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Winona cuts ART, more staff from budget

by CHRIS ROGERS

The Winona library, police department, and parks and recreation department may have to make do with fewer staff next year, and a fledgling program to dispatch social workers in addition to police on certain calls may be canceled before it gets off the ground.

To make up for a hole in their budget, Winona city leaders plan to eliminate the Alternative Response Team (ART) and the equivalent of three staff positions in the police,

library, and parks departments. City officials said they hope to possibly reverse the cuts in the future years.

“Cuts are always difficult,” Mayor Scott Sherman told the Post. “The cuts that were proposed, I think, were the best efforts by city staff members to identify where we could make those cuts without impacts to our services or with minimal impacts to our services to the community.”

The impetus for the cuts came in September, when Sherman and Winona City Council

members Michelle Alexander, George Borzyskowski, Aaron Repinski, and Steve Young voted 5-2 to eliminate \$590,000 in proposed deficit spending in the former city manager’s draft 2022 budget. “We’re draining the savings account to spend each year,” Young said at the time. “... My view is that is not sustainable. We should not be using reserve dollars to spend on daily operations, and it’s important to stop that.” The vote also capped next year’s tax levy at a 5.2 percent increase and tasked city staff with finding

\$590,000 in budget reductions to make up the difference.

On Monday, Acting City Manager Chad Ubl presented his proposal for balancing the budget. It mixes approximately \$410,000 in budget cuts with \$180,000 in increased revenue to make up for the \$590,000 deficit.

That includes \$193,000 in staffing cuts, which Ubl said would eliminate one position each at the police department and library,

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Seeking solutions to sub shortage



by ALEXANDRA RETTER

For a few of Ella Skranka’s classes, there was no teacher or substitute teacher. “I think that harms students, because that takes away from learning time we already lost from COVID,” the senior at Winona Senior High School (WSHS) and Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) Board Student Representative said at the board’s October 19 meeting.

Goodview Elementary School Principal Emily Cassellius witnessed the district’s substitute shortage firsthand, as well. She has stepped in as a substitute teacher for some classes at Goodview. “When we have those unfilled jobs,

I’m always willing to sub ... I like getting in the classroom and being with students,” she said. Other staff members at the school, such as a counselor and social worker, have also substitute taught. It is not an ideal situation, however, she said. “If we were able to fill all our sub jobs, we’d be able to avoid pulling other people from the important jobs they have,” she said. “There is a domino effect when we start pulling other staff to fill sub jobs.”

WAPS is not alone in facing a substitute shortage. Districts across Minnesota are struggling with the problem, which the pandemic

Photo by Alexandra Retter

■ Substitute teacher Michael Meurer helps a student with an assignment at Winona Middle School. Like districts throughout the state, Winona Area Public Schools is facing a substitute teacher shortage.

see **SUB SHORTAGE** page 5a

Citizens weigh in on WAPS’ new student coaches

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Out of about \$5.3 million in federal COVID relief funding, Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) plans to put about \$679,000 toward developing a department and coaches to support student success. The coaches would support students and families of color, low-income students and families, those who have immigrated, those who are experiencing homelessness and those impacted by mental health.

Meanwhile, there were previous calls from some community members, staff and students to create a cultural liaison position, including a proposal for doing so from the district’s previous diversity and equity committee and another proposal from a student. Recently, some community members have advocated at School Board meetings this fall for the district to establish a more specific cultural liaison position. The cultural liaison would be a person of color with lived experience who would specifically support students and families of color. Community member Ruth Charles

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Winona COVID cases hit 2021 high

by CHRIS ROGERS

After falling in late October, Winona County COVID infections climbed again over the past two weeks and are now at the highest level of 2021. Minnesota as a whole has some of the fastest case growth in the country at the moment. State health officials encouraged citizens to get vaccinated, wear masks, and stay home when sick and urged the federal government to expand access to booster shots.

There were 251 new COVID cases reported in Winona County the past seven days, an average of 36 new cases per day, according to the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH). That is close to the county’s worst transmission rate of all time; last November cases neared 400 per week. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports the county’s positivity rate — the percentage of COVID tests that are positive — is 17 percent.

MDH Commissioner Jan Malcolm raised concerns on Tuesday about the shortage of hospital beds. According to MDH there are

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Sheriff’s dept. deploys body cams



Photo by Chris Rogers

■ Winona County Sheriff’s Office Deputy Adam Carlson and the rest of the department’s full-time officers are now outfitted with body cameras.

by CHRIS ROGERS

After years of discussions, body cameras are here. Late last month, the Winona County Sheriff’s Office (WCSO) deployed body cameras for the first time. It is now the only law enforcement agency in the county using them. Next year, the Winona Police Department (WPD)

aims to follow suit. Police leaders say the technology promises to improve evidence gathering, promote public trust, and safeguard officers.

The cameras themselves aren’t too foreign. The black body-worn camera clipped to WCSO Deputy Adam Carlson’s jacket is literally a common smartphone with a special app. Every full-time

licensed officer in the department, from patrol to administration, now wears one, as well as the county’s jail staff, Chief Deputy Jeff Mueller explained.

The WCSO has been eyeing body cameras for a few years now, and the County Board approved a roughly \$60,000 bud-

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COVID

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eight available ICU beds in all of Southeast Minnesota. “These are numbers we haven’t seen since late December last year,” Malcom stated. The state recently opened some alternative care centers to help relieve the pressure.

Winona County reported one new hospitalization for COVID this week and no new deaths.

Winona Fire Chief Curt Bittle said that, even though many people have gone back to life as normal, the situation remains serious. He lamented the fact that more people haven’t chosen to be vaccinated. “It’s disheartening to see where we’re at, and this all really could be fixed,” he said.

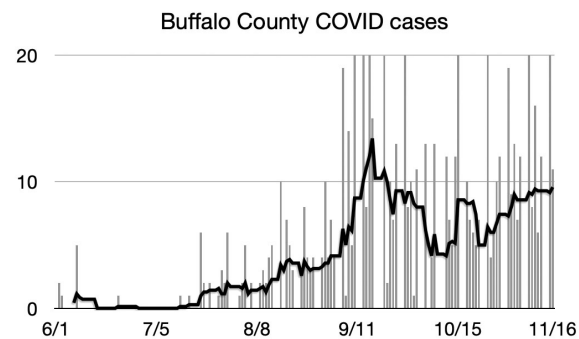
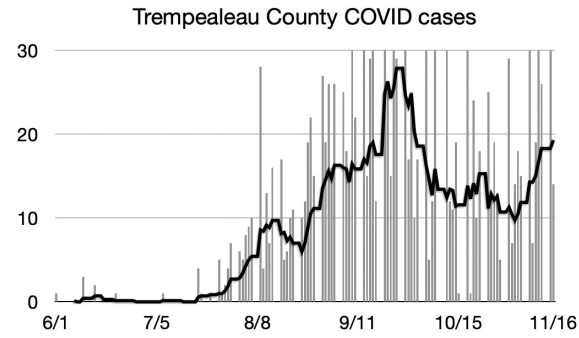
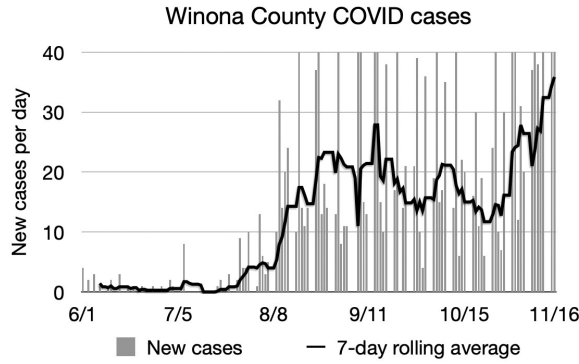
Infections were up less sharply Trempealeau County and relatively steady in Buffalo County. There were 135 new cases in Trempealeau County this week, up from 100 last week. Buffalo County saw 67 new cases this week, compared to 63 last week.

Malcom encouraged all Minnesotans to get vaccinated as soon as possible. Ninety percent of Minnesota COVID hospitalizations are among unvaccinated individuals, according to MDH. She also urged people to take advantage of boosters if they are eligible.

Currently the federal government has authorized boosters for seniors and people whose jobs, living situations, or medical conditions put them at extra risk, but Malcom said she expects the U.S. to OK boosters for the wider public in the near future. She said Minnesota would be prepared to take action on that front if the feds do not.

More information on vaccine eligibility and vaccine clinics is available at www.vaccines.gov.

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Data from state health departments

- Winona County COVID infections reached their highest level of 2021 this month.
- Transmission was also up in Trempealeau County but fairly steady in Buffalo County.

Cuts

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as well as part-time positions in the park and recreation department that add up to the equivalent of a full-time position. Ubl said he could not comment at the moment on whether the police department reduction would eliminate a licensed peace officer from the force or a civilian position.

Those cuts come in addition to six vacant staff positions that were already cut from next year’s budget: a street maintenance worker, a tree crew worker, an accountant, the city’s youth and adult recreation coordinator, an economic development specialist, and a police investigator.

“It’s challenging, specifically when you’re nearing the end of a budget,” Ubl said of the decisions in an interview. “... The last cuts to any annual budget are typically the most difficult.” He added of the impact of the staffing cuts, “We’re all facing challenges in the workforce. Reducing the workforce at the city certainly is a concern.”

The proposal calls for departments citywide, excluding the Port Authority, to cut a combined \$33,459 from their operating expenses — trimming back budgets for office supplies and maintenance work.

The plan would also eliminate the ART, which consists of two social worker-type positions contracted through Hiawatha Valley Mental Health Center totaling \$185,000. Based on successful models in other cities and spearheaded by a group of Winona citizens last summer, the ART was meant to send social workers in addition to or instead of police to certain calls for assistance.

City staff placed the ART on the chopping block in part because the program has not been able to hire staff to fill both positions. Police Chief Tom Williams said that, with a tight labor market in general and mental health professionals especially being in short supply, there were only two applicants for the two openings, and only one accepted the job. Throughout the fall, the open position didn’t garner any more qualified applicants and with only one person, the program wasn’t able to function as intended, he said.

“It hasn’t taken off from the standpoint we anticipated,” Williams said. “We thought the concept was outstanding, and in terms of the [budget] adjustment, I prefer to say we are going to pause with the ART programming.” Everything is in place to start the program up again in the future when funding is available, and hopefully the labor market will improve, too, he stated.

“I am disappointed to put a pause on the ART, but after multiple discussions, it was not suitable at this time due to the shortage of qualified applicants,” Sherman said. He added, “That is something we should seriously revisit and we should not let it fall off the table too long.”

On the revenue side, the final piece of Ubl’s proposal would take into account \$180,000 the city of Winona expects to receive from the Minnesota Department of

Sub shortage

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exacerbated. School Board member Michael Hanratty broached the topic at the School Board’s October 19 meeting after reading articles about the issue.

At WAPS, the number of available substitutes has decreased over the past several years, with a particularly significant dip because of the pandemic. Since the 2016-2017 school year, WAPS has gone from 141 to 78 substitutes, according to information that Human Resources Director Emily Solheid presented at the School Board’s November 4 meeting. Between the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, the district lost 34 substitute teachers, the largest decrease of the past six school years.

Like other employers, the district is facing problems with filling positions in general, Solheid said at the School Board’s October 19 meeting.

In addition to having fewer substitute teachers, the percentage of substitute openings that are filled has decreased. The percentage of filled openings ranged from 74 percent to 82 percent this school year, compared to a range of 90 percent to 94 percent in 2018-2019. Moreover, of 232 absences of education assistants in the first 34 days of school this year, 106 were not filled, or 46 percent. Among teachers, of 417 absences, 45 were not filled, or 11 percent.

School Board member Karl Sonneman asked at the board’s November 4 meeting what percentage Solheid would like to see. She said the 85 to 90 percent range is comfortable and the range in which staff do not feel they need to come in when they are sick.

Substitute teachers are needed slightly more on Fridays than other weekdays, according to Solheid. Fridays are the day on which 21 percent of absences fall this school year, compared with 20 percent on Mondays, 19 percent on Tuesdays, 17 percent on Wednesdays and 19 percent on Thursdays.

One factor that potentially affects this field is substitute teachers being able to work in more than one district.

WAPS also considered wages. The district increased the rate of pay to \$20 an hour or \$130 a day this school year, Solheid said. In contrast, Alberta Lea pays \$110 to \$130 a day, Faribault pays \$145 a day, Lewiston-Altura pays \$120 a day and Cotter pays \$100 a day, she said. The highest rate in the region is \$170 to \$215 a day at Red Wing.

Solheid said she would want to be cautious about further increases, as she does not want to devalue the pay for a beginning teacher, about \$229 a day.

Hanratty said he felt it would be worth exploring an additional raise.

Unfilled substituting openings impact students and staff. School Board Chair Nancy Denzer asked whether the district could not allow a teacher who scheduled an absence for professional development, for example, to be out if there was a high need for substitute teachers that day. Solheid said yes; WAPS sometimes asks teachers to work anyway.

When the district cannot find an available substitute teacher, other staff often fill the need. Solheid said some

Transportation (Mn/DOT) for the purchase of right-of-way property for the upcoming Mankato Avenue reconstruction project. Because it is one-time revenue, it won’t benefit the city’s budget in future years.

The City Council voted unanimously to tentatively approve Ubl’s proposal.

“I tentatively approve this new budget, but as a note for future years, the library should be a priority for us to revisit in terms of services and personnel since that’s one of most public-facing and most utilized services in the city,” City Council member Eileen Moeller said.

City Council member Michelle Alexander praised city staff’s hard work to balance the budget. Regarding the staffing cuts, she added, “I have no problem with revisiting employees as long as we budget for them. If that tax rate is appropriate to cover the expenses, I think many of us will look at those employees and say, we want them back on the staff, but we need to fund them. So I look forward to that discussion for next year.”

“It’s going to be a challenge for us, but it’s a challenge we are going to be able to meet,” Borzyskowski said in an interview about the budget decisions. “Hopefully [the cuts] will be for a short time,” he added.

City staff have yet to spell out exactly what positions will be eliminated. Citing concerns about personnel issues, Ubl said he will present that information to the public and the City Council on December 20, the same night the council will take its final vote on the budget.

Sherman said he was comfortable with that timeline, saying city staff were in the best position to determine where the city could afford to cut. “I guess I don’t have any concerns about the public not having a say on, ‘Put more people in the library and take them out of police,’ or, ‘Put more people on police and take them out of the water department or tree crew.’ That’s up to staff to decide what is feasible because they’re the ones that do it from day to day,” he said.

Ubl clarified in interviews after Monday night’s meeting which departments would be affected by staffing cuts. During the meeting itself he simply told the City Council there would be \$193,000 in reductions to “employee services.” Nevertheless, some council members were aware which departments were affected. Ubl said he shared his proposal to the council for the first time at Monday’s meeting, but that he had one-on-one conversations with all City Council members about the budget cuts leading up to Monday’s meeting. The Minnesota Open Meeting Law requires the City Council to discuss public issues in public and allows for staff to share information with council members outside public meetings but not to conduct a straw poll of what council members want.

Describing his private discussions with staff, Sherman said, “I know that I have and I hope that other council members have conveyed [constituents’ wishes to staff] along the way about what they view as essential for the public.”

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educational assistants at the middle or high school level have a teaching or short-call substitute certification, and the district has asked them to substitute teach.

Combining classes is an option at some schools, depending on class sizes, Solheid said. The school could offer supervised study halls for combined classes, she said.

If an art, PE or music teacher is absent at the elementary level, WAPS would ask a classroom teacher to keep their students during what would have been their time to prepare lessons, Solheid said.

Hanratty expressed his concerns about counselors and social workers filling substituting needs, as he does not want their time being taken away from helping students, in light of social and emotional needs arising from the pandemic. Hanratty also said at the October 19 meeting that he was concerned about principals or other staff substituting, as it could impact their ability to complete their work and, therefore, impact students.

To substitute teach on a day to day basis, those with a four-year degree can apply to the state for a certification. Those substituting in a class for an extended period of time must be certified in the area they are teaching in. Those without a bachelor’s degree can substitute as an educational assistant, for example, but not as a classroom teacher, Solheid said in an interview.

The district also is working to recruit substitute teachers and find new ways to do so. The district works to engage with substitute teachers and have them feel part of the WAPS community, Solheid said. WAPS also collaborates with local universities. School Board member Jim Schul said at the board’s November 4 meeting that he is recruiting some of the students he has taught as an education professor. WAPS asks those who retire from the district if they would like to substitute teach, as well, Solheid said.

Ideas other districts have implemented include giving a bonus to employees who refer a substitute teacher to the district and reimbursing subs for certifications.

At WAPS, Solheid said in an interview, she would like to work on a program to provide substitute teachers training on earning certification and skills such as classroom management. She would also be interested in reimbursing some certification costs, she said.

Skranka said at the October 19 School Board meeting that it is important to consider teachers’ mental health, as well. School Board member Stephanie Smith agreed on November 4, stating teachers perhaps need time off for their mental health and the district could support that.

For one of the district’s substitute teachers, the position brings him full circle to the start of his career. Michael Meurer substitute taught for several years before teaching for a few decades. Now, he is thrilled to be back in the classroom. At the middle school, where students have “so much hope and promise,” he said, he loves watching students grow from fifth to eighth graders. Also, some of the teachers there are his own former students, and he appreciates collaborating with them. He said he wants prospective substitute teachers to know the students are wonderful and joyful, and the adults in the building are supportive.

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Drawing by Savanna Peterson