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County debates ballot board roles

by CHRIS ROGERS

Winona County officials and local Republicans set off a debate over election integrity and transparency at the County Board's last meeting on March 22. At issue was the role of partisan election judges in absentee voting.

In the 2020 election, the county did not include election judges in duties state law requires them to conduct. Winona County

Auditor-Treasurer Sandra Suchla — who oversees local absentee voting — said that won't happen again in 2022, but County Board member Steve Jacob's calls for partisan election judges to be involved in the entire absentee voting process ran into objections from Suchla and other officials, who said the law may prohibit election judges' involvement in some steps.

Election judges excluded from legal duty in 2020

The county's Absentee Ballot Board is a group that reviews and counts absentee ballots. Under state law, the ballot board must include citizen election judges and may also include county staff. Election judges must disclose their party affiliation and there must be a balance of election judges from different parties.

Prior to 2020, the county often appointed

only county staff and no election judges to the ballot board. At the urging of local Republicans in fall 2020, the County Board voted unanimously to add partisan election judges to the ballot board.

Both county staff and citizen election judges served on the ballot board in 2020, but Suchla and her staff gave them different roles. Election judges were primarily

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Winonans react to upcoming roundabouts



by CESAR SALAZAR

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) held a public meeting last Wednesday to help explain the Mankato Avenue roundabout construction plans to Winonans. Construction is planned to start on April 11, and the majority of the project is scheduled to be completed by November.

While the roundabout project hopes to alleviate traffic issues, some Winonans expressed their concerns to the project leaders. One such concern was drivers' ability to pay attention to signs and warnings — both

during and after construction.

Winona Area Ambulance Service Director of Operations Andy Teska wants drivers to know the importance of paying attention to the surroundings of the roundabout and to be prepared for unexpected situations, even after construction is complete. "You can't be distracted while driving," Teska added. "Pay attention to the signage because your phone isn't going to have the answer once the roundabouts open up because they're

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Photo by Cesar Salazar

■ Hoffman Construction Vice President Brian Aebly (center) explains the Mankato Avenue construction plans to Winonans during a public meeting held last Wednesday at Minnesota State College Southeast.

More schools offering virtual option

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

As daily in-person learning resumes this school year, some local schools are continuing to offer a remote option, while others have moved away from it or may do so next school year.

The Cochrane-Fountain City (C-FC) School District currently offers an on-line learning option called Educere. Superintendent Jo-Ellen Fairbanks said the program provides lessons students work through at their own pace, and there are opportunities for students to receive support in different ways, from phone calls to video conferences.

The district started using the program at the beginning of last school year to try to help families and students who were not comfortable returning full time or who enjoyed online learning. Fairbanks said. "By having the online option, we're able to serve the needs of all different learners in our school," she said.

C-FC plans to offer remote learning

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Why WPD is seeking a new station

by CESAR SALAZAR

The Winona Police Department (WPD) is looking into getting a new space to meet its changing needs. The WPD is looking into the idea along with the Winona Fire Department (WFD), with city officials proposing a combined police-fire station where the current East Recreation Center (ERC) stands.

The idea stems from the WPD's need for more space, as Police Chief Tom Williams believes that the department has outgrown the current space at the Winona County Law Enforcement Center (LEC). The WPD leases the LEC building space from Winona County and shares the building with the Winona County Sheriff's Office (WSCO). While expanding in the LEC is possible, Williams believes it would be a better investment to expand in a brand new building.

According to Williams, as it stands, the police department needs space for updates that don't fit in the current building. Williams said that includes a fume hood in the evidence room, office space for officers, more locker space for officer storage needs, garage space for police vehicles, and dedicated spaces for

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Student scientists earn state recognition

by ALEXANDRA RETTER



Photos by Alexandra Retter

■ (Clockwise from top left) Winona Area Public Schools seniors Benjamin Brand and Willa Kruse and Cotter Schools senior Grace Finnerty recently attended the state science fair.

A lab isn't the only place science happens. Three local high school students conducted research at locations including an orchard on a hill and back room of a science classroom while on their journeys to earn spots at the recent state science fair.

Willa Kruse and Benjamin Brand, both seniors at Winona Senior High School, and Cotter Schools senior Grace Finnerty spent months developing and carrying out their plant studies. Along the way, they gained a deeper understanding of collaboration, planning and the scientific process. They also learned how things not going according to plan is a vital part of science. Their efforts led to them recently attending the virtual state science fair, after moving on from the regional science fair.

"I was very excited, but also kind of nervous, because it's a higher level of competition, and I think that more is at stake," Finnerty said of the state fair.

"We were pretty excited. It feels great to advance on to something, especially something you care about," Kruse said. Brand and Kruse particularly enjoyed getting a send-off from their school, complete with the band

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