



Stars

The Weinreis twins earned the Athena Award in the early days of Title IX.
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Thursday, April 28, 2022

Edina Garden Council gears up for plant sale

The Edina Garden Council is getting ready to host its annual plant sale, kicking off the gardening season, according to a news release.

The sale will be held May 6-7 at Arneson Acres Park, 4711 70th St. W. The sale will include commercial perennials, annuals, herbs, vegetables and hanging baskets.

The hanging baskets were designed by members of the Edina Garden Council and grown in the Arneson Acres Park greenhouse, the news release said.

The sale will have free park and drive-thru pick-up.

Hours on Friday, May 6, are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. and on Saturday, May 7, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

By following COVID-19 safety guidelines, the council has been able to keep the Arneson Acres Park greenhouse open, the news release said. This year, the council introduced a late-afternoon planting group for young adults with special needs,



(PHOTO COURTESY EDINA GARDEN COUNCIL)

Sam LoPresti, right, and Mikhail Katyal, members of an Edina Garden Council planting group, pose for a photo with hypoestes plants intended for the council's annual plant sale or to be placed in community gardens.

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Details emerge on crash with López Franzen, Blaha; prompt scrutiny

State Patrol says incident was 'thoroughly' investigated

By **CAITLIN ANDERSON**
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Details of a rollover crash involving Senate Minority Leader Melisa López Franzen (D-Edina) and State Auditor Julie Blaha last summer have recently surfaced, revealing the presence of an alcoholic drink can in the car and prompting affirmation from the Minnesota State Patrol that the incident was "thoroughly" investigated.

The crash occurred after Blaha and López Franzen left Farmfest Aug. 4. The pair collided with a semi-truck at the intersection of Highway 67 and a Redwood County Road, causing

Blaha's Jeep Cherokee to flip upside-down into a nearby ditch. The two were hospitalized with non-life-threatening injuries.

Blaha, who was driving the car, was ultimately given a citation by the Minnesota State Patrol for failing to yield when going through the intersection. But a recently published article by conservative news website, Alpha News, revealed that at the time of the crash, an alcoholic White Claw can was found in the car "open, still cold and mostly full," the article says, suggesting an open-container violation, which is considered a misdemeanor under state statute.

"An open alcohol container was found in the vehicle, ... yet nobody was charged with

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an open-container violation,” the article says.

López Franzen told law enforcement at the time of the crash that the can was hers, noting she had consumed drinks at the event but none in the car, and that she “just takes all her trash with her” and “had forgot about it,” according to field reports by State Patrol troopers. Blaha was given a Breathalyzer test, wherein she blew 0.0.

In response to the recently surfaced details, DFL leaders, including Blaha, pointed to confusion by first responders, resulting in errors in initial reports. Blaha said in a statement on her Facebook page and in an interview with the Sun Current that officers determined the can referenced as cold that spilled was a can of Cocktail de Fruits, a non-alcoholic fruit juice. She told the Sun Current the “best evidence” of that determination was the charging decision.

Blaha said she believed the outcome of the investigation by law enforcement was “fair” when examined in its full context.

“The charging decision makes sense,” Blaha said. “And it’s really frustrating that people cherry-picked (reports) for political gain.”

After the initial article was published, GOP leaders signaled their scrutiny of the incident, including Senate Deputy Majority Leader Karin Housley (R-Stillwater.)

“Elected officials are always held to a higher standard,” she said in a statement on the Minnesota Senate Republican Caucus website. “The public deserves better from their leaders and we have many questions left unaddressed from August that are only now coming to light.”

But the Minnesota State Patrol asserted that the case was carefully examined, resulting in only a citation given to Blaha.

“This crash was thoroughly and objectively investigated by the State Patrol, including the driving conduct, commercial vehicle inspection, and the details surrounding the White Claw container,” Minnesota State Patrol Col. Matt Langer said in a statement sent to the Sun Current.

López Franzen said in a statement provided to the Sun Current by her legislative aide that there was “absolutely no drinking and driving on August 4, nor was alcohol a factor in the accident.”

She added, “I am extremely grateful to the first responders who arrived so quickly that day, and for the thorough investigation that brought this matter to a close.”

Details of the crash

On Aug. 4, Blaha and López Franzen were heading to an event after leaving Farmfest, a three-day agriculture convention. Blaha entered an intersection, pulling out in front of a semi-truck, which in response, attempted to break and maneuver away but hit the rear-end of the car’s

passenger side, according to an email by State Patrol Lt. Matthew Sorenson dated the day of the crash.

The email noted there was no impairment from either driver in the crash.

Three troopers’ dash-cam videos captured the scene immediately following the crash. Sgt. Sabrina Skold was the first to arrive as footage from her patrol vehicle’s camera appears to show witnesses tending to López Franzen and Blaha, who were lying on the ground nearby each side of the vehicle.

López Franzen and Blaha were soon strapped onto spinal boards and transported via ambulance to the Carris Health - Redwood Hospital, according to an initial report by the State Patrol.

Soon after the crash, DFL Party Chair Ken Martin, along with other staffers, arrived at the scene in a DFL-branded van, after López Franzen called him, according to the field report.

Martin asked what happened and told law enforcement at the scene that the pair were public officials. “I know you know this but these are two elected officials,” he said, as heard on dash-cam audio.

This interaction was emphasized in Alpha News’ article, which states, “Martin spoke with officers on site, ensuring that they knew who they were dealing with.”

Marc Kimball, director of media and communications for the DFL Party Caucus, said in an email to the Sun Current that Martin identified the officials



(PHOTOS COURTESY MINNESOTA STATE PATROL)

State Auditor Julie Blaha and Sen. Melisa López Franzen (D-Edina) were involved in a rollover crash last summer after the pair left Farmfest.

in the “context of notifying people and their medical care,” he said. “There is no request for favoritism or anything even appearing as such.”

White Claw, Cocktail de Fruits cans

A report filed by the State Patrol noted two unsealed 12 oz. aluminum cans that were placed into evidence, one the alcoholic White Claw can and the other a can of non-alco-

holic Cocktail de Fruits.

According to field reports by troopers at the scene, Morgan Fire Department Assistant Chief Justin Blomeke found the White Claw can after López Franzen asked that her backpack be retrieved from the car. When he went to pick up the backpack, which was found on the roof of the upside-down car behind the driver’s seat, a can of White Claw “came out

with it and spilled all over the backpack and himself,” according to the report by Trooper Matthew Gleisner.

The report also stated that Blomeke said the backpack was zipped up, indicating the White Claw was not inside. The firefighter “guessed that the contents of the can was pretty full due to how

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A can of the alcoholic beverage White Claw was found inside the car following the crash, according to reports by Minnesota State Patrol troopers at the scene.



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Crash

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much spilled out. Blomeke also stated the can was very cold, indicating it was opened very recently," according to Gleisner's account.

Blomeke also mentioned this discovery to Skold and other troopers on the scene, as heard in the dashcam videos.

Blaha said she believed López Franzen put her belongings, including the backpack, into the back of the car. But "there's no way to tell after I rolled it," she added. "Everything's just everywhere."

A field report notes that Blaha could not say for

sure at the time that López Franzen's belongings were in the back hatch of the vehicle.

In one video, troopers and a firefighter, while standing on the driver's side of the car, can be heard discussing the location of the backpack and liquid pouring out of a cold can. Later, on the passenger side of the car, Trooper Daniel Walker proceeded to pick up what appears to be a Cocktail de Fruits can from the car and ask Gleisner, "Does this look like an alcoholic drink to you? It's all in Spanish. ... I can't really tell."

When asked for comment on the recently emerged details, López Franzen pointed the Sun Current to the law en-

forcement reports and an anticipated email by Kimball. In the email, Kimball noted confusion by law enforcement about which cans were alcoholic, saying that it was the Cocktail de Fruits can that spilled. He added that photos from the crash show the spilled fruit-juice liquid inside the vehicle.

Kimball pointed out that the field reports discuss alcoholic containers located in a blue Yeti cooler in the car. But, as photos of the Yeti cooler taken by troopers at the scene show, cans inside appear non-alcoholic: Bubly, La Croix and San Pellegrino cans.

"Everything contained within the videos reinforces the fact that the can in question was not a White Claw, but the green Cocktail de Fruits can. They were using White Claw as shorthand for a canned alcoholic beverage, but the fact of the matter is the beverage in question was not alcoholic," Kimball said.

Attempts by the Sun Current to reach Blomeke or a spokesperson for the Morgan Fire Department were unsuccessful.

Follow-up to the crash

While DFL leaders casted doubt on the characterization of the cans



(PHOTOS COURTESY MINNESOTA STATE PATROL)

A can of Cocktail de Fruits, which is non-alcoholic fruit juice, was found inside the vehicle after the crash. A DFL Party spokesperson told the Sun Current that the spilled liquid in the car came from the juice. Blood splatter can also be seen.

found in the vehicle, another aspect of the investigation remains unclear: details surrounding the charging decision.

State Patrol's Langer said in his statement that the case file was "submitted for review by the local prosecutor, consistent with other high profile cases. The result of that review was a citation issued to the driver for the driving error that caused the crash."

The Sun Current did

not receive a response by the State Patrol when asked to identify the local prosecutor. But an Oct. 11 email to troopers and other officials by State Patrol Captain Casey Meagher, provided some insight.

Meagher said he "had a conversation with Redwood County Attorney Jenna Peterson this past Friday, and this case came up in our discussion. Since all reports are completed for this crash, she agreed we

should handle this specific case by issuing a citation to the at-fault driver."

When contacted by the Sun Current, Peterson said in an email that her office was initially asked to review the case, but was given an incomplete set of reports by the State Patrol.

Then, after inquiring about the rest of the reports, she was told the State Patrol no longer wished for her review for charges and that the agency would be issuing a citation. She added that no recommendations or input was given from her office.

Requests seeking clarification on the differing accounts were not returned by the State Patrol or Peterson before publication.

Blaha said when people "cherry pick" law enforcement reports without taking into account the full context of the situation, the result could be a "chilling effect" on investigations, where law enforcement may not feel safe to write down all perceived observations for fear of misrepresentation in the future.

Presented with the differing accounts by law enforcement officials, Blaha said the situation shows that "chilling" effect "starting to creep into the process" with people "second-guessing" themselves.

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A Yeti cooler containing what appears to be non-alcoholic drinks was found inside the vehicle following the crash. Reports by troopers at the scene falsely described the cans as alcoholic.

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