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Ellsworth E3 Community Development Corporation awarded grants to student service projects on Tuesday, March 29. One recipient is a group of students who plan to host a fundraising dinner for Ukraine. Photo courtesy of Anne Pechacek

Empower Ellsworth grants inspire community service

By Melissa Thorud

ELLSWORTH – The Ellsworth E3 Community Development Corporation recently took grant applications for student service projects and on Tuesday, March 29, awarded a total of \$5,000 to various Ellsworth Community School District student groups to support projects they want to coordinate in the community.

In the grant application, the grant is outlined

as an opportunity for students to make a difference in the community. It states, "The Ellsworth E3 CDC and the Ellsworth School District will be hosting a grant competition to generate ideas and powerful, student-led projects to strengthen the greater Ellsworth community. This grant will be awarded to K-12 students and student groups who wish to do a local service learning

See GRANTS, Page 12

Falls Theatre expands with Bobtown Brewhouse addition

By Melissa Thorud

RIVER FALLS – Falls Theatre on Main Street in River Falls expanding again following the most recent addition of a second auditorium. The new addition will be home to Bobtown Brewhouse, currently located in Roberts.

The news comes because owner Michelle Maher wants to expand the theatre's offerings. Following challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic closures, she realized the business could benefit from having another form of service.

"We have to find ways to continue to stay relevant and ways to anchor our Main Street location which is our greatest asset," Maher said.

The Falls Theatre, located at 105 S. Main St., has vacant space at the back of the building. This is where construction will

start later this year on the restaurant and brewing area for Bobtown. The project will take about six months to complete.

The plan is for the dining area to overlook the Kinnickinnic River and enhance the back alleyway known as Riverwalk. Maher believes this expansion will help bring more life to that space and will give other businesses incentive to do the same.

"The space that we are using for this expansion behind Auditorium One sits high up and overlooks our Kinni, so it is beautiful, but the reality is that it is unfinished and the outer walls need to be supported, but we have that in place and are working on it," she said.

Falls Theatre has been in Maher's family for 50 years and she intends to keep the business thriving for many more – this partnership is a way to help do that. Another ef-

See BREWERY, Page 3

No Farm Left Behind



Bringing Rural Areas into the Digital Age

Puzzling out how to spend ARPA funds

By Sarah Nighbor

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

During the pandemic, the American people have become accustomed to hearing many

new terms and acronyms in the news: COVID, ESSER, ARPA, PPE. We've added a whole new pandemic vocabulary, it seems.

The Pierce County Board Ad-Hoc Committee is tasked with figuring out how to appropriate the county's awarded federal American Rescue Plan Act funds, which total about \$8.3 million. Funding must be spent by the end of the calendar year 2024.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury is responsible for the funds' distribution. Four broad eligible uses for ARPA funds include:

Revenue replacement for government services

•COVID-19 expenditures or negative economic impacts from COVID-19, including assistance to small businesses, households, hard-hit industries and economic recovery.

•Premium pay for essential workers.

•Investments in water, sewer and broadband infrastructure

The "final rule" from the U.S. Department of Treasury issued Jan. 6 significantly increased flexibility for municipalities in how they spend ARPA funds, especially in how

See BROADBAND, Page 9



Falls Theatre has been a fixture in downtown River Falls since it opened in 1927. A new partnership will bring Bobtown Brewhouse to the theatre, overlooking the Kinnickinnic River. Photo courtesy of Falls Theatre

Ptacek's IGA is the 'real MVP'

New video and scoreboards will be installed at PHS with local business financing the project

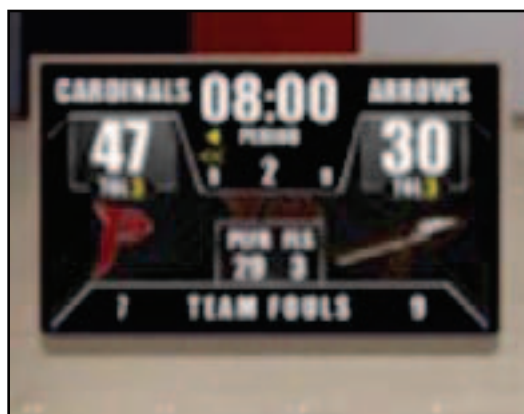
By John McLoone

"This is a slam dunk." Prescott School Board President Mike Matzek started off the sports idioms at the monthly meeting of the board Wednesday, March 30 in the Prescott Performing Arts Center.

The real MVP of the night was, no doubt, Ptacek's IGA. Long the anchor of the Prescott community, the Ptacek family "stepped up to the plate" in a big way.

The board voted to approve a plan for a new score-

See VIDEO, Page 3



A rendering of the scoreboard/video board and large video board that will be installed in the Prescott High School gymnasium under a program approved by the Prescott School Board Wednesday, March 30. Ptacek's IGA of Prescott stepped forward to finance the cost of the project, with funds to pay for it coming from sponsorship agreements with local business. Photos courtesy of the Prescott School District

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Troy and Rachel Connolly live in the town of River Falls, Sittin' Valley to be exact, with their three young children. Rachel relies on an internet connection to work from home as a bank examiner. Photo courtesy of Rachel Connolly



Town of Gilman farmer and substitute teacher John Shafer, with his children Rose and Zachary, had to connect with Ellsworth Community School District staff and students over the internet during the pandemic. Photo courtesy of John Shafer

ARPA Committee recommends \$3.6M revenue loss claim

Nugget Lake dredging project high on the list

By Sarah Nigbor

The Pierce County ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) Ad Hoc Committee forwarded a recommendation to the Finance & Personnel Committee April 4 to allocate \$3.6 million in ARPA funds to replace revenue lost by the county in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. F&P met immediately following that meeting, and voted unanimously to recommend the appropriation to the full county board.

The Pierce County Board Ad-Hoc Committee's purpose is to figure out how to appropriate the county's \$8.3 million in awarded ARPA funds

The U.S. Department of the Treasury is responsible for the funds' distribution. Four broad eligible uses for ARPA funds include:

- Revenue replacement for government services
- COVID-19 expenditures or negative economic impacts from COVID-19, including assistance to small businesses, households, hard-hit industries and economic recovery.
- Premium pay for essential workers.
- Investments in water, sewer and broadband infrastructure

The "final rule" from the U.S. Department of Treasury issued Jan. 6 significantly increased flexibility for municipalities in how they spend ARPA funds, especially in how they calculate the local tax revenue loss attributable to the pandemic.

Municipalities can use a standard allowance of up to \$10 million for the revenue loss category, said County Administrator Jason Matthys. This replaces the previous revenue loss calculation formula. This provision could allow municipalities to claim all of their ARPA funds under the "revenue loss" category.

Finance Director Julie Brickner calculated the 2020 revenue loss to be \$3,623,849, which auditing firm CliftonLarsonAllen confirmed. In reality, Matthys said, the county's revenue loss for 2020 through 2024 would like exceed \$15 million, meaning the county could appropriate all of its funds to the "revenue loss" category. However, Matthys doesn't think that's the route to go.

"I think it's appropriate and necessary to at least claim the 2020 loss," Matthys said. "But there are other community needs to consider."

The money claimed under the revenue loss category can be used for "general government services," which can mean any service traditionally provided by the government (minus a few exceptions). Some examples the final rule lists are construction of schools and hospitals, road building and maintenance, other infrastructure, health services, general government administration, staff and administrative facilities, environmental remediation, and provision of police, fire and other public safety services (can include buying fire and police vehicles.)

Matthys feels strongly that the Nugget Lake dredging project, which falls under environmental remediation project guidance, is a strong candidate for the revenue loss claim. The only other way to pay for this project would be to levy taxes or go to bond.

In 2007, 33,000 cubic feet of sediment was dredged from Nugget Lake. The new proposal calls for removing 100,000 cubic feet of sediment and building a sediment pond. The total cost is estimated to be between \$1.2 and \$1.4 million.

"In my opinion it's absolutely necessary to have a park setting in that area," Matthys said at the F&P meeting. "It's brought increased revenues. The lake is the main reason people go there to recreate."

Without the lake, the county might have to consider closing the park or repurposing it, Matthys added.

The full county board will vote on the resolution at its April 19 organizational meeting.

ARPA applications

Several more ARPA requests have filtered in from various organizations, county departments and citizen groups. Matthys shared briefly a list of the latest 13 requests to consider. Matthys said he hasn't gone "deep into the weeds" as far as eligibility of the requests yet. Some may be difficult to characterize, he said.

1. Pierce County Jail – Purchase an intercept full body scanner at a cost of \$244,000. This would allow jail staff to check for contraband in lieu of a strip search. The recommendation came from the last jail inspection.

2. Israel Haas, representing Coulee River Trails in Prescott/town of Oak Grove – Complete buildout of a seven-mile ADA accessible trail system in a regionally significant location at risk to being lost to development. The total price tag for the project is \$3.8 million.

3. Town of Ellsworth - \$220,000 for broadband expansion in the township along 450th, 410th and 710th. The town has appropriated \$124,000 of its ARPA funds to this endeavor.

4. City of Prescott Well No. 3, which is no longer in use due to high nitrate levels. The city's total ask would be \$260,909.75 to be used toward this project. The city would pay the same amount, and also apply for a DNR Safe Drinking Water Loan at a 49% loan forgiveness rate.

5. Pierce County Public Health – Sustaining the communicable disease funding capacity after 2024. The salary and benefits for this position for two years would cost \$192,940.87.

6. PCPH – Enhancement of the River Falls exam room at a cost of \$10,000. They've been unsuccessful at finding funding from other sources.

7. Matthew Stepaniak of Limitless Cycling - Brings adaptive bikes to seniors, veterans, and the disabled in Pierce, Polk and St. Croix counties. He's asking for \$20,000 with supplemental funding coming from other sources.

8. Bethany Christensen of Fairyland Wonder Park in Prescott, an inclusive park dedicated to healing while becoming a regional destination. The project is estimated to cost \$1.5 million total. The group has raised \$181,999 so far and is requesting \$25,323 to complete Phase 1.

9. Amy Berg of Turningpoint for Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence – A new shelter would cost \$4.9 million. They are at capacity with 21 beds. They would not be asking for the full amount as the project is in its infancy stages, Matthys said.

10. Amy Berg of Turningpoint – Oct. 8 domestic violence walk with upfront costs of \$12,000. It would be supplemented by registration fees and sponsorships.

11. Village of Plum City – New ambulance at a cost of \$297,650. They have \$100,000 saved, so they are requesting \$197,650 in ARPA funds.

12. Village of Plum City – New vacuum sweeper/holder tractor for the village streets. They are asking for \$40,000 out of \$60,000.

13. Village of Plum City – New John Deere tractor for plowing. The request is for \$102,789 out of \$162,789.

Matthys pointed out that three requests – the jail's and PCPH's – may be considered government services, so it may be possible to find other funding aside from ARPA, or from the revenue loss category.

He and Emergency Services Director Christine McPherson are also proposing the committee consider using funds to build a tornado safe room at the Pierce County Fairgrounds. No such room exists, which is dangerous for people who camp there or 4-Hers who stay on the property during the fair, Matthys said.

In the past, a dispatcher would unlock the courthouse annex door facing Oak Street when the tornado siren would go off. Now that the dispatchers are located at 555 W. Overlook Drive, that's no longer a feasible option.

The committee will continue to examine the ARPA guidelines and prioritize requests. The next meeting date is to be determined.

BROADBAND

From Page 1

they calculate the local tax revenue loss attributable to the pandemic.

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The money claimed under this category can be used for "general government services," which can mean any service traditionally provided by the government (minus a few exceptions). Some examples the final rule lists are construction of schools and hospitals, road building and maintenance, other infrastructure, health services, general government administration, staff and administrative facilities, environmental remediation, and provision of police, fire and other public safety services (can include buying fire and police vehicles.)

The funds' use lists the following restrictions:

- Funds allocated to states cannot be used to directly or indirectly offset tax reductions or delay a tax or tax increase.
- Funds cannot be deposited into a pension fund or rainy-day fund.

Many associations and organizations throughout the state, such as the League of Municipalities, Wisconsin Towns Association and Wisconsin Counties Association are encouraging municipalities to spend the money on one-time investments rather than recurring expenditures that would require further funding down the road. This means avoiding creating new programs or add-ons which will require ongoing financial commitment.

The following recommendations for ARPA funds are listed on the UW-Extension website ARPA education tab:

- Replenishing reserves used to offset revenue declines during the pandemic should be given high priority to rebuild financial flexibility/stability and restore fiscal resiliency.
- Using ARPA funds to cover operating deficits caused by COVID-19 should be considered temporary.
- Investment in critical infrastructure is a good use because it's a non-recurring expenditure that can be used on long-term assets. Municipalities should be careful to assess any ongoing operating costs associated with the project. These projects are often difficult to fund on tax revenues alone, so the ARPA monies provide the opportunity to invest in the future.
- Engage the community to identify their priorities on investments and implement a public participation mechanism to help allocate funds.
- Look for innovative partnerships and collaborations to implement strategic projects, such as non-profits, neighboring local governments and regional organizations.

As one can imagine, a list a mile long of where the funds could be best used is imminent. A group of advocates for broadband expansion, led by non-profits Pierce County GrassRoots Organizing and Western Wisconsin Needs Broadband, along with Pierce County Economic Development Corporation and local internet providers, are hoping Pierce County agrees to allocate a portion of its \$8.3 million in ARPA funds to support broadband expansion throughout the county.

The points awarded in applications to the State Broadband Expansion Grant Program are one reason why local government ARPA allocation to internet service providers (such as SwiftCurrent Connect or BevComm, for example) in a public-private partnership is important. Each application is awarded more points if matching funds are available and public-private partnerships exhibit community engagement.

The Connollys

When Rachel and Troy Connolly moved to Sittin' Valley four miles east of River Falls in July 2019, they'd been warned that the internet service was questionable. They thought the previous owner of their house was exaggerating. He wasn't.

"We bought the house from a co-worker directly and he had told us it's not great, there aren't many options," Rachel Connolly said. "Oh yeah, we thought. We'll figure it out. We kind of brushed it aside."

Before they moved, Connolly spent a good week calling every place she could possibly think of, inquiring about internet service. She had terrible luck. The only option she found was satellite internet that cost \$260 per month.

"It worked okay unless it was raining or snowing, then it didn't work at all," Connolly said. "It wasn't terrible when we first moved in, but then I was forced to work from home when COVID hit and I still am. The satellite wasn't fast enough and I couldn't just not work when it was raining. We didn't know where to turn."

That's when she became acquainted with WWNB and Katie Pata. It helped to connect with others in Pierce County who had the same struggles she did. It wasn't just about streaming movies at home or checking social media. It was about working from home and figuring out how to do it when the internet wouldn't work.

"We suffered through satellite, limping along, through Fall 2020," Connolly said. "I thought I'd go back to the office in a couple of weeks. We weren't doing a bunch of video calls yet, but our time at home kept extending."

Connolly works as a bank examiner for the Farm Credit Administration. She knew she had to figure something out, as the stay-at-home work continued. They found a company called

Hoff Satellite Sales & Installs out of Eau Claire that offered fixed wireless internet. Fixed wireless internet uses antennas that

are attached to your home (or another structure nearby). The antennas beam an internet signal from your computer to a fixed location, which is usually a fixed wireless hub attached to a tower.

Connolly said the company's owner Brandon Hoff was "super great to work with" and provided "the best internet since we lived here." While less expensive, it was still close to \$200 a month. But there was one catch: Hoff had to affix the wireless hub to an AT&T tower. Connolly said AT&T threatened to shut it off several times, but then would extend the agreement at the last minute. It created unwelcome stress, not knowing if she would be able to do her job from week-to-week.

In Fall 2021, the Connollys welcomed their third child and she went on maternity leave, giving her a break from needing the internet. When she returned to work in January 2022, Hoff's internet service was working, but the speeds had slowed – enough so that she couldn't do any video calls. AT&T again threatened to drop the agreement.

"I panicked because I have to work, and I couldn't drive into Bloomington every day to use the internet," Connolly said.

She researched more options and settled on Bix Wireless, based in Tennessee, which was a fixed wireless option contracted through AT&T. Bix had even slower speeds and consistently dropped her video calls. She felt her hands were tied and it still cost \$180 per month. If AT&T would provide them fixed wireless directly, which it declined due to "tower space constraints," that price would have dropped to \$60 per month.

Back to Hoff it was at a price of over \$200 per month; however, he had struck a deal with Verizon to use their tower and the speeds seem adequate at this time. However, she's counting down the days until they are able to connect to SwiftCurrent Connect through Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services.

"It's (Hoff) really our only choice," Connolly said. "The part that is so astonishing to me is that we're only four miles from town and 35 miles from the Twin Cities and we have no internet options. My parents live in the literal middle of nowhere near Durand on a dead-end dirt road and they have broadband internet."

The Connollys are where they want to be and worked hard to be able to live near River Falls, Troy's hometown. He works for the City of River Falls Public Works Department. Rachel attended college at UW-River Falls and loved the city. They tried for a long time to break into the River Falls housing market and don't want to leave due to an internet problem.

They count their lucky stars their children were young when the pandemic struck, because online schoolwork would have been impossible. Their oldest, who is now 6.5, was in 4K at the time. His teacher drove out to their house and worked with him on tests outside. She said it was more effective than struggling with it over the computer.

The Shafers

John Shafer, a dairy farmer turned substitute teacher, lives in the town of Gilman with his two children, Zachary (fourth grade) and Rose (seventh grade). They have internet service through Spring Valley Telephone Company. It's pretty reliable, which is good because both children use Chromebooks to complete school work at home.

"The older they get, the more technology is needed," Shafer said. "As a substitute teacher, this technology is great for keeping students working and being connected with their teachers. However, we need infrastructure and skilled workers to keep this technology working."

As a farmer, Shafer uses the internet for finding parts and tools online, information on equipment, and online auctions. He believes high speed internet needs to be available for everyone in order to have a sustainable community.

"While on the Pierce County Board back in the early 2000s, I believed in sustainable communities and supporting rural America and family farmers," Shafer said. "I still believe in both now. Rural America has been neglected for too long and we cannot continue to make big metropolitan areas continue to grow out of control while we see rural America and rural communities crumble. Having high speed internet is going to keep people connected and help out rural America."

When Gov. Tony Evers instituted the Safer at Home Order in March 2020, Shafer's kids were in elementary school. Shafer believes all area schools did well in keeping kids as engaged as they possibly could, considering the situation. He remains grateful to the teachers and staff, and the use of a school Chromebook was a lifesaver.

"It was learn-on-the-fly and with the help of Zoom and Google Meets, they were able to help many students out, but it had its struggles," Shafer said.

Last year, Rose started sixth grade at Ellsworth Middle School, while Zachary was in third grade. They had to go online from time-to-time, though Ellsworth mostly kept learning in-person.

"A few times we either had difficulty connecting or having the teacher get disconnected while the students were still on the computers," Shafer said. "I remember asking Zachary's classmates to look for a topic for their paper until the teacher could reconnect."

Shafer transitioned from dairy cattle to beef cattle for health reasons. At that time, he saw that many schools were struggling to staff classrooms with substitute teachers and paraprofessionals, so he began subbing almost daily at three area districts. The pandemic exacerbated the problem, forcing some classrooms or schools to go to distance learning when staff was spread too thin. Distance learning is tough to do when not everyone has adequate internet service.

"My hope is to find the best solution for Pierce County," Shafer said. "We have to focus on the entire county (not just the western side). There are so many opportunities out there if we change our way of thinking."