

OBITUARIES

Thomas Vodinelich 1936-2022



Thomas Martin Vodinelich, age 86, of River Falls passed away on Wednesday, Feb. 23, 2022 at the University of Minnesota Medical Center in Minneapolis after a short battle with cancer. He was born Jan. 6, 1936 in South St. Paul, Minnesota to Joseph Jr. and Anna (Srednicki) Vodinelich. Tom graduated from South St. Paul High School in May of 1956. He then went on to pursue a career as an Electrician and was a proud member of the IBEW Local 110 Union for 55 years. During his career he worked for many companies including his own, Vodinelich's Town & Country Electric. He also owned B & T Rental. Every summer Tom looked forward to attending the Union Picnic with family. He also enjoyed birdwatching, feeding wildlife in his backyard, walking on a trail he created in the woods behind his house with his dogs, and meeting friends at the casino. Most of all he enjoyed his amazing ability of being able to fix anything. Tom married the love of his life Bonita Jean (Young) on July 20, 1957 in the Town of El Paso, WI. They enjoyed many trips over the years with the Hawaiian Islands being one of their favorites. Tom had a true devotion to Bonita and would have been married for 65 years

this July. He is survived by his wife Bonita (Young) Vodinelich; children Peggy (David) Wiseman, Timothy (Leslie) Vodinelich, Terry (Sherri) Vodinelich, Patti Vodinelich, Pamela (Jeffrey) Larson and Michael (Christine) Vodinelich; 17 grandchildren; 15 great-grandchildren, brother Joseph Vodinelich; and his beloved dog, Pierre. Thomas was preceded in death by his parents, Joseph Jr and Anna; siblings Maryann, Paul and James Vodinelich; as well as his grandson, Spencer Halverson. A memorial gathering will be held on Saturday, March 12, 2022 from 11 a.m.-3 pm with a prayer service at 3 p.m. at Bakken-Young Funeral & Cremation Services. Private interment will be held at a later date at Rush River Cemetery. Arrangements are with Bakken-Young Funeral & Cremation Services.



Norma Smith 1938-2022



Norma L. (Manor) Smith, age 83, born March 16, 1938, of River Falls, Wisconsin passed away Wednesday, Feb. 23, at home. She grew up in Arkansaw, Wisconsin, where she married Raymond J. Manor June 15, 1954, farmed and raised five children. She was a hard-working wife and mother who showed her love through cooking for her family and others. She enjoyed square dancing, bowling, playing cards and board games, and anything to do with sports. She never missed a game or performance for any of her children. She was widowed in 1988 and relocated to River Falls and worked at Smead Manufacturing.

Norma met John R. Smith, whom she married Sept. 3, 2000, and began wintering in Mesa, Arizona. She picked up the sport of golf, playing cards, and loved socializing with friends. She became a huge Wisconsin sports fan and enjoyed cheering on her teams.

Survivors include her husband, John Smith, her five children: Jerry (Mary), Jim (Kelly), Cindy (Dan Kampa), Joe (Katie), and Sue (Bill

Wynn), her 2 step-sons Greg (Siri) and Mike (Kirsten), her 17 grand children, 6 great grandchildren, and 3 great great grandchildren. Preceded in death by Raymond Manor, Dec. 6, 1988.

A Memorial Mass of Christian Burial will be held on Thursday, March 3, 2022 at 11 a.m. at St. Bridget Catholic Church (211 E Division St.) in River Falls. Visitation will also be Thursday from 10-11 a.m. at the church. Private family interment will be at a later date in St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery in Arkansaw, WI. Arrangements are with Bakken-Young Funeral & Cremation Services.



Cindy Becker 1952-2022



Cindy L. Becker, age 69, resident of Hager City, WI, passed away Friday, Feb. 18, 2022 at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN.

Cindy was born to parents Norman and Georgia (Champion) Holt on April 19, 1952 in Plum City, WI. She attended school in Ellsworth and after graduation, went on to attend college in Eau Claire. She received her Associate's degree in accounting. Although she used her schooling in accounting on a community board for the PACE credit union, she found enjoyment working for Smead's in Hastings, MN as a press operator, where she worked for over 30 years. Cindy was passionate about helping others and also worked for Red Cross Goodhue County. She helped families find shelter and other resources when recovering from a disaster.

She married Michael Becker Oct. 18, 1980 and in their 41 years of marriage, were blessed with 3 children. Cindy loved being a mom, and especially loved being a grandma. In her free time, she gardened, raised chickens, and found joy in watching the birds on the feeder. She was a member of the Red Wing Collectors Society and took great pleasure from collecting antiques and finding good deals at auctions.

Cindy will remain in the hearts of her husband, Michael;

children, Krista (Bradley) Huron of Ellsworth, WI, Michelle (Steve) Wicks of Shakopee, MN, and Jake Becker of Hager City; grandkids, Ryan, Chrysler, and Tyler; parents, Ernest and Georgia Hase; siblings Jim Holt of Hager City, WI, Rhonda (Mike) Johnson of Hager City, WI, and Ernie "Toad" Hase of Maiden Rock, WI; and other family and friends.

Cindy is preceded in death by her biological dad, Norman Holt.

A Celebration of Life will take place 3 - 6 p.m. Friday, Feb. 25, 2022 at the O'Connell Family Funeral Home of Ellsworth. Burial will be at a later date. Memorials preferred to the family. Services entrusted through O'Connell Family Funeral Home.



BROADBAND

From Page 1

broadband expansion at the forefront of the Pierce County ARPA AdHoc Committee as it decides how to appropriate Pierce County's funds. ARPA funds specifically authorize allocation for broadband expansion, according to the Wisconsin County Association Guidance. Given these facts, the two organizations have joined together to advocate for affordable, reliable and sustainable broadband internet access for all of Pierce County.

Western Wisconsin Needs Broadband (WWNB), founded by town of River Falls resident Katie Pata in October 2020, is a non-profit, non-partisan citizen advocacy organization that believes quality internet access is essential for quality of life and economic prosperity, and advocates for reliable, affordable and sustainable broadband internet access to all living and working in Western Wisconsin.

Pierce County Grassroots Organizing (PCGRO), led by town of Martell resident Juliet Tomkins, is a non-profit, non-partisan organization committed to empowering and supporting Pierce County residents in improving quality of life by accomplishing community projects that meet local needs and by strengthening democracy. Founded in October 2019, the group has recently held community conversations to learn what issues are most important to Pierce County residents. Among the top issues is better access to affordable, reliable and sustainable broadband internet.

In a letter to Pierce County Board Supervisors dated Oct. 26, 2021, Pata and Tomkins shared the following beliefs:

- 21st century Wisconsin requires quality broadband internet access, just as mid-20th century Wisconsin required electricity.
- Broadband internet has become an essential service, and is vital to quality of life and economic prosperity.
- Access to affordable, reliable and sustainable broadband internet is critical to all residents and businesses in Pierce County, not just a privilege to those who live or work in the right locations.
- Time is of the essence: It will never be easier or more affordable for Pierce County to invest in broadband infrastructure than it is right now. Broadband internet build-out grant funding is currently available from the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (PSC). Providing Pierce County ARPA funding allocated for broadband infrastructure as local match, strengthens PSC grant applications, which is crucial to grant funding success.

WWNB

One reason Pata founded WWNB was to consolidate everyone's broadband stories in one, efficient place, where legislators could find testimonies and feedback as they work toward broadband solutions. The forum, a Facebook discussion group/page, is open to the public.

"It's a place of refuge," Pata said.

While not a gripe group, it is a place where people can share their frustration and anger, find validation and share resources and solutions. Why is internet connectivity so important? Well, the pandemic brought those reasons to the forefront, Pata said. It's essential for quality of life and economic prosperity.

"This is a hard concept to understand," Pata acknowledged last summer. "It's hard to understand options, especially when you're worried about switching contracts or expensive start-up costs with hardware."

The pandemic shifted the pulse in the community, she said. From "Haha, welcome to western Wisconsin where the internet is terrible" to a traumatic, desperate situation where people couldn't function in the stay-at-home situations they were thrown into.

The group is also a way to "move the needle" on the pipe dream of high-speed internet, Pata said. Much of her time has been spent educating residents and townships about Broadband Forward certification, which allows a municipality to pass an ordinance expressing their support for accessible, affordable broadband. This action could help grant applications rise to the top when seeking broadband funding.

"My hope is that this is an effort that will gain momentum," Katie said. "I'm in it for the larger picture. It's been fast and furious. I get goosebumps just thinking about it. People want to celebrate!"

Pata admitted she literally cried tears of joy when Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services announced the start of SwiftCurrent Connect, its new broadband fiber internet service. "It's my hope others in positions to help make changes will follow in PPCS' bold footsteps in whatever ways they can, to answer the bell and finally bring fiber internet, now more than ever an essential service, to all underserved areas," Pata said.

To do that, internet providers have the opportunity to apply for grants, and those applications are strengthened when municipalities appropriate ARPA funds or show support for broadband expansion. On Feb. 22, the Pierce County Board approved a res-

olution in support of broadband infrastructure expansion and availability.

PCGRO

PCGRO, led by Tomkins, includes 50 highly committed volunteers and a network of 400 volunteers who wish to be updated about PCGRO's efforts and participate when they feel compelled.

Tomkins wanted to find a way for people to be able discuss issues in a time when people were and are divided. Her goal is to empower people to be able to have difficult conversations while focusing on facts.

"We ask people to talk and think about their values as it relates to education, the environment, community development, health care, access to health care, and look at what candidates are saying about those things," Tomkins said. "It was a way of having those conversations to talk and discuss, find venues and opportunities to bridge differences."

Tomkins, a 35-year Pierce County resident who raised her children on a grass-fed beef farm, was disheartened by people not being able to talk to each other and work on community problems.

"Things were becoming more and more divisive," she said. Her background in community organizing in higher education gave her skills she felt are valuable for starting these conversations, for helping people make changes they want to see. She spoke with many people before launching PCGRO, all of whom expressed a desire for the ability to have civil discourse on topics that resonate with them. A group committed to taking community organizing training and they were off and running.

The organization has a staff of several people who have identified two pillars for the organization: Community projects and strengthening democracy in the form of voter education and voter registration from a non-political party perspective based on values.

Tomkins explained PCGRO is working in collaboration with WWNB because they have a common goal: To keep broadband expansion in front of the Pierce County Board as ARPA funds are appropriated. A number of people from both organizations have spoken during meeting public comment time to tell their stories about why broadband is important to them.

The organizations have also been advocating for local townships to become Broadband Forward certified. Created by 2015 Wisconsin Act 2015, Broadband Forward! Is a voluntary program for local units of government (city, village, town or county) to signal that they have taken steps to reduce obstacles to broadband infrastructure investment by passing an ordinance. Locally, the towns of Kinnickinnic, Ellsworth, Martell and Gilman have become Broadband Forward certified, with more in the works, Tomkins said.

"It's been an education process all the way up the ladder," Tomkins said.

She spoke about a Martell woman who reached out to her to ask what she can do. The woman eventually spoke to her town board and advocated for the Broadband Forward ordinance, which passed before a packed house.

Tomkins said broadband is one of those things that people don't think about much if they have it. If they have fast, reliable and affordable internet, they might not realize how many people in Pierce County don't.

Tomkins was excited to see the Pierce County Board pass the resolution in support of broadband expansion, but says they're not over the finish line.

"We just need to be sure that we keep pounding the drum for making sure that does happen," Tomkins said. "ARPA funds are a very unique potential infusion of capital into a rural community like ours. It's important to capitalize on those funds and have the actual installations go in. Many people have their hearts in the right places, but they must be kept apprised of the urgency of it, especially when they aren't the ones personally impacted."

What can you do?

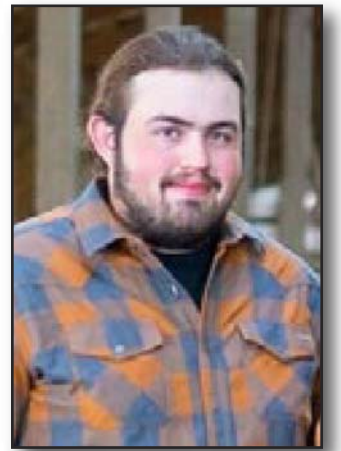
Tomkins said deadlines for state grant applications are quickly approaching, so it's important to stay apprised of those deadlines and prod people who are lagging in a sense of urgency. Once the funds are distributed, they're gone. She urges Pierce County residents to contact their individual board supervisors about the importance of broadband.

It's important to note, Tomkins said, that some people who have internet in the county are paying exorbitant prices for poor quality services, which are not sustainable nor available everywhere.

If you're someone directly affected by lack of internet service, lack of high-speed internet, quality, or affordable options, or if you're an advocate (someone not directly affected but sees the value, economic impact and equity broadband internet access brings), reach out to Editor Sarah Nigbor at sarah@piercecountyjournal.news or 715-307-0366 to share your story in our article series. You can also share your story on WWNB's Facebook discussion page or at <https://piercecountygro.org/broadband/>

Seth Webb

1998-2022



Seth L. Webb, age 23, of Hawkins, WI, formerly of Thorp, WI, passed away at home on Friday, Feb. 25, 2022. Funeral services will be held at 11:30 a.m. on Friday, March 4, 2022 at St. Bernard-St. Hedwig's Catholic Church in Thorp, with Rev. Baskaran Sandhiyagu officiating. Pallbearers will be: Terry Webb, Bobby Webb, Jeremy Webb, Mike Christman, Luke Christman, and Riley Raether. Visitation will be held at the church on Thursday, March 3rd, from 4pm to 8pm, and again on Friday from 10am until time of service.

Seth Lee Webb was born on Aug. 26, 1998 in River Falls, WI, the son of Jody L. and Amy M. (Christman) Webb. He was raised in Spring Valley, WI, near Cady Creek, where he attended Elmwood Elementary School. When he was eight years old, Seth moved with his family to Thorp and was raised on his family's farm, Dutch Dairy, in the town of Reseburg. He attended Thorp Public Schools, and graduated from Thorp High School in 2017. While in high school, Seth was involved in 4-H and in FFA, where he served as president. He also milked cows for Tom Lipinski, Dave Boehlke and Barry Eslinger. After completing high school, Seth attended UW-Madison and completed the Dairy Science Short Course. He returned home to work on the family farm, also working at Fairway Dairy in Thorp, until moving to Hawkins, WI in August 2020. Seth worked at Jeld-Wen Windows in Hawkins, and as a

butcher at Conrath Quality Meats.

He was a member of the Thorp FFA Alumni, where he was a great role model and looked up to by the kids in FFA.

Seth had many interests, but especially loved his beef cows, hunting, fishing, farming, and being outdoors in nature.

He will be dearly missed by his mother: Amy (Sander) Penterman of Thorp; his father: Jody Webb (Jodie Durden) of River Falls; one sister: Brooke Webb (Riley Raether) of Thorp; three brothers: Evan, Izaak and Ethan Penterman, all of Thorp; his maternal grandparents: Bernie (Denise) Christman of Elmwood, WI; his paternal grandparents: Larry (Audrey) Webb of Spring Valley, WI; his step-Oma: Hermien Penterman of Zieuwent, The Netherlands; many aunts, uncles, cousins and friends.

Seth was preceded in death by his step-Opa, Hemmy Penterman.

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be given in Seth's name for a memorial to be established at a later date.

Online condolences may be expressed at: www.cuddiefh.com

Thorp Funeral Home is assisting the family with arrangements.

Dr. Stanley J. Yeshe Jr. DDS.

Dr. Stanley J. Yeshe Jr., died Thursday, Dec. 23, 2021 at Abbott-Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis, MN. Funeral services will be held in Hibbing, MN in May, along with an additional celebration of Stanley's life in June in Vadnais Heights, MN. Arrangements, dates, and times are pending with the Dougherty Funeral Home of Hibbing.

To leave an online message of condolence, please visit us at: www.doughertyofhibbing.com.

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On a mission to promote broadband expansion

By Sarah Nigbor

Editor's note: This is the first in a five-part series highlighting the need for broadband internet expansion in Pierce County.

Much like electricity was a necessity for rural areas in the 1930s, the need for quality, high-speed broadband internet access in Pierce County can no longer be ignored. When the world as we knew it stopped nearly two years ago, the need to be able to work, study and conduct business from home was pushed to the forefront. Wisconsinites require quality broadband internet access in the 21st Century just as mid-20th Century residents required electricity.

An urgency has been created with the recent release of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, which will deliver \$350 billion to state, local, territorial and

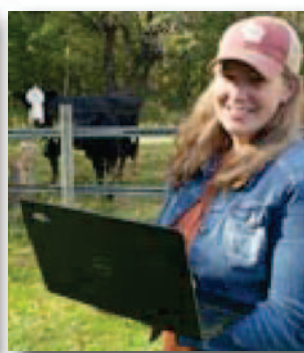
No Farm Left Behind



Bringing Rural Areas into the Digital Age



Juliet Tomkins



Katie Pata

Tribal governments to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and lead recovery efforts. As part of this effort, Pierce County will receive \$8,304,463 for local, eligible initiatives that fall within four key eligible use categories as defined by the U.S. Department of The Treasury.

Key objectives of the funding include:
•Fight the pandemic and support families and businesses struggling with its public health and economic impacts
•Maintain vital public services, even amid declines in revenue resulting from the crisis
•Build a strong, resilient, and equitable recovery by making investments that support long-term growth and opportunity.

Two local nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations have joined forces to keep

See BROADBAND, Page 9

River Falls Chamber honors Gavin at banquet

Leah Gavin of Freeman Drug was named the Citizen of the Year Monday night at the River Falls Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Bureau Annual Awards & Recognition Banquet. Freeman Drug is celebrating its 150th year serving the community. For full coverage of the event, held at Kilkarney Hills Golf Course, see page B-12. Photo by John McLoone.



PSD will receive an extra \$650,000 in ESSER funds

Board approves funding allocations

By Sarah Nigbor

PRESCOTT – The Prescott School District received some welcome news on Groundhog Day. It learned that it will receive about \$650,000 in additional federal COVID-19 relief funds. At the Feb. 16 school board meeting, Superintendent Dr. Rick Spicuzza outlined staff's recommendations for those funds, which the board unanimously approved.

The budget for these funds must be submitted to the state by March 11.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the ESSER III (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) Fund grant program authorized under American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act, provides additional money for local educational agencies (LEAs) to prevent, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19. ESSER III supplements ESSER I, created by the CARES Act in March 2020, and ESSER II, created by the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act in December 2020.

See FUNDS, Page 8

Passing the torch

Langer retires as EFD chief, Peterson steps into role

By Melissa Thorud

ELLSWORTH – After 24 years as chief and 39 years serving as a firefighter, Brent Langer is hanging up his gear for retirement. Langer was a leader in the community for many years and aided pivotal changes for a successful station and fire association in Ellsworth.

Langer made his home in his hometown of Ellsworth. He has always lived in the community.

"I've lived in Ellsworth my whole life; I've never felt the need to leave, this is my community," Langer said.

After deciding he would retire from the chief position, he also decided his time as a firefighter would end after many years. Now he hopes to focus more on his career as a Certified Public Accountant and spend more time with his family.

Langer has always prioritized his life outside of firefighting and gives the same advice to future firefighters.

See FIRE DEPARTMENT, Page 10



Chief Brent Langer's white helmet was a familiar sight on countless Ellsworth Fire calls over the years. It was reassuring to know someone who cared so much was on hand to help, along with a dedicated team. Photo courtesy of Ellsworth Fire Department

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