



BATHED IN SUNSHINE

Travis Grimler / Echo Journal

Alan Bibey and Grasstowne's audience was bathed in sunshine at the Lakes Bluegrass Festival on Friday at the Lakes Music and Events Park just north of Pine River. The 2021 event by comparison was troubled with a drought-breaking heavy rain and a thunderstorm. See story and more photos on page A15.

CROSSLAKE

Design work begins

Intersection preliminary work to begin

By Chelsey Perkins
Brainerd Dispatch

BRAINERD — More in-depth planning is set to begin in earnest for improvements to one of the most prominent intersections in Crosslake.

The Crow Wing County Board authorized a contract with Bolton & Menk engineering firm to assist with public engagement, engineering analysis and final design for the intersection of county highways 3 and 66, scheduled for 2024.

The Aug. 23 decision means preliminary work can commence ahead of construction, the costs of which are almost entirely covered by federal grants.

"The city of Crosslake is a tourist area and the impacts of construction and these types of improvements in that area are important to the city and the businesses, so we want to make sure we're doing a very good job of public outreach," said Tim Bray, county engineer.

The planned project comes in response to the 2024 construction of the National Loon Center in Crosslake, which is expected to draw as

ROAD: Page A6

Schools prepare to open doors

Teachers are excited and busy

By Echo Journal Staff
Area school buildings are quickly coming alive again with the start of a new - and normal - school year approaching.

Most area students start school Tuesday, Sept. 6, though Crosslake Community School students return to class Thursday, Sept. 1.

Area administrators are excited for the school year - with hopes

students are too - and teachers are busy getting classrooms ready.

Following is a back to school look at area schools.

Pequot Lakes School District

The Pequot Lakes School District heads into the new year with an increase in enrollment over the previous year, though just how

large of an increase is unclear.

The district finished the 2021-22 school year with 1,734 students in grades K-12, and expected a jump to 1,757 this year. Now it looks as though there may be even more students.

"Our enrollment numbers are extremely preliminary," Superintendent Kurt Stumpf said

SCHOOLS: Page A3



Nancy Vogt / Echo Journal

Tawnia Allyn helps her fifth grade son, Levi, put school supplies in his locker Monday at Pequot Lakes Middle School.

Nisswa's \$25K donation helps food shelf

By Megan Buffington
Echo Journal

PEQUOT LAKES — The city of Nisswa donated \$25,000 of American Rescue Plan Act funds to the Lakes Area Food Shelf in Pequot Lakes last month as food shelves across the state

struggle with rising food prices and demand.

In March, when the Lakes Area Food Shelf first began to see a spike in visitation, they gave presentations to Nisswa and other area city councils to ask for their help.

Nisswa City Council member Jesse Zahn drove the decision to target the money to the food shelf.

He was passionate about the need to spend federal dollars to directly assist local citizens.

The council unani-

mously agreed and voted June 21 to donate to the food shelf.

"We're really happy to have it and honored to have it," said Mark Casey, Lakes Area Food Shelf board member. "But that money is already gone."

LAFS and other food shelves are seeing the same things shoppers are seeing: higher prices and less food available.

"These are our friends; these are our neighbors," said Kathy Adams, LAFS director.

FOOD: Page A6

Student driver stickers give peace of mind

By Travis Grimler
Echo Journal

PINE RIVER — A column in the PineandLakes Echo Journal in early August caught the attention of two mothers in Pine River.

The subject of State Patrol Sgt. Jesse Grabow's column was the legality of having a "Student Driver" sticker or magnet on the vehicle of students who are practicing driving for their license or new to driving legally. A parent had asked whether those stickers are legal.

Grabow said they are legal, but he advised

the parent to consider a sticker that is different from the "Student Driver" stickers required on driver's education cars.

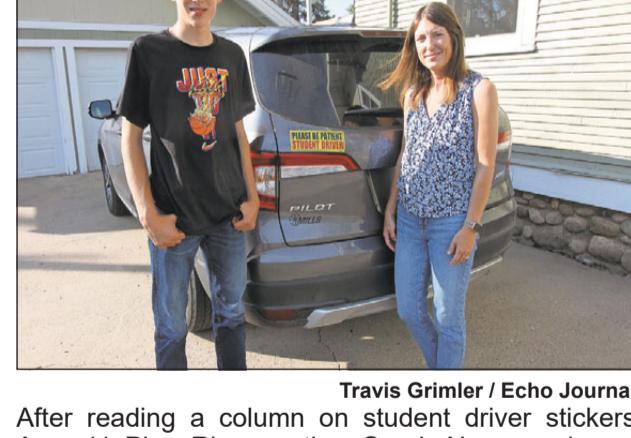
Though maybe not the norm, the column was relatable for Sarah Norman, a mother of three from Pine River who has used a student driver sticker on her vehicle since her oldest, Hunter, began driving approximately two years ago.

"A friend had them for her kids," Norman said.

"When our oldest got his permit, we got one. That's kind of where I got the idea. I think he

STICKER: Page A6

After reading a column on student driver stickers Aug. 11 Pine River mother Sarah Norman shared her experience with using the stickers. Her son, Tate, said other drivers treat him more kindly when they see the stickers.



Travis Grimler / Echo Journal

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SCHOOLS

From Page A1

in an email. "... It appears that we will be over the anticipated number of 1,757, but it is a little early to determine how much over we will be."

The district saw a large increase in enrollment in the fall of 2021, due in part to Brainerd students moving northward as that school district continued to mandate masks in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19.

At the middle school, it appears that increased enrollment is not temporary.

"So far, our ratio is about eight new students coming in for every one student departing," middle school Principal Mike O'Neil said. "We had a big influx last year – specifically in grade 5 – and some of those students have returned to Brainerd, but we have retained a lot of them. It makes you feel really good that families maybe came for reasons associated with COVID, but like what we are doing and stuck with us."

One thing exciting O'Neil about the coming school year is not a new change or addition, but rather a reversion back to learning prior to 2020.

"We are getting back to pre-pandemic conditions in our school," O'Neil said. "Back to using lockers, back to using the bells and back to a school environment that most of us are more accustomed to."

In a turn back to pre-pandemic learning, technology will be more limited for use by middle-schoolers, as it was prior to distance learning. Student cell phones will stay in lockers this year to hopefully cut back on students' screen time, and use of Chromebooks will be different for younger grades.

"Fifth- and sixth-graders are only going to have access to Chromebooks on carts," O'Neil said. "Seventh- and eighth-graders will have Chromebook access like we did last year where they bring it home, since they are a bit more mature learners."

The district sees 14 new staff members join the district's ranks.

Pine River-Backus School District

With the first day of school right around the corner, the Pine River-Backus School District has marked a slight decrease in enrollment compared to the beginning of 2021; however, as the first semester approaches, enrollment is very close to the end of the 2021-2022 school year.

"I think we're going to start the year where we ended last year," said Rick Aulie, elementary principal. "We were down a little bit, but we've had more kids enter the district than have left so far, so it's been up and down."

At a recent school board meeting, Aulie said the district was graduating a larger class into high school compared to the incoming kindergarten class. The district also had a larger graduating senior class, but even so, administrators say the difference is not very significant.

"I think we've maintained," said Chris Halverson, high school principal. "We're probably up a few but we have at least maintained. We didn't lose kids. I heard just last week about six or seven new kids coming from districts south of us."

"Enrollment is staying fairly steady," said Jonathan Clark, PR-B superintendent. "We did lose a larger senior class and our kindergarten class isn't quite as large as the senior class was, but it's still 62, and that's been pretty close to our average the past few years."

The total enrollment sits at 910 students.

Students and parents will notice some differ-



Nancy Vogt / Echo Journal

Heather Douglas, with FLR Sanders, sands the Pequot Lakes School gym floor Monday. The floor was refinished, including new paint, for the 2022-23 school year.

ences in the district this year, chief among them the new paint job and Tigers logo in the commons where people often gather for games and events.

"There will be a brand new look in our commons, or in the cafeteria," Clark said. "It's gotten a new kind of face-lift with more of a PR-B Tiger format that the kids should get excited about."

"We've done a rebranding project," Aulie said. "There will be an interactive board showing the history of the school, the Backus history, the Pine River history. They're going to notice that right away."

"There's going to be a new kiosk down there with historical things to make it look more branded for PR-B Tigers," Halverson said.

This fall, fans of PR-B Tiger athletics teams will likely be spending a lot of time at the newly renovated athletic fields where restroom facilities compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act and a more convenient concessions stand are waiting for eager crowds.

"The football field looks amazing compared to what it looked like last year with the dry conditions and construction," Clark said. "It was really exciting to have some football games here. The baseball fields all got a new look. Their sidelines and infields all got redone this summer."

The district has 10 new teachers. Most of these instructors take the place of outgoing staff in classes the district has had in the past.

"We have some new course offerings at the high school and middle school level with more career development and exploration pieces," Clark said. "We're kind of really excited to be able to have those."

"The schedule isn't going to change that much," Halverson said. "We're going to be adding a Tiger Time or advisory time on Mondays. So for about a 20-minute period after second hour we'll go over handbook expectations, personal learning plans, maybe career exploration and positive journaling pieces. We're just going to talk about any kind of aspects that might come up in school and address them in a timely manner."

That new program will allow small group meetings and one-on-one time with teachers who will, optimally, assist the same group of 15-17 students through several years.

The high school will be short one Family and Consumer Sciences class. With the retirement of the former FACS teacher at the end of the 2021-2022 school year, the district struggled to find a candidate to fill the position. A lack of applicants left the district short for now.

"Our industrial technology will look a little different," Clark said. "This year we have a new staff member as well as new



Travis Grimler / Echo Journal

Pine River-Backus Elementary School teacher Travis Hoffarth sets out chairs Monday ahead of the new school year.

career exploration pieces. Those will be the two biggest core series that will look different. We did lose our FACS teacher last year and we haven't been able to replace them. So that will look different."

"Seventh and eighth graders won't have a traditional FACS class because we didn't get a FACS teacher," Halverson said. "They will be exploring careers and career pathways at a much earlier age, which is a piece I think we were missing here at the high school. So in seventh and eighth grade they'll be taking a meteor course, as it's called, from Sourcewell, our Region Five partner.

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PEQUOT LAKES SCHOOL DISTRICT

► **First day of school:** Tuesday, Sept. 6.

► **Estimated enrollment:** K-12 is around 1,800.

► **New teachers/staff:**

Bryan Boreen, high school earth science; Abelein Dunn, elementary special education; Clayton Foster, high school physical education; Melissa Hannah, fourth grade; Ashley Ingman, elementary social worker; Heidi Knudsen, fifth grade; Cory Kralovetz, elementary special education; Erin Linehan, high school English/language arts;

Emily Monson, middle/high school special education; Tiffany Montgomery, high school secretary; Travis Raske, director of teaching and learning; Amanda Sigler, speech language pathologist; Amanda Trinka, middle school special education; Jeremy Weiland, high school social studies.

► **Anything new/exciting/different happening in the district this year:** The Pequot Lakes School District is currently performing a comprehensive facilities study. There will be six community meetings this fall to gather input from students, staff and community members.

education.

► Beth Duffy and Kelly Bittner, office staff.

► Stephanie Pederson, paraprofessional.

► Jake Moser, custodial.

New this year is a lending library for students, keeping with the school's environmental education focus. Students bring in books, check them out, return them and donate others.

Also new this year is the clothes closet. Students are able to borrow or keep clothing as needed.

The LAKE (Lakes Area Kids Enrichment) Foundation made some property updates, including updated and expanded parking.

"Things have really been busy at Crosslake Community School," Klang said. "We received the best school in the area during the 'Best of' voting series. We have also received Level One Certification honors as a High Reliability School. We work hard to keep integrity at the top of our values."

Former kindergarten teacher Andrea Parrington will teach third grade after a third section was added this year. Former kindergarten teacher Shaylee Schei left the Brainerd lakes area.

Nisswa Elementary School's annual open house will be from 4:30-6 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 31.

"Our amazing PTO will be providing a meal and is even bringing in an ice cream truck to kick off this 'sweet' year," Principal Molly Raske said via email.

Nisswa Elementary School staff, families and students could not be more excited to get this year started, Raske said.

"This past week, we had Kindercamp, and it

PINE RIVER-BACKUS

► **First day of school:** Tuesday, Sept. 6.

► **Estimated enrollment:** PreK-12th grade, approximately 910. PreK 62, elementary 436, high school 412.

► **New teachers/staff:**

Andrew Moore, high school special education teacher; Neil Travis, high school industrial tech teacher; Brianna Blanchard, high school English teacher; Nicholas Ackerman, grades 5/6 math teacher; Janice Weaver, van driver; Diandra Gottsch, high school special education teacher; Karl Ludeman, high school teacher (agriculture, science, home economics); Olivia Becker, high school youth and family services worker; Gregory Gentry, high school English teacher; Darla John, school nurse; Courtney Benson, elementary STEAM teacher; Ariana Schendel, high school interventionist; Roger Hoplin, paraprofessional; Cassandra Meis, paraprofessional; Crystal Sams, van driver; Erik Vetsch, high school social studies teacher.

► **Anything new/exciting/different happening in the district this year:** Pine River-Backus is excited to announce the addition of many new staff to our team. Each new teacher is provided a mentor to offer additional support and serve as a resource during this first year at PR-B.

Last spring, High Reliability Schools monitoring and quick surveys with staff indicated a need to strengthen our new teacher programming. As a result of this survey information, a new committee was established to take a look at what we currently have in place and make adjustments to areas that needed to be strengthened.

Mentors recently met for this training and then later connected with their new mentee. Not only do our PR-B mentors feel empowered to assist our new teachers, but also a sense of pride at being part of this new process at providing focused support for our new teachers.

When you step into Pine River-Backus schools this year you will know you're in Tiger Territory. We launched a new marketing and branding campaign to show how proud we are to be PR-B.

Our updated orange and black colors throughout the school bring a fresh new look to our facilities.

This PR-B revitalization is still a work in progress and many changes are still to come.

Raske said the new staff members join Nisswa School's "already gifted roster."

"We are ecstatic as they bring a wealth of knowledge, energy and enthusiasm," she said.

In other staff changes, Holly Olson returns to teaching fourth grade, and Joe Koman takes on the integrationist/interventionist position.

This week before the official first day of school Tuesday, Sept. 6, staff are back on campus for inservice days.

"As we all know, teaching, learning and living in Nisswa is magical and what we have planned for this year will be nothing short of that," Raske said.

"We are so ready. Let's get this year started!"



Schedule Annual Eye Exams for back to school.

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