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SPORTS
Albert Lea boys swim and dive takes on Owatonna

INSIDE
New COVID-19 deaths reported in Freeborn, Faribault counties

OPINION
Celebrate the holiday season with a little extra sparkle

Albert Lea Tribune Weekend

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3 TORNADOES CONFIRMED IN AREA IN HISTORIC STORM



The back wall of the building in downtown Hartland that hosts the post office was ripped off Wednesday night during severe weather. Several buildings along Broadway and houses in the immediate area were damaged from what the National Weather Service has confirmed was an EF2 tornado. SARAH STULTZ/ALBERT LEA TRIBUNE

Weather Service: 1 EF2, 2 EF1 tornadoes

By Sarah Stultz
sarah.stultz@albertleatribune.com

The National Weather Service confirmed Friday in a preliminary report a series of three tornadoes touched down in Freeborn County on Wednesday night with the most significant damage from an EF2 tornado in Hartland.

The other two tornadoes were confirmed as EF1 tornadoes in rural Alden, according to preliminary damage surveys.

The fast-moving Hartland tornado reached wind speeds

See WEATHER, Page A9



Arcadian Bank in Hartland sustained severe exterior damage Wednesday night during a storm that came through the area.

'I'm just grateful we are here' RESIDENTS DESCRIBE EXPERIENCES

By Sarah Stultz
sarah.stultz@albertleatribune.com

Hartland residents say they are devastated by the tornado Wednesday night that came rushing into their small southern Minnesota town as part of a historic day across the state.

The National Weather Service has confirmed the tornado to be an EF2, and preliminary damage assessments conducted by the American Red Cross list 21 homes in the city with minor

damage and one home with major damage, Freeborn County Emergency Management Director Rich Hall said Friday. Three businesses were destroyed, and three others had major damage. Forty power lines were blown down on the east side of the county, and nine were down in the southwest.

Melissa Bell, who owns a house west of Broadway Street in Hartland that she and her husband, Zechary, rent out, said she was

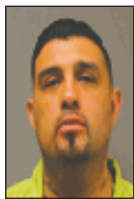
See GRATEFUL, Page A10

A.L. man sentenced to more than 28 years in crim. sex case

By Sarah Stultz
sarah.stultz@albertleatribune.com

An Albert Lea man was sentenced to 344 months in prison Thursday for criminal sexual conduct of two children over a period of time.

Juan Eduardo Rodriguez Morales had been on trial in June for eight counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct and two counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct when he pleaded guilty to one count of first-degree criminal sexual



Juan Rodriguez Morales

conduct, involving penetration of a victim between 13 and 15 by a person in authority, and one count of first-degree criminal sexual conduct of a victim under 13, by a person more than 36 months older.

Assistant Freeborn County Attorney Abigail Lambert said the two victims had testified in the trial, along with their mother, and an Albert Lea Police Department detective was starting to testify when Rodriguez Morales entered the plea.

The remaining eight counts were dismissed.

District Court Judge Karen Duncan sentenced Morales to 172 months for each count, of which they will be spent consecutively. He will be on a lifetime of conditional release following his release.

The defense had asked Duncan for a departure in sentencing and that Rodriguez Morales be put on probation. Lambert argued against it, requesting a total of 344 months.

Clarks Grove man part of fatal crash

By Albert Lea Tribune

A Clarks Grove man was part of a fatal crash Thursday in Pemberton in which one woman died.

According to the Minnesota

State Patrol, Linda Ann Shell, 67, of Elysian, was driving a 2007 Ford Taurus southbound on 627th Avenue in Pemberton when the car collided with a 2020 Kenworth semi, driven by Jeffrey Norris Hagen, 62, of

Clarks Grove, that was northbound on Highway 83.

The crash took place at 2:05 p.m.

Shell reportedly died at the scene.

Hagen was not injured.

A.L. police, school district: 'The safety of our students and staff remains our priority'

By Sarah Stultz
sarah.stultz@albertleatribune.com

Albert Lea police and Albert Lea High School officials reassured students and parents Friday that they remain vigilant about rumors circulating on social media warning of shooting and bomb threats at schools

across the country.

"School administration and the Albert Lea Police Department have fully investigated all threats and have determined the school to be a safe place for our students and staff," said a message sent out to high school parents Friday morning.

Albert Lea Deputy Chief of

Police Darren Hanson said there have been no threats specific to Albert Lea and Freeborn County.

The department received a couple reports that they followed up on, and when they did it was clear that it was part of the situation taking place across

See SAFETY, Page A9

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A large hole is seen Thursday morning in the back of a building in Hartland near the most severe part of the damage from the EF2 tornado. SARAH STULTZ/ALBERT LEA TRIBUNE

WEATHER

Continued from Front Page

as high as 115 mph and was 55 yards wide.

It started at 7:10 p.m. one mile south of Hartland and moved into town, damaging numerous buildings, trees and utility poles.

The weather agency stated the damage in the southern residential part of town was mainly tree and roof damage, but as the tornado moved into the center of town, more significant damage was observed to buildings along Broadway Street, with the most severe damage occurring to the two buildings along Broadway and Johnson in the center of town.

Additional tree and roof damage was observed to the northeast with some branches observed along Minnesota Highway 13.

The tornado dissipated to the northeast in a field, a total of 2.17 miles from where it started.

The first tornado in Alden started at 6:56 p.m. Wednesday about two miles east and northeast of Walters. It reached wind speeds as high as 105 mph and ended one mile southwest of Alden.



A large tree, power lines and other debris on the ground in Hartland Thursday morning after the city was hit by the tornado.

Surveys identified damage of a twisted road sign near the tornado's origin. The path of tree and utility pole damage continued to the northeast.

The Weather Service did not identify this tornado's width.

After the first rural Alden tornado dissipated,

See WEATHER, Page A11

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SAFETY

Continued from Front Page

the nation surrounding posts on TikTok.

Hanson said the department became aware of the national threats Monday and have been monitoring them since, also getting information from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety.

In a joint statement from the Police Department and the school district Friday afternoon, officials said they did not view the threats as credible for the community.

"To bring public attention to an unsubstantiated non-specific threat would have caused a great deal of stress and anxiety to the mental health of students, staff and their families. It would also encourage further irresponsible behavior on social media," it stated. "The safety of our students and staff remains our priority. We will continue to communicate credible information to the community, as it is the practice of both the Albert Lea Police Department and Albert Lea Area Schools."

The Minnesota Department of Public Safety said law enforcement and school administrators nationwide have seen an increase in the number of social media posts threatening school violence. Many of the social media posts contain similar wording or are duplicate

posts not related to verified threats. The threats prompted some schools in Minnesota to close early on Friday.

Law enforcement agencies across Minnesota reported 29 threats to schools in Minnesota with nearly half of those threats coming in the last 24 hours. The Minnesota Department of Public Safety was unaware of any credible or a specific threat to schools in Minnesota. The department encourages anyone with information about a possible threat to contact their local law enforcement agency so the threat can be thoroughly investigated.

"Even though we have not seen any credible threat, it's important for any report to be investigated to keep children and school's safe," said DPS Assistant Commissioner Booker Hodges. "It's important for people to report any perceived threat to their local law enforcement agency."

The State Fusion Center at the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) and the School Safety Center in the DPS Homeland Security and Emergency Management division shared a message with schools, law enforcement and other partners alerting them of the threats. The ongoing threats circulating nationally on social media noted Friday as the date to carry out the threats.

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GRATEFUL

Continued from Front Page

not there during the storm and was just glad no one was hurt.

"Everything can be replaced," said Bell, who lives in Owatonna.

She and her husband used to live in the house but moved out of town about 15 years ago. In 2010, the house had been damaged another time, including broken windows and doors, and the siding had to be replaced.

The house this time around received roof damage and its garage was lifted up off its concrete pad and essentially destroyed. Several trees in the backyard of the house were also damaged.

"It's pretty incredible that winds and God can do these things," she said.

Pieces of a garage are believed to have damaged J.R. and Joyce Henderson's home nearby.

J.R. Henderson said he and his wife had received an alert on their phone of a



Several homes sustained major roof damage during the storm. SARAH STULTZ/ALBERT LEA TRIBUNE

tornado warning, and then the tornado sirens started sounding. When the sirens stopped, he opened the door to look, as he believed that meant the warning had stopped.

"I could hear it coming and that's when it exploded," he said. "That's when the garage hit the windows. It went off like a cannon. It just exploded — that's when all the glass and everything went."

He said his wife was knocked to the floor in the kitchen and all of the

windows on the house's south and east sides were broken out.

Though there is glass, some shingles, dirt and debris on the floor of the house inside, many of their collectibles remain intact and untouched.

"We survived and that's what counts," Henderson said.

He and his wife took ownership of the house in 1997 and have lived there ever since. It previously belonged to his wife's mother.

Matt Beckmann, who lives in a house on Barker Street further south, said he was working on getting down to the basement of his house when he heard a noise that he compared to a train.

"It came out of nowhere," he said, noting that ahead of time he hadn't thought the storm was supposed to be that bad.

The south side of his



A house owned by J.R. and Joyce Henderson sustained severe damage in Hartland from downed limbs and debris from nearby homes.

"I could hear it coming and that's when it exploded. That's when the garage hit the windows. It went off like a cannon. It just exploded — that's when all the glass and everything went."

— J.R. Henderson

roof came off, and several trees were destroyed. His neighbor's trampoline ended up several feet in the air in a tree between their properties.

Once he realized the tornado was done, Beckmann said he immediately went across the street to check on his elderly neighbor, who had several downed trees. He started cleaning up Wednesday night and was out Thursday morning doing the same.

Mariah Lynne said she and her boyfriend, Dale Christenson, tried to be as prepared as possible ahead of the storm and had things set up and ready to go when the threat became a reality.

Lynne said she had even let her employees at her business, Good Steward Consulting, leave early that day to prepare their farms for the storm.

Lynne said she, Christenson and Lynne's two children, ages 9 and 12, went downstairs after the

alarm went off and sat underneath the stairs.

Shortly after, the power went out, and then they heard sounds of things crashing for what Lynne estimated was only about 15 seconds.

They waited under the stairs a little while longer before coming back upstairs and starting to survey the damage and then deciding to take the children to their grandparents' home in Albert Lea.

"We didn't get to fully see all the damage until this morning," Christenson said.

Their damage included some to the roof, siding, screens and an attic window. The garage wall and the north side of the house shifted slightly, their outside tables and furniture on the porch went through their fence and some trees were down. Christenson's truck was moved about 10 feet in the driveway.

Lynne had moved the house from another location in the county two years and two days before the tornado to the William and Railroad street Hartland intersection.

"I'm just grateful we are here," Lynne said. "We have each other."



Numerous trees were downed throughout Hartland.

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WEATHER

Continued from A9

A new tornado started at 7:03 p.m. Wednesday about one mile east of Alden, damaging trees and a farm outbuilding.

It reached speeds as high as 100 mph and traveled 1.64 miles to the northeast, damaging additional trees before dissipating in a field.

The weather agency said that tornado was 40 yards wide.

The tornadoes are part of a historic night in Minnesota, as prior to Wednesday no tornado had ever been recorded in December in the state. The latest tornado on record prior had been on Nov. 16, 1931 near Maple Plain.

According to the National Weather Service, the storm was a serial derecho tracked from Kansas

to Wisconsin that resulted in over 400 reports of damaging wind and several tornadoes.

According to Minnesota Public Radio News, the Weather Service has confirmed five tornadoes in Minnesota, with others in Wabasha and Winona counties.

At least five tornadoes have touched down in northeast Iowa and at least four in western Wisconsin.

Before the storms, strong southerly winds led to record high temperatures in much of the Upper Midwest. Temperatures exceeded 60 degrees across southern Minnesota, melting the remaining snow from the winter storm the weekend prior.

After the thunderstorms, strong gradient winds and widespread wind gusts in excess of 50 mph developed for several hours late

Wednesday night and into the overnight hours.

Several barns and sheds in other areas throughout the county were also damaged, including Glenville, Conger, Hayward and Myrtle.

Freeborn County is asking residents with storm damage to report it through an online form on the main page of the Freeborn County website at www.co.freeborn.mn.us.

The information will be used to determine if Local Option Disaster Abatement (refunding part of taxes paid in 2021) or the Local Option Disaster Credit are available to the property owner.

Completed forms will be processed by county staff and referred to the assessor's office for review and action.

For questions, call 507-377-5186.



Debris was scattered across several streets and a camper was tipped on its side in Hartland from the Wednesday night storm. SARAH STULTZ/ALBERT LEA TRIBUNE

Bank president assures customers accounts are safe after building sustains major damage

The president of Arcadian Bank in Hartland assured customers that their accounts and banking information are safe despite significant damage to the bank Wednesday night from severe weather.

A press release from the bank Wednesday afternoon said the building's most extensive damage was to the exterior of the building, mostly on the southwest side, with windows blown out and debris scattered inside. Some of the brickwork on the east side was also torn off.

The interior, other than miscellaneous debris, is mostly intact.

It was unknown at that time how much structural damage was sustained.

The release stated the

safe deposit vault was undamaged and remains secure with plans being made to relocate the safe deposit boxes to the bank's Albert Lea location. If a customer needs access to a safe deposit box vault urgently, they should contact the Albert Lea or Freeborn locations to discuss.

All accounts are accessible, any banking transactions can be conducted from the other two locations or online.

The Hartland branch will be closed until further notice with staff members temporarily reassigned to other branches.

"We try to plan for things like this, but no amount of planning can prepare you for seeing sections of the 100-plus-year-old building

where our bank started turned into rubble," said President Mark Heinemann. "Nobody was hurt, and buildings can be repaired or rebuilt. This is a sad event to end the year, but we will persevere."

He said the bank's staff remain positive and dedicated to the community of Hartland.

"Our core values and mission statement will ensure that our organization and customers will get through this unfortunate event," he said.

The press release said staff are community-owned and community focused and appreciated the thoughts and kind words at this time. People with questions can call 507-373-1945.



Trees were snapped behind a residence in Hartland.



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