



## SPORTS • U.S. women's national hockey team visits Chippewa Steel for scrimmage/1B YOUR REGION • Eau Claire School Board approves capital projects /3A

### Chippewa Co. officer cleared in fatal shooting case

BY CHRIS VETTER  
LEADER-TELEGRAM STAFF

CHIPPEWA FALLS — A Chippewa County deputy was cleared Monday of all wrong-doing in a fatal shooting that occurred Oct. 8.

Chippewa County District Attorney Wade Newell released a report Monday afternoon, clearing Deputy Martin Folczyk in the shooting death of 30-year-old Lance R. Stelzer. Folczyk had stopped Stelzer, who was riding a moped, in in the town of Goetz, near Cadott, that evening. A physical altercation between Stelzer and Sergeant Folczyk broke out during the traffic stop and Stelzer sprayed Sergeant Folczyk with a substance. Sergeant Folczyk discharged his weapon, striking Stelzer.

Newell wrote that after reviewing the actions of Folczyk, he determined it "was a reasonable act of self defense."

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Folczyk

### 'Momentous day'

Sonnentags raise gift to \$70M to put UW-EC event center on fast track



Staff photo by Dan Reiland

John and Carolyn Sonnentag hold an artist's rendering of the planned County Materials Complex along Menomonie Street in Eau Claire. UW-Eau Claire announced Monday that the couple has raised its donation to the project to \$70 million.

BY ERIC LINDQUIST  
LEADER-TELEGRAM STAFF

EAU CLAIRE — When John and Carolyn Sonnentag attended events at Zorn Arena in the 1960s as students at UW-Eau Claire, they never could have imagined that one day they would provide the money necessary to pay for the building's replacement.

But that's exactly how their story transpired, with university officials announcing Monday that the Sonnentags have increased their total philanthropy to \$70 million in cash, land and relocated business operations toward what will be called the County Materials Complex, named after the business the couple operated for years.

The gift from the Sonnentags, which UW-Eau Claire officials called "among the largest gifts to a public regional university in the country," will fast-track the event center that was first proposed in 2014 but has endured several delays. Construction



Staff photo by Dan Reiland

UW System Interim President Tommy Thompson speaks Monday at a news conference at UW-Eau Claire about a major donation by John and Carolyn Sonnentag (seated) that will enable construction to begin in spring on the planned County Materials Complex.

is now set to begin as soon as the weather allows after Jan. 1, with a groundbreaking ceremony planned April 25. The goal is to have the complex open in time for graduation ceremonies in spring 2024.

Chancellor James Schmidt called it a "momentous day at UW-Eau Claire and in western Wisconsin" in announcing what he called the "transformative" donation by the Sonnentags, formerly of the Wausau area and now of Florida.

"The generosity of the Sonnentags is simply remarkable," Schmidt said at a news

conference in the university's Davies Center. "This is truly an institution-shaping gift that will have a positive impact on tens of thousands of people for decades to come."

John Sonnentag said he first conceived of a sports complex on the Menomonie Street site about a mile west of campus about 20 years ago as he was driving a bulldozer while helping to pave the way for the scenic stretch of the Chippewa River State Trail between County Materials and the river.

SEE SONNETAG PAGE 5A

### Sonnentag Project Timeline

- **Aug. 5, 2014:** John and Carolyn Sonnentag's initial gift of \$10 million in land and funds is announced at County Materials' Menomonie Street site. The goal is to replace Zorn Arena. Initially called the County Materials Event and Recreation Complex. Project partners include UW-Eau Claire, UW-EC Foundation/Blugold Real Estate and the Eau Claire YMCA.
- **Oct. 28, 2015:** Preliminary plans for the John H. and Carolyn Sonnentag Event and Recreation Complex presented to the media. Project partners include UWEC, Blugold Real Estate, Mayo Clinic Health System and the Eau Claire YMCA. Components include a 5,500-6,000-person capacity events center and UWEC/YMCA/Mayo wellness, aquatics and recreation facilities.
- **June 29, 2016:** Visit Eau Claire and Blugold Real Estate announce the possibility of a hotel and convention center alongside the future complex.
- **Sept. 21, 2017:** Site work begins on Menomonie Street for future home of the complex, thanks to a \$900,000 grant from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. to tear down most of the buildings on the site and complete environmental analysis and remediation through the Environmental Protection Agency.
- **Oct. 8, 2019:** UW-EC and partners announce plans to begin construction on the complex by July 1, 2020. Components include 3,300-4,100 capacity multipurpose events center, a 118,000-square-foot fitness and recreation center replacing the YMCA's downtown facility, a kinesiology research/academic space and a Mayo clinical location.
- **Dec. 17, 2019:** The Eau Claire YMCA pulls out of the project, citing its fundraising policy. UW-EC, Blugold Real Estate and Mayo plan to continue the collaboration.
- **Jan. 28, 2021:** City of Eau Claire signs a letter of intent to contribute \$6-\$8 million to the project to increase the major events center size and invest in redevelopment around the site.
- **April 17, 2020:** Eau Claire Community Complex announces planning for the Sonnentag Centre has been suspended due to COVID-19, delaying the planned summer 2020 groundbreaking. Components include a 5,100 capacity events center, indoor turf field house, fitness center and Mayo sports imaging and human performance clinic.
- **Feb. 20, 2021:** Project planning resumes. Eau Claire City Council and city staff negotiate terms of the city and Visit Eau Claire's participation in the project.
- **March 2, 2021:** Eau Claire Community Complex announces construction will begin in the fall with a tentative opening date in 2023.
- **April 14, 2021:** The student body passes a referendum, with 61% approving a new fee of not more than \$90 per student per semester for use and maintenance of the Sonnentag Complex Event & Wellness Center. Components include a 5,000 capacity events center, a wellness/fitness center, a 50-60-yard turf field house, and a Mayo sports medicine and imaging clinic.
- **July 9, 2021:** UW System Board of Regents votes to support the Sonnentag Event Center and Field House following the student referendum through a 20-year lease with a 10-year renewal option. Components include 5,000 total capacity events center, 60-yard turf field house, wellness and fitness center and Mayo sports imaging and human performance clinic.
- **Nov. 23, 2021:** Eau Claire City Council finalizes Menomonie Street site rezoning and general development plan for the project following review and approval from several city commissions.
- **Dec. 6, 2021:** UW-EC announces John and Carolyn Sonnentag's total philanthropic gift to the project totals \$70 million, with construction beginning in spring 2022 and the facility opening in 2024. The overall project is now called the County Materials Event and Recreation Complex. The facility will have two named components — the Sonnentag Event Center and the John and Carolyn Sonnentag Fieldhouse.

### 101-year-old returns to Pearl Harbor to remember those lost

BY AUDREY MCAVOY AND GILLIAN FLACCUS  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

HONOLULU (AP) — When Japanese bombs began falling on Pearl Harbor, U.S. Navy Seaman 1st Class David Russell first sought refuge below deck on the USS Oklahoma.

But a split-second decision on that December morning 80 years ago changed his mind, and likely saved his life.

"They started closing that hatch. And I decided to get out of there," Russell, now 101, said in a recent interview.

Within 12 minutes his battleship would capsize under a barrage of torpedoes. Altogether 429 sailors and Marines from the Oklahoma would perish — the greatest death toll from any ship that day other than the USS Arizona, which lost 1,177.

Russell plans to return to Pearl Harbor on Tuesday for a ceremony in remembrance of the more than 2,300 American troops killed in the Dec. 7, 1941, attack that launched the U.S. into World War II.

About 30 survivors and 100 other veterans

from the war are expected to observe a moment of silence at 7:55 a.m., the minute the attack began.

Survivors, now in their late 90s or older, stayed home last year due to the coronavirus pandemic and watched a livestream of the event instead.

Russell is traveling to Hawaii with the Best Defense Foundation, a nonprofit founded by former NFL Linebacker Donnie Edwards that helps World War II veterans revisit their old battlefields.

He recalls heading topside when the attack started because he was

trained to load anti-aircraft guns and figured he could help if any other loader got hurt.

But Japanese torpedo planes dropped a series of underwater missiles that pummeled the Oklahoma before he could get there. Within 12 minutes, the hulking battleship capsized.

"Those darn torpedoes, they just kept hitting us and kept hitting us. I thought they'd never stop," Russell said. "That ship was dancing around."

Russell clambered over and around toppled lockers while the battle-

ship slowly rolled over. "You had to walk sort of sideways," he said.

Once he got to the main deck, he crawled over the ship's side and eyed the USS Maryland moored next door. He didn't want to swim because leaked oil was burning in the water below.

Jumping, he caught a rope hanging from the Maryland and escaped to that battleship without injury.

He then helped pass ammunition to the Maryland's anti-aircraft guns.

SEE PEARL HARBOR PAGE 2A

### TOMORROW Pearl Harbor Day remembered

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# Zorn Arena now 70 years old

» SONNENTAG  
FROM PAGE 1A

In 2014, the Sonnentags kicked off the project by donating to Blugold Real Estate Foundation 25 acres of land along the Chippewa River, composed of parcels that had been home to their family's business along with adjacent land they acquired from Student Transit. That record-setting donation of land and money was valued at \$10 million.

The 170,500-square-foot complex will include Sonnentag Event Center, which will replace the 70-year-old Zorn Arena and expand its capacity to 5,000 people, and John and Carolyn Sonnentag Fieldhouse, which will feature a 100-yard turf field. The complex, which has a total price tag of about \$107 million, also will house wellness and recreation facilities, offices and a Mayo Clinic Health System sports medicine and imaging clinic.

"It's going to be a beautiful, beautiful area for the city of Eau Claire," John Sonnentag said. "It's going to be marvelous."

## 'Game-changer'

Former Gov. Tommy Thompson, now interim president of the UW System, was equally as enthusiastic about the Sonnentags' donation and its expected impact on the region.

"This is amazing — \$70 million," Thompson gushed. "Just think what this is going to do for the area, going from probably the poorest gymnasium in the state to the best, most modern center possible."

"You're going to attract young people coming up here for classes, you're going to inspire athletes to come here and play and you're going to become an athletic mecca; plus it's going to be a laboratory for Mayo Clinic. ... This is just a win-win-win for the Chippewa Valley."

UW-Eau Claire athletic director Dan Schumacher said it's extraordinarily rare for a \$100 million building to be built for athletic and other events at an NCAA Division 3 campus, saying that's usually reserved for universities competing at the Division 1 level.

"It's a game-changer for us. It's a game-changer for our coaches and their recruitment ability," UW-Eau Claire athletic director Dan Schumacher said. "The fieldhouse is going to affect every sport for training yearround, which also sets us apart besides the arena itself."

## Turning point

John and Carolyn Sonnentag acknowledged



they had grown a bit frustrated over the past seven years by the delays in getting all of the approvals necessary and funding secured to get the project underway, with the latest setback being the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We weren't getting any younger, so we were saying, 'C'mon we've got to get this going,'" Carolyn said. "We're really excited. It's starting to feel like it's really going to happen. It's kind of a dream come true."

They recently increased their original donation, the largest in UW-Eau Claire history, after around three weeks of finalizing details with university officials.

"Never in my wildest dreams would I imagine that 100% of the philanthropy for a project would come from one donor," said UW-Eau Claire Foundation President Kimera Way, whose voice broke as she tried to resume speaking after an audience of community leaders erupted in the first of a series of standing ovations for the Sonnentags.

John Sonnentag graduated from UW-Eau Claire in 1966 with degrees in business administration and history. Carolyn Sonnentag graduated from UW-Eau Claire in 1967 with a degree in medical technology. After graduating from UW-Eau Claire, John joined the family business, which at the time was named County Concrete Corp. Carolyn later joined the business and worked as a bookkeeper in the finance office.

John's father, Merlin, founded Sonnentag Concrete and Gravel in Marathon in 1946. The company offered concrete block and aggregate in the first two decades, but under John's leadership, the company expanded its product line and began offering concrete pipe and other precast products. The company was renamed County Materials Corp. in 2003, and though it is still headquartered in Marathon County, the company now has

additional locations in Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Missouri and Florida.

Now the couple, who Carolyn revealed lived in a 10-by-45-foot trailer home as married college students, indicated they are pleased to be able to give back to the university and community where they met.

## Public-private partnership

With the help of representatives from the UW-Eau Claire men's and women's basketball teams, the university presented the Sonnentags with framed No. 1 Blugolds basketball jerseys, prized UW-Eau Claire Recreation Champion T-shirts and lifetime free passes to all university athletic events.

UW-Eau Claire students voted to support the university's dedicated space in the project in a referendum this April. Sixty-one percent of the students who voted in the referendum backed using \$90 in segregated fees per student per semester to help pay for the cost to lease the facility. The student fees will begin when the facility opens in spring 2024.

Student body president Jaden Mikoulinskii joined other officials in thanking the Sonnentags for their philanthropy and also thanked her fellow students for supporting the project, which she said would put Eau Claire on the map for major events.

"The current and future students at UW-Eau Claire are thrilled to welcome the Sonnentag center as its new home for recreation, athletics and staple events for this community for years to come," she said.

The public-private partnership also includes the city of Eau Claire committing to provide nearly \$7.88 million so the center will fulfill certain community needs, including providing a large venue to attract major events and youth sports activities to Eau Claire and serving

as an emergency shelter during disasters.

The ground level at the site will be raised to take care of environmental issues and move the project out of the flood plain, and changes to Menomonie Street are planned to improve access to the facility.

The event center will be the largest event center in northwest Wisconsin, Way said, noting that it also will provide more access to recreation and fitness facilities to the thousands of students living off campus.

## Happy ending

Schmidt and Way reminded Monday's audience of an anecdote they shared at the 2014 news conference announcing the Sonnentag's initial donation about how a 1971 Sports Illustrated story about the national powerhouse UW-Eau Claire men's basketball team touched on the university's desire to build a replacement for undersized Zorn Arena.

"Not too far in the future the Blugolds hope to be playing in a new 10,000-seat arena, but for now they will have to make do with their tiny, 3,500-seat fieldhouse," the article stated.

The report was published on Nov. 29, 1971, or 50 years ago, which illustrates how long university and city officials have been talking about the need for a larger events center in Eau Claire.

"Today I can unequivocally state that the future is here," Way said. "In 2024, the Blugolds will be playing in a brand new, 5,000-capacity arena and events center that will replace that tiny and aging Zorn Arena."

That dream will be realized thanks to the landmark gift from a pair of alumni who had their commencement ceremonies in Zorn Arena just a few years before the Sports Illustrated article appeared.

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# Mushrooms being tested for cleaning up contaminated soil

By ROB MENTZER  
WISCONSIN PUBLIC RADIO

MADISON (AP) — In the garage of a vacant farmhouse at the Marathon County landfill, mushrooms are growing in contaminated soil.

The soil was the site of an oil spill in the Fox Valley. Plants won't grow on it. It's not safe to leave it. In fact, there's not much that can be done for it: The usual result of such a spill is that all the contaminated soil needs to be dug up and carted to the landfill.

The mushrooms may hold the key to changing all that. They're part of an innovative pilot project to study the effects and potential applications of "mycoremediation," or cleaning soil by growing mushrooms on it.

This study is using pearl oyster and Italian oyster mushrooms — gourmet varieties. Mushroom farmer Jerome Segura, whose Stevens Point-based business Segura Mushrooms sells all over the country, takes a sample of the soil from one container, noting the dense network of mycelium that has grown below its surface, Wisconsin Public Radio reported.

"It's definitely penetrating in, which is good," said Alex Thomas, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and a researcher on the project, which is being run by the Marathon County Solid Waste Department.

The mushrooms here are 10 weeks old at this time, and still growing despite the chilly mid-November weather.

"Those are good-looking mushrooms; I could sell those at market," Segura jokes.

But these are the last soil samples the team will take from this experiment. From here, the samples are headed to the lab, where scientists test whether growing the mushrooms here effectively cleansed the soil of contaminants.

Mycoremediation isn't widely practiced in the United States, but scientific studies out of Germany, Finland and elsewhere support the idea that growing mushrooms can be a surprisingly effective way to clean up soil. A study out of India even found mushrooms removed 100 percent of certain contaminants from soils.

In central Wisconsin, solid waste department director Meleesa Johnson teamed with Segura, Thomas and Solid Waste Management Board member Ashley Lange to create the study. The pilot launched in September, and they're expecting preliminary results in December. In the meantime, the team already has plans to expand the experiment and test other uses and applications.

Johnson said it's part of the department's mission to consider "how we can be better stewards of the land by finding alternative uses for waste materials."

She's hoping the lab results show mushrooms have real cleanup potential. And there's some preliminary reason for optimism.

"Our control soils, if you dig into it, it smells like oil," Thomas said. After mycoremediation, the soil "came back smelling really clean — to me it almost smelled like baby powder. That's an early indication that hopefully we'll see some results."

Petroleum is a fossil fuel, made of carbon. Mushrooms can feed on the organic compounds and break down the lignins that bond them. Previous studies have shown that they not only remove the petroleum-based contaminants from the soil, but also break them down in such a way that even the mushrooms themselves are nontoxic. You wouldn't want to eat them, but they can simply be composted back into the now-clean soil.

In other uses, such as soil contaminated with heavy metals, the mushrooms would become toxic materials that require disposal at the landfill. But they would take a fraction of the space required to dispose of contaminated soil.

"Traditional methods would be to excavate the dirty soil, haul it away and dispose of it in a landfill," Segura said. "What we're actually trying to do is spread mushroom compost on top of the dirty soil on site, and have all of this done in a way that the soil is never really disturbed."

It's all preliminary, and Johnson acknowledges that lab tests could show little change or not enough cleanup potential to make mycoremediation a plausible alternative.

The team is planning separate studies this winter to test whether mushrooms have any utility in cleaning up PFAS, the "forever chemicals" linked to cancer risks that have been found to make drinking water unsafe in multiple Wisconsin communities.

"All the systems (for dealing with PFAS) are really just sequestering them," Johnson said. "They don't break them down. Could mushrooms be used on PFAS? ... That's what we have to find out."

In practice, that application is probably a long way off. But even in this early stage of research, it's a measure of the potential mycoremediation advocates see in the technique.

"We've been stagnant in the world of solid waste management for a long time," Johnson said. "It's when we step outside the box like this that we are actually moving toward something else."

# Evers signs bills to improve sexual assault kit process

By SCOTT BAUER  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

MADISON (AP) — Gov. Tony Evers on Monday signed bipartisan bills establishing a first-ever process for collecting and tracking sexual assault evidence kits, proposals that stalled for years over partisan bickering despite widespread support among law enforcement agencies, victims' advocates and others across Wisconsin.

Evers' signature of the measures, which drew praise from Democratic Attorney General Josh Kaul and Republican lawmakers, completes a yearslong struggle to create protocols in the law for processing and retaining the kits, which can provide integral evidence in sexual assault cases.

Evers said the new laws

will increase transparency and accountability in the state's testing process "to help prevent future delays in justice for victims while empowering survivors with resources to track their kits directly."

Kaul praised the laws, saying they would help to provide justice for survivors and put violent criminals behind bars.

"Wisconsin will be safer because this bill has become law," Kaul said in a statement.

Republican state Sen. Robert Cowles, who sponsored the bill creating the protocols, said it was designed to "systematically prevent a testing backlog of sexual assault kits from ever happening again."

Tens of thousands of sexual assault evidence kits in the U.S. have gone untested for a variety of reasons. Sometimes

prosecutors decide cases are too weak to pursue or victims refuse to cooperate. Victim advocates have been pushing for years to get the kits tested in hopes of identifying serial offenders.

The new comes more than six years after the state Department of Justice discovered more than 6,000 untested sexual assault kits across the state, some of which were several decades old. Kaul's predecessor, Republican Brad Schimel, started testing about 4,500 Wisconsin kits in 2017, work that was completed in 2019.

There have been 20 prosecutions against 19 offenders resulting from the testing of backlogged kits, including six convictions and 10 pending cases, the Department of Justice said.

The new laws create deadlines and protocols for the collection of sexual assault evidence and requirements pertaining to how long the kits must be stored at the state crime lab. Health care officials who collect the evidence from a person who wants to report it must notify law enforcement within 24 hours and that agency then has 72 hours to collect the kit and 14 days to get it to the crime lab.

There are different timelines for those who choose not to report to law enforcement. Those kits must be saved at the crime lab for 10 years in case the victim changes their mind about reporting.

The Legislature passed the measures this year after they stalled in the Assembly last session.

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