



winona's locally owned newspaper since 1971 winonapost50

1971
YEARS
2021

wednesday, october 6, 2021

volume 50, no. 38

Official newspaper of the city of Winona

WSU hosts Expanding Perspectives Series - 2B

New jail construction to begin this month - 4B

Drowning death near Buffalo City - 4B

C-FC cross country teams win races - 5B

Cases decline; mask opponents speak out

by CHRIS ROGERS

The Winona County Board's potential mask mandate is still slowly advancing, but with local COVID infections declining somewhat, County Board members Greg Olson and Marie Kovcesi said local infection trends will influence their decision on whether a mandate is necessary. A public hearing and final vote on the proposal is expected in late October or November.

The County Board got a taste for what that hearing may be like last week, when scores of citizens held a rally in opposition to masks outside the county offices.

After shooting up in August, local COVID infections have declined some over the past three weeks. In Trempealeau and Buffalo counties, cases are down markedly, with 102 new cases in Trempealeau County this week, down from 164 last week. In Buffalo County, there were 34 new cases this week,

down from 64 last week. In Winona County, the trend is a little mixed. COVID infections rebounded slightly, with 135 new cases this week, up from a low of 95 cases last week. However, that is still significantly lower than the recent peak of 195 cases in one week in mid-September.

"I think we still need to be cautious. I think it's a positive sign, although I think we had 40-some cases today," Winona County Emergency Management Director

Ben Klinger said in an interview last Friday, when 42 new cases were reported. "I don't think we're at a place where we see a trend yet," he said when asked whether things were getting better, "but every day where we see positive [movement], we're closer to that."

"I think it's a little too soon to tell what we're seeing," Winona County Public

see **OPPONENTS** page 5a

Portaging for suicide prevention



by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Evan Hansen knows one thing about the people whose names are on the canoe he has portaged across Minnesota. "They left too soon," he said.

Over the past 35 days, Hansen portaged a canoe through southern Minnesota and into Wisconsin to raise money for and awareness about suicide prevention. He was motivated by the four people he knew who died by suicide. On Tuesday, he completed the 313 mile trek, called Portage for a Purpose, at Kinross, outside Fountain City. For those who have faced suicidal thoughts, known someone

who has or lost someone to suicide, Hansen said his message comes down to three things: "You're not alone. You're not a burden. And you are loved."

Along the way, some went online to submit the names of loved ones who died by suicide, while others shared the names when they happened upon Hansen as he walked. About 640 names were written on the canoe, and he went about 1,000 steps for each name.

Hansen also talked about this difficult topic with many people during his journey. He has faced suicidal thoughts himself. To have

see **PORTAGING** page 8a

Photo by Chris Rogers

■ 15-year-old Winonan Izabella Foss joined Evan Hansen as he crossed the Mississippi River in Winona. After losing four people close to him, Hansen portaged a canoe across Minnesota to raise awareness about suicide and depression.

Split vote approves county's 3% tax increase

by CHRIS ROGERS

New circumstances, same outcome — the Winona County Board approved the county's 2022 preliminary budget and a 3 percent property tax levy increase on a 3-2 vote last week. In a familiar breakdown, board members Marie Kovcesi, Chris Meyer, and Greg Olson supported the budget and tax increase, and members Steve Jacob and Marcia Ward opposed it.

Next year's budget includes the first debt payments on the new county jail, totaling \$827,000. Outside of that, it is a relatively status quo budget in terms of spending, though wage increases for county staff and the rising cost of social services perpetually pressure the county to raise revenue. The 3 percent tax increase is lower than the 4-6 percent increases approved in 2017-2020, but higher than this year, when the County Board kept taxes flat in an effort to ease the economic damage of the pandemic.

In 2022, a 6 percent tax hike would have been required to fully balance the roughly \$1 million deficit in the county budget, according to County Administrator Ken Fritz. Alternatively, the county could have offset the need for any tax

see **TAX INCREASE** page 5a

WAPS enrollment declines slightly

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Enrollment at Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) has declined since last school year, but remains above the number district leaders projected while creating this academic year's budget. The rate of decline is also gradually slowing and remaining below the past rate.

As WAPS develops its budget each year, school officials try to project what enrollment the district will have the following school year. That enrollment, the budgeted enrollment, is then used to forecast how much revenue the district will receive from the state per student.

The current enrollment is higher than budgeted, meaning WAPS will receive more revenue than projected.

Currently, the district's enrollment of 2,451 students is about 130 students over the budgeted number of 2,323. "It's good for us that

see **DECLINES** page 8a

Winona cuts more trees than it plants



File photo

■ City of Winona Tree Crew member Keith Loth (left) showed Dylan Russert (center) how to plant a tree at Earth Day 2016.

by CHRIS ROGERS

For years, the city of Winona has been removing more trees than it plants in boulevards and parks across town. The city recently won grants that will narrow that gap over the next three years. In the longer term, the city faces financial hurdles to replacing as many trees as it takes

out.

Winona Forester Chris Kramer said the city removes on average 250-300 trees a year, while planting around 125. "Obviously, it's not a good thing," Kramer said. "I think in my time here our tree population is probably younger than when I started, so yeah, that would mean the canopy is being reduced."

Emerald ash borer (EAB) — which has killed off local ash trees en masse over the last several years — contributed to that trend by greatly increasing the numbers of trees the city has to remove, though the city ramped up its tree planting efforts in response, Kramer said.

see **CUTS MORE** 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 Parents

with their children's injury claims.

www.brosnahanlawfirm.com

Opponents

continued from page 1a

Health Supervisor Melanie Tatge echoed. If cases decline now, there is still reason to be concerned about a rise later this winter, with holiday gatherings and more people indoors, she noted. On a positive note, Tatge said the Pfizer vaccine may be approved for children ages 5-11, possibly as soon as this month.

Hospitalizations have continued. According to a state dashboard, Southeast Minnesota intensive care units are at 96 percent capacity and non-ICU hospital beds are at 94 percent capacity. Winona County Public Health reported one new county resident hospitalized for COVID this week. Trempealeau County reported three new hospitalizations last week, the latest data available, and one new death last Wednesday. Buffalo County reported zero new hospitalizations.

In an interview, Olson said he supports passing an ordinance that would give the County Board the power to adopt a mask mandate or other emergency public health measures regardless of whether infections are improving. Whether any mandate is necessary depends on the situation on the ground, he said.

"If it protects public safety, if our cases are rising to a point, then I think you do what you have to do," Olson stated. "I don't think that will be the case, but I will support having the ordinance on the books." He continued, "As far as the masks, I'm hoping that we don't have to do anything. I'm hoping that cases decline and are at a level that we don't have to have a mask ordinance. That would be good for the community, good for everybody."

"I'm still in the midst of things," Kovcesi said when asked about whether her views on a mask mandate had changed. "One major thing that's going to be a part of it is the numbers and the numbers are changing." However, she said that regardless of infection trends, young children are still unable to be vaccinated and might benefit from wider masking. Asked if there was a certain point where she would no longer consider a mask mandate necessary, Kovcesi responded, "I don't know. I'm still researching." She stressed the underlying goal of any action from the county was to protect people's health. "I don't want anybody else to get sick. I certainly don't want anybody else to die. I don't want anybody to go to the hospital," she said.

Along with County Board member Chris Meyer, Olson and Kovcesi have been part of a majority on the board that supported a possible mask mandate. County Board members Steve Jacob and Marcia Ward opposed the measure, saying a mandate



was the wrong approach and questioning the effectiveness of masks.

Mask opponents speak out

"I will not wear a mask," said Tiffany Hemker, one of over 15 people who spoke against a mandate at the County Board meeting last week. "My son will not wear a mask. I will strongly consider moving to the Rushford school district, and I will not shop in Winona."

The speakers described masks as preventing recognition of facial expression and human connection. Many argued a mask mandate would be an overreach of government power and a violation of their civil liberties. Others said citizens should be allowed to make their own choices about how and whether to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID. "Freedom is risky," Stockton resident Dave Eastep said.

Rollingstone resident Paul Kreidermacher held up a petition against any county mask mandate that he said had nearly 400 signatures. "There's one thing these people all have in common, they do not want the County Board to have emergency powers to put on mandates ... It should be up to the voters, not five people," he said.

Many of the speakers claimed that masks do nothing to prevent the spread of COVID. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Minnesota Department of Health, Mayo Clinic, Gunderson Health and Winona Health all advise that masks help reduce COVID transmission.

County doesn't insist on current mask policy

Winona County currently requires face masks in its own buildings, including the County Office Building that hosted last week's meeting. However, many attendees, including many citizens who spoke against masks, did not wear them.

"The direction to the staff is not to confront anyone regarding a mask," County Administrator Ken Fritz said. He explained that county policy technically requires masks in county buildings when social distancing is not possible; however, when people come in without masks, the policy directs staff to offer those people masks, but not insist that they must wear them to enter. Winona City Manager Steve Sarvi said earlier this summer city staff used the same approach at city hall.

"The rationale for that is, first of all we don't want our employees in confrontation with the public," Fritz explained. "That doesn't lead to good results. And secondly you don't know if they have a medical exemption or some other reason they can't wear a mask, and it's not up to us to determine if they can wear a mask. We've indicated staff should offer them a mask and leave it at that."

Along with an armed patrol deputy and Sheriff Ron Ganrude, who was also armed, Klinger helped man the door at last Tuesday's meeting. He confirmed attendees were offered masks, but few accepted them.

Photo by Chris Rogers

■ Scores of people gathered to oppose Winona County's proposed mask mandate last week.

Asked if a mask mandate would ask local businesses to do something — strictly enforce mask requirements — that the county itself is not willing to do, Kovcesi responded, "I don't know, that's a hypothetical." Kovcesi continued, "I don't have the solution ... In a way it comes back to misinformation. What is causing people to deny themselves and the people around them a minimal amount of protection?"

Olson responded to the same question, "I think everybody is in a situation where they want to avoid confrontation. But I think [last week's meeting] pointed out the very basis for why mandates sometimes become necessary. I read a lot about 1968 and when they did the seatbelt, many people were against it, but they had to mandate it because people wouldn't wear them ... Here we have a sign on the door, asking people to wear masks, and they just blatantly refuse. The very people who want to fight the mandate are the very reason a mandate might be necessary."

Asked how a mask mandate should be enforced, Olson responded, "I think that for the most part, I believe in society, I believe in our citizens and I believe that when asked, they're going to do the right thing, and there are always going to be people who won't."

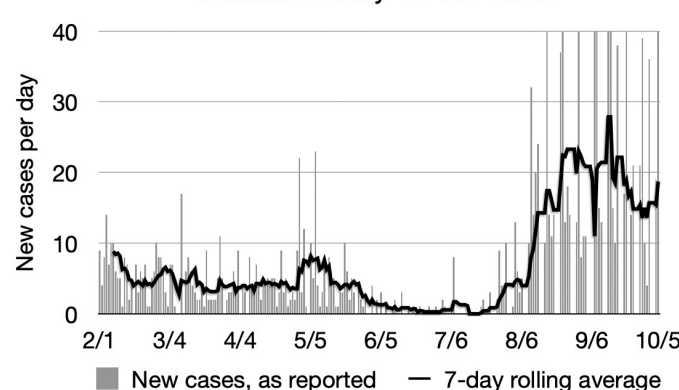
Fritz pointed out that the way the county enforces its current policy and the way it might enforce a possible countywide mask mandate in its own buildings may be different. "If the County Board creates a more restrictive policy, we would use that," he said.

As for the practical considerations of enforcing a mask mandate, Fritz continued, "My recommendation would be that anything that is implemented should be crafted to avoid creating those conflicts ... Our experience has been that it's very difficult to have frontline personnel enforce something like that."

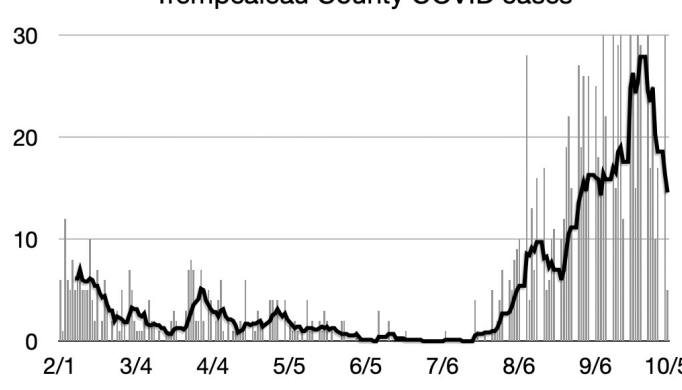
Earlier in the meeting, Winona Area Chamber President Christie Ransom highlighted the same issue, asking the board not to pass a mandate. "In one day of the city of Winona's mandate, I talked to five business owners that had fights in their businesses." That is not something small businesses are equipped to deal with, she added.

Chris@winonapost.com

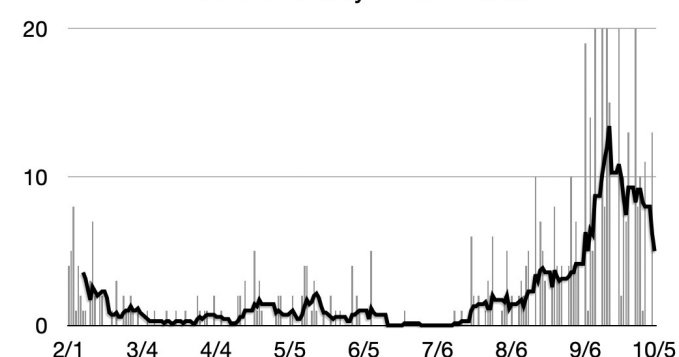
Winona County COVID cases



Trempealeau County COVID cases



Buffalo County COVID cases



Data from state health departments

■ Local COVID infections have been declining while Winona County cases rebounded somewhat this week.

Tax increase

continued from page 1a

increase by using up part of its \$3 million in federal COVID relief funding.

Fritz warned that relying on one-time money to balance the budget would force

the county to raise taxes more drastically in future years once the one-time COVID money runs out. "If you don't pass some kind of tax increase, you'll be dealing with a bigger deficit in the coming years," he said. Instead, Fritz recommended and the County Board majority approved a middle way: a 50-50 mix of higher taxes and COVID relief funds.

"We just approved employee contracts, which is a very large part of our budget," Olson said at last week's meeting, alluding to Jacob's support for paying employees more while voting against the budget. "And I think the 3 percent preliminary levy is reasonable," Olson continued.

Jacob praised the budget, taking issue only with the jail debt payments. "I don't see anything that looks out of place on [the budget]. As a conservative person, financially conservative, I remember the days that we had zero percent and even tax cuts.

And that is certainly what I would want to strive for ... The only part of [the budget] that is a little bit of a tough pill to swallow was, I voted against the jail."

The county was set to be debt free, an achievement that would have lessened the pressure to raise taxes; however, the county has started borrowing what will total \$28 million in debt to finance the new jail. The county had to do something to replace its old jail because it was condemned by the state. Jacob and Ward had argued for a smaller facility, while the board majority supported the planned 80-bed jail. A county study reported that a smaller jail would have been more expensive in the long run because of the cost of transporting inmates to neighboring jails.

"I've been really looking forward to the day that we would be debt free ... So to automatically parlay those payments into the new liability of the jail, that's just a tough

pill for me to swallow," Jacob said.

Ward argued the county should not raise taxes when it has so much federal COVID relief money. "I cannot in my right conscience ask local property tax payers to pay a property tax increase when we can't figure out how to spend the money we're given," she said.

Conversely, Kovcesi pointed out a recent uptick in requests for social services, saying, "There are a lot of services that we provide for people, and the number of people that need those services is increasing. I want to commend our staff. They're doing more with less every year."

The County Board could lower next year's tax levy before the budget is finalized in December, but historically the board tends to stick with the preliminary levy amount.

Chris@winonapost.com



WEATHER Forecast

source: weather.com

WEDNESDAY
Partly Cloudy
High 75°
Low 59°

THURSDAY
Scattered Showers
High 70°
Low 61°

FRIDAY
Partly Cloudy
High 74°
Low 60°

SATURDAY
Partly Cloudy
High 78°
Low 63°

winona's twice-weekly newspaper since 1971
winonapost
winonapost.com

Drawing by Savannah Peterson