

New to the stage

It can be fun to play someone bad

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On a roll

Pine River-Backus boys win three straight

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BREEZY POINT

Disc golf again sparks debate

City discusses cost to restore to 'natural state'

By Dan Determan
Echo Journal

BREEZY POINT — The Breezy Point City Council concluded its Monday, Feb. 6, meeting with an update from city officials on the expansion of the disc golf course, then conducted a contentious public hearing on the matter.

Ultimately, council member Brad Scott moved to have city staff look into the costs associated with restoring the entire course to its natural state. When no council member agreed to that, he moved to have staff look into the costs of restoring just the newly expanded portion of the course, to which the council agreed.

City Administrator David Chanski and Public Works Director Joe Zierden informed the council and the roughly 40 residents in attendance that as of Thursday, Jan. 12, the project has cost \$49,750.57, and further expenditures are expected to cost roughly \$6,000.

"That should put us around the \$55,000 to \$56,000 budget, which would get us almost \$30,000 under what we anticipated for the cost of this project," Chanski said.

Zierden said he expects a late spring or early summer completion date, depending on the weather.

DISC GOLF: Page 7



Travis Grimler / Echo Journal

Saturday is the day that will live on as the first time Griffin Umland ever ate a s'more. It was a sunny day at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Campground in Crosslake during WinterFest when his father, Eric, roasted a marshmallow and helped him make a mess.

PERFECT DAY | And perfect soup for Crosslake WinterFest

By Travis Grimler
Echo Journal

Crosslake

There was no shortage of steaming, delectable soups at

the Saturday, Feb. 4, WinterFest in Crosslake with 26 different varieties in the annual SoupFest competition.

On the corner of Highway 66 and County

Road 3 alone there were three recipes from south of the border, including Andy's Bar and Grill's steak quesadilla, chicken tortilla at Frandsen Bank and chicken

fajita at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Campground.

There were plenty of options, including the loaded potato soup at Zorbaz, pickle

soup at the Northern Minnesota Railroad Heritage Association and squirrely chowder at Squirrely Mama, squirrel not included.

WINTERFEST: Page 6

Area legislators call for community help

Reps. address challenges that come with being minority of a legislative body

By Travis Grimler
Echo Journal

EAST GULL LAKE — A packed room turned out to Madden's on Gull Lake's Wilson Bay Dining Room on Friday, Feb.

3, to hear legislators that represent them speak about the atmosphere, bills and outlook of business-relevant legislation at a Brainerd Lakes Chamber of Commerce Eggs & Issues event.

Present were Sen. Justin Eichorn, R-Grand Rapids; Rep. Ben Davis, R-Mission Township; Rep. Josh Heintzman, R-Nisswa; and Rep. Krista Knudsen, R-Lake Shore.

A common theme included those legislators' limited power in a year when Democrats control the House, Senate and governor's office.

"I honestly believed the Republicans would

have the trifecta," Davis said. "I honestly believed that's the way the elections were going to go. When that didn't happen it was shocking."

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Nancy Vogt / Echo Journal

Kip Sandoz, a volunteer at the Lakes Area Food Shelf in Pequot Lakes, stocks shelves Jan. 26.

PEQUOT LAKES Food shelf to become community resource hub

By Nancy Vogt
Echo Journal

PEQUOT LAKES — While staying true to its mission to provide nutritious food, the Lakes Area Food Shelf in Pequot Lakes will become a community resource hub to offer social services in northern Crow Wing County.

As Kathy Adams, LAFS director, said: For

some people looking for helpful resources, the 20-mile drive from Pequot Lakes to Brainerd "might as well be 2,000 miles."

"The most exciting thing is the friends and neighbors who live in our area will have immediate access to experts in different disciplines — housing, mental health issues, transportation,

Legal Aid," Adams said during a busy morning at the food shelf Thursday, Jan. 26.

"This will really be an opportunity for people to start to knock down those barriers that keep them from having productive lives," she said.

The goal will be to publish a schedule so community members know when various resource

people will be at the food shelf, or at neighboring Grace United Methodist Church, where a Crow Wing County Social Services worker has already been meeting with people.

The hope is to raise funds for a food shelf building expansion to be able to offer private conference rooms and more.

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HELP

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Knudsen echoed those sentiments.

“The biggest shocker to me so far has been how much power the majority party has and how little power the minority party has,” Knudsen said. “In every decision. I thought there’d be a lot more debates, a lot more discussion about issues and we’re really put in our place. We don’t get the opportunity to share ideas.”

Not everything was negative.

“We have 25 new freshman GOP members in the House and they’re awesome,” Knudsen said. “I feel blessed to be part of this group.”

Eichorn talked about the divide between the parties, saying that when he started, then-Gov. Mark Dayton was open to meeting with Republican legislators, but Gov. Tim Walz has yet to meet with him.

The four discussed issues teed up by Chamber President Matt Kilian, especially the mandated paid leave program and tax relief.

The mandated paid leave program was one of the primary discussions.

Heintzeman said Republican opposition and lobbyists aren’t going to be enough to affect change in the current proposed bill. He encouraged business owners in the area, especially large business owners, to be their own advocates.

“It’s going to take folks in the energy sector, Xcel (Ener-



Travis Grimler / Echo Journal

Rep. Josh Heintzeman, R-Nisswa, addresses a crowd at a Brainerd Lakes Chamber event Feb. 3 at Madden’s on Gull Lake, discussing upcoming legislation. Joining him were Chamber President Matt Kilian, left; Sen. Justin Eichorn, R-Grand Rapids; Rep. Ben Davis, R-Mission Township; and Rep. Krista Knudsen, R-Lake Shore.

gy), for example,” Heintzeman said. “I need the CEO in committee testifying how bad these bills are.

“In order to be taken seriously,” Heintzeman said, “the biggest voices in the state are going to have to step up.”

Eichorn went into details about his biggest concerns with the mandate, particularly the amount of time a person could take off if they or a family member are sick. Under the current version of the bill, employees could receive 24 weeks off for illness.

“It’s worse than that,” Eichorn said. “You have the paid family leave stuff, but you also have the sick and safe time. On top of the 24 weeks, you’re going to get another two weeks of additional time off. Basically, someone could take off half the year and you

wouldn’t be able to terminate that employee.”

Eichorn said Republicans in 2022 had proposed a privately run insurance product instead, functioning similar to Aflac, which employees or employers could opt into.

Kilian asked if any of the chamber members in the room supported the program, seeing only one hand in support.

That man later explained that he wanted to be able to support his employees’ health needs with time off, and that the .7% proposed tax provided him with the only way he could afford to do so.

The legislators said the bigger issue is having a small business short one employee for a temporary but extended period of time. This was the issue Knudsen brought up.

“We can’t even hire the

employees we need right now,” Knudsen said. “Where are we going to find the temporary employees we need, especially in my business in the summer, because all of a sudden three of my employees have a sick aunt in North Carolina they have to take care of? I think it could be devastating as written.”

Knudsen said there are only 20% of businesses that don’t have a paid medical family leave plan in place. That number seems to vary from source to source, with some indicating only 13% of businesses offer such a plan, or just under 40%, but Knudsen said twice that only 20% do not.

Knudsen urged those who wish to oppose the mandate to message Democrats outside of their districts to urge them to reconsider.

Tax changes were also a topic at hand. Legislators were happy to have finally achieved tax conformity; however, it was a short-lived celebration.

Many Republican legislators are disappointed that the majority blocked a full repeal of Social Security taxes.

“We originally thought there would be something in the realm of Social Security,” Eichorn said. “Now the governor in the house and Democrats are saying they don’t want to do that anymore.”

Davis and Knudsen echoed Eichorn on the Social Security repeal.

“It’s so frustrating, especially as a business owner,” Knudsen said. “I really campaigned on eliminating the tax on Social Security benefits for everybody. I co-authored that on my second day and it’s

not going to happen. That’s heartbreaking. I thought we could all agree on that.”

There are also new tax proposals. Heintzeman said Walz is proposing an increase in capital gains tax, dividends and income over \$1 million on individuals and trustee estates.

The group did have some positive outlooks on the smaller, less contentious issues before the House and Senate. Some of that surrounded possible education bills.

“I heard a bill in committee offering EMT classes in school as an elective,” Knudsen said. “They had appropriations for it – \$1 million to offer EMT classes as an elective in our schools. Everybody is struggling to find employment, but health care has been hit so very hard.”

Davis commended efforts to increase technical education in schools. Heintzeman also celebrated Minnesota achieving the lowest unemployment rate in the country.

The summer 2022 1.8% rate was not only the lowest in the country at the time, but the lowest number since that number has been recorded, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

Smaller discussions were had on such topics as deregulation of industry, mining and child care as well as bonding projects including the National Loon Center in Crosslake and WonderTrek Children’s Museum in Brainerd.

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FOOD

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The idea to form a community resource hub came out of focus group discussions last summer where people who use the food shelf, civic and business leaders, volunteers and the faith community gathered to talk about what a strategic plan for the food shelf should look like.

Discussions opened eyes to the fact that needed social services aren’t readily available. People said their food insecurity can be due to many factors, including high housing and transportation costs, lack of access to medical care and the growth in multigenerational families.

Such issues can be addressed through access to social services.

“We don’t want to duplicate what other agencies are doing,” said Tim Moore, LAFS board chair. “However, we have an incredible opportunity here.”

Those involved want to offer more resources beyond food to those who need them, and in a central location — Pequot Lakes.

Moore echoed Adams’ thoughts on some people’s ability to reach those resources in Brainerd.

“Pequot Lakes or Emily to Brainerd is like going to the moon for some people,” he said.

“We’re like a shopping

mall. We’re the Dayton’s. We’re the anchor,” he said of Pequot Lakes. “They’re (food shelf patrons) here in the building. Let’s have them meet with agencies.”

Moore and Adams are happy with the response to the community resource hub.

“They’re excited about it, and mostly because of our location,” Moore said.

Adams agreed.

“These people are dedicated to making sure people get what they need,” she said, noting those who work at the food shelf know about food, but they aren’t mechanics or dentists or experts on other needs.

Other community members are reaching out too. The school is using the food shelf to help families, and doctors are sending low-income patients to the food shelf.

“A dentist showed up and said, ‘I know there are people out there who need dental work. How can I help them?’” Moore said.

“It’s all about collaboration,” he said.

Food shelf expansion

The LAFS already partners with Grace United Methodist Church, which leases the land to the food shelf. The food shelf owns its building and is working closely with the church to finalize any expansion plans.

“The support we have received from the GUMC congregation over the years

has been instrumental in our success,” Moore said.

The goal is to launch a fundraising campaign called Hunger Free & Healthy to add on to the back of the food shelf building and then rearrange to be able to offer an Americans with Disabilities Act compliant restroom, a conference room and small, private offices.

Moore said one use for a conference room would be to bring in chefs and dietitians to demonstrate how to make a healthy meal.

Computer stations and printers would be available to help people apply for certain benefits or jobs. Phone charging stations would allow them to charge cell-phones.

Food shelf leaders hope the expansion occurs this summer.

The LAFS has already secured two grants. The Blandin Foundation approved a \$90,000 Leadership Boost Grant, and the Hunt Family Fund pledged \$75,000 as a matching grant.

The LAFS will designate money from its reserve funds as well.

To donate to Hunger Free & Healthy, send a check to: Hunger Free & Healthy Campaign, Lakes Area Food Shelf, P.O. Box 423, Pequot Lakes, MN 56472.

Or visit <https://lakesarea-foodshelf.org/donate>.

All donations are tax deductible.

More people seek help

The food shelf served 4,657 individuals in 2021. That number skyrocketed to 10,978 individuals in 2022.

Those involved at the food shelf anticipate the increasing numbers of people using the resource will only continue as additional resources offered to people during the COVID-19 pandemic have waned while the cost of food, gas and other goods continues to rise.

Moore said the food shelf is seeing more of the working poor – families with two full-time jobs but Mom moves in with them, or grandparents living on Social Security are now raising grandchildren.

“We can’t fix these problems, but we can be a hub,” Moore said, introducing people to helpful agencies and helping them navigate the systems.

He said Adams is the driving force behind the community resource hub.

“She talks to everyone and hears their stories,” Moore said, while also gaining people’s trust.

Hours

The Lakes Area Food Shelf is open from 9 a.m. to noon Tuesdays and Thursdays, and 3-6 p.m. Wednesdays.

The food shelf is on Patriot Avenue, just south of Grace United Methodist Church.

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WINTERFEST

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There were three different categories to win: judges choice, people’s choice culinary and people’s choice amateur. Winners were as follows:

Judge’s choice

- First place: Maucieri’s Italian Bistro
- Second place: Crosslake Coffee
- Third place: Manhattan’s

People’s choice culinary

- First place: Andy’s Bar and Grill
- Second place: Maucieri’s Italian Bistro
- Third place: Crosslake-Fifty Lakes American Legion

People’s choice amateur

- First place: Key Wellness
- Second place: Whitefish at the Lakes Senior Living
- Third place: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers/Paul Bunyan Scenic Byway

The crowd flocking the city of Crosslake was so thorough that some businesses ran out of the goods only an hour into the competition. SoupFest is a main attraction, but WinterFest offers plenty of other activities as well.

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