



Girl Scouts spread word on endangered species – 3B



Change cuts back on WPD parking enforcement – 5B

Sheriff candidates make pitches in Lewiston – 4B



WAPS' strategic plan for academics, outreach, more – 7B

\$40M police-fire-ERC project proposed for 2024

by CESAR SALAZAR

City of Winona officials and staff are tentatively planning to construct a new police-fire station and community center project in 2024, according to the city's latest Capital Improvements Program (CIP). The Planning Commission approved the

newest CIP last Monday, and it is now headed to the City Council for a vote next week.

The current proposal for the project would see the East Rec Center (ERC) site demolished and a new joint police-fire station built on the block. The city would also seek to buy St. Stan's school and establish

a new community center to house the ERC and Friendship Center at that location. A majority of comments presented during the July 5 City Council public hearing urged the city to reconsider the plan.

Under the tentative CIP, the city is planning to spend approximately \$40 million on the project, using a 50-50 split of state

and local bonding, or loans. State bonding requires legislative approval, and local bonding would be repaid with higher property taxes.

According to City Manager Chad Ubl, the insertion of the project into the CIP is

see **ERC PROJECT** page 8a

Pillbox Bat Co. lands MLB deal



by CESAR SALAZAR

Nestled away in its little pocket of the city, Winona's Pillbox Bat Company scored a home run: a contract to produce Major League Baseball merchandise. With its team of eight, the company is stepping up to the plate and competing against the big players in the game of baseball memorabilia.

Pillbox makes all its wooden bats, pennants, leather work, and baseballs by hand and in-house, from carving to painting. It had humble beginnings compared to where it is now.

Owners Zak Fellman and Dan Watson initial-

ly started the company in 2015 to make some beer and side money. Saying that baseball was an influence for them growing up is a huge understatement. They lived, breathed, and ate baseball, and it got them to where they are today. Even the name of the company is based on an obscure baseball park in St. Paul, Minn., from the early 1900s.

"I didn't even know at the beginning if [the company] was going to be a big thing one day — it'll just be something we can do together," Fellman said. "We talked baseball stories,

see **PILLBOX** page 5a

Photo by Cesar Salazar

■ Pillbox Bat Company Owner Zak Fellman shows off a Minnesota Twins wooden pennant, a new company product following a licensing agreement with the MLB.

'Way lost' ocean bird spotted in Winona

by CESAR SALAZAR

Earlier in the week on August 13-15, Winonans flocked to catch a view of a once-in-a-lifetime sight: a Caribbean brown booby in the Midwest. Birder and City Council member Steve Young equated it to having a hummingbird in the North Pole.

Many regional birders took this rare opportunity to check off the bird on their lists, with over 40 people checking in their sightings on the spotting site eBird.org. It's unknown how the bird arrived in the region and where the bird is now.

The bird "got way lost," Young said. He continued, "It's probably a once-in-a-lifetime [experience], and that is what draws the birders."

This is also the first reported sighting of the bird in Minnesota and Wisconsin, according to bird-tracking records, Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge Wildlife Biologist Stephen Winter said.

The brown booby, which typically lives in the tropical climates of the Caribbean, is adapted to live off of salt water, but many birders saw that it was able to live off the fresh water of the Mississippi River. "Water brings birds and so Winona being on the Mississippi River, we're a birding superhighway," Young said.

see **OCEAN BIRD** page 5a

Schools, CDC relax some COVID rules

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

With the new school year, there are some slight changes to local schools' COVID protocols in areas such as quarantining and tracking cases.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) earlier this month did away with recommendations to group students in cohorts to minimize the potential for the virus to spread, as well as quarantine recommendations for those who come in close contact with someone who tests positive for COVID. Local schools are also relaxing COVID protocols.

"There's a lot less reporting we have to do, and it's more about monitoring situations, so we're going to continue with a lot of the good hygiene practices we had in place," Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) Superintendent Annette Freiheit said in an interview.

"I think as the incident rate of positive cases continues to decline, we are working toward protocols that reestablish procedures

see **COVID RULES** page 5a

Cotter welcomes back students



Photo by Alexandra Retter

■ From left, Cotter Schools students Patrick Morgan, Aero Paulsen, Alex Swenson and Macy Donnerwerth head off to class on the first day of the 2022-2023 school year.

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Students greeted one another with waves, high fives and conversation as the 2022-2023 school year started at Cotter Schools on Monday.

Ninth graders Ezra Burros and Anthony Schneider were starting high school. Schneider was excited about having "a little more independence with classes."

10th grader Kollin Diaczun and 11th

grader Griffin Albrecht were also enthusiastic about the first day. "It feels good. I'm ready to get going," Diaczun said.

"I'm excited," Albrecht said.

The students were all looking forward to seeing their friends.

The first day brought enthusiasm for staff members, as well, about having students back in the building. "I think the first day is always so exciting," President Mary Eileen Fitch said. "There's some

nervous energy from kids, as well as a lot of excitement to be back around their friends." She continued, "It's a beautiful day, so to have students walking through and finding their way, and the joy on their faces — I think for as much as we enjoy summer vacation, I think both students and staff and teachers all enjoy being back together as well."

see **STUDENTS** page 5a

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COVID rules

continued from page 1a

that were more typical prior to the pandemic,” Lewiston-Altura School District (L-A) Superintendent Gwen Carman said. “We’ll continue, of course, to monitor cases of COVID or other health concerns that arise and respond as we need to to assure the safety and health of our students and staff.”

“As the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year approaches, prioritizing in-person learning while protecting the health and safety of students, staff and families remains Cotter Schools top priority ... Our hope is that we can go back to some of the traditions that are important to our Cotter Community while continuing to take the necessary precautions to keep our entire community safe and healthy,” Cotter Schools said in a statement.

Local schools are generally requiring a five-day isolation period for those with COVID. Under proposed protocols for WAPS, those who test positive for COVID will need to isolate for at least five days, whether or not they are vaccinated or symptomatic. There would not be quarantining for those who come in close contact with someone who tests positive for COVID, Freiheit said in an interview. The district would not complete contact tracing, as well, per the draft guidelines.

According to the CDC, those at school exposed to COVID “should follow recommendations to wear a well-fitting mask and get tested.” The organization does not recommend quarantine for those exposed, outside of particular high-risk group environments, according to its most recent guidance, and it does not categorize schools as one of those environments.

L-A will also require that those who test positive for COVID isolate for five days, Carman said. There will not be a quarantining requirement for those in close contact with someone who tests positive for COVID, she said.

Those who test positive for COVID at Cotter will also need to isolate for a minimum of five days, according to the school’s statement. The school recommends that those exposed to COVID keep an eye out for symptoms, test for COVID if they get symptoms and wear a mask for 10 days after being exposed.

At WAPS, the district is not requiring masks, but continuing to recommend them when risk of the virus is high in the community. The proposed guidelines on wearing masks say that, “Wearing a well-fitting mask consistently and correctly reduces the risk of spreading the virus that causes COVID-19. Universal indoor mask use is strongly recommended at a high COVID-19 Community Level.” The CDC sets the level for a community at low, medium or high based on factors such as case rates and hospitalization rates. Currently, Winona County is at the medium level. The WAPS draft guidelines also state that the district will support those who decide to wear a mask.

L-A will not require masking, Carman said.

In addition, WAPS would not require physical distancing, under the proposed protocols. There will not be physical distancing requirements at L-A, Carman said.

Freiheit said WAPS will continue to provide tests for free. “I think a lot of these protocols are just really good protocols with any type of infectious illness or disease,” Freiheit said.

WAPS will also continue to report case numbers to the department of health, Freiheit said. However, WAPS will no longer include a COVID dashboard online tracking case numbers, Freiheit said.

Cotter Schools does not have a dashboard at this time, Communications Director Jana Korder said in an email.

In contrast, Carman said that though district leaders have yet to discuss whether to include a dashboard in the upcoming school year, the district will need to keep reporting case numbers to the department of health, so she would anticipate the district would continue to update the dashboard regularly.

The WAPS Board will vote on the proposed protocols at its meeting on September 1.

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Photo by Cesar Salazar

■ Pillbox Bat Company Production Manager Carrie Frederich adds gold lettering to a baseball bat commissioned by a Little League team in Texas.

Pillbox

continued from page 1a

baseball stuff, maybe we’ll have some fun with it, but a couple of years in, it was like, ‘OK, we can’t do this part-time anymore.’”

Pillbox doubled its sales every year for the first few years, according to Fellman. He joked that it’s easy to double your sales when your revenue is zero at first. The company recently won a licensing agreement from Major League Baseball to produce MLB team merchandise and memorabilia.

When the company first began, Fellman said, “... [MLB licensing] wasn’t something we threw around as a possibility even,” Fellman said. “It was a super big, pie-in-the-sky type of dream.”

Although Pillbox now has products for the big leagues, the company initially started producing for local and country-wide Little League teams and commissioned pieces. In 2019, the company actually began working with the Minnesota Twins to celebrate their record-breaking season.

“They called and asked if we could make some custom bats to celebrate them break-

ing the records,” Fellman said. “It turned into a really good partnership with the Twins. We’ve done projects every season now since then, and we just built a really solid relationship with them.”

Fellman added that thanks to the partnership with the Twins, Pillbox was able to get in a good word with the MLB to get a licensing contract. Pillbox initially applied to produce MLB baseball bats for team commemorations and memorabilia, but was denied due to other companies having those exclusive licenses. Eventually, the MLB granted Pillbox to produce other baseball memorabilia, such as wooden pennants, coasters, and baseballs. So far, the agreement has worked out favorably for the company, according to Fellman and Production Manager Carrie Frederich.

“So far, it’s been insane,” Frederich said. She continued, in reference to a large room that had a large table full of wooden pennants, “That’s not even the entire order for Fanatics. That’s just a chunk. We haven’t stopped — our laser engravers and leads have not stopped since we got this license.”

“Pretty much, MLB art is our niche,” Fellman said. “We’ll still hold out for the bats at some point.”

While the company is able to meet

MLB’s demands, Pillbox hopes to be able to expand the company even more in the future.

“Zach jokes that he would like to hire five people,” Frederich said, laughing. “I think another full-time person would definitely be beneficial. With the college kids coming back ... it’d be nice to hire a few part-time people as well.”

While Pillbox worked with some local organizations in the past, Frederich said that she’d like the company to continue expanding locally. “I think we’re always definitely willing and interested in expanding our presence in Winona,” she said. “Always willing to collaborate with different people, different efforts, and different ideas that people have. We’re always open.”

“This is a big step, I think it’s going to take a few years even just to get to a place where this is really successful,” Fellman said. “Even though we have licensing, good sales, and partnering with teams, the scale of it needs to be really able to do that really well. It’s going to take a while. We’re really focused on making sure this license is super successful and we live up to what’s expected of us.”

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Photo by Deedee Nadeau

■ Far from its home at sea, a brown booby soars in the Winona harbor.

Ocean bird

continued from page 1a

Many birders saw the bird fly high and dive into the river to catch fish, similar to how it fishes in the Caribbean. “It was just sitting on a barge forever,” bird watcher Deedee Nadeau said. “It didn’t move ... Finally it flew, and everyone was so excited to see it because they’re such acrobatic flyers they twist and turn and dive into the water.”

Young also added that the brown booby’s beak structure allows it to dive into the water at very fast speeds. “You can imagine if every time you ate you had to go 80 miles per hour, face-first into the water, that could have some effect on your face,”

Young said, laughing.

The bird had also been spotted earlier this month in La Crosse, Wis., and potentially even further south around the Ozarks in Missouri, according to eBird and Winter. It is unknown if it was the same bird from Missouri, but Winter said it could be possible. The bird hasn’t been reportedly spotted since.

In terms of the brown booby surviving in the area, Winter said, “It most likely cannot establish and persist away from the coast.” He continued, “I assume that when they’re out of range of the coast, they’re kind of doomed.”

“I’m amazed at all the terrific photos that fellow birders posted of the brown booby, and will never take for granted that river habitat is mostly protected around Winona, and so it provided the booby places

to feed and rest,” local bird expert Richie Swanson said in an email. He continued, “I see any long-distance migrant, I’m awed it can survive a journey riddled with constant human threats. The trouble is when I don’t see a bird.”

“It was so cool to see so many people interested to see this simple bird that got so lost,” Nadeau said. She continued, “It was a wonderful opportunity to see a tropical bird here in Winona.”

“For me, as a birder, I enjoyed how the bird community reacted,” Winter said.

“It was just really special to have this bird here,” Young said. “It’s part of what makes Winona such an interesting place. Our proximity to the Mississippi River is what brought this [bird] here.”

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Students

continued from page 1a

Many students were looking forward to attending particular classes. Schneider

was excited to take German for the first time. Albrecht and Diaczun were eager to take part in choir. They said their teacher Ms. Jirele was wonderful. “She makes it fun,” Albrecht said.

The students were also excited to participate in sports. Burros was looking forward to the soccer season. “A lot of my friends play,” he said. “I’ve been playing for a while, so it’s fun.”

Albrecht and Diaczun are awaiting the basketball season. “I just love the people I’m around when I’m playing basketball,” Diaczun said.

The students also set some academic and personal goals. “Last year, math was hard for me, so I’m just trying to get better, become a better student and just a person in general,” Albrecht said. Diaczun is hoping to do well in a high-level class, Advanced Placement Biology. “It’s going to be scary, but at the same time, I hope it’s fun,” he said.

Fitch also hoped the students would learn new academic and social skills over the course of the school year. “I’m just hopeful that they will continue to learn, grow, have meaningful experiences with

their classmates,” Fitch said.

With COVID protocols relaxing, school events are also continuing to come back. One event returning this year during the first week of school is a camping experience for ninth graders, Fitch said. While camping in the local area for several days, they participate in activities like canoeing and biking. Fellow high school students a couple years ahead of them also visit to answer their questions about what it is like to be in high school. “It’s an opportunity to welcome in new students, to give students an opportunity to get a glimpse of what high school will be like and to grow as their class together as they start off in high school,” she said.

The new school year brings a number of other possibilities for students with learning and growing, Fitch said. “That’s one of the gifts of working with younger people, is they still have so much hope in them,” she said. “And the possibilities to see where they can begin in a year and grow to by the end is awesome.”

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