

Pandemic hazard pay for frontline workers – 5B

DFL congressional hopefuls visit Winona – 4B

MN Wild: In with a whimper – 4B

WAPS funding teachers with COVID relief – 3B

# Winona council hears \$38M+ public safety proposal

by CESAR SALAZAR

A new report from BKV Group and ISG showed Winona could be paying \$38.2-42.3 million for two buildings: a joint fire-police department where the East Rec Center (ERC) stands and an adjacent new community center.

Because time ran out before the consultants' presentation was completed on Monday, the Winona City Council is going to hear more from BKV and ISG in a future City Council meeting, but the council must

ultimately decide if it wants to pursue this option. The plan is also contingent on the Diocese of Winona-Rochester selling St. Stan's school as the proposal would demolish the school to build the community center on that property.

"I also think [BKV and ISG] should bring back the next step of this because either the council needs to decide we're going to move forward looking at this project or we need to say we're not going to do it so we can keep moving forward," City Council Member Michelle Alexander said. She

continued, "We need to make a statement and as part of that, I'd like there to be a plan presented for public comment periods at the ERC, here, and online so that people can start responding to this [plan]. Honestly, if we're not going to go forward with this plan, we might as well not have the public input. That needs to be a part of the presentation so that we're able to say that this is what we're seriously looking at, now let's talk about this as a community."

"I'm not super comfortable with us pursuing the St. Stan's property without know-

ing how the public feels about this plan," City Council Member Eileen Moeller said. "This is the first time they're seeing [the new study] and maybe we don't have time for a public forum, but I want to at least have people see what we saw today and call us and email us."

The new report shows that separating the community center from the joint public safety building would provide the space needed for the police and fire departments,

see **PUBLIC SAFETY** page 5a

# Short on workers, Behrens turns to robots



by CESAR SALAZAR

Like many Winona companies and businesses, Behrens Manufacturing Company has experienced a labor shortage and has been in need of workers to keep up with its growing demand. Rather than slowing down production, Behrens came up with a solution for its shortage: robots.

"Truly the heart of our issues here at

Behrens is labor," Vice President of Manufacturing Bill Bellingham said in an interview. "There's a U.S. shortage of manual labor plus the labor costs are rising significantly ... Our product isn't a very expensive product. We don't make a Tesla or anything like that; we make a garbage can. We're really struggling

see **BEHRENS** page 5a

Photo by Cesar Salazar

Robotic Operators Mark Bofinger (left), Rafael Ramirez (middle), and Jennifer Schultz (right) stand with their newest installment at Behrens: a robot that helps in the trashcan lid manufacturing process.

# County pitches jail sales tax in St. Paul

by CHRIS ROGERS

Winona County's bid for a local sales tax to pay off the new jail's \$28 million tab is making headway at the Minnesota Legislature. If lawmakers approve the county's request, voters could see a referendum to approve the tax on the ballot this fall.

"I'm here to ask for your support for Senate [bill] 2833," County Board Chair Chris Meyer told the Minnesota Senate Committee on Taxes at a hearing last week. Meyer testified before the committee, outlining the jail project — which is currently under construction — and a bill authored by Senator Jeremy Miller (R-Winona) to authorize a sales tax referendum. Under state law, the county needs both legislative and voter approval for the tax. A matching bill in the House was sponsored by Representative Gene Pelowski (DFL-Winona), and Winona County Attorney Karin Sonneman testified before a House committee in March.

The County Board has already borrowed \$28 million to finance the new jail, and debt payments will cost over \$1 million a year through 2046. Normally, this debt would be paid off with higher property taxes, but a local sales

see **JAIL TAX** page 5a

# WSU 'pauses' journalism major

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Winona State University paused its journalism program due to staffing and budgetary constraints about a month ago. Current students will be able to complete their degrees, while new students will not be able to major in journalism.

College of Liberal Arts Dean Peter Miene, the mass communications department chair, provost, and president were part of making the decision, Miene said, adding that it was mostly under his jurisdiction.

"It really came down to the fact that we've had several retirements in the last couple of years that we have not been able to replace because of our budget reductions," Miene said. Those who retired were all permanent journalism faculty, he added.

The decision was not a statement about the value of journalism, Miene said.

Additionally, the mass communications department is growing and adding new programs, Miene said. "That's how we're investing our resources."

President Scott Olson told Winona State University's student newspaper, the Winonan,

see **JOURNALISM** page 7a

# Students learn from orchestra players



Photo by Alexandra Retter

Winona Symphony Artistic Director Erik Rohde performs for students at St. Matthew's Lutheran School.

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Students at St. Matthew's Lutheran School recently enjoyed front row seats to a concert from members of the Winona Symphony Orchestra at their school and had an opportunity to speak about music with them. They listened to solo violin and piano performances, as well as a piece with both instruments, and

asked the professional musicians questions about their work.

The performance accompanied a concert series featuring the Winona Symphony Orchestra playing at the Minnesota Marine Art Museum. The four-concert series paired music with the museum's works of art to delve into the connections between musical and visual art. With each concert, some musi-

cians performed part of the program at area schools, Winona Symphony Artistic Director Erik Rohde said. "For a lot of students, it's a unique opportunity to interact at close range with a professional musician ... And that's such a great honor for us to be able to share that with students," he said.

see **MUSIC** page 5a

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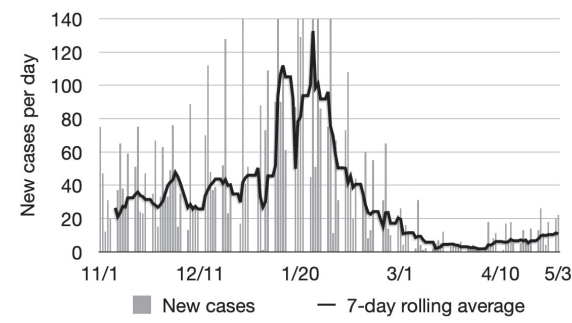
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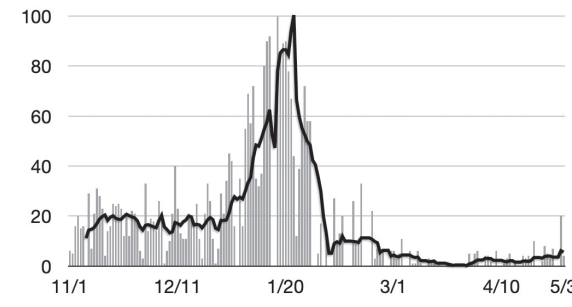
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# Coronavirus: Local update

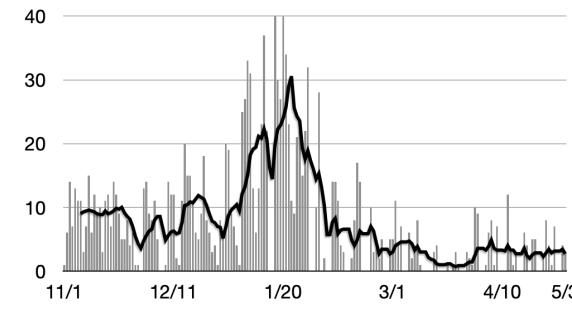
Winona County COVID cases



Trempealeau County COVID cases



Buffalo County COVID cases



Data from state health departments

Local COVID cases rose this week, while there were no new hospitalizations or deaths in the area.

In Winona County, there were 75 new cases this week, up from 67 last week and 46 two weeks ago. Under the CDC's metrics, Winona County reached "medium" COVID activity levels for the first time in months. Trempealeau County saw 39 new cases compared to 27 last week, while Buffalo County had 19 new cases, on par with last weeks' 20. The two Wisconsin counties remain in the CDC's "low" category.

There were no new hospitalizations or deaths due to COVID in any of the three counties, according to the latest data from county and state health departments.

## Jail tax

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tax is another option. The proposed sales tax would charge an extra 1/4 cent on every dollar. It would come on top of the county's existing, half-cent sales tax for road repair.

While the County Board was divided in narrowly passing the sales tax for road repair, it has been united on a sales tax for the jail. During the debate over road repair funding, some citizens criticized sales taxes as regressive — in that poor people pay a larger share of their income in sales tax compared to rich people — and business leaders said the move would drive customers to competing outlets with lower taxes in Wisconsin. However, the Winona Area Chamber of Commerce backed a sales tax for the jail project, saying it would be less painful to local businesses than the sizable property tax hike that would be needed, and the County Board voted unanimously last fall to seek a sales tax referendum in 2022.

It's a question of whether to pay for the jail with property taxes or sales taxes, Meyer said. A relatively modest sales tax hike of .25 percent could cover it, while the hike to the property taxes levy needed would be much larger, she noted. Meyer highlighted the chamber's support and other County Board members' interest in having visitors to Winona County help alleviate some of the burden on rural property owners. Personally, Meyer was more neutral about the proposal. "If there are residents that feel, yes, this is a valuable thing to do and there's enough support to move forward with a sales tax, then fine," she said.

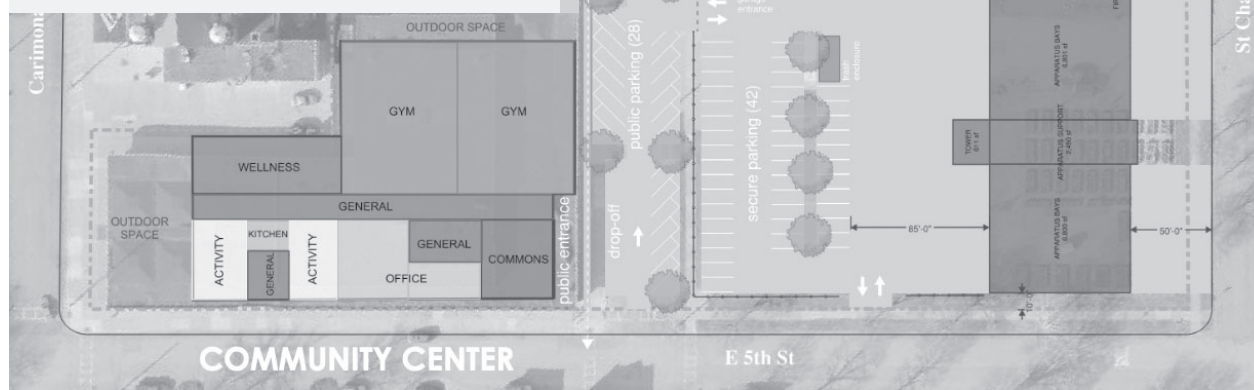
While approving referendums for local sales taxes is fairly commonplace — the legislature approved 20 last year — Meyer said she had not gotten any indication how likely the Winona County bill was to pass. "I'll keep my fingers crossed," she told the Post. "But it's just one step in the process. If we manage to pass the legislature, we still need a referendum." The legislative session ends this month.

If legislation is approved and the County Board moves ahead with its plans for a referendum in November, the board won't know the results of that referendum before budgeting season begins in the fall. That means the County Board would likely have to set its preliminary tax levy for 2023 as if the referendum would fail — so that it would have enough money to make debt payments just in case, Meyer said. If a referendum passes, the County Board could lower the levy before the final budget is set in December. However, in the interim, Meyer said, "It might be shocking to people to see that preliminary levy increase."

Chris@winonapost.com

Concept plan from the city of Winona,  
BKV Group, ISG

■ The city of Winona's latest conceptual plan includes a police-fire station on the current East Rec Center site and a community center at the site of St. Stanislaus Elementary School.



## Public safety

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but the community center wouldn't be getting as much outdoor space as was included in the city's last designs for that project. Previously, the new community center would have gotten the whole ERC block when the design was for a standalone community center there. While the new proposed space does fit the community center's indoor needs, such as the two gyms and activities area, the outdoor space would be missing most of its proposed outdoor recreational areas, such as the basketball courts, an amphitheater, and a community garden.

Currently, the Winona Friendship Center and the ERC have a combined estimated 24,000 square feet, and the new proposal would have approximately 29,000 square feet of indoor space, according to City Manager Chad Ubl.

The report shows that the joint police and fire station would use the whole ERC block, for a proposed 69,888-square-foot station. This square footage would help meet current and future space needs for both departments and would allow for the convenience of having a shared space and roof, offsetting potential costs if the two departments were built or renovated separately, con-

sultants said. Building the departments in the ERC block would also see emergency response times stay about the same as they are at the present, according to BKV.

City Council Member George Borzyskowski said he toured a joint public safety building in Fridley, Minn., commenting, "That was a massive complex, and we don't need anything that big." Instead of demolishing the current St. Stan's school, he suggested making use of the existing school building. BKV and ISG consultants replied that could be a possible option in future proposals.

Ubl said that if the city does decide to go forward with this proposal, city staff needs to be made aware as soon as possible to begin discussions with the diocese. "We're starting at a different starting point if [the diocese is] not interested in negotiating for that property," Ubl said. "It's a good idea for [city] staff coming back responding to the information received tonight and also putting together a plan for public input."

The City Council plans on holding another pre-meeting discussion with BKV and ISG consultants in the future to discuss if the city should be going forward with this new proposal, according to Ubl. Once the council decides on what direction to go, the city can go forward with more detailed plans and outlines and funding proposals for the project.

Local@winonapost.com

## Behrens

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with these higher labor costs, so we have to start engineering an amount of our process. Having one person do the work of three doesn't mean they have to work faster or physically work harder; that means we have to have that person teaching machines how to do the job."

Bellingham explained that Behrens has been unable to fill at least 30 positions since October of last year. "This will displace about nine people in our plant, meaning that these three are going to do the work of nine," he said. "That doesn't mean we're going to lay off three people, that means we'll have to hire three less people." He continued, "That's huge for us because everything that we make is sold and we just can't make enough, and that's why we were needing to hire 30 people. By not needing so many people, we can instantly make more product and make more money, and that's the goal of any business."

"We want more automation," Human Resources Assistant Ashley Sanford said, adding that they'll continue to hire workers, as well.

Behrens trained three of its employees to become robotics operators; former Line Leads Rafael Ramirez and Mark Bofinger, and former Hand Sealer Jennifer Schultz.

"It's hard and complicated to understand because it's a lot of stuff, but anything is possible if you want to do it," Ramirez said in an interview.

"It's definitely interesting, coming from a slight understanding of CNC operation, just how intuitive a robot works," Bofinger said. "Just simply moving a robot is much more organic-feeling compared to typing in a computer and then having a router move around what you typed. It's a big learning curve, and it's really interesting seeing how you program it."

Schultz, who previously did robotics work, explained that her experiences, work ethic, and go-getter attitude helped her jump on the new robot operation. "If I didn't have a familiar background with [robotics] it would be complicated for sure," she said. "It's definitely interesting to get a handle on it."

Bellingham explained that it's easier for the company to

train its current employees and that has the added benefit of providing growth opportunities. He also hopes to train more employees on robotics operations and maintenance in the future as it helps keep downtime low.

"We're just scratching the surface of the robots," Bellingham said. "Robots in the industry do so many more complicated things than what we're doing. We're using maybe 5 percent of the robot's brains, and they're capable of so much more. This is a pretty simple application that they're working on."

The robots, alongside a new press, were purchased from Machine Concepts for around \$1.5 million and will be a part of a trash can lid seal-press manufacturing process. According to Bofinger, the robots could help produce around 4,000 lids a shift compared to other more hands-on processes producing around 1,000-2,000 products a shift.

"Right now we pay [our employees] to make a cover," Bellingham said. He continued, "When we launch the robots, we're going to pay them to problem-solve."

"I feel more professional," Ramirez laughingly said, comparing manual labor versus his new role overseeing robots.

"It's totally different; on one hand, you have this really interesting skillful thing that you can make to operate for you, and on the other hand ... you can make-believe for the entire day and just stay busy," Bofinger said.

Behrens hopes to install more robotics for other processes in the future. "The next process we're going to target is what we call our folding operation or seam-lock operation, which locks the two halves of our cans together," Bellingham said. "That's currently kind of in a research and development phase." He continued, "From the time we develop a process and figure out how it'll work to the time we come up with an industrial solution that will stand up to the test of time is about a year ... It took us over a year to get this said and done."

Behrens and Bellingham see the new robotics processes as a way to help employees gain more skills. "When they come to work, their job is to make cans; you zone out and you turn into a human-robot," Bellingham said. "Now, we're going to pay them more and they're going to do the work of more people, so it's not manual labor anymore. We're paying them for their brain, to think, and to respond to problems."

Local@winonapost.com

## Music

continued from page 1a

At the top of the concert, Apollo Music Festival Artistic Director Garret Ross and Rohde told students that one aspect of music they appreciate is its ability to tell stories and express different characters. Ross then performed two pieces by Robert Schumann called "Fantasy Pieces." Ross explained to students after performing that when he discusses music, he likes to start with two questions: Is it happy or sad, and is it energetic or calm? He asked students what they heard with the first piece. One student said it sounded angry. Several exclaimed that it was energetic, while another student said the piece was "intense." With the second piece, one student described it as sad.

Student Carter Christiansen, who is in fifth grade, said he appreciated "the intenseness ... how it was so low, and went up so high," and student Michael Hill, who is in fourth grade, said he enjoyed observing the pianist's playing technique. The musician moved swiftly over all the piano's keys, playing the lowest notes to the highest.

"You can listen to a video of someone playing music. It's so much different to hear it in person," eighth grade student Isabel Bohme said.

Rohde next performed a rondeau by Bach. In this musical form, the piece begins with a melody, then moves to another phrase of music, then returns to the melody, then shifts to a different phrase, and repeats this back and forth several times. Rohde challenged students to keep track of how many times Bach used the melody in the piece. Students guessed everywhere from four to 10 times, with six being correct.

"I enjoyed seeing all the younger kids as they were trying to count the times and come up with words to describe the music," Bohme said.

To conclude the concert, Ross and Rohde performed the first movement of the "E Minor Sonata" by Mozart. Rohde explained how Mozart wrote the emotional piece after the death of his mother.

After the performance, students had an opportunity to ask questions. One asked the musicians why they chose to play the piano and violin. Both said their families inspired their decisions. When Rohde was about four, his parents picked the violin for him, his father having played it, and he ended up really enjoying it. A slight sibling rivalry influenced Ross' choice. His older sister began playing the piano when he was about five. "I was really jealous, so I asked if I could take lessons," he said. She ultimately stopped her lessons, and he discovered his enthusiasm for piano.

Another student asked how long it took the musicians to learn how to play their instruments. They agreed that they are still learning. "You never stop learning, which is great," Rohde said.

That learning will hopefully motivate students, Rohde said. "I want students to be inspired by the music and inspired to make music a part of their lives in some way, whether that's playing an instrument of their own or enjoying music," Rohde said. He continued, "Music is a team sport. There are no winners or losers. We all get to experience it together in such a powerful way."

Principal Scott Schomberg agreed, noting that he enjoyed observing students enjoy the performance and hoped it inspired them to pursue music in some form.

For Hill, Christiansen and student Alison Anderson, who is in third grade, the concert provided that inspiration. Hill, who plays the piano, said the performance motivated him to want to play more music and more instruments. Anderson said she would like to learn how to play the drums, and for Christiansen, learning to play the guitar is now a goal.

"I really respect all the people that take time and effort to play all these instruments," Hill said.

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