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FEBRUARY 26, 2026

Volume 20 • Issue 2

NH+C Acquisition of Allina Clinic Moving Forward



Courtesy of KYMN Radio News

Northfield Hospital + Clinics President and CEO Zander Abbott said he is feeling very good about the prospects of NH+C's purchase of the Northfield Allina Clinic. In fact, he said the last details for the purchase of the Allina Clinic are on pace for finalization in the coming months.

(continued on page 3)

Dundas Advances Major Housing Plans as Demand for Workforce Homes Grows

Courtesy of KYMN Radio News

The City of Dundas is preparing for a significant expansion of its housing stock as the City Council moves forward with plans for more than 100 new residential lots amid strong regional demand for workforce housing.

ing.

During the Dundas City Council meeting, the council approved a preliminary plat amendment for the Stoneridge Hills Second Addition, a 60-lot single-family subdivision proposed on the west side of town near



County Road 78 and Dundas Boulevard. Dundas City Administrator Jenelle Teppen said the project, led by national homebuilder D.R. Horton in partnership with Land Craft Development of Woodbury, marks an important step in addressing housing shortages across the region.

(continued on page 3)

Announcements

REMEMBER TO RETURN YOUR VOLUNTARY SUBSCRIPTION

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• **Save the date! 2026 Dennison Days August 7 & 8!**

• **Reminder to clear sidewalks;** Public sidewalks must be clear 24 hours after snowfall, and snow cannot be deposited into the streets.

• **Winter Parking Ban:** The winter parking ban is in effect from October 31st through April 15th, between 2 am and 6:30 am. Parking is not allowed on any city street. Vehicles in violation will be ticketed. Ordinance §71.06.

Do you have an announcement?

Email:

hometownmessenger@gmail.com

Town Kids, Farm Kids, All Kids: Northfield FFA

~ National FFA Week February 21-28, 2026 ~



Northfield FFA members and chapter officers at the first official meeting of the 2025-26 year (not all members pictured). *photo courtesy o National FFA Organization*

Courtesy of National FFA Organization

While FFA traditionally is known for livestock and "farm kids," the Northfield FFA Chapter is breaking the mold and has become a chapter with a unique blend of members. This chapter includes farm kids and a blend of athletes, loud and quiet kids, 4-H kids, artists, photographers, and environmentalists. Different backgrounds, different interests—but all share the same passion: agriculture, leadership and the spirit of FFA.

(continued on page 5)

Sheriff Thomas announces he won't run for re-election

Sheriff Jesse Thomas announced his intention to retire at the end of his current term on Dec. 31.

"I have had a great career here and have met and worked with a lot of amazing people," said Thomas, who starts his 31st year with the Rice County Sheriff's Office in April.

(continued on page 15)



**Sheriff
Jesse Thomas**



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Does God Really Love Me?



By Ashley Dudek,
founder of Isaiah Ministries, bringing
Biblical teaching to help overcome
life's everyday challenges.
www.isaiahministries.cc

A few years back, I was watching a typical ooey-gooey Hallmark film. These are not necessarily my go-to movies anymore, but back then, they were a nice way for me to decompress. It was late evening; Jon (my husband) was already in bed. There was your typical happy scene in the movie of a mother and daughter having a nice time together, where your average person, as they watch, would be smiling with feelings of rainbows and sprinkles inside them. I can't quite remember what they were doing. Perhaps they were grabbing coffee together or were in the kitchen talking, but I started to cry. My eyes grew heavy, and I began, for just a little while, to long for things I never had. There's no such thing as the perfect, white-picket-fence family that Hallmark might portray, but boy did I desire it.

Then a few years later, I was listening to Steffany Gretzinger (a worship singer) talk about her father, who is now in heaven, and the amazing man of God he was. As she shared some various ways he parented, tears began to well up and fall down my face. My insides grew a little weighty, and sadness filled my heart. At first I softly said to myself, "I missed out."

Fast-forward a little bit more. Now, especially after long days of ministry, when I am drained from pouring out, oh, how I can still long to be taken care of, like a little child being embraced by their mom or dad. To have someone cook me a meal and simply take care of me—ah, would that be ever so nice. When

those days come, I begin to have a silent cry in my heart, and I can still grieve what I lacked as a child, teenager, and even as a young adult.

When these situations happen, yes, my heart starts to pitter-patter with sorrow. However, then love rushes in, my chest grows wide, and I start to breathe hope, in and out. I know I have a Father in heaven who will parent me with His love and fill in the gaps. The absence of my parents at times, has only enriched my relationship with the Father. I thought I missed out, but I only truly gained.

You see, if you are ever so willing, something special happens when you come to Jesus in pain or loneliness. The various holes and crevices of your childhood as well as adulthood can be filled with the heavenly Father's love.

Regardless of whether you have present parents or not, if they are stable or wobbly, kind or rude, when you run to the Father (and Jesus), He fills the gaps, He fills the pits, and He even fills the areas where the good parent falls short.

The Lord absolutely, one hundred percent loves you. I mean radical, bottomless, overflowing, and abundant love. Regardless of what you have done or are doing. That's right, He loves you. Now, He may not like some of the actions we have done or are doing, but His love for us is present, more present than we could ever imagine.

We probably all have heard the famous verse, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." It then goes on to say, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:16–17).

Pay attention to the onset of the last verse I just shared: "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn." Let that sink deep down in your inner being. Listen, my friends, we do not have a God who does tummy twisties and points the finger in our face. He is not a God with hands on His hips. Jesus, the Lord and Savior, He squats low and meets us where we are at, all with the heart posture of love.

His love is unlike anything you have ever tasted, and Scripture even says that His love passes knowledge (Ephesians 3:19). I could present a few more verses that directly declare about this love, but I want to share His unconditional love with you, through the

Bible, in more of an abstract way.

God (Jesus) must represent the Scriptures. If He has called us to "do" or "speak" something that is in the Word of God, how much more will He? God is the author of the Scriptures; therefore, He has to represent the following truths.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23). If we are called to carry the fruit of the Spirit, how much more does God (Jesus)? God is Love. God is Joy. God is Peace. God is Patience (longsuffering). God is Kindness. God is Goodness. God is Faithfulness. God is Gentleness. God is Self-Control.

"A friend loves at all times" (Proverbs 17:17a). How much more will Jesus love at all times?

(continued on page 3)

Area Church Directory

The Newness of Eternal Life

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. — John 3:16

The newness we celebrate at the start of each year pales in comparison to the ultimate newness we receive through Christ. Eternal life isn't just about a future promise; it's about a present reality that transforms how we live today. When we embrace the newness of eternal life, we accept that we are part of something far greater than ourselves—an unshakable kingdom that will never fade.

I remember when I first understood this truth fully. It wasn't until a hard season in my life that I truly grasped what it meant to have eternal life through Jesus. I realized that no matter what happened in the world or in my circumstances, the gift of eternal life could not be taken away. This profound shift in perspective gave me the peace that surpasses understanding. I knew I had a hope beyond what this world could offer.

Eternal life changes everything. It shifts our values, our priorities, and even the way we see hardship. Each day becomes a step closer to the fulfillment of God's promises. So when the trials of life come, we can face them with the confidence that we are secure in the love of God, which never ends.

As we conclude this devotional journey, let's remember that the newness we experience now is just a foretaste of the life we have in Christ that will never fade but last forever!

Lord, thank you for the gift of eternal life. Help us to embrace your love and the hope you have given us, trusting in your promises. Amen.

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YTH Wednesdays at 6:30p.m. Canvas Recovery Group meets Thursdays at 6:30p.m.

LITTLE PRAIRIE UNITED METHODIST 2980 130th St. E.

Pastor **Penny Bonsell** • pastor@littleprairieumc.org

507-663-6150 church phone • 651-503-4279 Cell

9:30 a.m. Sunday Worship; Sunday School & Nursery; Adult Group 8a.m.

CITY LIGHT CHURCH 2140 Hwy. 3 South, Northfield, MN

Pastor **Pete Haase** • **507-645-8829** Call for service times

LIFE21 CHURCH 2100 Jefferson Road (just north of Target)

Pastor **Brent Bielenberg** • **645-7730** life21church.com

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NORTHFIELD EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH 5600 East 110th Street

Pastor **Dan Runke** • **663-0133** • northfieldefc.org

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Dundas Advances
Major Housing
Plans as Demand
for Workforce
Homes Grows

(continued from page 1)

“This is very exciting,” Teppen said. “Dundas is growing, and these homes meet a real need in our community.”

The development amends an existing Planned Unit Development (PUD) to allow for smaller lots and slab-on-grade homes, a shift from the city’s traditional 10,000-square-

Does God
Really Love Me?

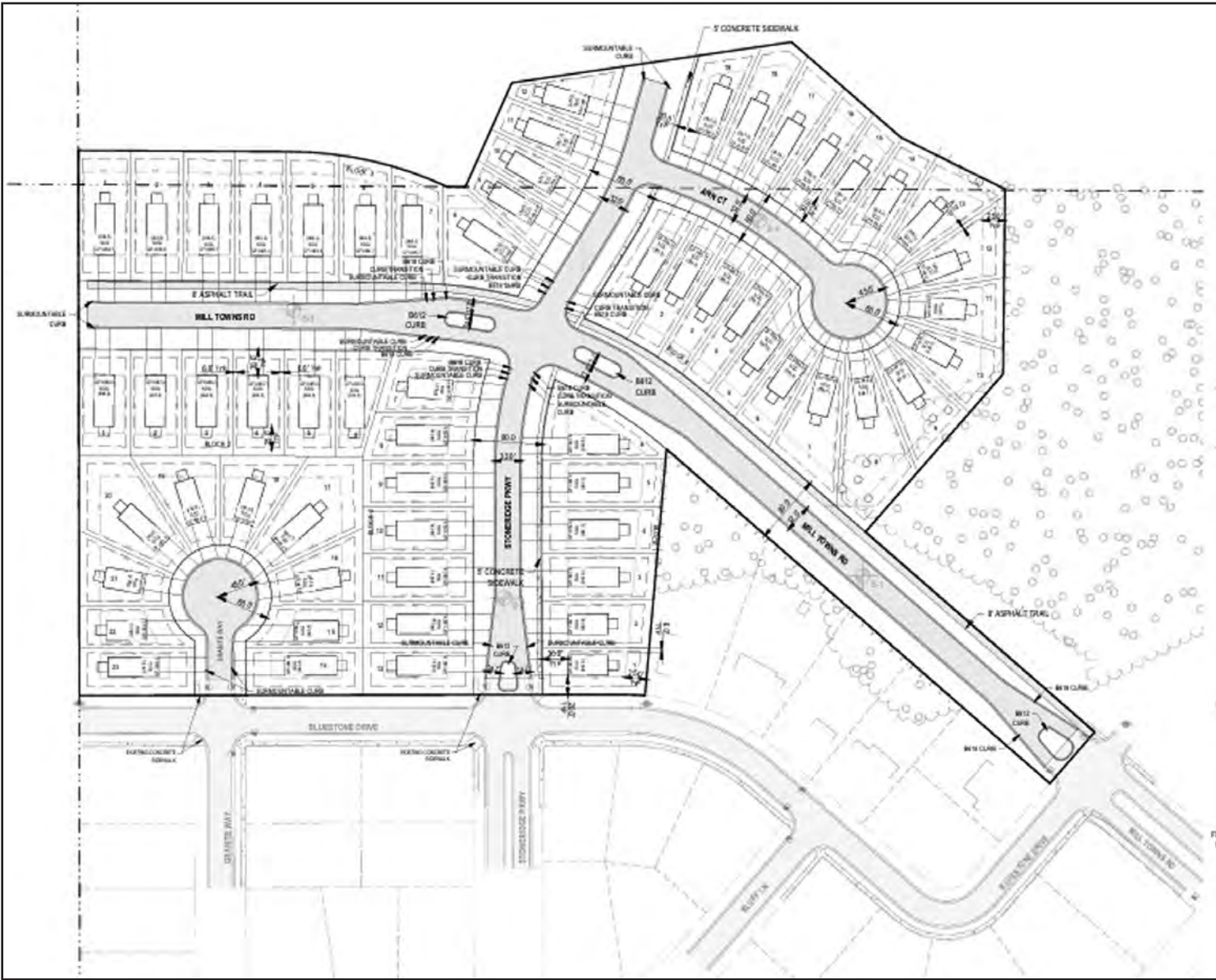
(continued from page 2)

“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness” (Galatians 6:1a). God is the most spiritual being. How much more will He restore you with gentleness?

You are loved by our heavenly Father (and Jesus) more than you could even imagine. When I need a reminder of the Lord’s love for me, I will read over various verses that talk on His love over a cup of joe. The Word of God is truly alive and active, and as you absorb its truths, it will radically change you. Let the Lord parent you with His love; He really is a good Father.

Here are some verses on God’s love if you want to check them out. You could even pour a cup of coffee or tea for yourself and invite Jesus along as you read them, kind of like a coffee or tea date with the Lord! Blessings, Ashley

Zephaniah 3:17; Romans 8:35–39; Ephesians 3:14–19; John 17:23; Psalm 89:2



Courtesy of Dundas City Council

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foot single-family standards. Teppen acknowledged that change has sparked some controversy, but said the PUD process is specifically designed to help cities respond flexibly to market trends.

D.R. Horton has successfully built similar homes in other Minnesota communities, and

Teppen said the company sees strong demand for the styles proposed in Dundas.

Complicating the project is the long-delayed installation of essential infrastructure originally planned during the early 2000s. Pandemic-era cost spikes for utilities and roads have intensified financial challenges, leading the developer to request tax increment financing (TIF) assistance from the city. The council scheduled a public hearing on the TIF request for later this spring.

If approved, the TIF arrangement would require future buyers to meet income-qualification standards. Teppen emphasized that

these homes are not low-income units, but rather workforce housing aimed at teachers, police officers, young families, and others priced out of the current market.

“Housing is absolutely economic development,” Teppen said. “This is one of the tools we can use to move projects forward.”

The council also approved the preliminary plat for Dundas Commons, a five-lot commercial development at Highway 3 and County Road 1, signaling continued commercial growth alongside the city’s expanding neighborhoods.

NH+C Acquisition of Allina Clinic Moving Forward

(continued from page 1)

Abbott spoke about the acquisition last week with Rich Larson on KYMN In the Morning.

“We’re getting close to finishing out our final analysis and due diligence, so to speak, about this deal,” Abbott said. “We’ve gotten some really good external counsel about the legal elements and the financial elements as well as the operational elements. Hopefully in the next month, month and a half, we’ll have all those details set.”

The finalized agreement would then be presented to the NH + C board. Once the agreement meets board approval, the final hurdle will be city council endorsement.

“We’re a city-owned hospital, which means that any real estate transaction gets to be approved by city council,” Abbott explained. “They’re really engaged. I’ve had really good conversations with the mayor and her team. And then hopefully this all gets approved in the next month or two.”

Abbott hopes to see the transition period for patients to commence in later summer.

“The city is so invested in keeping health care local that they were very interested,” Abbott noted. “They asked tough questions, they represented constituents, and said, hey, let’s figure out what it’s going to do in terms of access to health care and cost of health care.”

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2026 Faribault Flannel Formal

Uff-da! Get Your Plaid Ready for the 10th Annual Faribault Flannel Formal!

FARIBAULT, MN – Sharpen your axes! The Faribault Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism is back with the 10th Annual Flannel Formal on March 7th, 2026. It's the most Minnesotan event in Minnesota, taking place at the Craft Beverage Curve (10,000 Drops and Corks & Pints) in Historic Downtown Faribault from 5:00 PM to 10:00 PM.

What's Cookin' & What's Happenin':

- The Hotdish Showdown: Taste the finest casseroles in town or sign up to compete for the title by emailing devin@faribaultmn.org.

- Live Music: We've got Robos headlining the stage to keep the joint rocking all night long!

- Lumberjack Games & Axe Throwing: Test your true grit with traditional lumberjack games and our brand-new axe throwing trailer (\$5 for non-VIP).

- Signature Swag: The first 500 ticket holders snag a collectible pint glass and a complimentary beverage to get the party started!

- New Chilly Additions: Check out the Sleigh Bar, grab a drink, and then warm your toes in our heated tent.

- Beard & Plaid Glory: Compete in the Best Beard Contest or strut your stuff in the Lumberjack & Jane costume contest for a chance



to win big.

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Tickets & Sponsorships:

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Town Kids, Farm Kids, All Kids: Northfield FFA

(continued from page 1)

National
**FFA
WEEK**
FEBRUARY 21-28, 2026

Northfield is a small town in Minnesota with over 21,000 residents, but like the FFA chapter, it is home to a wide variety of people and communities. After a 33-year hiatus, Northfield FFA was re-established three years ago and has been growing steadily ever

since. With every new member, it becomes more diverse, welcoming students regardless of their background or upbringing.

Tara Alaniz, the 2025-26 chapter president, is a “town kid” and a three-sport athlete. She discovered FFA through her grandfather, a longtime member, but she doesn’t fit the traditional image of an FFA leader.

“I think it’s important for everyone to know FFA is not just cows and plows; it is truly a

lot more than that,” she said. “FFA builds community and connections with so many people. I think one of the big ways to encourage kids similar to me is by showing them that I don’t come from a farm, but I still have a place in the agriculture world.”

Northfield FFA has welcomed a growing number of members, creating a supportive environment where members are encouraged to explore a wide variety of career and leadership development events (CDEs/LDEs). Opportunities range from floriculture and agriculture mechanics to prepared public speaking and Creed speaking. “I like to challenge students to step outside their comfort zones,” said Thomas Austin, the chapter advisor. “Trying new things helps them grow and become stronger individuals. Through these experiences, members not only develop new skills but also gain confidence and strengthen their leadership abilities, which deepens their connection to the FFA community.”

While many “town kids” are involved in Northfield FFA, there are just as many “farm kids,” including members like Mackenzie Hohrman. The Hohrman family farm is a fourth-generation sheep and cattle farm. Hohrman said, “Growing up as a farm kid has given me hands-on experience and confidence with agriculture, which helped me quickly connect and get more involved in FFA. However, FFA allows everyone, highlighting that success comes just as much from passion and willingness to learn as it does from a farm background.”

Northfield FFA truly brings together students from all walks of life. Whether mem-



Thomas Austin, the chapter advisor, and his family at the 2024-25 Northfield FFA chapter banquet.



Mackenzie Hohrman, working at the Miracle of Birth Center during the 2025 Minnesota State Fair.



Tara Alaniz, the 2025-26 Northfield FFA president, at the 98th National Convention & Expo.



Photo courtesy of Ag-Week, taken at the Minnesota State Convention.

bers come from a farm, the heart of town, the hockey rink, or the art studio, each member contributes unique strengths that enrich the chapter. As Northfield FFA grows, it continues to create its own traditions, fostering a

space where every student can learn, lead and discover their place in agriculture. It’s a reminder that FFA is for farm kids and anyone willing to make a difference.



Celebrating Our Area’s Future Farmers

National FFA Week • February 21-28, 2026

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Farm Girl Chatter **The Ones That Have Taught Me Life Lessons and True Love**

By McKell Lemmerman

This article is dedicated to the animals that shape a farmer's life and give meaning to the work done before sunrise and after dark. While family and friends are essential, the deeper connection often lives in the pasture and the barn. It can be found in frost-lined fences at dawn, in the creak of a barn door opening, and in the quiet sound of hooves shifting. For many farmers, animals are the reason the day begins early and ends late. They are constant companions—silent speaking with no words back to you, but always present.

Many farmers, like me, grew up around animals, yet it is often with age and experience that their true value becomes clear. Farming teaches responsibility early, but devotion is learned over years of repetition. They depend on us whether the winter wind strikes through a coat, or the summer dust clings to our sweaty skin. They wait for us, they trust us, and they require our consistency. In your daily routine, you learn patience, and the quiet discipline that defines rural life.

Horses are often dismissed as “hay burners,” but their worth has never been measured by profit at my farm. Horses offer something deeper; they bring peace. Stepping into the saddle, feeling the leather between your legs, you escape your reality. There is saying that there is no better view between the ears of the horse, the land stretches wide and open, offering perspective that few other places can. They are the ones who are spirited with attitudes, but when they know you have a hard time, they understand what you are going through. Galloping through the fields, they are the ones who give you the imagination of flying like a bird, arms out, soaring through the sky with the air bouncing off your body. They are the animals that can carry you for miles without hesitation, go through unwanted territory like they are a boy scout wondering about the woods. While horses still serve practical roles, such as helping me gather cattle, their greatest contribution is the calm they bring to an otherwise demanding life.

Then there are the dogs—the always present helpers and loyal shadows. Farm dogs are the hired hands who never ask for wages, just a treat or a good scratch. Farm dogs are up when you are up and go to bed when you go to bed. They follow their owners across every stage from sun baked pastures to snow kissed ground. They are always ready and always watching. A good farm dog understands your routine, the long hard days that are worked. No matter how busy the day becomes, the dog remains.



And finally, the heart of the farm is the cattle. For many farmers, appreciation for livestock grows with time. Calving season brings long nights and early mornings, but also moments that remind farmers why they chose this life. Kneeling in straw as a calf takes its first breath, watching a cow instinctively turn to her newborn. The cow gives a gentle moo of appreciation, thanking the farmer much like a new mother thanking the doctor who helped bring her baby into the world. Farmers help the cows raise these calves through storms and sunshine, knowing each one represents hours of care, effort, and hope—whether it becomes replacement stock or is eventually sold, they all have a purpose. The cows eventually know your routine and patiently wait at the gate for every meal that is served. They learn your voice and your body language. They know the sounds that follow every action you do. So, when you give a call to the herd that is dispersed in open green fields, they shout back, saying I am here. They know you and because of that they come running, jumping, kicking with joy of excitement to see the person they trust most.

Farmers love their animals not because the work is easy, but because there is a bond built. Loving animals means sore muscles, sleepless nights, and heartbreak when one is lost. But it also means purpose. These animals shape daily routines and give meaning to the labor that often goes unseen.

In the end, farming is not just about land or livestock. It is about a bond formed through routine, trust, and responsibility—a bond that demands everything and gives back just enough to make it worth it. That is why farm-

ers love their animals: because in caring for them, they find not only their livelihood, but their identity.

Silent appreciation never goes unnoticed from the eyes of your four-legged animals.



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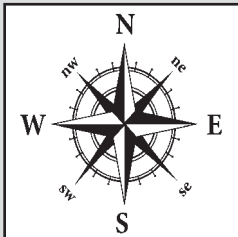
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Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes

Vacation Funland or Fraud



By Terry Campbell

This column is written by Messenger editor and Minnesota native Terry Campbell. Terry now splits his time between Minnesota when it's warm here and Tennessee when it's cold here.

Timeshares, we all have heard of them. Most have heard bad things about them. I owned one forty years ago when I had young kids. I paid \$6,800 for one week in Florida. We used it twenty-years and it worked out to \$120 per night. Couldn't get hotel for that price. Gave it to my ex-wife so I no longer owned it.

So, this year we rented the same vacation villa for \$99 per night when we visited Disney World. We love the condo, the pools, the loca-

tion, the restaurants and amenities on site. A great deal for \$99 per night. Then they offered us \$200 to attend their sales presentation. Only 90 minutes of our time. That is where it went off the rails. First of all, my wife and I knew there wasn't a snowball's chance on a Florida beach we were buying. The sales guy wasn't aware of that. He hadn't been told that some tourists weren't gullible.

They fed us breakfast, they gave us the tour, we saw the kids arcade, water park, paddle boats on the lake, bar and restaurants. They said no pressure, if it wasn't for us to not even consider buying. They wouldn't even tell us the price, just said that it would pay for itself. We would save so much money, our vacation would be almost free. It was a legacy to hand down for generations. Then a closer stepped in and was going to clinch the sale. She said to forget that "pinky" promise we made before we came that we would not buy.

All of this fanfare and we were shown the price. \$39,900 for one week per year. Why, this was an investment better than any we had ever seen. We should pull our money out of whatever we were vested in and place it with them. And maintenance and taxes were only an additional \$1,500 per year.

I am a farmer and I have hauled a lot of manure and have never seen this much shoveled out in such a short time. I replied that my investments made over 14% last year and that \$40,000 would generate \$5,600. Add in the \$1,500 maintenance fee each year and I was throwing away \$7,100. I could rent the condo for \$700 a week and have \$6,400 to spend on vacation a week without risking a



cent of my principal. Poor sales kid was speechless. They called in the boss.

This guy was certain he had us with a \$10,000 price reduction. We didn't even flinch. Then because, I had once been an owner he said he would sell us this unit for the incredible price of \$15,000. We still didn't blink an eye. He lowered his voice and said that for this hour only and never again offered, we could steal it for the measly sum of \$8,900. Three strikes and this guy's pitch was over.

By this time, we were three hours into the presentation and my wife had a spa appointment, she had booked the day before, in half an hour. So, we stood up to leave. A short woman with long black hair stormed onto the scene. She was the clincher, all business, she

was going to save the day, she was their last hope, she would make the sale. When she realized we were leaving she became rather insolent, demanding extra time to speak to us. I said we have a prior engagement and we were going. She looked right at me with fire in her dark eyes and scolded me for scheduling something the day of the presentation. I replied that her 90-minute presentation ended an hour and a half ago and walked away. Still part of me wished we could have stayed to have seen just how low they were willing to go.

We will go back again, we love the facilities. For \$99 a night it is a great deal. And after all, they will pay you \$200 to sit thru the ordeal.

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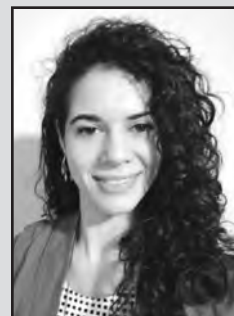
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A Minnesotan: Cats



By RosaLin Alcoser

Growing up in rural Minnesota cats were mainly an outdoor animal that sponded into existence in barns. Yes, there were plenty of people who had house cats, but the ones I saw were mainly outside cats.

Working cats who knew how to survive out in the world. And who may or may not scratch you if you got too close depending on the cat. Not indoor cats of leisure like all city cats appear to be.

My family did not have any cats; inside or outside. Mainly due to the fact that half of the family unit was allergic to them. We were a combination inside outside dog

family; the combination really depended on the dog. Since our first dog basically refused to come inside until she was quite old and my parents current dog panics if she accidentally gets left outside alone.

My husband, however, is from a cat family and he has two inside cats; because we live in the cities and outside cats are not a thing here. Which means that I now have two cats for the first time in my entire life. And I don't mean that they are a cat family like my family is a dog family. Where we have a dog and we love it because it's part of the family. I mean they are a cat obsessed family who takes their cats to the cabin with them and has cat images everywhere. It doesn't even have to be their cats or past cats, it just has to be a cat, and can be on literally anything.

I do like cats and I absolutely love our specific two cats; and with the cold weather we've been having, I am very glad that they don't need to be taken outside. There have been things that I have had to learn though to live with in order to live with indoor nonworking cats. Such as they will stand on us in our sleep and if they choose to sleep on your lap you're just sitting in that chair until they get off on their own.

Hiawathaland Rails

By Cheri Roshon

Are you looking for some fun and historical events to attend this spring? If so, and if you like trains, the 20th Annual Randolph Railroad Days is coming to town! Located at the Randolph High School & Museum at 29110 Davisson Avenue in Randolph, you will find all things trains! March 28th from 9 am to 3 pm and March 29th from 10 am to 2 pm, there will be a lot going on. There will be a swap meet of collectables, model trains, antique toys, books and magazines. The Museum will be open with many new railroad artifacts, and its enhanced G scale Train! There will be large scale train layouts and displays, and of course a concession stand. Admission for adults is \$7.00, and children 10 and under are free with a paying adult. A bit of railroad history to get you better informed follows.

The Hiawathaland region of southeastern Minnesota holds a rich and enduring railroad heritage. From high-speed streamlined passenger trains to hardworking regional freight lines, rail service shaped the economy, culture, and identity of this Mississippi River Bluff Country landscape. At the heart of this legacy was the famed Twin Cities Hiawatha, one of America's most celebrated passenger trains.

"Hiawathaland" refers to a 12-county area in southeastern Minnesota: Goodhue, Wabasha, Winona, Houston, Rice, Dodge, Olmsted, Fillmore, Waseca, Steele, Freeborn, and Mower counties. Nestled along the Mississippi River Valley, the region's rolling bluffs and fertile farmland made rail transportation essential to its growth. Agricultural

transport as well as passenger cars were vital to the growth and stability of the country.

Beginning in the late 19th century, several major railroads established routes through the region. Chief among them was the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, commonly known as the Milwaukee Road. Another key player was the Chicago Great Western Railway (CGW), which operated important regional lines connecting agricultural communities to larger markets.

These railroads provided more than transportation. They linked small towns to urban centers, moved grain and livestock to national markets, delivered manufactured goods, and carried passengers across the Upper Midwest. Rail lines became economic lifelines, shaping settlement patterns and fostering industrial growth throughout the Hiawatha Valley.

Introduced in 1935, the Twin Cities Hiawatha quickly became the pride of the Milwaukee Road. Running between Chicago and Minneapolis-St. Paul, the train began official service on May 29, 1935. It soon earned national attention as one of the fastest scheduled passenger trains in the United States, averaging speeds that exceeded 100 miles per hour in certain segments.

Powered initially by specially designed Atlantic-type 4-4-2 steam locomotives, the Hiawatha featured striking two-tone orange and gray paint schemes and innovative passenger amenities. Its distinctive Beaver Tail parlor-observation cars—and later the dramatic Sky Top lounge-observation cars—offered sweeping panoramic views, blending luxury with modern design.

The train's popularity led to expanded service, including the Morning Hiawatha, Afternoon Hiawatha, Midwest Hiawatha, and eventually the long-distance Olympian Hi-

awatha. Over time, streamlined diesel locomotives such as EMD's E6 and E9 units replaced steam power, but the Hiawatha name remained synonymous with speed, comfort, and Midwestern innovation.

Although private passenger rail declined in the mid-20th century, the Hiawatha legacy continues today through regional passenger services operated by Amtrak, preserving at least part of the original corridor's spirit.

Beyond the famous passenger trains, southeastern Minnesota's rail heritage includes countless branch lines, depots, river crossings, and junctions that once bustled with activity. In an effort to preserve the local southeastern Minnesota area's history, train buffs in this area and beyond have been actively bringing history to life by building replicas of different train routes to scale with corresponding trains of the eras in which they served.

Rail historians and enthusiasts alike have documented these remnants through video archives, field explorations, and preservation efforts. Former Chicago Great Western routes at Zumbrota Junction, segments of the Milwaukee Road's River Division, abandoned trestles, and historic signage remain tangible reminders of the region's rail-centered past.

Museums, local historical societies, and model railroad exhibits help preserve artifacts and stories tied to these lines. In many cases,

former rail corridors have been converted into recreational trails, allowing residents and visitors to walk or cycle along routes once traveled by freight and passenger trains. The famed Douglas Trail is one of the rail line turned bike and walking paths observed in this area.

Railroads were instrumental in shaping Hiawathaland's economy. They enabled efficient agricultural shipping, supported industrial development, and connected rural communities to national markets. Passenger service fostered tourism and mobility, while freight operations sustained local businesses.

The Twin Cities Hiawatha stands as a symbol of the golden age of streamlined rail travel—an era defined by speed, technological progress, and design innovation. At the same time, the region's lesser-known branch lines reflect the everyday importance of rail transportation in small-town America.

Today, preserved depots, converted rail trails, and historical archives maintain a tangible connection to southeastern Minnesota's railroad heritage. The tracks may be fewer, but the legacy of Hiawathaland's railroads continues to run deep through the Bluff Country landscape.

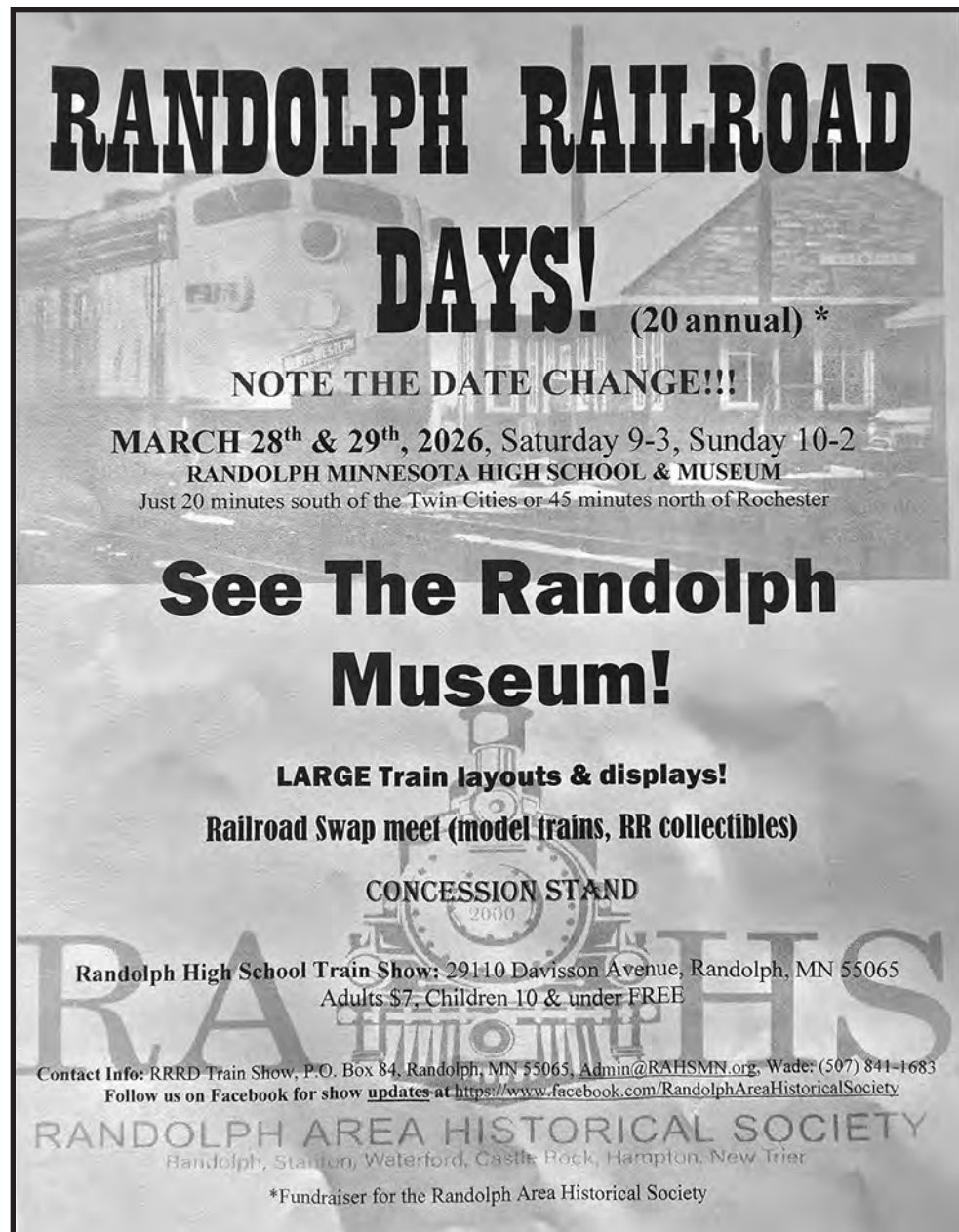
So, if this sounds like an outing not to be missed, come on over to the show, and enjoy going back in history to learn all about trains!



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Tapping into Stronger, More Diverse Trees



By Steve Pahs
District Manager, Rice SWCD

As I drove to work this morning, the light in the eastern sky shown a little brighter than last week, a good sign that spring will be here soon. Although it is still very cold, it won't be long before it is time once again to walk in the snowy woods and tap the maple trees to collect sap for nature's sweetest bounty.

I've been making maple syrup for many years now, and it is one of my favorite activities of the year. Of course it wouldn't be possible without the trees, and with all the foreign pests we've seen in recent years, we all need to be aware of the threats and do what we can to protect our natural resources.

The biggest pest in recent years has been the emerald ash borer. It is now well established

across most of the state and has decimated nearly all the ash trees wherever it has arrived. I've seen so many properties where the only trees they had growing were green ash, and they've had to cut down all of them, leaving a barren landscape with no wind protection, wildlife habitat, or shade.

If this happened to you, it may seem obvious now, but replacing your ash trees with multiple species of trees is a key strategy to managing for pests in the future. We don't know what the next bug or disease will be next, but if we plant a variety of tree types, hopefully it won't leave us with nothing when it does happen.

Here are a few suggestions for replacing your ash trees. Red Oak: contrary to popular belief, this tree is a fast grower and provides beauty and wildlife habitat. Sugar maple is another beauty that can provide many benefits including maple syrup, wildlife habitat, and shade. Basswood provides pollinator habitat and is a great shade tree. Bitternut Hickory, Mountain Ash, Quaking Aspen, and Kentucky Coffeetree are good choices as well.

Remember to mix it up and plant several of these to add species diversity and promote wildlife habitat. If you need to install a new windbreak or replace an existing one, Rice SWCD may be able to help. Reach out to us at 507-332-5408 for technical assistance in planning your next project. We still have a few more weeks of winter, so get outside, go snowshoeing or skiing through the woods and take in the beauty of winter before the sap starts dripping and the tulips pop out of the ground.



A view of a trail through a young woodland forest

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Northfield Township slips deeper and deeper into clutches of the city

As reported on November 19, 2025, utility work was started on the 80 acre Eugene Lyman farm in Northfield Township. The contract with SM Hentges & Son of Jordan was first disclosed to the public in the October 22, 2025, Northfield News in a letter to the editor from Doug Jones for AGA. The contract clearly stated that the city could pay the Lymans just \$25,000 and thereby not be obligated to spend \$10 million, which is now a “sunk cost” under the snow and frozen ground.

At the annual meeting of Northfield Township on March 10, 2026, the three supervisors will be asked whether they have agreed to the retroactive annexation going back to 2023. If the Lymans have not received their \$25,000 and the massive sewer and road work is irrevocable, then the second large annexation of agricultural land (the first was for the golf course expansion) will mean the 80 acres will no longer be in the township tax base. Northfield city council will no doubt want to pave the north and south ends of Hall Avenue and demand that the township pay half the cost.

Northfield City is currently annexing land north of MN 19 and west of St Olaf college under a previous annexation agreement with Bridgewater. Next to Dundas’s west side, a proposal to annex 40 acres for residential was rejected by the township. On Northfield’s south side, the Spring Creek development is nearing completion next to the soccer fields, ending development there.

Since the start of 2024, Northfield city administrator Ben Martig (paid \$208,000 per year) has personally approved \$10 million of consulting contract cash payments (all without public bids), leading to four city projects each costing \$10 million (rebuilding Bridge Square and putting a giant new municipal liquor store on the city parking lot at 5th and Washington, across from all Saints Episcopal Church, and a \$40 million Local Option sales Tax on the November ballot for park projects, and the \$40 million (principal and interest) new hockey arena.

These taxes, even before the Lyman Farm development of streets and utilities which will no doubt grow from \$10 million to \$40 million, have raised commercial and industrial property taxes per square foot in Northfield 30% higher than comparable quality property in Lakeville (where AES is currently moving, taking 100 jobs from Northfield).

This explains why there are absolutely no prospects by any industrial companies or developers to even look at developing Northfield’s 1,400 acres in Dakota County north of North Avenue.



Fertility



By Noel Aldrich, PhD, CNS
Licensed Nutritionist

While you may remember a discussion of “the birds and the bees,” with a parent or in a classroom setting, nothing of that content provides a helpful foundation for how to create a family. A couple can establish a household and have a stable place for raising children, but there are many more factors that go into creating an environment for conceiving a child. The perfect environment seems to be harder to achieve these days as the fertility rate in the USA continues to decline. The Center for Disease Control has documented a continuing decline of fertility since the “baby boom” of the 1950s, and the British Medical Journal published a report in 2025 that the fertility rate in the US had reached an all-time low. Current fertility rates are not able to sustain a stable population. In order to create a perfect environment for conceiving children,

a couple must begin with an evaluation of their nutrition.

My personal journey into nutrition began with this question of fertility as my wife and I learned how challenging conception can be. I am very thankful we were directed to a doctor who clearly outlined for us how important nutrition is for establishing a foundation of health that can support the creation of new life. This discovery has changed my life and the life of my family, which now includes two healthy young adult children. As the statistics from the CDC declare, there is an increasing number of couples across the country who need to know this information too.

Healthy conception is a team effort dependent on the health of the man and the woman. Sperm and egg quality reflect the quality of food that has been consumed in the past six months. In fact, the study of epigenetics points to the impact a grandparent’s diet will have on the grandchild. The children of the “baby boom” were the result of family food practices that involved gardens and farm fresh foods. Very little processed food existed in the 1950s compared to what is on the store shelves today. But as processed foods, preservatives, fast foods, and sugar have increased in the nation’s food supply, the fertility rate has decreased due to decreased sperm and egg quality.

As my wife and I discovered, there are opportunities to select quality food sources and nutrition supplements that will heal the body and restore fertility. A few of those choices include:

Add healthy fats – Do not purchase any product with “low fat” on the label. Healthy

cells egg and sperm cells require quality fats to function well. Whole milk yogurt, whole fat cheese, wild caught fish, eggs, Olive oil, and coconut oil are good examples of healthy fat sources. These whole food sources should be a part of each day to help promote the stable production of hormones that will direct the conception process.

Add protein to each meal – Protein provides the building blocks to make new tissue and new cells. Protein should come from whole food sources like poultry, fish, meat, beans, nuts, and cheese. Avoid protein powders as there can be additives and these products are more expensive forms of protein.

Add fresh vegetables each day – Fresh vegetables will provide the vitamins, minerals, and additional nutrients that will help the sperm and egg to function properly. Dark leafy greens like kale, collard greens, chard, and broccoli are rich in folate and minerals. Make an effort to add a rainbow of colors to your plate with carrots, red onion, cabbage, bell peppers, and black olives. Each color represents a different set of nutrients deliv-

ered to fertility system.

Within these primary food categories are important nutrients that sustain healthy fertility and a stable environment for a growing baby. Key nutrients for fertility include: Omega-3 fatty acids, folate, zinc, selenium, iodine, Vitamin D, iron, Vitamin C, Vitamin E, Vitamin B12, and choline. Both the male and female need to give attention to consuming these nutrients to improve fertility and give the next child the best chance of a healthy start. Your grandchildren in the future are affected by your diet now.

I enjoy helping couples develop a healthy food plan for their households that result in greater health and stronger families. Contact me to discuss your health goals for the coming year. Nutrition is designed for healing. I can help you reach greater health freedom in 2026.

Contact me at nutritionproportion@gmail.com, or check out my website at www.nutritionproportion.net

**Information and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and may not reflect those of The Messenger.*

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Yes! Cold Weather Does Make You Ache More!



By Shauna Burshem, D.C.

Here it is. The answer to the most asked question during winter months pertaining to aches and pains: Cold weather exacerbates arthritis symptoms by affecting joint fluid, circulation, and muscle flexibility. As temperatures drop, the synovial fluid in joints thickens, making movements feel stiff and painful. Reduced blood flow and tightened muscles further amplify discomfort, while shorter days and less sunlight contribute to inactivity and vitamin D deficiency, weakening bones and increasing inflammation. These combined factors make winter particularly challenging for those with arthritis, as the body struggles to adapt to the seasonal

changes.

Barometric pressure drops during cold weather also play a significant role in worsening arthritis pain. When the pressure decreases, tendons and muscles expand, creating additional strain on already inflamed joints. This internal pressure makes joints feel tighter and more sensitive, often causing discomfort even before a storm arrives. Additionally, poor circulation in cold temperatures slows the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to joints, delaying recovery and heightening stiffness, especially in weight-bearing areas like the knees and hips.

Lifestyle changes during winter, such as reduced physical activity and dietary shifts, further contribute to joint pain. Inactivity weakens muscles, reducing their ability to support joints and increasing friction and stiffness. Immune system overactivity in colder months can also intensify inflammation, particularly in autoimmune conditions like rheumatoid arthritis. However, proactive measures like regular movement, heat therapy, and maintaining a nutrient-rich diet can help counteract these effects and improve joint health.

Nutrition and supplementation are crucial for managing arthritis symptoms in winter. Optimizing vitamin D and K2 levels strengthens bones and reduces inflammation, while consuming anti-inflammatory foods supports overall joint health. Warm bone broth, rich in collagen and cartilage-repairing compounds, nourishes joints and improves circulation. Avoiding inflammatory seed oils and replacing them with healthier fats like grass-fed butter or ghee can also reduce ox-

idative stress and support cellular health, further alleviating joint discomfort.

Daily movement, heat therapy, and sunlight exposure are essential strategies for staying active and pain-free during winter. Gentle exercises like yoga, stretching, or indoor walking keep joints lubricated and improve circulation. Heat therapies, such as warm baths or saunas, relax stiff tissues and restore flexibility. By combining these practices with proper nutrition and self-care, individuals with arthritis can reduce winter flare-ups, maintain mobility, and confidently navigate the colder months.

Improve Mental Health; Reduce Social Media time: A recent study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association AMA Network Open revealed that reducing social media use to approximately 30 minutes per day can significantly improve mental health. The research found that participants experienced a 16% reduction in anxiety, a 25% decrease in depression, and a 15% drop in insomnia symptoms. However, loneliness scores remained largely unchanged, highlighting the dual role of social media as both a source of connection and stress. These findings align with earlier studies, such as those from the University of Bath, which demonstrated that even a one-week break from platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook can enhance well-being, though such short resets are not substitutes for therapy or medical care.

The study, which tracked 373 young adults aged 18 to 24, used a digital phenotyping app to measure real-time social media usage and its effects on mental health. Participants were monitored over three weeks, including a one-week "detox" period where nearly 80% voluntarily reduced their social media use from 1.9 hours to just 30 minutes daily. During this detox, participants reported significant improvements in mental health, particularly those with severe symptoms at the start. Depression scores dropped by nearly 50% for those with moderate-to-severe depression, while anxiety and insomnia symptoms also saw notable reductions. Researchers attributed these benefits to reduced opportunities



for negative social comparisons and addictive behaviors rather than simply cutting overall screen time.

Interestingly, the study found that behavior changes during the detox were subtle, with participants spending slightly more time at home and maintaining similar overall phone usage. This suggests that the type of content consumed on social media, rather than the total time spent, plays a more critical role in mental health outcomes. Experts emphasized that interventions targeting problematic engagement, such as late-night scrolling or unhealthy comparisons, may be more effective than focusing solely on reducing screen time. While the study's short-term nature limits its ability to predict long-term outcomes, it highlights the potential of brief digital detoxes as a practical mental health strategy for young adults.

Mental health professionals have praised the study for its robust methodology and impactful results. Psychologist Mitch Prinstein of the American Psychological Association noted that the improvements observed in just one week rival those typically achieved after 8 to 12 weeks of therapy. However, experts caution that such detoxes should be approached thoughtfully, especially for individuals who rely on online communities for support. Planning and consulting with a trusted health professional can help integrate these experiments into broader mental health care. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of mindful social media use and its potential to positively influence mood, sleep, and overall well-being.

*Information and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and may not reflect those of The Messenger.

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Teacher Turned Deputy Honored for Work with Sexual Assault Response Team

By Rice County

When technology failed, Matt Slinger stepped in, handling the presentation and the restless crowd of teenagers like a pro.

Truth is, in this area, Rice County Deputy Slinger is a pro.

With eight years of teaching under his belt – two years each at Maplewood Middle School and Bethlehem Academy and another four at Faribault High School – managing a crowd of kids is second nature.

But it's his ability to connect with them, especially when discussing a uncomfortable topic like sextortion, that helped lead the HOPE Center's Susan Powell to nominate Slinger as the state's SMART team Member of the Excellence. Slinger received the annual award given by the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault late last year.

Rice County's SMART (Sexual Assault

Multi-Disciplinary Action and Response Team) team is comprised of Powell, and staff from HOPE Center, Rice County Attorney's Office, Public Health, Social Services and Community Corrections, local hospitals, Carleton and St. Olaf colleges and local law enforcement who work to improve the response to victims of sexual violence.

Slinger, who left the classroom to become a deputy sheriff in 2018, currently works in Investigations for the Rice County Sheriff's Office, focusing on internet crimes against children. He joined the SMART team just as it was launching a series of presentations to local high schoolers. Powell says the timing couldn't have been better.

"He was at every presentation. He did such a good job connecting to the kids," said Powell, adding that she believes the surprisingly high number of students who then disclosed they or a friend was a victim of sextortion is due largely to Slinger's ability to convey compassion and trustworthiness.

According to the FBI, sextortion "occurs when someone threatens to distribute your private and sensitive material if you don't provide them images of a sexual nature, sexual favors or money."

While girls are certainly targets, an increasing number of boys 14-17 are being victimized. It often starts with an adult posing as a young girl feigning romantic interest in them, quickly leading to threats that explicit photos they've shared will be made public if they don't send additional photos or money.

Slinger says it's the unfettered access so many kids have to devices that puts them at risk. Teaching kids how to avoid becoming a victim is a message the father of two daughters is happy to share.

Sheriff's Deputy Matt Slinger was honored with a state Member of Excellence award for his work on the county's Sexual Assault Multi-Disciplinary Action & Response Team. (Rice County photo)

Powell says Slinger more than meets the award criteria of "demonstrating outstanding leadership, innovation and dedication in supporting their team and strengthening their community's response to sexual assault."

She says the former science teacher prioritizes victims and seeks out training to "be better and to show up for survivors of sexual assault."

Sheriff Jesse Thomas concurs, adding that he's glad to see Slinger's dedication and commitment recognized.

For his part, Slinger seems to take the award in stride, focusing little on his accomplishment but instead on keeping kids safe.

"There's a lot of good that can be done with technology," he said, "but there are a lot of dangers. We give students more and more access, but we need to make sure there are appropriate safety measures in place. Do parents know how to control how much access to the internet and apps their kid has?"

"With a phone in their hand, who can they be exposed to?"



Matt Slinger

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- In 2023, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's CyberTipline received more than 186,800 reports of online enticement.
- Between 2021 and 2023, the number of online enticement reports increased by more than 300%.
- Find tips on keeping you and your children safe from online predators at <https://bit.ly/OnlineEnticement>.

Proposed Rice County Mental Health Court would reduce recidivism, improve participant outcomes and public safety

By Rice County

The evidence was there.

In report after report from her probation officers and staff working with community members in crisis and jail detainees, Angela Brewer could see the increasing number of residents dealing with serious mental health issues.

Many, said Brewer, the county's Community Corrections manager, were justice-involved and often struggled to navigate the justice system and complete traditional probation. And, she added, there was frequently a relationship between their mental health issues and criminal activity.

Both Rice County Attorney Brian Mortenson and Faribault Police Sgt. Brandon Gliem underscored Brewer's findings during a Jan. 20 Rice County Board of Commissioners meeting.

"We have mentally ill offenders who continue to reoffend and their offenses are largely because of their mental illness," said Mortenson.

"The need for mental health resources is real," said Gliem, who's seen the need for services rise exponentially in his 24 years in law enforcement. "The cost, and application and the resource allocation of our law enforcement officers are going way more toward more mental health than it ever has."

In 2023, Brewer applied for a federal grant to provide funding for Rice County to implement a Mental Health Court that would help assist impacted individuals and reduce recidivism, but wasn't it selected for

funding. Last summer, she learned Minnesota's 2023 adult-use cannabis law includes funding for new treatment courts. An 18-member multi-disciplinary team then spent several months assessing local needs, developing mission and vision statements, goals, policies and procedures for the proposed court which received preliminary approval in 2023.

In January, the Board of Commissioners endorsed the creation of a Mental Health Court in Rice County. Final approval from the Treatment Court Initiative Advisory Committee and the Minnesota Judicial Council is expected this spring. That will allow the Rice County court to launch in July.

Ending the cycle

These courts, considered treatment courts by the Minnesota Judicial Branch, are more of a program than traditional court though they're led by a district court judge. In Rice County that will be Judge Christine Long.

The court is similar to the county's Drug Treatment Court in that it employs evidence-based practices, includes intensive supervision, curfews, regular group sessions and is overseen by a team of professionals, including several service providers from the community. Mental Health Court participants must spend at least 13 months in the program.

The focus is on progress, recovery and stability, says Brewer.

The program is strengths-based and individualized. Each participant has a program that is tailored to their individual needs. Progress made toward goals and program compliance is incentivized. If rule violations occur, they

are handled through sanctions or service adjustments.

The Mental Health Court also differs from drug treatment courts in that its team includes a number of mental health professionals such as mental health providers and therapists, a mental health social worker and a psychiatric nurse practitioner.

The team, which meets prior to each session to discuss participants' progress, also includes a county prosecutor, defense attorney, law enforcement, probation officer and those who specialize in substance use disorder.

Brewer expects they'll start with a handful of participants to ensure everyone is getting the support they need but says the hope is to have about 15 participants by its first anniversary. The number of participants is capped at 25.

Participants must be over 18, Rice County residents, have a felony-level offense and a diagnosis defined in state statute as a Serious and Persistent Mental Illness. While participants will be court-ordered to the Mental Health court, they must agree to the conditions for admittance. Anyone convicted of a felony sex crime or required to register as a predatory offender isn't eligible. There are also restrictions around admitting individuals with some offenses that include the use of firearms.

Once final approval is granted, Rice County will become the fifth in Minnesota to operate a Mental Health Court. Hennepin, Ramsey and Itasca have one each; St. Louis County has two due to its size and different challenges faced by its urban and rural residents.

According to the Minnesota Judicial Branch website, "Treatment courts stop the vicious cycle of relapse and recidivism by treating substance use and mental health disorders for individuals involved in the criminal justice system. ...The goal of treatment courts is to engage individuals in treatment long enough to experience the benefits of treatment in order to end the cycle of recidivism and successfully treat their substance use and mental health disorders that brought them into the criminal justice system."

Brewer, during the Jan. 20 presentation to the Board of Commissioners noted that not only does she expect a Mental Health Court to reduce crime in Rice County and improve outcomes for participants, the cost to operate a treatment court is far less than incarceration.

Treatment courts are a cost-effective way to provide wraparound services and supervision. On average, probation supervision costs about \$3.42 per day. A stay in the Rice County jail is approximately \$190 per day, while the average cost for a psychiatric hospital nationally can run up to \$14,000 per day.

While cost is a factor, Mortenson, the county attorney, believes it's really about the safety of the community.

"If we can end that cycle (of relapse and recidivism) or at least minimize its impact," he said, "we're doing more for public safety without sending a person to prison."

Ask A Trooper

By Sgt. Troy Christianson,
Minnesota State Patrol



Question: I know you were talking about winter safety tips in your last article. Can you go over the items a person should have in their vehicle when traveling in the winter?

Answer: When assembling a winter travel survival kit, it's best to include a variety of items that prepare you for cold, isolation, and unexpected delays. Even if you keep the kit in your vehicle year-round, review it regularly to make sure everything is in good condition and still in its proper place. A winter travel survival kit should focus on warmth, traction, communication, and basic supplies.

Winter Travel Survival Kit Essentials Warmth

- Extra blankets or a sleeping bag
- Warm hats, gloves, socks, and scarves
- Hand and foot warmers
- Emergency thermal (space) blanket

Traction & Vehicle Safety

- Ice scraper and snow brush
- Small shovel
- Sand, cat litter, or traction mats
- Tire chains (if appropriate for your area)
- Jumper cables

Communication & Visibility

- Fully charged power bank and charging cables
- Flashlight or headlamp with extra batteries
- Reflective vest or roadside flares
- Whistle for signaling
- Paper and pencil(s) to leave note/message

Basic Supplies

- Non-perishable food and snacks
- Bottled water (rotate to prevent freezing or expiration)
- First aid kit
- Multi-tool or basic tool kit
- Matches or lighter (stored safely)
- Paper towels, tissues, and wet wipes

Additional Helpful Items

- Map of the area (in case GPS fails)
- Emergency contact information
- Duct tape and zip ties
- Tow strap

Keeping these essentials on hand can make a critical difference if you're stranded or delayed during winter travel. Regular checks ensure your kit is always ready when you need it most.

Question: My husband always used to say "never use your cruise control during the winter months". Is that still true with advances on tires and technology?

Answer: He is correct, cruise control

should never be used on wet or icy roadways. If your wheels lose traction, the cruise control will continue to accelerate, causing the vehicle to skid. By the time you realize you are skidding, it could be too late.

With dry road conditions, cruise control helps you safely monitor your speed, stay within the speed limit and improve driving comfort on long, fairly straight stretches of road. It should be used only when you are able to drive at a steady speed with safe road conditions.

On icy, snow-covered or wet roads.

When deciding if you should set your cruise control:

- Ask yourself if it's safe to travel the speed limit. If not, it isn't safe to set your cruise.
- Is there limited visibility? If it's foggy, snowing, or raining and your range of visibility is significantly reduced, play it safe. Don't set your cruise.
- Is traffic moving smoothly? If it's stop-and-go, or there's heavy traffic around you, it's not safe to use cruise.

Remember that using your cruise control can be an advantage when driving long distances, but YOU are your vehicle's best safety feature.

Question: I listened to your radio show the other day and you were talking about fatal crashes were lower last year, what was the break down on the numbers?

Answer: In 2025, Minnesota saw a significant improvement in road safety, recording 370 traffic-related deaths. This marks the lowest fatality count since 2019 and reflects a 22% decrease from 2024 and 8% percent less than in 2023.

While the overall trend is positive, specific categories show where our roads are getting safer and where challenges remain:

Speed-related fatalities (98) were 29 percent less than in 2024 (138), 43 percent less than in 2021 (171) and the lowest since 2019. Unbelted deaths (70) were 31 percent less than in 2024 (101) and the lowest in the past seven years. Distraction-related deaths (21) were 30 percent less than in 2024 (30), 34 percent less than in 2020 (32) and the lowest in the past seven years. Bicycle fatalities (14) were twice as high as in 2024 (7). The next highest count since 2019 was in 2020 (10). Motorcycle deaths (57) were 25 percent less than in 2024 (76) and the lowest since 2019.

The Minnesota State Patrol remains committed to a dual-pronged approach for 2026. While public education on the dangers of speeding, impairment, and distraction is vital, it must be supported by extra enforcement.

Let's work together to make 2026 the safest year yet. Buckle up, put the phone away, and drive for the conditions.

Question: I travel a lot and I see a number of people making some poor choices when



it comes to passing semis and large vehicles. There is no way these big rigs can stop in time when people do these unsafe maneuvers. Can you write about this?

Answer: A commercial vehicle is a motor vehicle or a combination of motor vehicles that weighs more than 26,000 pounds and is used to transport passengers or property. Buses, including school buses of all sizes, and smaller vehicles with hazardous materials placards are also considered commercial vehicles.

Before passing a commercial vehicle, make sure you have safe clearance to the side, behind and ahead of your vehicle.

- Passing on a level highway: It takes three to five seconds longer to pass a commercial vehicle than a car. Allow enough time to pass and return to the right lane before coming within 100 feet of oncoming traffic.
- Do not pass: If you plan to exit or turn off the road soon, stay behind the commercial vehicle until you reach the exit.
- Passing while going uphill: Commercial vehicles often lose speed on an upgrade, making them easier to pass than a car.
- Passing while going downhill: Commercial vehicles increase speed on a downgrade. Allow more distance to pass.
- Complete your pass quickly: Do not remain alongside the commercial vehicle. Move back into your lane only when you can see the front of the commercial vehicle in your rearview mirror. Maintain your speed after passing.
- When a commercial vehicle passes you: Keep to the far side of your lane and slightly reduce your speed. Do not speed up while the commercial vehicle is passing.
- Meeting a commercial vehicle from the opposite direction: Stay as far to the right as possible to avoid a sideswipe crash and reduce wind turbulence between the vehicles. Turbulence will push the vehicles away from each other, not toward each other.
- Judging speed and distance: Because of their large size, commercial vehicles often appear to be traveling slower than they actually are. Many car-commercial vehicle collisions occur at intersections because the driver of the car misjudges the speed and distance of the commercial vehicle.

You can avoid a ticket — and a crash — if you simply buckle up, drive at safe speeds, pay attention and always drive sober. Help us drive Minnesota Toward Zero Deaths.

If you have any questions concerning traffic related laws or issues in Minnesota send your questions to Sgt. Troy Christianson — Minnesota State Patrol at 2900 48th Street NW, Rochester MN 55901-5848. (Or reach him at, Troy.Christianson@state.mn.us)

Sheriff Thomas announces he won't run for re-election

(continued from page 1)

"When I reflect on the past 30 years, I feel I am truly blessed and fortunate to have accomplished everything that I set out to do. But it's time for me to spend more time with my family and let someone else take the lead."

Thomas, who grew up in rural Rice County, graduated from Bethlehem Academy and got his degree in criminal justice from St. Mary's University. He began his career with the Sheriff's Office as a correctional officer but within a year had moved to patrol deputy.

He later served as an investigator and on the region's SWAT team before climbing the ranks, first as a sergeant, then lieutenant and finally chief deputy in late 2014.

He was named sheriff by the Rice County Board of Commissioners in November 2021, finishing out Troy Dunn's term before being elected sheriff in November 2022.

Among his many accomplishments:

- Overseeing the construction of the new Public Safety Center, which opened in November 2024.
- Adding an armored vehicle to the RCSO fleet, which provided a second such vehicle for the regional SWAT team.
- Restructuring the RCSO command staff to replace a single lieutenant's position with two captains' positions to provide additional administrative oversight.
- Ensuring deputy and correctional staff salaries are competitive in the current job market, helping to ensure staff retention.

Thomas, who long ago made it his goal to become sheriff, says he's confident that qualified candidates will be on the ballot next fall, noting his diligence in ensuring RCSO staff are well trained and able to step into his shoes once his term is over.

But even as he looks ahead, Thomas acknowledges there's still work to do and that he couldn't have done it without his family's full support.

"Thank you to my wonderful wife, Megan, for her understanding of the commitment and dedication that goes with a career in law enforcement: the early morning calls when I was on the SWAT team or had to come in for a serious call and the long days during special events and meetings," he said. "I also want to thank my two amazing children whose milestones I missed because I needed to be helping another family."

Thomas said he plans to remain in Rice County and stay involved in the community. He is currently chair of the Rice County Salvation Army Board of Directors and vice chair of the HOPE Center Board of Directors.





Friends,
The 2026 legislative session begins today, February 17. Before anything else, I want you to know that I don't see this role as just me coming up to the capitol and voting however I feel like it. Yes, I have my principles that guide me. But your feedback is just as important. This job is about listening, constantly, to the people I represent. You might not know this, but half of my district is a little more red and half of my district is a little more blue. As you can imagine, the emails and calls I get about the issues pretty much runs the entire spectrum. I'm willing to have a discussion with anyone, regardless of party or ideology, I just ask that we remain civil.

Throughout the conversations I've had lately at local events, at my clinic, and around the district, there are a few constant themes. First is fraud. People are rightfully livid that fraud has been allowed to get this out of control. They want to know what happened and what we're doing to stop it. This is priority number one. In the past we've offered a number of bills that will get to the heart of this issue. I expect you'll see many of them again, so stay tuned.

Second, families are concerned about Minnesota's high cost of living. Housing and en-

ergy costs are high. We're one of the least tax friendly states in America. Our dollar just doesn't stretch as far here as it does in surrounding states. Some of this is the result of the Democrats having total control of government in 2023 and 2024: They took our \$18 billion surplus and spent it into a projected \$6 billion deficit. They imposed a bunch of mandates that sunk school budgets into the red and hurt small businesses. They raised more than \$10 billion in tax increases on working Minnesotans, including regressive taxes like sales taxes, gas taxes, and tab fees. It's time to work on providing some relief.

Third, data centers are a hot topic right now. I hear your frustration. In a recent column I wrote a little bit about data centers legislation I am working on this year, including a simple transparency proposal that will prevent another NDA mess.

Above all, what matters most to me is that I continue hearing directly from you. If something is affecting your family, your business, or our community, I want to know about it. If you agree with me, tell me. If you disagree, tell me that too. I value thoughtful input from everyone.

One final thing I want you to be aware of: Beginning February 17, new security screen-

ing procedures will be in place at the Capitol and Senate Building. If you plan to visit, you will now pass through screeners like you would when you go to a Wild game or a concert. If you are a permit holder, you will still be able to carry your firearm on Capitol grounds.

However, Senate Democrats also adopted a policy this year that will require an extra layer screening to enter the Senate gallery. This policy includes a firearms ban, even for valid permit holders. It appears to be a clear

violation of state statute, but for the time being it is in place, so keep that in mind if you visit.

It is an honor to serve you. Let's have a great session.

Sincerely,
Senator Bill Lieske
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**Opinions expressed in Letters to the Editor are not necessarily those of The Messenger.*

To the Editor:

PCB's

By Kathryn Keller

Do you remember when PCBs were first found to be an endocrine disruptor, neurotoxin and a potential cause of breast cancer. We all checked our plastic food containers, Water bottles, and anything made of plastic to make sure it did not contain PCBs. Most manufacturers producing food related products have now eliminated its use. I just learned of a new threat of PCBs. One you can do nothing about if wind turbines come to your area. Industrial wind turbine blades contain BPA in the resin coating used to slow erosion that occurs on the leading edge of the blades. A Norwegian analysis calculates 62 kg (137 lbs) of material loss from each turbine annually. A paper written by Solberg however calculated that 20 turbines (130m rotor diameter) could release up to 24.8 tons of material over the course of their lifetime (approximately 20 years). The wind industry claims a much lower loss of just 150 grams per year. I don't know about you, but I do not want any PCBs being distributed through the air to land on my lawn, my vegetable garden, the lakes and rivers I recreate in and even in my house. Without air-conditioning our windows are open six months out of the year. It takes only 1 kg of BPA to pollute 2,641,720,524 gallons of water. And what happens when the blades are replaced? Most of them are stock piled because there are very few landfills that will accept them. They sit out in the weather as more PCBs are released and washed into our lakes, rivers and underground water supply. If this upsets you, I suggest you contact your elected officials. Especially those at the state and national level since Minnesota recently passed a law taking away the ability of local governments to regulate turbines over 500 feet. Those being proposed for Rice, Goodhue, Steele and Dodge counties will be well over that height.

You can educate yourself about some of the harms that wind turbines have the potential to cause by visiting the local website saveourskylinesmn.com.

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THEME: LOVE'S IN THE AIR
ACROSS

1. Biology lab supply
5. Aldous Huxley's drug of choice
8. *Certain Courtney
12. Tear violently
13. Color of a bruise
14. Al Roker's show
15. Pupil control
16. Any minute, to Shakespeare
17. Sheep-like
18. *H. P. of science fiction fame
20. Hibernation stations
21. Boat station
22. Tennis shot
23. Packed in container
26. User-friendly interface, acr.
30. Genetic info carrier, acr.
31. *Love unquestioningly
34. Equal to 1.3 ounces in Asia
35. Not a minor
37. Poem addressed to certain subject
38. Hundred, in Italian
39. Nothing
40. Relating to clone
42. Division, abbr.
43. Sloughed off skin
45. Fluffy dessert
47. All good things come to this?
48. Between Oets and Novs
50. _____ Verde National Park
52. *B-52s' "little old place" (2 words)
56. Singing femme fatale
57. Deed hearing
58. Reverberated sound
59. Blue-Green scum, pl.
60. Misery cause
61. Actress Perlman
62. Scheme
63. Right coast time
64. Made by tailor

DOWN

1. Seed cover
 2. Biking helmet manufacturer
 3. Tel _____, Israel
 4. #64 Across, redone
 5. Like 1969 landing
 6. Laugh with contempt
 7. Fender-bender damage
 8. *a.k.a. hickey (2 words)
 9. Norse deity
 10. "Off The Wall" shoe
 11. Needle hole
 13. Macy's Thanksgiving offering
 14. Commotions
 19. Silica variety
 22. NaOH
 23. Solder together
 24. Dewey Decimal Classification, a.k.a. Relative
-
25. Pleasant Island
 26. Small songbird
 27. Harry's and Hermione's magic tools
 28. Bigfoot's cousins
 29. *Hand cover, with love
 32. *Lemming relative, or anagram of love
 33. Tokyo, formerly
 36. *Couch for two
 38. Lumps in liquid
 40. Knave
 41. Unit of electric current flow
 44. Absurd
 46. Theater guides
 48. Nutritious beans
 49. Black tie one
 50. Grain grinder
 51. "Cogito, _____ sum"
 52. Stud site
 53. Occasional heart condition
 54. Prepare to swallow
 55. Riddle without solution
 56. Tree juice

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