



# winona's locally owned newspaper since 1971 winonapost 50

1971  
YEARS  
2021

wednesday, september 1, 2021

volume 50, no. 33

Official newspaper of the city of Winona



Hope Lutheran opens new school – 3B

Daley Farm appeal denied – 5B

Caledonia beats out Winhawks volleyball – 6B



WSU sets plan for Children's Center – 4B

## All options on table for future of WAPS bldgs.

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Facing about \$63 million in deferred maintenance and declining enrollment, Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) is preparing to make big decisions about

the future of its school buildings. Some School Board members said substantial changes — such building a new school or reorganizing schools — are not off the table. School Board members voted on August

19 to create an updated master facility plan. WAPS will also be developing a task force of board, community and staff members to gauge community sentiment on the future of the district's facilities. The

question of whether WAPS will pursue a referendum to borrow money for building projects remains open, as well, though board members set November 2022 as the

see **WAPS** page 5a

## Winona revokes mayor's mask mandate



## Winona city budget: 5% tax hike, staffing cuts

by CHRIS ROGERS

The city of Winona's draft budget for next year proposes a 5-percent tax hike, staffing cuts, reduced funding for road repair, and plans to spend some of the city's reserves. It would mark the largest reduction in city staff since the Great Recession and a bit of austerity for a city that has become more fiscally ambitious in recent years. At the same time, the 5-percent tax hike is in the middle of the pack when compared to property tax levy increases over the past five years.

The draft budget included \$470,000 for repairing neighborhood city streets, down from the normal \$800,000 or more. The City Council reduced that figure to \$365,000 on Monday after voting not to use city reserve funds on street repair.

The budget includes a placeholder for the \$6.3-million dollar community center project — which would relocate the city's senior center to the East Recreation Center — to be paid for with state or federal funds, but no such funding exists. City staff also proposed spending \$1.8 million in COVID relief funds to add air conditioning to the Masonic Temple, which the city plans to use as an arts center in the future.

"I would not vote for the budget as presented," City Council member Michelle

see **TAX HIKE** page 5a

## County Board plans its own mask mandate

by CHRIS ROGERS

In a flurry of activity last week, a mayoral mask mandate was in place in the city of Winona for less than 36 hours before the Winona City Council voted 4-3 to rescind it. Meanwhile, the Winona County Board voted 3-2 to pursue a countywide mask mandate, with a public hearing on the proposal expected later this month. The order made Winona

one of the first local governments in Minnesota to require masks since a state mask order expired earlier this summer.

With the goal of curtailing a surge in local COVID infections, Winona Mayor Scott Sherman issued an emergency order requiring face masks in all indoor, public settings citywide last Wednesday. The city announced the order at about 5 p.m., and it took effect at midnight the same night. On Friday morning, the City Council put an immediate end to the mask mandate, with council members Michelle Alexander, George Borzyskowski,

see **MASK MANDATE** page 8a

Photo by Chris Rogers

Winona County Board members Greg Olson (right) and Marcia Ward (left) debated a possible countywide mask mandate last Tuesday night.

## Hospitals stretched by COVID surge

by CHRIS ROGERS

Area hospitals are feeling the impact from this summer's COVID surge. Winona Health and Gundersen Health System doctors said their and other regional hospitals are operating near maximum capacity, the delta variant is making some relatively young people gravely ill, and the strain of the pandemic is wearing on health care workers.

Locally and across Minnesota and Wisconsin, COVID infections shot up in August as the more infectious delta variant took hold. Hospitalizations also rose. In Wisconsin, the number of people actively hospitalized for COVID went from 93 patients on July 15 to 804 on August 24, according to the latest Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) data. Eighty-nine percent of hospital beds in Wisconsin are currently in use, and 92 percent of intensive care unit (ICU) beds. In Minnesota, the seven-day average for new hospitalizations rose from 20 patients on July 15 to 74 on August 26. According to the Minnesota Department of Health, 93.7 percent of hospital beds in Southeast Minnesota are full.

"We are being inundated with patients, and we are struggling to keep up," Gundersen Health System Regional Manager Lindsey

see **SURGE** page 5a

## WSHS principal makes an impression



Photo by Alexandra Retter

Heather Fitzloff, Winona Senior High School's new principal, wants to be accessible and approachable for students, families, staff and community members.

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Heather Fitzloff let teachers know she may stop by their classrooms, just to interact with students and watch them learn. Winona Senior High School's (WSHS) new principal wants to be approachable, visible and accessible for students, families, staff and community members. "I don't want kids to not know who their principal is," Fitzloff said. "I

want them to know I'm here to help and listen, and I want families to feel that, as well."

Social studies teacher Linda Pfeilsticker said Fitzloff listens, asks good questions and treats staff and students in a caring, positive way. "She sees them as a person, as a human being first," Pfeilsticker said.

"And I think that feeling that your teachers truly care

about you and look out for you, believe in you, inspire you, that role is so instrumental to all kids," Fitzloff said.

Superintendent Annette Freiheit agreed with Pfeilsticker. "[Fitzloff] has just a great sense of empathy and understanding and commitment to students, and their student voice, along with staff and their staff voice," Freiheit said.

see **PRINCIPAL** page 8a

the winonapost ... proud to be your community newspaper for over 50 years

**BROSNAHAN LAW FIRM P.A.**

PAUL BROSNAHAN

507-457-3000 | 24-Hour Emergency: 507-450-2422

Located in Winona | Helping families throughout Minnesota & Wisconsin

**Helping Families**

with their personal injury & death claims.

www.brosnahanlawfirm.com

## postscript

# Mask mandate reversal was the right decision

Congratulations to the Winona City Council for the vote to overturn Mayor Scott Sherman's ill-advised mask mandate.

I understand that there has been a surge in COVID cases locally, but that is to be expected with the delta variant circulating around, a few thousand college kids returning to Winona and school starting.

A mask mandate at this time would be ridiculous and intrusive. Who are we protecting with such a wide mandate? People who have not been vaccinated, that's who.

That group may include children, but the vaccine has been approved for kids 12 and older. Most of the cases of COVID in children at this time are occurring in teens 16 and older who have not been vaccinated. Cases in younger children are usually quite mild.

The unvaccinated are the ones ending up in the hospital with the more severe cases of COVID. That should be a clear message to the unvaccinated that the odds are stacked against them.

I understand and accept that people have the freedom to decide whether or not to be vaccinated. However, I do not accept the premise that those of us who have been vaccinated should

by Frances Edstrom, columnist

be required to mask up to protect those who have decided not to get the vaccine.

Businesses shouldn't be mandated to become health police. If a certain business owner freely decides that all employees and customers must be masked, that is perfectly acceptable. If a business owner sees no reason to require masks, that, too, is just fine. We can choose whom to patronize.

When the previous mayor issued a mask mandate, there was no vaccine widely available, and masking and hand-washing were our only defenses against the virus. Now, vaccines are practically available on every street corner! Winona Health has a walk-in vaccine and testing clinic. Local pharmacies are administering the vaccine, as well. The immunocompromised among us are being offered a third shot.

There is not much of an excuse to not be vaccinated these days. The Food and Drug Administration has approved the Pfizer vaccine, and will soon approve Moderna and Johnson & Johnson. If a person does decide not to get the vaccine, that person also is deciding to take a chance on getting the COVID virus.

Mayor Sherman's mask mandate was uneeded and overly intrusive in our lives and businesses.



## scents

# Evolutionary tales

The scents of things going wrong are more obviously in the air these days than any answers blowing in the wind.

I learned a story about "evolution" years ago when I was a kid in the public schools. My lesson was pictured as a poster on a bulletin board. There I saw little fish-like things happily swirling in blue water, and then the picture showed them moving upward while happily growing fins. Then they magically sprouted leg-like appendages. Then, behold, they walked ashore, grew bigger and hairy, and lived in jungles, huts and villages. Eventually they built skyscrapers and one day were certain to go tripping off to Mars.

Most of my teachers probably didn't know the poster did not represent what scientists really were finding out about evolution. But the poster made it easier for everyone to feel good about the human story. It was, above all, a "Progress" story. The poster proudly displayed humanity as nature's predestined elect. We, human beings, were at the top of nature's ladder of success, the self-proclaimed stars of nature's show. Nature was quietly scheming to make winners of us. Or rather, nature was said to favor some of us, a special few, the winners smart and strong enough to put loser humans, and "lower" animals, in their proper place.

My cat Milo reminds me of how wrong my old teachers were. Milo insists he has a perfect right to my favorite easy chair.

A philosopher named Herbert Spencer pushed the human progress view very hard, and for a few decades he convinced even academics it was the truth. His "Social Darwinism" claimed that the modern industrial society was evolution's top achievement. Henry Ford liked the idea. The winners would own Ford cars. Adolph Hitler loved the idea. The winners would own Volkswagens and be blue-eyed and blond, except him.

While I was asked to believe this story my brain was also was fattened on sports, movies and TV. Whenever one of the teams I was on won a game we used the word "great" a lot. We also used the word to describe a lot of the movies and TV shows, the steady diet of mental junk-food we were routinely fed to spice up the ads. It was easy for me to believe that what I ate up as I was growing up someday would make me great. The good guys — the he-men heroes — are fit to survive and win. The poor, cancerous, crippled, insane, frail, ugly, crooked, clueless, alienated and depressed are naturally destined to obey some "law of the jungle" — call it "evolution" — that makes losers of them. They get sicker, go away, go to jail, or get killed by he-men, and they don't have a lovely romance with a gorgeous woman destined to give birth to children destined to make all the varsity teams. In most of these stories the best and bravest — like Superman and home run hitters in huge sports stadiums on freeways far from Main Street — are lion-kings.

Those considered losers in life — like all those sperm that fail to wiggle their way successfully into an egg — seem like hoards of useless extras playing pointless roles in "evolution's" progress selection schemes. These extras are so many and so diverse — the poor, cancerous, crippled, insane, frail, ugly, crooked, clueless,

alienated and depressed — that the brilliant, beautiful and fit to survive rarely make any mention of them in their credit lines.

We love success stories and their happy endings and like to call them (oxymoronically) "true stories." But the real science of evolution tells untidy tales. Biology's ways are, like all gods, strange and mysterious. They are not easily plotted on a progress curve. Whales, elephants, tigers and lions — those top of the line beasts — are losing out. While natural selection's untidy whims quietly kick in, lion hunters have a blind spot for the target on their backs. Roaches, termites, and ticks dig in to increase and multiply, while waiting things out. Zillions of them often know enough to cooperate with tiny stuff in mud, roots and each other in order to survive. Meanwhile, king-of-the-beasts lions, down to a lonely few, have fewer places to hide.

Evolution can be very cruel. Lovely small creatures good for us — bees and butterflies, for example — are quietly going the way of the dinosaurs. The cells in tiny beasts — bacteria and virus species — may prove more "smart" than all our smartphones combined. They may be the most fit to survive.

COVID and its new strains come to mind. We can't see them, so it's easy to think they don't have strange eyes and noses for us. It's actually dangerous to believe they don't exist.

While all this tiny activity is invisibly going on we like to think we're techno-savvy enough to conquer outer space without ruining or running out of garden space. What we call human progress — our "technological genius" and our "taming" and "conquest" of nature — makes us feel we're still lording it over and in control of nature. In this view nature is our slave. We can tell it what to do, and it must obey. It's a loser, compared to us.

The key to human success — call it also survival these days — maybe depends on how we treat the natural presences we have tried to harness and enslave to human use and ambition, sometimes also called greed. What emanates from our American history of slavery is the need — and opportunity — for empathy and cooperation. Our nation will likely fall apart if we continue to lord it over each other.

And nature continues to be treated like our slave. The story I learned as a kid about evolution and human progress is rather obviously in deep trouble. Today's poster art depicting evolution's real ways would be bizarre indeed. We need a better story to live by than the one in the poster I saw as a kid. Quiet and often invisible success stories normally result from empathy and cooperation. Without empathy and cooperation self-proclaimed winners make a lot of noise as they try to knock each other off.

Nations becoming dictatorships experience the false version of survival of the fittest in very nasty ways.

by Emilio DeGrazia, columnist



## letters

# Fed up with the COVID careless

From: David Girod  
Winona

I'm getting fed up with all the response to this pandemic being politicized. This isn't your ordinary common cold. People are getting seriously ill with this virus. People of all ages are dying from it, children, young and elderly adults. This is why I can't fathom any citizen of this country vigorously opposing precautions, in some cases rising to assault between opposing sides on the issues of mask wearing and getting vaccines.

We're told by those "heroes" that are treating victims of COVID-19 that most are ones who aren't vaccinated. For God's sake this isn't a no brainer. And I can't believe the B.S. put on social media concerning the vaccine: You'll receive a computer chip with your shot.

People complain their rights are being violated, by mask or vaccine mandates. To those I respond, how about the rights of your children not to become ill, or worse yet, die?

To those with that mindset (anti-mask or anti-shot) I say you're a poor example of a parent. I love how some school boards in Florida and Texas are telling their prospective governors, DeSantis or Abbott, essentially, "Go to hell." Those, to me, are true parents.

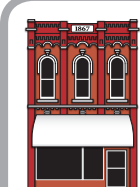
I guess incentives for getting a vaccine is a good idea. If it results in a huge increase in new vaccines. I like what some restaurants and bars are doing to help the cause; no mask or shot, no entry, no beer. These items were on national news shows.

I would whole heartedly support mask and vaccine mandates in this country. Personal rights be damned unless you have a legitimate medical reason for not doing either. When I and my two brothers got our two shots last March at Hy-Vee, there should be no problem, America; roll up your sleeves.

# Health should come first on City Council

From: Colette Hyman  
Winona

Thank you, Mayor Sherman and Councilwomen Eyden and Moeller, for putting people before profits and data before dollars when voting to support a mask mandate! These elected officials acted in consideration of reports and recommendations prepared by experts immersed in science and evidence, whose jobs are to look after the health of community members. The others, Council members Alexander, Borzyskowski, Repinski, and Young voted on the say-so of individuals looking after their own bottom lines. Who do you think is acting in the best interest of all Winonans?



winona's twice-weekly newspaper since 1971  
**winonapost**  
email: winpost@winonapost.com | winonapost.com



507.452.1262 800.353.2126  
fax: 507.454.6409  
P.O. Box 27, 64 E. 2nd St.  
Winona, MN 55987

**Publisher:** Patrick Marek  
**Editor:** Chris Rogers  
**Finance/Operations Director:** Dana Cierzan  
**Advertising Director:** Patrick Marek  
**Sales:** Kim Farkas, Bob Shattuck, Les Guderian  
**Inside Sales/Classified:** Amanda Sattler

**Reporter:** Alexandra Retter  
**Columnist/Proofreader:** Fran Edstrom  
**Circulation:** Mary Veraguth  
**Creative Director:** Ashley Blum

**Composition Editor:** Monica Veraguth  
**Creative Designer:** Andy Boysen  
**Editorial Assistant:** Cyndi Wehlage  
**Pressmen:** Jim Bethke, Jesse J. Brandes  
**Mailroom:** John Payne

## letters

# Afghanistan debacle

From: Lt. Col. Roger M. Reitmaier  
USMCR, retired

I am so upset, I can't see straight. The decision Joe Biden made to close Bagram air base in favor of the Kabul airport in the withdrawal from Afghanistan scenario was a *colossal* mistake. That mistake lead directly to the loss of 12 Marines and one Navy corpsman (medic). Those young Marines and sailor would be alive today if Biden had followed the advice of senior military commanders. Their blood is on his hands.

If you know of an Afgan veteran, please reach out to him/her with compassion.

# Another way to look at vaccination

by Dr. Katrina Hammel, Winona Health

Almost a year and a half ago, the world was taken by a storm with the novel COVID-19 virus and the destruction that it has caused—from a medical standpoint, business standpoint and, for many, on a very personal level. It has completely disrupted our way of life. It didn't matter if you were in the workforce, a student, or retired — life changed for everyone. And we all buckled in for the ride. Unfortunately, the ride has lasted a little too long in my opinion. I'm starting to get "car sick" and would like a rest stop.

Yet, the rest stop seems far away as we continue to be in the thick of things and the delta variant is hitting our community. We see both in our community, as well as the surrounding regional hospitals, that COVID admissions are increasing and increasing rapidly. The patients now are younger and quite a bit sicker. Providing care requires more resources, like personal protective equipment, oxygen, medicines, and medical devices such as ventilators — some of which are scarce. Here at Winona Health, we are caring for patients who have COVID-19 both in the hospital and in the clinic. So far, we have not had to divert any patients, and we hope that doesn't change.

As much as science continues to amaze me day after day, we don't have a whole lot that offers effective treatment once you need to be hospitalized after contracting COVID-19. The majority of people will *not* need to be hospitalized. That's irrefutable. But I worry about, and care for, the ones who are unlucky. Can science yet predict who will have severe disease? No. The most effective way to prevent ending up in the hospital is to not get COVID-19. And getting vaccinated is the best way to prevent severe illness and hospitalization if you do get the virus.

This is not an editorial to suggest that vaccination will mean you'll have zero chance of getting the virus — the delta variant has proven that this is just not the case. Delta has also proven that it is affecting more kids, which is concerning to me as a physician and also as a parent who still has young children who are not old enough yet for a COVID vaccine.

Although this is a novel coronavirus, the concept of taking precautions is certainly not novel. The seat belt law in Minnesota passed in 1986, as lawmakers knew that the best way to avoid injuries and death from motor vehicles was to avoid the accident; but if the accident is unavoidable, in many cases, seat belts save lives. That is what health care workers are trying to impart — of course you should try to avoid getting the disease (COVID-19), but if you can't avoid it, being vaccinated is like your seat belt.

I hear concerns from people about the new technology of the mRNA vaccines and how many people don't trust how quickly they were developed. Medicine has continually developed new technologies and classes of medication — this is how we learn. We have been doing this for generations. Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin, which is widely lauded as a game changer in modern medicine, and now we have many, many different antibiotics that are arguably much better than penicillin.

The practice of medicine constantly changes with the goal of improving both quality and quantity of life. Sometimes, there is no way to be certain of long-term outcomes while we are making these changes, but we can understand the risk of not making the changes. We can only control what we do today. And today, if you haven't already, I hope that you'll choose to get vaccinated, not only to protect yourself, but also the people you care about around you.

For information about getting a COVID-19 vaccine, visit [www.winona-health.org](http://www.winona-health.org) or call 507-454-3650.

## Do you need to run LEGAL ADS?

Assumed Name? Bids? Probate? Dissolution of Marriage? Call us for the lowest prices in town! 507-452-1262 or FAX 454-6409

# WAPS

continued from page 1a

date for a referendum to go before voters, if the district decides to move ahead with one.

School Board member Steve Schild said he would like those involved with facilities planning to thoroughly consider the district's deferred maintenance and declining enrollment and develop a community-supported plan that meets students' educational needs in the near future and longer term while being the best value on tax payers' money.

School Board Chair Nancy Denzer said those taking part in facilities planning should consider the capacity of WAPS' buildings, long-term maintenance needs and students' academic requirements.

School Board member Michael Hanratty said he hopes those involved in facilities planning talk about thinking outside the box with the district's buildings and prioritizing safety needs. Like Schild, he also wants the plan to serve taxpayers well.

Superintendent Annette Freiheit said she is considering collaborative learning spaces with furniture that can be moved easily and upgraded technology, as well as building air quality. Additionally, she is pondering expanded early childhood education and community education opportunities. She believes those involved with planning will also think about deferred maintenance and enrollment, she said.

At a past School Board meeting regarding the task force, Schild brought up the idea of new building construction. When asked what was meant by his question, Schild said, "I want the charge of whatever group looks at the facilities needs to be worded in such a way that any viable possibility can be examined. So, I didn't have anything specific in mind when I asked about new construction, but I don't want anything to be off the table, either."

When asked if opening new schools is an option, Schild said, "Any viable or plausible option should get a fair hearing."

Asked if building a new school was an option, Denzer said, "[It] is not in my view."

Asked whether he would consider new construction, Hanratty said he would want to see the plan for doing so. "I'd need a lot of convincing as to why that would need to be done," he said. "I'm fully in the camp of asset preservation and preserving the assets we have, including the buildings we have."

Freiheit said new construction could be a possibility. "If you're doing your due diligence for your community, I think you have to weigh in on that," she said. "You have to look at and present to your community, 'Here's what it's going to cost to upgrade what we currently have. And how we can use it to the best of our ability.'" She added, "I'm sure everybody would love to [have a new building], but I also respect the commitment we have to the history and culture of our community." Winona State University upgraded

buildings to develop Education Village, Freiheit noted, stating, "But you also have to look at that and go okay, but can we build a new building for that same dollar amount or less? And I think that's what you have to present to your community, so they can provide you with feedback on it."

Conversely, could closing schools be a possibility? When asked if closing current schools is a possibility, Schild said, "I don't have in mind any such plan."

Denzer replied to the same question, "It's not been in my view."

Hanratty said, "I am fully against any school closures."

Freiheit said she felt the School Board had indicated it did not want to go down that path.

Earlier this summer, Hanratty brought up the idea of reconfiguring what grade levels attend what schools. For instance, several elementary grades could be housed at one current elementary school, several others could be housed at another and the third school could become an early childhood education center. In an interview, Hanratty said he would like to draw people to the district, noting that child care shortages are an issue, so a center could be beneficial. Elementary educators who teach the same grade would all be in the same building for collaboration, he added. The high school could also potentially welcome seventh and eighth graders, he said.

Schild said those involved with facilities planning could also think about reconfiguring current schools. "If we wouldn't take into account some possible recon-

figurations that were raised, then I don't think we'd be doing our work very well," he said.

A conversation about reconfiguration is feasible, Denzer said, and will be part of the task force's work.

"I do think when we meet with our community task force, I really feel like there's nothing that's going to be taken off the table," Freiheit said.

The upcoming task force work will be another substantial part of facilities planning. The group will have about 30 members.

The number of community and staff members on the task force has not yet been determined, Freiheit said. Earlier this month, she said the group is expected to have three School Board members. The meeting dates for the group have also not yet been set, she said. The School Board will appoint task force members, and the district's historical collaborator, architecture firm Wold, will facilitate the group's meetings, Freiheit said.

In addition to facilitating task force meetings, Wold is providing the district with estimated project costs currently, Freiheit said. WAPS will not be charged for the work until a referendum is passed or project work such as gathering construction specifications begins, she said. She does not know what the cost may be at that point, she added.

Education@winonapost.com

# Tax hike

continued from page 1a

Alexander said in an interview. "I am not OK with 5.2 percent for an increase," she stated. Alexander described the current budget situation as some of the city's past financial decisions — such as expanding its staff and spending reserves — coming home to roost. Asked about the proposed staffing reductions, she said, "I actually think we still need to cut operations."

City Council member Eileen Moeller told the Post in an interview, "The staff have had to make a lot of cuts because of COVID, and I think that they're doing the best that they can. There's a lot of projects on the [capital improvement program] that need to be done that aren't going to be, which is too bad, but I think we have a great city staff and they are really conscientious of using city dollars, and I appreciate the work that they do." Asked about the proposed tax increase, Moeller pointed to growth in the city's tax base, "Considering how much development we've had, that's not going to be felt by most average taxpayers, not significantly anyway ... I think it's fitting for the amount of development we've had."

Released last Friday, the proposed

\$56-million budget would eliminate six positions: an accounting position, a police investigator, a street maintenance worker, a city tree crew position, a community development staff member, and the city's recreation coordinator. The budget also postpones a plan to add a third firefighter to fully staff the West Fire Station.

Most of the above positions were already vacant. The city instituted a soft hiring freeze during the early days of the pandemic, and left these positions unfilled after retirements or resignations. The new budget formalizes the cuts and makes them permanent. The police investigator position previously acted as a school resource officer for Winona Area Public Schools, a position the School Board eliminated last summer.

After cutting staff in 2009 following the Great Recession, the city slowly added roughly 13 employees in recent years, growing from 168 full-time equivalents (FTEs) in 2015 to 181 FTEs in 2021. For example, when former recreation director Maynard Johnson retired in 2017, the city converted that job into three: an arts and culture coordinator, an outdoor recreation coordinator, and a recreation coordinator. The draft budget would eliminate the park and recreation department's only full-time staff position dedicated entirely to traditional sports and recreation. Overall, the draft budget would reduce city staff from

181 to 175 FTEs.

"City staff have been working diligently to reduce costs and implement long-term strategies that will enhance the city's financial health," City Manager Steve Sarvi wrote in a memo to the City Council. Regarding the cuts, he said that, following the precautionary hiring freeze, city departments simply found they could operate with fewer people. "As we continued our operations, we realized that, while it would be great to have more people, it's really not necessary to get the job done," he told the Post in an interview. He acknowledged that if next year's budget did not include the staffing cuts it would "dramatically increase" the proposed tax hike. Asked if there was financial pressure to reduce staff, he responded, "No," adding that workers compensation insurance increases, wage increases for unionized employees, and the need to raise part-time wages to attract candidates were the driving causes of the 5-percent tax increase.

Mayor Scott Sherman supported the proposed tax increase for now. The City Council must set a preliminary tax levy by the end of September. Between then and the final budget vote in December, taxes may be lowered but not increased. Noting that dynamic and that a big-picture study of the city's finances is planned for this fall, Sherman said, "I think what we need to do

is maintain what we have in that preliminary [tax increase] right now so that we have the ability to go through the financial study and use pieces of that that we may find advantageous to us."

Sherman said city staff had done a good job of finding areas to reduce spending and strike the right balance between providing excellent service and having low taxes. "There are always going to be differences of opinion in the community about how we spend our money," Sherman continued. "I think we need to be cautious to make sure we don't get into a bad spot down the road."

The City Council voted earlier this year to hire financial consulting firm Baker Tilly to advise the city on how to fund major projects such as the community center and a new police-fire station. Recently, Sarvi and Sherman described the consultants as having a broader focus, to advise the city on its entire financial situation and fiscal policies.

The City Council voted to tentatively approve parts of the proposed budget on Monday, and met Tuesday night, after the Post went to press, to discuss the remainder. A formal vote on the preliminary budget is scheduled for later this month.

Chris@winonapost.com

# Surge

continued from page 1a

Styx told the Winona County Board last week as it moved to pursue a mask mandate.

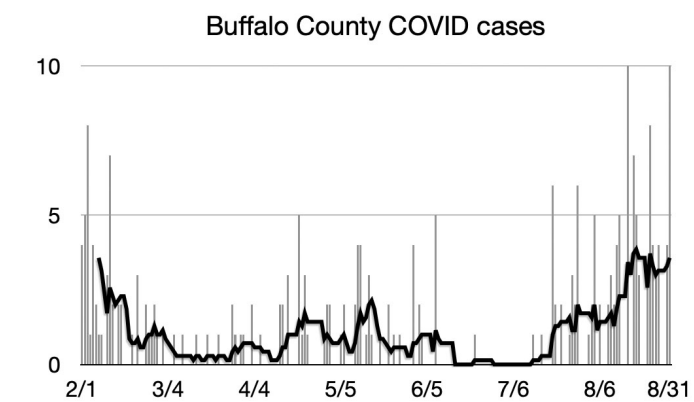
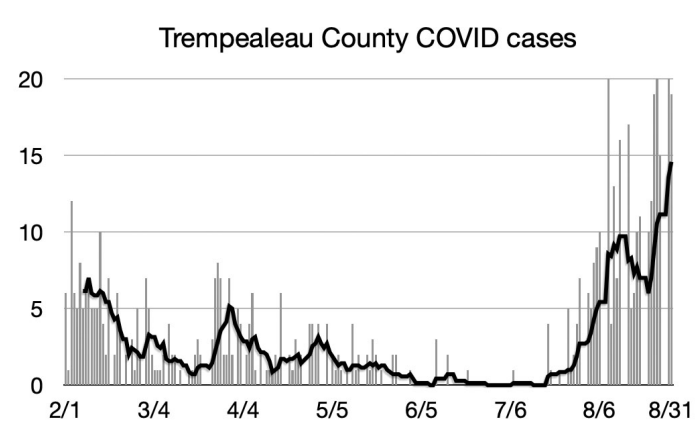
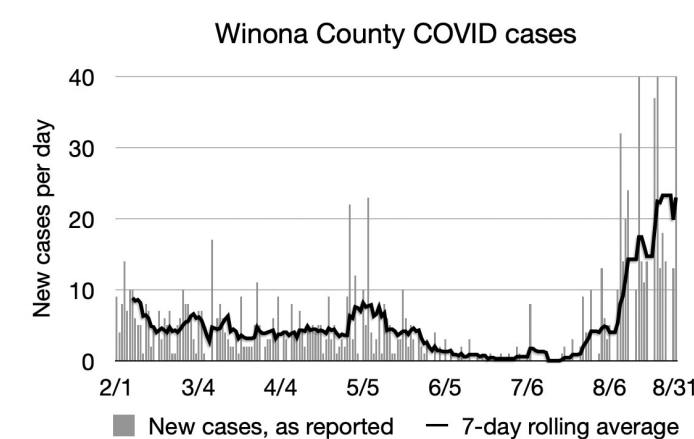
"I think for the most part we're doing OK. We're certainly seeing an uptick in COVID cases," Winona Health Physician Katrina Hammel said in an interview last Thursday. Hammel said that the Winona hospital has been running an average daily census of 21-22 patients out of 33 staffed beds, including eight ICU beds.

However, Hammel highlighted that several regional hospitals have been on diversion, meaning they were too busy to accept patients. "What we have seen is that the numbers aren't as bad as they were last November or December. So the actual number of patients isn't as bad, but the acuity or how sick they're getting is higher," she added.

"With the number of COVID patients we're seeing now, we had to reopen a dedicated COVID unit, and we've got half of our ICU beds filled with COVID patients, many of whom are on ventilators," Gundersen Health System Medical Chief Operating Officer Michael Dolan said in an interview last Thursday. Gundersen's main hospital in La Crosse, Wis., has been running a census of around 290-300 patients out of 325 total beds. "That's really busy," Dolan said. The hospital capped elective surgeries last week. "That is a testament to the fact that it is impacting our day-to-day operations and our ability to take care of patients," he said.

At both Winona Health and Gundersen Health System, coronavirus patients made up a minority of the hospital census: 25 patients out of nearly 300 in La Crosse and four out of 22 or so in Winona. However, with plenty of other medical emergencies — heart attacks, strokes — that also need immediate attention, the uptick in COVID cases is enough to stretch hospitals, Hammel and Dolan said.

The level of care needed is major factor, too. COVID patients often require a one-to-one nurse-to-patient ratio, as opposed to the more normal one-to-five, Dolan explained. "That requires a lot of staff dedicated to



Data from state health departments

■ After multiplying rapidly in recent weeks, new COVID infections were steady in Winona and Buffalo counties in the past week. Cases rose sharply in Trempealeau County.

that small number of patients," he said. Like Hammel, Dolan noted the severity of COVID cases is part of the issue. "They are so sick. And a lot of them die," he said. "We've had to watch a lot of very young people, younger than me, die over the last couple of weeks. I wish people could actually see what it's like in the COVID unit."

"If you have one or two COVID patients in the hospital and they're not in a dedicated unit ... that is just everyday, easy for us to take care of," Dolan said. "But when a 10th of the patients in the hospital are COVID patients and the resources they take, because of the one-to-one and one-to-two ratio of COVID care ... that's where it starts to impact your other operations, because in order to staff that unit, you've got to take away staff from other units."

Staff, as much as beds and ventilators, are a limiting factor for U.S. hospitals. Winona

Health CEO Rachelle Schultz said that staffing challenges have driven down hospital capacity across the country. Dolan described how 18 months of fighting COVID have affected nurses, aides, and doctors: "They are fatigued. We're definitely seeing the increasing burnout among our nursing and clinician staff that are dealing with the COVID patients day in and day out."

Asked if he was worried that regional hospitals would be overwhelmed this fall if COVID infections keep climbing, Dolan responded, "I'm worried about that every day. I'm hopeful that the fact that we have much higher vaccinations in our region compared to the Southeast [U.S.] will help." He added of hospitalizations, "It's crept up a hair over the last couple of days. I'm hopeful that we'll just plateau at this level and start to go down in a month or so."

Hammel said Winona Health could expand

its capacity to serve more patients if need be.

## Local COVID infections remain high

COVID transmission remained high but relatively stable in Winona County this week, with 161 new cases in the past seven days, on par with 157 last week and up from 122 the week before, according to MDH.

New infections were also stable in Buffalo County, where there were 25 new cases this week, down from 26 last week, according to DHS.

However, COVID cases spiked again in Trempealeau County, with 102 new infections this week, double last week's 49.

There was one new hospitalization each in Trempealeau and Buffalo counties and zero in Winona County, county health departments reported.

Chris@winonapost.com

Winona's #1 source for up to date school news.



winonapost

