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# The Globe



Emma McNamee / The Globe

Worthington business owner Bill Keitel stands behind the counter at Buffalo Billfold Co., holding a photo of buffalo calves from Dakota Sweetgrass Bison Ranch.

# LIFE OF LEATHER

# Buffalo Billfold Co. celebrates 50 years in business

By Emma McNamee

Worthington n the corner of Tenth Street and Fourth Avenue in Worthington, a brick building houses the Buffalo Billfold Company, where Bill Keitel and his wife Laurie have been selling — and making — leather products since 1972.

Originally from Luverne, Bill, 69, came to Worthington in 1971 and, armed with a dozen belts and some candles, the Keitels opened up shop the following year. Today, their staff operates out of two floors in the historic Tenth Street building, and maintains an online store with more than 130 different

products available. "It's taken us 50 years to become an overnight success," Bill joked. "But here's what it is. We've really had a blast here in Worthington. We like what we do. We like the people. Worthington has been incredibly supportive of us."

During an informal tour of the store, Bill pointed toward a corner at the front end of the basement. Fifty years ago a picture was

taken of the Keitels' first day, set up in that same corner.

Since then, the business has expanded exponentially. Piles of tanned leather and cut-outs that have yet to be sewn on one of the six industrial sewing machines in the shop cover much of the work area in the basement. A large table is set up with finished products and shipping boxes. The team at Buffalo Billfold is preparing to send out holiday orders.

Back up the stairs, Rebecca Roepke, an outof-town customer, came into the shop with her nusband. The Keiteis offered a warm welcome, which Roepke reciprocated enthusiastically.

"I've been waiting two years to come back here," Roepke said excitedly. "I drove all the way over from Wisconsin.'

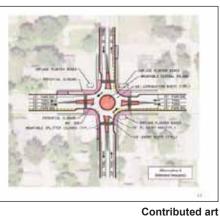
She proudly showed off her Buffalo Billfold traveling purse, which she got passing through Worthington a couple years ago, before launching into a tale about her first encounter with the Buffalo Billfold name.

**BUFFALO:** Page 3

# MnDOT proposes Luverne roundabout

# Site at intersection of Kniss Avenue and Main Street





One of several alternatives presented for the intersection of U.S. 75 and Main Street in Luverne is this revised compact single-lane roundabout.

#### By Julie Buntjer The Globe

LUVERNE — Minnesota Department of Transportation engineers met with Rock County commissioners and Luverne City Council members Tuesday evening to discuss the potential construction of a compact roundabout at the intersection of U.S. Highway 75 (Kniss Avenue) and Rock County State

Aid Highway 4 (Main Street). The intersection is a main thoroughfare in the city and the site of two severe crash-

a pedestrian was hit — in the last five years. Meanwhile, there were five leftturn crashes and 20 property damage crashes (fender benders), according to Ross Baker, one of two MnDOT traffic engineers to present the proposal at the joint meeting.

MnDOT plans to make improvements to U.S. 75 from Main Street to Veterans Drive in 2025, and said now is the time to consider placing a roundabout at the intersection.

— including one in which **ROUNDABOUT:** Page 3

# District 518 continues to prepare for any mandate

Vaccines and weekly testing on the table

> By Kari Lucin The Globe

WORTHINGTON — District 518 continues preparing for a mandate that could give employees two options: being vaccinated for COVID-19, or wearing a face mask and testing weekly for the virus.

"Do we have employees who aren't going to want to test? Yes. Do we have employees that don't want vaccinations? Absolutely," said Superintendent John Landgaard at the District 518 Board of Education meeting Tuesday. "We're going to work with them the best we possibly can."

While the federal mandate is currently stalled by legal challenges, Minnesota has its own state-level regulatory agency, Landgaard explained, and they are moving forward on the vaccinate-or-test

requirement. "Again, I think most school districts or even a lot of businesses would choose not to do this," Landgaard said. "There are some that have, but we're

kind of being forced into it." The mandate, if it goes into effect, means employers with more than 100 workers must either require vaccination, or have employees comply with face masking and weekly testing.

It remains unclear when the rule will go into effect, but Landgaard said the dis-trict will begin collecting vaccination status information soon. Then the school will need to set up testing for those who do not wish to be vaccinated, which must be done on paid time.

**DISTRICT 518:** Page 4

# 7 hospitals receive grants for COVID-19

Funds will go towards testing and mitigation

> By Kari Lucin The Globe

WORTHINGTON — Seven hospitals in southwest Minnesota are about to get a booster in their fight against COVID-19 in the form of \$244,084 each in federal grants.

Sanford facilities located in Worthington, Jackson, Luverne and Westbrook, as well as Windom Area Hospital, Pipestone County Medical Center and Murray County Memorial Hospital, Slayton, are all slated to receive grant money. The funds must be used for coronavirus testing and mitigation, which could include contact tracing, distributing personal protective equipment, establishing testing sites and testing education.

"The grant is very specific in how it can be used," said Sandra Schlechter, chief financial officer at Pipestone County Medical Center. "We are going through the grant criteria at this time to determine how or if we can use the funds."

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**WEATHER** 

MOSTLY

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### ROUNDABOUT

From Page 1

The existing traffic light system has met its useful life, MnDOT's Rhonda Allis said.

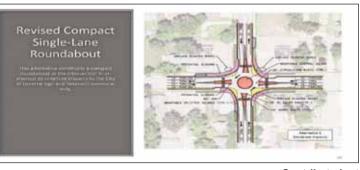
"We are looking for issues and needs along the corridor," said MnDOT Traffic Engineer Nick Ollrich. "We can look at replacing (the traffic lights) or look to see if something else makes sense."

proposed compact roundabout — a "small, navigable little hump" according to MnDOT Project Manager Robert Jones — would be traversable by trucks. Its raised center median isn't as high as the curbs in a standard roundabout. Worthington's roundabouts are considered standard because of their non-traversable center.

Baker said a study was conducted over the past several years that looked at traffic volumes, crash history and how the intersection could operate with different alternatives.

Rock County and the city of Luverne first heard about the potential for a roundabout earlier this year.

Both entities plan to make a formal decision on whether they want a roundabout in the community before the end



Contributed art

Another alternative from the MnDoT presentation.

of the year, as MnDOT wants to begin working on plans, according to Jones.

Large vehicles passing through

Baker said MnDOT looked at traffic volumes over the past five years, with the latest traffic count taken on October 13, 2020. The results showed the intersection has a higher number of heavy commercial vehicles and trucks passing through than intersections in similarly-sized communities. Heavy commercial vehicles include farm implements such as combines and tractors, he said.

Rock County Board Chair-Williamson man Stan expressed concerns of those larger implements being able to traverse a roundabout.

"Tractors (can be) pulling a

50-foot planter, and combines are coming so big they're taking up more than one lane," he said. "The people in the automobiles are very considerate from what I've seen they give the machines plenty of room to get through. I can't imagine getting a combine through that thing."

County Commissioner Jody Reisch said County State Aid Highway 4 is the only eastwest street in Luverne to cross the Rock River, which adds to the number of farm implements traveling the route.

Meanwhile, Luverne Mayor Pat Baustian said Premium Minnesota Pork brings 40 to 50 semi loads of hogs through town every day, and with line speeds at the processing plant increasing next week, it will likely add another 12 to 18 semi loads coming through per

in production at GEVO will also lead to increased numbers of heavy vehicles travelling through that intersection. The potential for wind turbine blades to also come through the intersection was noted.

#### Pedestrian traffic also a concern

Rock County Administrator Kyle Oldre, as well as some Luverne city council members, expressed concerns regarding pedestrian and bicycle traffic at that intersection as people make their way to the downtown business district. They asked how pedestrian traffic would be impacted if a roundabout was constructed there. Ollrich said slower speeds of

vehicles approaching a roundabout do help, but also noted that refuge spaces can be created so that a person is only crossing one lane at a time. "It would be ADA-accessi-

ble with truncated domes," he said, adding that pedestrian crossing signs could also be added. There would not be an audi-

ble protection system, however, for the visually-impaired. Luverne Mayor Pat Baustian said he heard from a visually-impaired community

member who wanted more

"This is not MnDOT coming

day. In addition, an increase safety measures put in place at the intersection, not fewer.

#### Is a roundabout necessary?

Luverne Councilman Kevin Aaker said with the intersection having two major crashes and 18 minor crashes in five years, a roundabout would decrease the number of major crashes, but likely lead to more minor crashes.

"Are we fixing a problem that doesn't exist?" Aaker asked. "If we have two major crashes in five years, is that going to imprové?"

Ollrich said the goal of MnDOT is to make the transportation system more forgiving. Roundabouts reduce the chance of a higher speed, angle-type crash, he said. Meanwhile, multi-lane roundabouts have more sideswipe crashes, but single-lane roundabouts — what is proposed at the Luverne intersection — would be less likely to lead to side-swipe crashes.

The council and county board were told there are other options if they don't want a roundabout, including replacing the existing traffic signal.

in here saying this one is the best," Jones said. "We want to make sure we have input."

#### **BUFFALO**

From Page 1

Bill started to chat with her about the town she lives in and the two spent the next several minutes trading stories like they're old friends. She ended up purchasing several different products from the shop, including a buffalo-stamped bracelet and some new leather goods.

While their online business has allowed Buffalo Billfold Co. to reach all 50 states, Bill said he still really appreciates the walk-in business they do, which lets interactions like the one with Roepke happen. Still, Bill called it a balance as the business has gone bigger with its in-store production throughout the years, using around 50,000 square feet of buffalo leather every

"We are a working leather gallery," he explained. "Our store is really geared towards production these days."

While the final steps of that production happen within the walls of the Buffalo Billfold Co. building, the process of obtaining, tanning, and preparing their material stretches much farther than the

Worthington shop. From several locations within the United States, a broker purchases "green" hides from buffalo ranchers, which then get sent to one of several tanneries **Buffalo Billfold works** with. There, 2,500 to 5,000 square feet of hide are made into leather of different colors, thicknesses, and textures during

a six-week process that the Keitels had a hand in developing throughout the years. That involvement and learning process is a staple of the Keitels' evolving business practices.

"All this stuff, you learn on the way," Laurie, 67, explained. "I mean, nobody taught any of this to us. I did little leather work as a child...but otherwise as far as business, it's really been learn as you

#### Changing with the times

About 25 years ago, the business then named Cows' Outside — underwent a metamorphosis after a friend of the Keitels

buffalo hides for their products instead of the cow hides they had been using. That first batch went over so well with customers, that the Keitels realized there was a real market for buffalo hide products and Buffalo Billfold Co. was born.

Not long after, another friend helped set up a website for the fledgling business, which was revamped by the Keitels' son, Noah, around 2014 and again in 2020, just before the COVID lockdown.

"The timing was, like in so many things for us, amazing," said Laurie.

Thanks to the website, the team at Buffalo Billfold was able to keep working during those first few months

suggested they try out of the pandemic. The Center 50 +Not your grandma's

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Keitels brought sewing machines to employees' homes and someone came in to ship out orders. They stayed separated, Laurie reflected, but they found "And we didn't have

to lay anyone off," Bill added. "To me, that's a big deal." The online business and physical store aren't

the only areas of Buffalo Billfold Co. to see expansion, though. Keitel estimated there

are "maybe a hundred" different venues where their leather products are sold, from shop galleries to national parks. They've also

participated in a number of on-the-road fairs and festivals, in everywhere from Duluth and Fargo, to along the Rocky Mountains and down to New Mexico. They've won a few awards for craft and artisanship as well, like "Festival Favorite" for their leather flight bag at Duluth's Art in Bayfront Park festival.

"We started with doing name bracelets, where we'd put your name on a piece of leather," Laurie said, looking toward the wall where one of their award winning bags is on display. "That was one of our early

products, and now we're doing flight bags.'

From those early days 50 years ago, the business has gone through a lot of changes. The Keitels have dabbled in imported gifts, books, and even juggling before finding their place as Buffalo Billfold Co. Throughout it all, though, a love for Worthington has remained unchanged.

"We look at it as an evolution. It's something that we get to give back to the community." Bill said. "With what we do, we could probably do this anywhere. We choose to be in Worthington."



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