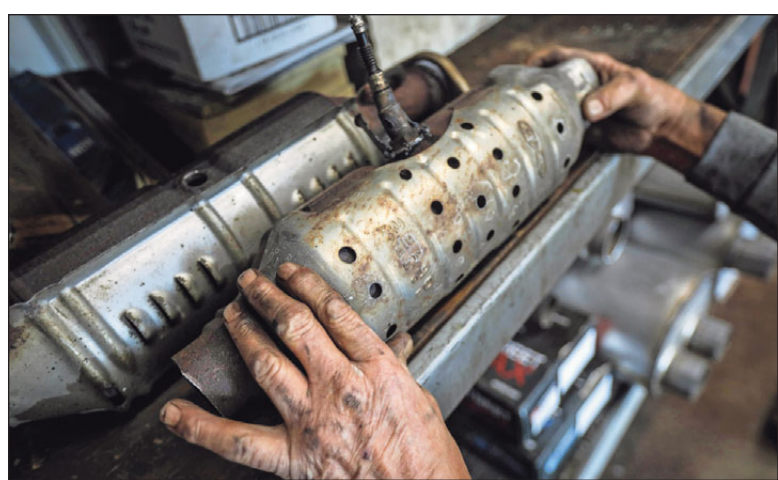


More catalytic converter thefts reported ³

New Thai restaurant opens downtown ⁴

The yard bear makes a quick appearance ¹⁰



POSTBULLETIN

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Lawmakers ask Mayo to drop COVID vaccine requirement

Letter says mandate not ethical, realistic

BY MATTHEW STOLLE
Post Bulletin

A letter signed by 38 state Republican lawmakers, including area Reps. Nels Pierson and Daune Quam, is calling on Mayo Clinic to drop its COVID-19 vaccine mandate or risk losing GOP support for health care worker shortage programs supported by the state.

“Though 100 percent employee vaccination may be ideal according to Mayo Clinic guidelines, we do not believe it is ethical, nor is it realistic,” states the Dec. 8 letter authored by Rep. Peggy Bennett, who represents the Albert Lea area. “Losing even a small number of doctors or nurses, because of an excessive employee vaccine mandate puts our health care system at risk.”

The letter was addressed to Mayo Clinic and President Dr. Gianrico Farrugia. Mayo Clinic did not respond to questions seeking comment.

The clinic hasn't shown any sign of changing course in mandating that its 73,000 employees be vaccinated or receive a religious or medical exemption.

Two weeks ago, the clinic issued letters to unvaccinated employees warning that their employment at Mayo will end Jan. 3 if they do not receive at least one vaccination shot.

The GOP letter calls Mayo's vaccine policy misguided, “top down” and “heavy handed.” It criticizes its religious exemption policy as inconsistent, claiming there are examples of one spouse at Mayo receiving a religious exemption and the other spouse not receiving it.

“This is all highly disheartening, especially considering that Mayo is an institution that was founded upon religious principles and by Franciscan Sisters with sincerely held religious beliefs,” the letter states.

Rep. Tina Liebling, a Democrat from Rochester and chair of the House Health Finance and Policy Committee, called the Republican efforts to change Mayo's policy disruptive. She noted that Minnesota hospitals are currently overwhelmed and ICU beds are filling up with COVID patients.

See **MANDATE**, Page 3



Post Bulletin file photo

From left, Nick Hagen-Erickson, Nathan Liesse and Richard Dessner, all with Elias Construction, work on a screened-in porch May 26 at a home in Rochester.

Building new

New-home construction up outside Rochester

BY BRIAN TODD
Post Bulletin

Looking for a new home? Not just new to you, but *new new*?

Just a handful of miles west of Rochester on U.S. Highway 14, the City of Byron issued building permits for 91 new single-family homes in 2021.

And there were permits for about 100 more residences in 2020 — 46 single-family homes and one apartment building with about 50 units.

Drive a little farther, and you'll find 92 permits issued for home construction in Kasson between 2020 and 2021. That city is also looking at a deal that would bring a 47-unit apartment complex to begin construction in early 2022.

All that construction is a necessity.

“The city added about 1,200 residents from 2010-2020,” said Kasson City Administrator Tim Ibisch, estimating the city's growth based on the 2020 U.S. Census data. “And we'll grow between 1,200-1,500 in the next 10-year period.

“Multiple developers have expressed interest in developing single-family, multiple-family homes, town homes, villas, senior living, assisted living, and affordable housing.”

RANAE ROHE, ORONOCO DEPUTY CLERK

So, we need 50 new single-family homes per year, or the equivalent of that.”

Ibisch added that while the private market seems to be handling the development of needed single-family homes at a steady pace, the city is trying to focus on market-rate apartments and townhomes.

“We'd like to see some progress on the senior housing front as well,” he said.

LOTS OF LOTS

Both Byron and Kasson are primed for even more growth in new homes for 2022. On the Olmsted County side, Byron has 63 single-family lots ready for building, plus another 38 duplex lots. Another 97 single-family lots

are available in Kasson.

Not every city has a list of available lots that large.

Chatfield, which has issued 16 home construction permits in the past two years — 15 single-family, one multi-family — only has 15 to 20 lots currently available. The price on most of them runs about \$60,000 to \$70,000.

The city would like to see some more housing in the entry-level price point. To that end, said City Administrator Joel Young, Chatfield has used tax-increment financing and tax-abatement to bring down the price of lots and try to nudge the housing market to a more affordable level.

“Recently, the city approved a \$1.2 million TIF deal that is intended to

make 23 lots more affordable than they would have been otherwise,” Young said. “The city is also at the end of a program whereby a \$10,000 rebate was provided to home buyers who met certain income requirements.”

WAITING ON WATER

Oronoco has issued permits for only a few new homes in 2020 and 2021, but the city is expecting a boom by the summer of 2023, shortly before the city's new wastewater treatment plant and connecting sewer lines come online. Construction on that project begins this month.

“Multiple developers have expressed interest in developing single-family, multiple-family homes, town homes, villas, senior living, assisted living, and affordable housing,” said Ranae Rohe, Oronoco's deputy clerk.

However, even in cities that have seen a construction boom, no boom seems big enough.

“We will have a shortage

See **HOMES**, Page 3

Fatal crash closes US Highway 52 for hours

Post Bulletin staff reports

The Minnesota State Patrol is investigating a fatal crash Wednesday morning on U.S. Highway 52 near Pine Island.

The crash, which involved three commercial vehicles and three passenger cars, resulted in the closure of northbound Highway 52 for several hours. The Minnesota Department of Transportation tweeted at 3:51 p.m. Highway 52 has reopened.

The fatal crash was one of a series of crashes on roads in Southeast Minnesota that snarled traffic in the morning's dense fog.

A crash on northbound U.S. Highway 52 between 490th Street and 480th Street near Zumbrota caused a closure of the road to all traffic except emergency vehicles. A Minnesota Department of Transportation camera on southbound Highway 52 at 480th Street about 9:20 a.m. Wednesday showed a heavy fog and a semi being towed from the scene.

A 2019 International semi was northbound on Highway 52 and a 2004 Toyota Tundra was at 480th Street when the vehicles collided, according to the Minnesota State Patrol

Crash report.

The driver of the Toyota, 62-year-old Maria Tuyet Le, of Rochester, was taken to Mayo Clinic Hospital-Saints Marys Campus with non-life-threatening injuries, according to the crash report.

The driver of the semi, 54-year-old Clayton Todd Cowl, of Oronoco, was uninjured. Both were wearing seat belts.

A crash on Minnesota Highway 57 caused a detour at the Dodge-Goodhue County line. The road was reopened about 11 a.m.

No further information was immediately available.



Traci Westcott / Post Bulletin

First responders attend to the scene of a crash along Highway 52 North on Wednesday near Pine Island.

THROUGH THE FOG



Joe Ahlquist / Post Bulletin

Fog blankets Rochester on Wednesday morning as Andrea Gates walks Rudy, a miniature poodle, at Soldiers Field.

LOTTERY

Minnesota Daily 3
Wednesday: 8-0-1

Minnesota Northstar Cash
Wednesday: 2-7-13-18-24

Minnesota Gopher 5
Wednesday: 15-19-20-26-43

Wisconsin Supercash
Wednesday: 9-11-14-24-26-28

All or Nothing

Wednesday: 1-2-3-6-7-8-11-15-20-21-22

Wisconsin Badger 5

Wednesday: 7-16-17-26-29

Wisconsin Pick 3

Wednesday: 1-7-0

Wisconsin Pick 4

Wednesday: 1-1-8-1

Lucky for Life

Wednesday: 10-23-26-30-39

Mandate

From page 1

“Their attack on Mayo Clinic is particularly disturbing,” Liebling said in a statement. “They question Mayo’s scientific judgment and decisions about how to best protect its patients and even threaten to withhold state funding if they don’t get their way. Meanwhile, doctors, nurses and health care leaders are pleading with Minnesota to get vaccinated and take other precautions to fight the pandemic.”

Mayo has maintained its stance on COVID-19 vaccine mandate despite the fact that some of the largest U.S. hospital systems, including Cleveland Clinic, have dropped their mandates for staff.

Those decisions were made after a federal judge temporarily halted a Biden administration mandate that health care workers get the shots. Before the judge’s decision, health care systems faced the threat of losing Medicare and Medicaid funding.

Although Mayo Clinic has been the focus of Republican criticism, other hospitals have quietly gone about implementing their own vaccine mandates. Olmsted Medical Center in Rochester has “followed through in implementing”

its own vaccine mandate for its employees,” said OMC spokesperson Barbara Sorenson.

Sorenson said that more than 95 percent of OMC employees are fully vaccinated with the expectation that compliance will reach 97 percent by Dec. 17. Currently, 99 percent of clinical staff is vaccinated.

“The science supports this policy and action, and we believe this is the right thing to do for our patients as well as the people in the communities we serve, some of whom have a health condition that makes them more vulnerable to the virus or are not able to be vaccinated due to age,” Sorenson said.

In talks with Mayo, Bennett said one of the reasons Mayo gave for following a more stringent vaccine policy was Biden’s decision to withhold Medicare and Medicaid payments from health care facilities that were not 100 percent vaccinated.

But once that decision was halted by a federal judge, it made sense for Mayo to revert to its original policy, which allowed vaccine exemptions for conscientious reasons, in addition to medical and religious reasons, she said.

“My thought is, ‘OK, go back to your more reasonable one,’” Bennett

said.

Others think Mayo should stick to its guns. Marty Cormack of Rochester said he has an immunocompromised family member who frequently visits Mayo to manage a health condition.

“We would not be comfortable going there if we knew the staff were not vaccinated,” McCormack said. “So we are strongly in favor of requiring all the patient-facing staff to be fully vaccinated and taking all the reasonable and necessary precautions to keep the patient safe.”

Quam, one of the Republicans to sign the letter, said he has met, in meetings and other settings, with more than 200 people who have raised concerns about Mayo’s policy. Many are constituents of his.

Some Mayo employees have told Quam that they work remotely and don’t have badge access to Mayo buildings.

“Logic would dictate that they shouldn’t be put under the same expectations as the front line people interacting with patients,” Quam said.

The letter also asks that Mayo give equal consideration to both natural immunity and artificial immunity, “which a preponderance of world worldwide medical evidence now supports.”

BYRON

New single-family housing permits: 2020, 46; 2021, 91.

New multi-family housing permits: 2020, 1; 2021, 0.

Lots available: 63 single-family lots, and 38 duplex lots.

CHATFIELD

New single-family housing permits: 2020, 6; 2021, 9.

New multi-family housing permits: 2020, 1; 2021, 0.

Lots available: 15-20.

EYOTA

New single-family housing permits: 2020, 6; 2021, 7 (four are still under review).

New multi-family housing permits: 2020, 3 (six dwellings total); 2021, 3 (six dwellings total).

Lots available: 15.

KASSON

New single-family housing permits: 2020 and 2021 combined, 92.

New multi-family housing permits: 2020 and 2021 combined, 0.

Lots available: 97

ORONOCO

New single-family housing permits: 2020, 3; 2021, 1.

New multi-family

housing permits: 2020, 0; 2021, 0.

Lots available: 0

PINE ISLAND

New single-family housing permits: 2020, 30; 2021, 21.

New multi-family housing permits: 2020, 0; 2021, 0.

Lots available: Less than 10.

PLAINVIEW

New single-family housing permits: 2020, 8; 2021, 6.

New multi-family housing permits: 2020, 0; 2021, 2 (both twin homes).

Lots available: 15 with another 20 being developed for next year.

STEWARTVILLE

New single-family housing permits: 2020, 10; 2021, 16.

New multi-family housing permits: 2020, 6; 2021, 10.

Lots available: 68.

ZUMBROTA

New single-family housing permits: 2020, 28; 2021, 37.

New multi-family housing permits:

2020, 0; 2021, 1 (a 57-unit apartment building).

Lots available: About 150 lots by next year.

Rochester business owner’s home burglarized

BY EMILY CUTTS

Post Bulletin

Rochester police say a business owner was likely targeted after the person’s home was hit by burglars Tuesday night and ransacked.

“The owner of this home is also an owner of a business and we’ve had several business owners that have either had their business or family home broken into and we believe this is another targeted burglary of business owners in the community,” Rochester police Capt. Casey Moilanen said. “If you are a business owner in the community, take steps to protect your property — have an alarm system, motion lights, make sure you’re not storing any valuables at home.”

Police were called about 7:10 p.m. to a residence in the 2100 block of Fieldstone Road Southwest for a report of a burglary. The homeowner called police after receiving a notification on their phone from the home’s security system that captured images of two people inside his home, according to Moilanen.

Officers responded to the home and met the owner outside. Unsure if anyone was still inside the residence, police called in the Emergency Response Unit to search the home before other officers and the owner walked through it.

The ERU left about 10:25 p.m. after determining no one was inside the home.

The house had been ransacked and pretty

much every room had been gone through, according to Moilanen. An estimate of what and how much had been taken was not available Wednesday morning.

Moilanen said officers have some information that the burglars are not from the Rochester area. He said the thieves appear to “really do their homework when they do these burglaries” and more than likely do some surveillance to determine when the homeowner is going to be home.

Anyone who may have seen something suspicious or may have information about the burglary is asked to call police.

Contact public safety reporter Emily Cutts at ecutts@postbulletin.com



Post Bulletin file photo

Greg “Darrel” Pfeifer of Darrel’s Muffler Shop shows an old, failed catalytic converter at his shop on North Broadway.

2 catalytic converters stolen from vehicles in NW Rochester

BY EMILY CUTTS

Post Bulletin

Two catalytic converters were reported stolen from vehicles parked outside of a Northwest Rochester business early Tuesday morning.

Rochester police received a report Tuesday from an employee at the Tile Superstore and More, 2411 Seventh St. NW, that two trucks parked in the lot had the catalytic converters stolen sometime between 5 and 5:30 a.m. that day, according to Capt. Casey Moilanen.

The employee came to work about 5:15 a.m.

and noticed a small sedan parked in the back of the store and a man wearing a hat. It is believed that person was involved in the theft of the converters from a 2006 Ford E350 and a 2011 Ford E150.

The two thefts are valued at \$3,500 each.

Catalytic converters, which became mandatory in the years after the Clean Air Act of 1970 was passed to help curb harmful emissions coming from a vehicle’s exhaust, contain the noble metals palladium, rhodium and platinum. The metals are worth thousands of dollars per ounce, and while catalytic

converters contain only small amounts, thieves can still get \$200 to \$400 per converter.

The converters are relatively quick to steal and hard to prove stolen. Typically, catalytic converters have no distinctive markings that tie them to a specific vehicle although in recent months, police departments and auto shops throughout the state have taken steps like etching vehicle identification numbers or spray painting them orange in an attempt to deter thieves.

Contact public safety reporter Emily Cutts at ecutts@postbulletin.com

Homes

From page 1

of apartments even after our new 57-unit building is complete,” said Zumbrota City Administrator Brian Grudem. “There has been a lot of interest from the older generation here in town. If they move into the apartment building, it should open up some of the smaller, older homes in town.”

Grudem said nine new homes are being constructed in one new subdivision, and that subdivision has another 25 lots available.

Meanwhile, said Dylan Armstead, Zumbrota’s community development director, the city is working with Goodhue County to bring programs that will keep new housing affordable in a high-demand market.

“We’ve grown at about 15% in the past 10 years, and that percentage should rise in the next decade with the rural migration movement benefiting a city like ours with having direct accessibility to the state’s top three most populated cities.”

Minnesota tops 10,000 COVID deaths

BY ALEX DEROSIER

Post Bulletin

ST. PAUL — The Minnesota Department of Health on Wednesday, Dec. 15, reported 54 COVID-19 deaths, bringing the total number of deaths to 10,018 in the state since the beginning of the pandemic.

More than half of the deaths so far were among people 80 years of age or older. Seven Minnesotans under the age of 20 have died of COVID-19.

Hospitalizations for infections remained near their year-long highs on Wednesday, with 371 patients in an intensive care unit and 1,274 in non-ICU beds for a total of 1,645 total COVID-19 patients statewide. Adult ICU bed occupancy statewide remained around 98%.

Key metrics of overall public health risk appeared to be dropping once again after spiking in recent reports. The seven-day rolling average for the percentage of

positive COVID-19 tests was 10.3% as of Dec. 7, the most recently available data. That’s down from 11.5% on Dec. 2. Public health officials consider anything above 10% “high risk.”

The seven-day rolling average for daily case rates per 100,000 was 71.9 as of Dec. 7, also the most recently available figure. That’s down from 86.1 per 100,000 on Dec. 3 but still well above the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s threshold of high risk at 10 cases per 100,000.

Following are the Minnesota Department of Health COVID-19 case rates, deaths, hospitalizations and vaccinations as of Wednesday. Because all data is preliminary, some numbers and totals may change from one day to the next.

STATEWIDE CASE RATES

• **NEW CASES:** 2,231
• **SEVEN-DAY, ROLLING AVERAGE OF NEW CASES PER**

100,000 PEOPLE: 71.9

(as of 12/7)

• **TOTAL CASES, INCLUDING REINFECTIONS:** 971,667

• **TOTAL REINFECTIONS:** 11,678

• **SEVEN-DAY, ROLLING AVERAGE TEST POSITIVITY RATE:** 10.3% (as of 12/7)

HOSPITALIZATIONS, DEATHS

• **ACTIVE HOSPITALIZATIONS:** 1,645

• **TOTAL HOSPITALIZATIONS:** 48,754

• **DEATHS, NEWLY REPORTED:** 54

• **TOTAL DEATHS:** 10,018

VACCINATIONS

• **FIRST DOSE ADMINISTERED:** 3,704,899 or 71.1% of ages 5 and up

• **COMPLETED SERIES (2 doses):** 3,466,342 or 66.5% of ages 5 and up

• **BOOSTER DOSES ADMINISTERED:** 1,440,325