats rose during the pandemic, it became increasingly unfeasible for Gallardo and her husband to continue buying because they were butchering very few for customers. In this period, the Kerkhoven Country Butcher was purchasing its own goats.

This came as a disappointment to Gallardo and Zallidizar, who had opened their butcher shop with the intention of serving the Somali, Jewish, Asian, and Amish communities surrounding Kerkhoven in addition to locals in the town of 800.

In a sense, Gallardo and Zallidizar were middlemen. She said customers do not always understand this when they are told they might have to pay a substantive portion of their salary for goat processing, citing that this period was

awkward for everybody.

“We may have purchased the animal at a very high rate, but at the end of the day, we were not providing the animals at a price they liked or could afford,” Gallardo said.

Relationships with the Somali community had transcended that of a customer-client dynamic, and though she said deep friendships had developed, when the prices were too high, they were too high.

“We tried to lower the processing fee,” Gallardo said. “But we were paying 210 dollars for a goat.”

It was not just members of the Somali community who stopped traversing the long driveway: customers in general were scarce until hunting season, when venison became the crux of the company.

Serdar Mamedov noted this is classic supply and demand--these negotiations which inevitably occur when deals are struck locally. Mamedov works for the University of Minnesota Extension and has served as the halal-consultant for the project.

But for Gallardo, the high price of goats could not be met by customers. Importantly, however, the Kerkhoven Country Butcher was a natural fit in Farrier’s search for someone who was accomplished in halal slaughter.

Now Gallardo and Farrier are a part of a larger push across the state of Minnesota to connect farmers and meat processors with local ethnic communities.

International dependency

The issue of bringing local, fresh goat meat to Willmar is

multifaceted. A dependency on international trade--meat brought from New Zealand, Australia--is one facing many immigrant communities in the U.S.

“Anything that happens overseas, drought, fires, we see the consequences. We are trying to maintain the availability of culturally relevant food locally,” said Mamedov.

Those who depend on quality halal-certified meat are at risk of beoming food insecure, because of an international market that generally supplies stores with low-quality goat at fluctuating prices.

“This is a major quality of life issue. They are at the mercy of international markets. If you have money, you can buy a goat, but if you live in the city, that becomes more complicated,” said Justice Walker.

Local store owners, so runs a common local refrain, should not have to import meat from across the world.

In working with Farrier, Zallidizar, and Gallardo, local store owners will now be aware of each facet of the supply chain. And fresh goat meat will be readily available. Farrier plans to bring 15 goats a week to Kerkhoven, which should be enough to supply the local stores.

Variable markets and product unreliability is perhaps the most prominent incentive for communities to be self-sustainable in terms of food availability, but it is hardly the only factor.

Trust factor

Local means reliable, and trust is an important factor. It is crucial for consumers

of halal products in Willmar to establish trust with the farmer. Transparency and traceability matter so that Muslim consumers know their meat is halal-compliant.

Because Muslim communities are heterogeneous, local communities have a different understanding and acceptance level of halal-certification.

In some cases, if store owners verify the halal certification, the assumption is that it is halal. Of course, this is only possible locally--when store owners can visit farms and processing sites. When products are shipped overseas, they must be marked halal-certified, with the blessing of an international halal- certification agency.

That is currently impossible in the state of Minnesota, where there is no formal halal certification agency. Because of this, Mamedov and store owners in Willmar have vouched for the halal integrity of Tiffany Farrier’s goats, as they have corroborated the halal integrity of Gallardo and Zallidizar’s butcher shop.

A halal confirmation agency in Minnesota would nevertheless be ideal.

In the past, not in Willmar or in Minnesota but elsewhere, stores or producers have claimed their products are halal when cross-contamination or other lapses in the supply chain have occurred. Store owners and Muslim communities strive to prevent against this by establishing trustworthy connections with farmers and meat processors.

A two-way street

Producing halal-certified

meat is another lucrative market opportunity for farmers in Minnesota, a way for livestock producers to increase their economic power. The production of halal-consistent meat will furthermore meet the intelligible and abundant demands of Somali and Muslim communities, whose population alone means a level of purchasing power in central and southwest Minnesota.

“We realized there is a lack of educational materials for farmers and meat producers in Central Minnesota when they want to learn about halal-meat,” Mamedov said.

Producing halal meat can be a way for farmers to diversify their markets.

Based in St. Cloud, Mamedov helped to establish connections and facilitate conversations between farmers and store owners, a conversation that may have otherwise been compromised by language barriers or an unwillingness on the part of either party to approach one another.

“In many cases, Somali store owners and livestock owners had limited connections,” Mamedov said.

Crucially, local store owners were invited to farms for visits, establishing a bond, one of trust. Mamedov said building an understanding is one of the obvious goals here. Promoting cultural understanding among different cultures is crucial; more culturally appropriate foods on the shelves in supermarkets and otherwise suggest that a community is immigrant and newcomer sensitive.

Dept. of Agriculture