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'IT'S UP TO NATURE'

Steve Kohls / Brainerd Dispatch

Fire Boss pilot Mike Dornan of Dauntless Air stands on the wing of his firefighting aircraft on Tuesday at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources airtanker base at the Brainerd Lakes Regional Airport. Dornan has been a pilot for 43 years.

Pilots, ground crews ready for wildfire season

By Chelsey Perkins
Brainerd Dispatch

Brainerd

Walking and waiting and walking some more — that's how Mike Dornan spent his time Tuesday, May 3, at the airtanker base at Brainerd Lakes Regional Airport. The 65-year-old Fire Boss pilot is ready for liftoff whenever he gets the call to help tame a wildfire from the air. But this year, he's starting to get a little antsy. "We're just waiting for a fire," Dornan said while standing next to his plane. "We pre-flight every day, make sure it's all ready to roll. But then it's up to nature."

PILOTS: Page 13

Brainerd to fund Arb through 2023

By Theresa Bourke
Brainerd Dispatch

BRAINERD — The city of Brainerd will continue its financial contributions to the Northland Arboretum for another year and a half. After about 40 minutes of testimony on the benefits the Arboretum brings to Brainerd and the surrounding community, Brainerd City Council members voted 4-3 Monday, May 2, to allocate money set aside in the city charter for a greenspace organization to the Arboretum through 2023. "We're happy with the final decision," said Candice Zimmermann, Northland Arboretum director, in a phone interview Tuesday. "I'm very pleased with President (Kelly) Bevans' leadership last night." Zimmermann and other Arboretum supporters spoke at the meeting in hopes of persuading City Council members to continue allocating funds

tion to the Arboretum through 2023. "We're happy with the final decision," said Candice Zimmermann, Northland Arboretum director, in a phone interview Tuesday. "I'm very pleased with President (Kelly) Bevans' leadership last night." Zimmermann and other Arboretum supporters spoke at the meeting in hopes of persuading City Council members to continue allocating funds

ARB: Page 12



Steve Kohls / Brainerd Dispatch

Supporters of the Northland Arboretum, including Board President Bryan Pike and Executive Director Candice Zimmermann, gather outside Brainerd City Hall Monday, May 2, 2022..

School officials say there are no litter boxes in bathrooms

By Theresa Bourke
Brainerd Dispatch

BRAINERD — Are there litter boxes in school bathrooms in Brainerd? The answer is no, despite persistent social media rumors. "We have not yet been asked to have a litter box in our bathrooms," said Brainerd High School Principal Andrea Rusk, during an April 25 interview.

Forestview Middle School Principal Jon Anderson said there are no litter boxes in his school either, and he has never been asked about making any sort of accommodations for students who allegedly identify as animals. "Might be a different school, might be a different community, might be a different state, but it's not happening at Forestview Middle School," he said. Claims of litter boxes in school bathrooms have cropped up on social media both locally and around the country. When a community member made a claim about litter boxes being in Brainerd at a March 9 School Board meeting, Board Chair Ruth Nelson refuted it. "There are no litter boxes in our school, and that's a rumor that's gotten out of hand," Nelson said. School districts around the country, including in Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan and Nebraska, have debunked rumors appearing to originate

LITTER: Page 14

President Biden pledges to protect 'fundamental' right to abortion

Supreme Court to investigate leak

By Lawrence Hurley,
Andrew Chung
and Jan Wolfe
Reuters

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Tuesday criticized as "radical" a draft U.S. Supreme Court decision that would overturn the landmark 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that legalized abortion nationwide, a bombshell that was denounced by Democrats and stunned even some moderate Republicans.

The court confirmed that the text, published late on Monday by the news outlet Politico, was authentic but said it did not represent the final decision of the justices, which is due by the end of June. Democrats scrambled to plan a response to the news that a half-century of abortion access for American women could come to an end. "I believe that a woman's right to choose is fundamental," Biden said in a statement.

BIDEN: Page 13



Evelyn Hockstein / Reuters

Pro-abortion and anti-abortion demonstrators protest outside the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington on Tuesday after the leak of a draft majority opinion written by Justice Samuel Alito preparing for a majority of the court to overturn the landmark Roe v. Wade abortion rights decision later this year.

'Not on my watch' is Walz' vow to uphold abortion access in Minn.

By Dana Ferguson
Brainerd Dispatch

ST. PAUL — Abortion would remain legal — at least right away — in Minnesota under a draft U.S. Supreme Court

opinion that would overturn the landmark Roe v. Wade decision and return the issue of abortion access to the states. Politico late on Mon-

day, May 2, reported that the high court was poised to strike down the precedent based on a leaked copy of a draft opinion. In the draft opinion penned by Justice Sam-

uel Alito, the majority writes that "Roe was egregiously wrong from the start" and should be overturned.

WALZ: Page 12

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LITTER

From Page A1

from social media about litter boxes in their bathrooms to accommodate students who identify as furries.

In March, Nebraska Sen. Bruce Bostelman backtracked hours after making remarks about litter boxes in schools during a televised debate, saying he acknowledged the claims were not true.

A furry issue?

Are there students at Brainerd schools who do identify as “furries,” wearing tails and ears and making animal noises instead of speaking? The answer is unclear. Some parents in the district say these “furries” exhibit disruptive behavior and other students are not allowed to say a thing about it.

District leaders say the disruptive behavior is not happening.

“It’s kind of like a wildfire that we don’t know exactly where it is,” said Rusk during an April 25 interview. “... Misinformation is being spread. But if I’m not part of, say, a closed social media group, then I’m not sure what information is out there. And so that’s where I feel like we’d like to know — we do want to know, and I appreciate when parents contact me so I can hear what they’re hearing or reading.”

One parent to contact Rusk is Susanna Lamusga. Although her children are in elementary school, Lamusga said she has become an advocate of sorts for parents with concerns.

Those parents, she said, have told her they heard from their kids there are about 15 student furries who identify as animals — like cats — and hiss, meow, rub up against things and lick themselves. She said she further heard students were told they could not report this behavior but said she did not know where this instruction originated.

Lamusga said there are many other parents with concerns, parents she said she reached out to in an effort to share their views, but who did not agree to speak with the Dispatch.

Lamusga and Rusk spoke about the issue, with Rusk inviting Lamusga into the school to check things out for herself. Lamusga said she appreciated the invitation and plans to accept but has not yet had time to do so.

Rusk said the concept of students referred to as furries is not new and is just like any other group or subculture of students, though she is not aware of an organized group of furries at the high school and isn’t sure what even meets the threshold. The school’s dress code does not allow students to wear costumes — such as animal ears or tails — outside of designated dress-up days. Rusk said staff members have discretion to look at students’ clothing and judge if it is acceptable or not, knowing kids endured a lot of social isolation the last couple years and are just coming back into a school setting.

A video taken by an anonymous student April 22 shows another student walking through

the high school hallways while wearing a long tail. Another photo circulating shows what appears to be the same student with a tail outside the school building on an unspecified date.

When presented with the photos and video, Rusk said she identified the student and spoke with him. He acknowledged hearing about furries but did not identify as one, she said. And when asked why he was wearing the tail, Rusk said the student told her he thought it was funny but would not wear it to school anymore and did not think about the ripple effect of his actions on the social media community.

Rusk noted an incident with students barking at others they believed were “furries.” Those students were told to stop, and Rusk said she believed the group of students targeted as furries just dressed differently than what might be labeled “normal” by others but were not wearing animal costumes.

“Now, we’ve asked students that if they see behavior that’s concerning that they should report it to a trusted adult in our building. We’ve had very few reports. And when I say very few, probably less than five,” Rusk said, noting those reports typically consisted of students making animal sounds.

The disruptive and disrespectful behavior is Lamusga’s biggest concern, especially if that behavior is being normalized.

“I do validate all feelings. I am all for everyone. But when it affects other students is where I feel parents need to get involved,” Lamusga said, noting she is not against dressing up, having fun or being quirky.

Policies are in place to prevent disruptive behavior, and those policies should be followed, she added.

“I’m about following rules,” Lamusga said. “... Just like we don’t drink and drive. Rules are in place to protect.”

While Rusk said disrespectful behavior has been the school’s greatest challenge this year, she said she does not feel like any student groups are out to hurt anyone.

“I believe that,” she said. “And I think what we are trying to teach our students, first and foremost, is we want a safe and secure school ... and that how we dress, who we’re friends with, what activities we want to be involved in, what our hobbies are — they’re going to be different, and that’s what makes a great school a great school.”

Rusk added she and other school leaders are not OK with unhealthy behaviors, and it’s frustrating when people

think they are.

“Students will try to push the boundaries,” Rusk said. “And it’s our job to respond.”

School board response

Board Chair Nelson said she has not received much in the way of direct communication regarding the issue but heard about it at school board meetings. She said she is sure teachers and principals would handle any issues appropriately.

Two board members who have students in the middle and high school — Jana Shogren and Sarah Speer — said their kids have not reported issues with furries.

“Of course every kid has a different perspective, or they move in different circles, but my kids both said, ‘What are you talking about?’ Like, they were shocked,” Shogren said of her two kids.

“Of course, I always appreciate when people bring things to our attention,” Shogren added, “but I guess for me, I’m struggling to find out where it’s really rooted when I’ve asked my own children, who are 10th and 12th grad-

ers, and they’ve seen nothing.”

Speer, who has a seventh grader and a senior, said her kids are not seeing it either. She did, however, say she heard of a couple of instances during the district’s mask mandate of students making animal sounds in an effort to be funny and confuse teachers, who couldn’t always tell who was talking.

If parents do have any concerns, though, Speer invited them to visit the school, as that’s what she would do if she had concerns.

“But I completely trust that Andrea’s got boots on the ground and is keenly aware that there’s folks that are worried about this and how it’s being handled as a disruption in school and is eyes wide open on how to handle it if and when that does happen, or if it’s happening. And I trust, you know, if she’s saying, ‘we’re not seeing this as a disruption,’ that that’s true. She would be in the know,” Speer said.

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