



Faribault County Register

Vol. 153 • No. 1

www.faribaultcountyregister.com

For the week of January 3, 2022

Blue Earth, Minnesota • \$1.00



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Is this the ugliest house in America?

Noel and Renee Johnson's BE home one of the 12 HGTV finalists

BY CHUCK HUNT
Register Editor

Is the ugliest house in America located in Blue Earth, Minnesota?

That question will be answered next week.

Noel and Renee Johnson live in a house that was a former funeral home on Sixth Street in Blue Earth. It is one of 12 homes across the country that is vying for the title of the ugliest house in America.

In fact, that is the name of a new television show on HGTV, called "The Ugliest House in America."

"It is a five-night event," explains Noel Johnson. "Three houses are featured each night from Monday through Thursday. Then, on Friday, they announce which house is the ugliest. The winner gets a



The Johnson family in front of their home in Blue Earth. In the back is Noel holding Oaks, and in the front, left to right, are Sydney, Anchor, Quincey and Renee Johnson.

Staff photo by Chuck Hunt

\$150,000 renovation designed by Allison Victoria, an HGTV designer."

The Johnsons' home is going to be one of the three midwestern houses featured on Monday night, Jan. 3, at 9 p.m. Central Time on HGTV. The other two are in St. Cloud and Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The crew of the show, along with the host, Retta, were in Blue Earth back in July. They filmed an interview with the Johnsons and a tour of their home.

Retta, whose real name is Marietta Sangai Sirleaf, is a stand-up comedian and actress, best known for her role as Donna Meagle on NBC's "Park and Recreation" show.

"Back when we bought this home we knew we needed to make a lot of renovations to it," Johnson

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USC Board lowers its 2022 levy

BY KEVIN MERTENS
Register Staff Writer

The United South Central School District held their Truth in Taxation meeting on Tuesday, Dec. 21.

Before voting to set the levy, USC Finance Manager Stacie Whiteside gave a brief overview of the district's budget and various factors which will affect the levy.

"I want to remind everybody that revenue formulas are set by the State Legislature, except for voter approved referendums," she shared. "Local levy and state aid mix are set by the



Stacie Whiteside

State Legislature. Also, an increase in local taxes does not necessarily mean an increase in revenues for the School District."

Whiteside also pointed out a change in the amount of federal aid the district had received.

"Federal aid has been typically less than five percent of our revenue," she explained. "It nearly doubled this year."

Following Whiteside's presentation, board members passed a resolution certifying the 2021 tax levy, to be collected in 2022, at \$3,538,977, which is \$133,268 less than last year's levy of \$3,672,245.

The Truth in Taxation meeting had followed a special meeting to review an audit of the School District.

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Body cams for BE Police?

Public meeting held to discuss reasons

BY FIONA GREEN
Register Staff Writer

The Blue Earth Police Department (BEPD) held a public meeting on Monday, Dec. 20, at 4 p.m. to discuss the implementation of a body-worn camera policy in Blue Earth.

BEPD chief Tom Fletcher presided over the meeting, explaining why the police department wishes to procure body-worn cameras for its force. He also outlined what implementation of the program would look like.

The meeting on Dec. 20 served as step one of the process. It consisted of an overview of the hows, whats, and whys of the camera implementation process for members of the Blue Earth City Council, all of whom were present at the meeting.

Fletcher began his pres-



entation with a Twin Cities PBS video which addressed the increased usage of police body cameras in Minnesota.

"A recent survey of police chiefs in Minnesota shows that the vast majority support body-worn cameras, and that most police departments in the state use them," the video noted.

It explained body-worn cameras seem to receive mutual support from officers and residents alike.

According to Jeff Potts, executive director of the Minnesota Police Chiefs Association, residents appreciate that body-worn cameras bring a level of accountability and transparency within their communities.

Fletcher then presented the BEPD's specific body-worn camera program objective, which is "to

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Wells increases tax levy by 5.77 percent

Council also adds hours of operation condition to Jake's Pizza CUP

BY KEVIN MERTENS
Register Staff Writer

The Wells City Council approved the 2021 tax levy, collectible in 2022, by a unanimous vote during their Truth in Taxation meeting held on Dec. 23.

The levy the council adopted shows a 5.77 percent increase (\$74,716) from the previous levy.

"Forty percent of the increase was in the General Revenue and Library funds," city administrator Connor LaPointe explained. "There was an increase of \$12,000 in the Capital Fund where we budgeted for a new lawn mower. However, in order to keep our budget down we also made the decision to repair a truck in-



Jake's Pizza's new location is starting to really take shape with the addition of a sign.

Staff photo by Kevin Mertens

stead of purchasing a new one. We also delayed putting new lights in the community center and some work at the pool."

Action was also taken by the council to revisit the conditional use permit (CUP) for Jake's Pizza in Wells.

Following discussion, council member John Herman made a motion to add a condition to the permit stating the establishment could not open before 8 a.m. and must close their doors by 10 p.m.

"Keep in mind this does not mean customers must leave the building by 10 p.m.," Herman told people at the meeting. "It means no

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Ugliest house, from page one

says. "Renee thought we needed to film any renovation and she looked up programs on HGTV that might be interested in doing it."

Renee Johnson submitted entries to several shows including "The Ugliest House in America" in October of 2020, soon after they purchased it. Then in the spring of 2021 they heard back and were asked to apply online, telling about themselves, the house, why they thought it was ugly, and much more.

"Then in the last week of June we heard back that we were one of the 12 finalists," Noel Johnson says. "We only had about two weeks to get ready before they came to film."

They learned some of the production crew were from Waco, Texas, and had done the filming for the last couple of seasons of "Fixer Upper" with Chip and Johanna Gaines. Other crew members came from around the country.

"It was interesting when the crew showed up," Noel Johnson says. They had a malfunction with host Retta's makeup trailer, so they set up a place in the



The elevator lift is shown in the upper left photo. It was used to lift caskets down to, and up from, the basement of the house. Upper right is Retta, the host of the new HGTV show "Ugliest House in America."

Johnson's basement. "The basement is not that nice," Johnson says. "It was used for storing all the caskets. But it worked for them to use as a makeup room."

It also was interesting to see the way the crew filmed the whole production. It included the house,

funeral home, as well as some other filming done around Blue Earth.

"They don't tell Retta anything about the house, so it is a big surprise to her," Johnson says. "They brought her in the door to the funeral home, not the door to the house. At first she asked if we lived in a



Staff photo by Chuck Hunt, above left, submitted above right

church, after she looked around. I said, 'Not exactly,' and then told her it was a former funeral home."

The Johnsons bought the house and funeral home not knowing what they would do with it exactly. Noel Johnson says it took Renee a little longer

to get on board with the idea than it did for him.

"She said the first thing that has to be done before we move in is that I had to get rid of the embalming room," Noel says. "All the equipment, surgical lights, embalming table, big stainless steel tub, was all still there."

The former embalming room is slated to become the family's laundry room.

The family, which includes the couple's four children, use all the space in the four bedroom, 3,600 square foot home.

The former funeral home's large space for holding funerals and visitations is now the kids gigantic playroom.

So, just how ugly is this house? The TV show's host had this to say.

"I am certain these were 12 of the ugliest houses in America," Retta was quoted as saying in a news release about the show. "Trust me. I had to walk through them all. There were so many stunningly bad design choices."

So, do the Johnsons know whether their home is the one selected in the Friday episode for the renovation?

"Nobody knows, it has been kept pretty secretive," Noel Johnson says. "It will be revealed on Friday, Jan. 7. I think they will review all 12 candidates on that show, then announce the winner."

For now, we just have to wait until Monday night.

USC Board, from page one

"It was a clean audit," Greg Lawson of Feldmann & Company of Austin, said.

While reviewing the financial figures, it was a different set of numbers Lawson emphasized as being a positive for the School District.

"You held good with your enrollment numbers," Lawson commented. "You did better in that area than most other districts in Minnesota."

The board approved the audit report.

During the regular meeting elementary principal Jennifer Taylor reported the enrollment in grades K-6 was 360 in 18 sections while high school principal Julie Stauber said the en-

rollment in grades 7-12 stood at 321, which was down by three students from last month.

"We hope to have the high school Student Council up and running by the end of the semester," student representative to the USC School Board, Ethan Koehler, stated. "I also want to congratulate the FFA for their performance at the region competition and for their fruit sales grossing \$36,000."

Superintendent Keith Fleming brought up the federal vaccine, testing and masking mandates.

"We will have to see if the Supreme Court issues a stay," Fleming noted. "If not, we will have to prepare

for weekly testing of unvaccinated employees. The district is supposed to compile a list of vaccinated and unvaccinated workers by Jan. 10. We have applied for a grant to help pay for the testing."

The pay for substitute teachers was also on the agenda.

"Our daily rate is currently \$120," Fleming commented. "I think we need to raise it to at least \$135."

Some board members wondered if that was a big enough increase.

"I am thinking we need to be at \$150," board member Jon Feist said.

Board member Tom Legred supported the opinion of Feist.

"I agree with Jon. We do not want to lose our subs," Legred said. "I do not think an inflationary correction is enough."

The board passed a motion setting the daily pay rate for substitute teachers at \$150 effective Jan. 1, 2022, with the stipulation to assess the situation at a later date.

During the meeting the board also:

- Approved ratification of the Education Support

Professionals (ESP) Master Agreement.

- Passed a resolution establishing combined polling places for multiple precincts and designating hours during which the polling will remain open for voting for School District elections not held on the day of a statewide election.

- Voted to renew the district's contract with Teachers on Call.

- Accepted the resignation of paraprofessional Jayne Meyer and approved the pregnancy leave of elementary teacher Mikayla Wegner.

- Approved the contracts of preschool paraprofessional Megan Ehlert, fourth grade teacher Alissa Nor-

man and ELL Success coach Lucila Reyes.

- Voted to accept the bid in the amount of \$6,500 to purchase a new pressure washer for the bus garage to replace the current one which is 25 years old.

- Approved a bid for the purchase and installation of two bluetooth controllers for the sound systems in the gymnasiums in the amount of \$1,605, from Video Services Incorporated of Mankato. The purpose of the controllers is to limit access to the sound systems.

- Voted to purchase a new eight-channel amplifier and speakers for the high school gymnasium from Video Services in the amount of \$6,812.

Wells Council, from page one

new customers may enter after 10 p.m."

The motion passed with a unanimous vote.

A public hearing was held during the regular meeting concerning the proposed policy for body worn cameras by officers of the Wells Police Department.

"This is the second public hearing," police chief Tim Brenegan announced. "We will have one more before the policy is adopted."

Brenegan was asked if other law enforcement entities in the county were using body cameras.

"We will be the first," he responded. "Blue Earth is a step behind us. From what I

gather, the Sheriff's Department plans to budget for body worn cameras for 2023."

Brenegan shared the proposed policy was based on a model provided by the League of Minnesota Cities and a copy of the policy will be made available on the city's website.

City engineer Ben Rosol was also at the meeting to present the council with a pay estimate for the Street

and Utility Project.

"The amount due is \$755,018," Rosol told the council. "That leaves a balance to finish, including retainage, of \$977,151."

A motion was passed to make the payment.

"The construction crew left all of their equipment here in the city," Rosol added. "They are hoping they can return to work on the project in April."

LaPointe also shared monthly sales data from the Wells Liquor Depot and said revenue was running ahead of expenses for the year.

"We are not having as many sales as we had in

2020," LaPointe noted. "However, we are doing much better than we did in 2019."

The council also accepted four resignations during their meeting.

Citing her lack of availability to attend meetings, Crystal Dulas resigned from the Housing Redevelopment Authority, effective Dec. 31, 2021.

Two of the resignations came from the Wells Police Department.

Officer Scott DiLorenzo resigned effective Dec. 1 and officer Austin Watkins resigned effective Dec. 2.

The last resignation was from Jon Trytten, who re-

signed from the Park Board.

Also, at the meeting:

- A resolution was passed designating the official polling places for 2022.

- The Board of Appeal and Equalization meeting for the city of Wells was set for April 27, 10 a.m., at the Wells Community Center. The purpose of this meeting is to determine whether property in the jurisdiction

has been properly valued and classified by the assessor.

- The council passed a resolution approving participation in opioid litigation.

"It is a resolution of support," LaPointe explained. "The city of Wells will not get anything out of this but hopefully it will help get more funds to Faribault County."

Body cams, from page one

develop and implement a system that will provide audio and video technology to be worn by officers of the BEPD."

He added the program will also include plans for the development of a digital data management system.

Fletcher said the BEPD began looking into a body-worn camera program in July of 2021.

Blue Earth's police department is not alone in its recent interest in the technology.

A recent survey from the Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association, which represents more than 300 Minnesota law enforcement agencies, reported nearly twice as many Minnesota agencies use body-worn cameras now compared to the amount surveyed in 2017.

"In our region, they are finally getting to cities of our size," city attorney David Frundt said. "This is the first year in the county

that we have a couple departments looking at this."

However, not all interested communities are able to procure the funds required to implement body-worn cameras locally.

"There are considerable costs," Fletcher noted. Apart from the cameras themselves, the program also necessitates the purchase of hardware and software and a data storage system.

"The cameras themselves aren't expensive," Fletcher explained, adding it is the additional equipment which hikes up the price of program implementation.

A bill which could have provided funding for body-worn cameras did not pass the state legislature, and Fletcher said there are currently no grants available to offset the costs.

Therefore, funds for Blue Earth's program will be taken out of the police department's budget.

Fletcher says the BEPD has reviewed several potential vendors, ultimately settling upon a bid from Axon Enterprise, Inc., for \$32,329.89 for six body-worn cameras and their accompanying gear and data storage systems, which will be paid in \$6,465.98 installments over the course of five years.

"It's an impressive company," Fletcher explained. "It was at the top end of the bids we got, but what we get is worth it."

Fletcher was particularly impressed by the software which the company offers along with its cameras.

"The software is extremely easy to use," he said. "No other company had this level of technology."

According to Fletcher, officers will be able to upload camera footage fairly easily using the system offered by Axon Enterprise, Inc., which he hopes will reduce time spent sifting

through data.

"All body-worn camera data must be maintained for 90 days, then destroyed," he noted, adding certain types of data, including that which documents firearm discharges and certain uses of force, are required to be kept longer.

Fletcher addressed a few additional inquiries which traditionally surround the usage of body-worn cameras.

One common query concerns the issue of privacy, particularly regarding who is allowed to view recorded footage.

"It is treated differently than most data," Fletcher said. "The law establishes unique access rights to body-worn camera data."

In an example, Fletcher explained how footage obtained during a house call would be off-limits to another citizen, but may be viewed by the subject of the video.

Meanwhile, "Squad car footage is public data," he said.

An additional issue concerns when the cameras can and ought to be turned on.



Connor LaPointe



Tom Fletcher

"It is treated differently than most data. The law establishes unique access rights to body-worn camera data."

— Tom Fletcher

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