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October 1, 2021 - Volume LI - No. 39 | \$2.00
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Tammy Nicholson, director of pupil services for the Ashwaubenon School District, says the special education effort in Brown County is collaborative as districts strive to help each other, but when it comes to funding, it often pits them against each other. **Lea Kopke Photo**

Just as important: The weight of the job

BY HEATHER GRAVES AND LEA KOPKE THE PRESS TIMES

BROWN COUNTY – The job of a special education director is a balancing act between state and federal requirements and a desire to help students and families.

Mandates, continuous paperwork, staff shortages, varied student needs, frustrated parents, limited resources, funding struggles – the list of responsibilities on the shoulders of the directors can sometimes seem infinite.

“Sometimes parents do not understand the processes and laws,” Green Bay Executive Director of Student



Services Claudia Henrickson said. “So, if their child does not qualify, they do not understand. They just want help for their child.”

Jerry Nicholson, director of pupil services for the De Pere School District, said though well-intended, and often necessary, state and federal mandates can fuel parent frustration.

“Working with families is about listening, communicating effectively and working together to determine

what we can do,” Nicholson said. “This is the art of being a director. We cannot always do exactly what is being asked, but we can almost always do something. (Mandates) can also be confusing and create challenges when trying to meet the needs and desires of each situation.”

Jennifer Garceau, executive director of student services for the Howard-Suamico School District, said mandates also create challenges for directors when trying to meet the needs of each student’s situation.

“I strive to listen to families, as they are their child’s first advocate, and

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10th map’s the charm: County Board approves new district map

BY HEATHER GRAVES STAFF WRITER

BROWN COUNTY – The clock was ticking for Brown County to approve a new district map based on the 2020 Census, as the deadline for municipalities to draw their wards off of it was fast approaching.

“Time is the reason we have to vote on this soon,” District 24 Supervisor Richard Schadewald said.

Ten maps, a pair of public hearings, two County Board meetings and a handful of votes later, and the new map is set – 26 Supervisory Districts Map E-2 was approved with a 14-8 vote at a special meeting Sept. 22.

The decision came a week after the board re-



District 3 Supervisor Amanda Chu told supervisors Sept. 22 when the priority is maintaining core districts and making sure there is no competition among current supervisors it becomes a discussion of ethics. **Heather Graves Photo**

jected the six maps created by the seven-member Citizens Drafting Ad Hoc Committee – casting aside the culmination of nine months of work.

“If you do something for nine months that was

authorized by the (County Board) and the County Board throws out the results, that, from a citizen’s point of view, looks funny, it raises questions,”

See MAP page 12



This is an aerial view of the 55-acre plot of land along Nicolet Drive that is in the early planning stages of being turned into a subdivision. **Josh Staloch Photo**

Nicolet Drive development discussed

BY JOSH STALOCH STAFF WRITER

GREEN BAY – Plans to develop a 55-acre parcel of land off Nicolet Drive along the east shore of the Bay of Green Bay are beginning to take shape.

Marina Development, LLC, on Sept. 23 outlined the first phase of a project, which calls for six three-story luxury condominiums with 54 units along Nicolet Drive.

The sale of those condos, which, according to the developer, are expected to range in price from \$600,000 to \$850,000, will provide funding for infrastructure necessary to develop a neighborhood of single-family homes on the remaining land.

The developers said they will not seek funding from the city for the project.

Residents attended an informative meeting with representatives from Ma-

rina Development and Mau & Associates, which will assist the developers with engineering.

Green Bay District 1 Alderperson Barbara Dorff, who lives in a home which borders the site, was also there to help mediate the discussion.

“This has not gone anywhere yet,” Dorff said before the start of the meeting. “It is in the infancy

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work together to provide the best services in the child's least restrictive environment," Garceau said.

Hendrickson said she tries to personalize each situation.

"I try to put myself in their shoes... Make the parent and student feel listened to and validated," she said.

The key, West De Pere's Director of Student Services Amy Schuh said, is open and honest communication with parents.

"We all have the same goal - a successful educational experience for students," Schuh said. "We may not always agree on how to get there, but I always want families to know that their child's success is what is most important. If we cannot work as a team, it comes at a cost to the student."

The unique nature of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) requires directors to have an individualized mentality toward each student's specific needs, while at the same time looking at the big picture of a district's special education department.

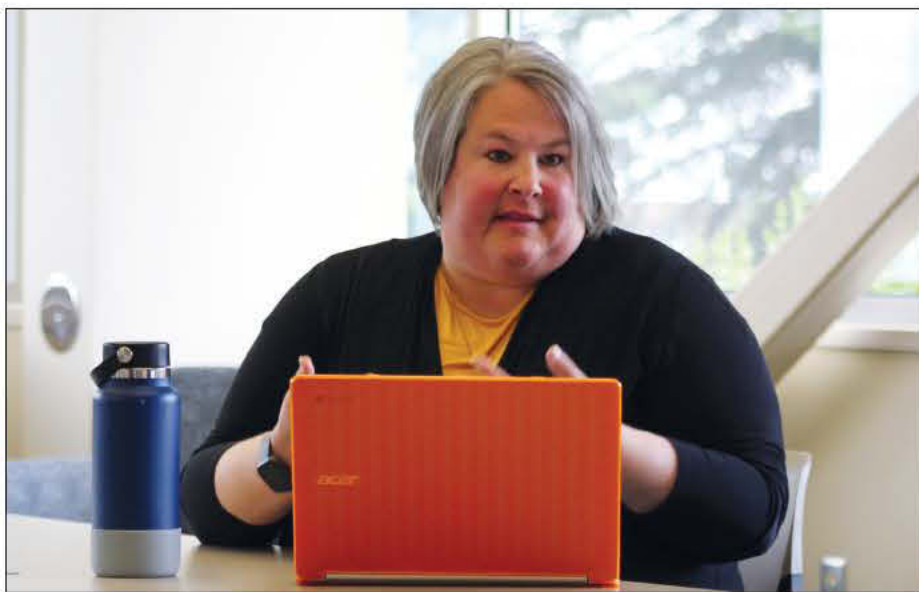
"Our students are coming to us with (many) complicated and complex needs," Hendrickson said. "It is hard to make sure we are giving each child what they need, as resources become more difficult to come by. Staffing is one of our biggest obstacles."

Nicholson said being asked to do more with less is a constant struggle.

"The needs of our students and their families are more complicated and complex..." he said. "The challenge is, how can we meet those needs with limited resources that have been impacted by revenue limits since 1993."

He said those needs can vary between districts.

"(Needs) can vary based on the size of the district and needs within each



Amy Schuh, director of student services for the West De Pere School District, has noticed a staff shortage for special education positions in recent years across the region. She said her district is lucky to get 10 applications for a position. When she first started there would be 40 or 50 applications.
Lea Kopke Photo

school community," Nicholson said. "I view our primary duty, (as directors), to be working within the requirements and systems to meet the needs of all students, but especially those that need us the most. This can vary greatly in any given year, which the last couple years has taught us. The mission and focus is still the same - meeting the needs of the whole child as best we can each day with the resources that we have."

Hendrickson said the weight of the job is something she constantly carries.

"We would not be good at our jobs if it didn't," she said. "Certain students stick with you longer than others. It's the ones who you feel the larger system has failed."

Nicholson echoed the statement.

"No matter how hard you try, this position is one that you cannot simply turn off at the end of the day," he said.

With 25 years under her belt in the Ashwaubenon School District - a former special education teacher and now director of pupil services - Tammy Nicholson said she recognizes change takes time.

Tammy Nicholson said she tries to focus on one day at a time, and celebrates daily successes.

"(It helps) me to focus on the small action steps that need to be taken each day to get to the overall goal of students leaving school prepared to tackle what lies next in life," she said. "I get to see the big picture, which allows me to see that those little action steps we support in the early years are the building blocks to establishing a strong foundation to build on throughout a student's life."

With most days tied to technicalities and a detailed set of requirements, Hendrickson said the smallest successes fuel her passion for the job.

"When I see a student graduate who struggled significantly, when I see a staff member or entire school change their thinking and make sure that every student gets what they need when they need it - that is what keeps me going," Hendrickson said. "I believe my job is to fight for the students and families who can't or don't know how to fight for themselves. That is very powerful, and something I

am very proud of."

Jerry Nicholson said students, teachers and parents keep him going.

"When you put your heart and soul into each and every student, each student's success, no matter how small, is a highlight," he said. "We feel the successes with them. But, each unmet student's need keeps me pushing and moving forward to accomplish more."

Tammy Nicholson agrees, and said there is nothing more rewarding than seeing students cross the graduation stage.

"I can't begin to describe what it feels like to reflect on the challenges that faced some of these students at the age of 3 and then to see them walk across that stage 15 years later," she said. "Knowing I helped build a team that rallied behind these students year after year makes all the stress and frustration of the job worth it."

Tammy Nicholson said it's a team-centered effort.

"I can't do this job alone," she said. "I am blessed to surround myself with so many passionate individuals. I truly believe that if we assume positive intent as we

approach every situation, we can tackle anything together."

When running their respective programs, an obstacle all agree is a daily struggle is staffing.

Staff shortages

Schuh said she's seen an increased teacher shortage in recent years.

"When I first started, you would have a position where you'd have 40 or 50 applicants," Schuh said. "And now maybe if you get 10 that is a pretty robust pool. So, I think, just in general in education, you are seeing that trend."

Garceau said Howard-Suamico struggles to staff its special education department, specifically special education teachers and speech and language pathologists.

"I don't know the reason why," Garceau said. "I love the career of education. I was a teacher first, a special education teacher."

When a district is unable to find or hire a qualified and licensed educator, it can apply to issue someone a Tier 1 license, also known as an emergency license, or a one-year license with stipulations.

"Sometimes I've had to use the emergency licenses criteria for staff, and sometimes I haven't," Garceau said. "But with that... you need to look for qualified and licensed individuals first. You know that is first and foremost. But, we are also looking for the right fit."

Jennifer Kammerud, director of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's educator preparation and licensing department, said districts can apply for Tier 1 licenses for people already licensed as teachers, but not in special education, or for people with a bachelor's degree who are in the process of receiving a special education license through an alternative program.

Kammerud said in recent years there's been an upward trend in the number of Tier 1 licenses issued each year.

"At the same time, we have more licenses we're issuing in this area, we also have more students in need of special education services," she said. "Those numbers have been going up, trending up slightly. And more students, who are in

need of services, means we need more staff to deliver those services who are appropriately licensed."

Green Bay Special Education Teacher Stacy Splittgerber said she has felt the shortage struggles trickle down into the classroom.

"We don't have a full-time social worker," she said. "That is really hard, because when you come in on a day when there is a significant problem with a student and their family and you need a resource, it may not be there for two days. And by then... you have one day that is really (bad) and then you have a couple days to think about it. The problem is still there, but you don't want help after that day. But you still know they really need (the help). So it is those moments when parents are asking for help with their basic needs and with things that are happening in their home, and I can't provide them with the resources, because we don't have them."

Splittgerber said substitute shortages are another obstacle.

"There have been times where if my (aide) is out, I am in my classroom by myself," she said. "That is hard when you have eight three-year-olds at all different levels. I am offered support, if another (aide) has like a half hour free, they will come into my room. But that inconsistency of a different person, every couple of hours, is not good for my students."

Steady degrees awarded

In contrast to the teacher shortage felt within schools, the University of Wisconsin System continues to award more and more special education degrees.

According to data from the UW System, state universities granted 451 special education degrees of various levels in 2019-20, the highest number of degrees since the 1983-84 school year.

The past five years have shown a positive trend, with 259 special education degrees issued in 2015-16, 273 in 2016-17, 312 in 2017-18 and 314 in 2018-19.

Those numbers coincide with the amount of special education licenses issued by the state.

A Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI)

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report found between 2011-12 and 2017-18, there was a 268% increase in the number of special education licenses awarded.

Jack Jablonski, associate vice president of the UW-System office of public affairs and communication, said the most recent state workforce figures show Wisconsin is projected to have 377 special education openings at all grades levels in 2021.

So if more educators are licensed, why are districts experiencing a shortage of qualified educators?

Jablonski said some graduates are mismatched by specific programs – for example, they specialized in early childhood education, but there’s a need for high school teachers, or they wish to live in a different region than where the greatest need is.

Additionally, he said some students are drawn to neighboring states post-graduation.

Henrickson said she believes Act 10, the Wisconsin Budget Repair Bill, is partially to blame for the shortage.

Signed into law March 2011 by former Gov. Scott Walker, Act 10 reduced collective bargaining options – the process employees used to negotiate contracts through their unions – for many public worker sectors.

“Since Act 10, other districts are offering to pay (a teacher) penalty for breaking their contract, or give them a \$1,000 signing bonus,” Henrickson said. “Or if it is a school psychologist, we have 20 of them and the other districts maybe have one or two, so they can afford to pay them at a higher rate.”

Since Act 10 was enacted, she said teachers have also not felt valued for their workloads.

“Public school teachers in particular, we are asking them to teach kids (who need more involvement) than ever before, but who are our future,” Henrickson said. “They should be considered heroes, in my mind.”

Attrition and turnover

Following Act 10, there was a sharp increase in the number of general and special education teachers leaving the workforce, which, has since returned to somewhat normal levels, according to a report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum.

The attrition and turnover rates for special education staff are worse than those for elementary education and other subject areas, according to data from DPI.

In the 2015-16 school year, there was a turnover rate of 11.95% and an attrition rate of 9.33% for cross-categorical special education.

Comparatively, elementary education’s turnover rate was at 6.75% and the attrition rate at 7.09%.

Julia Hartwig, DPI special education assistant director, said across the state there’s been a higher rate of special education educators leaving the profession than general educators.

Hartwig said retention is also an issue with other professions intertwined with special education – such as speech and language pathologists, physical therapists and interpreters.

“There are several positions that I would classify as hard to fill at this point,” Garceau said. “One of them being special education teachers. One of them being school psychologists. And I

would classify speech and language pathologists as a hard-to-fill position as well.”

Splittergerber said she attributes unrealistic expectations for some of the reasoning behind newer special education teachers leaving the profession after a few years.

“You have to walk in there with a blank slate,” she said. “I think that is any job. You walk in and you are like ‘Oh, this is going to be wonderful,’ and expect things and then get in there and are like ‘What do you mean I don’t have any money? What do you mean I don’t have any support? What do you mean, I might not get a lunch?’ And you have a month that might be pure hell, but it is always going to get better. And I think those that have stayed in the field for a long time have realized that.”

The University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, 4th Estate Media, made a searchable special education database that goes along with this series. It can be found in the online story at gopresstimes.com.

This story was produced by the NEW News Lab, a collaboration of newsrooms that focuses on issues important to Northeast Wisconsin.

**Next week:
Inside the
classroom**

Next week’s issue will feature the fifth installment in this six-part series on special education.

The story explains the role special education teachers play in the process and the challenges they face.



Libal Street in Allouez is due for a major overhaul in the next few years. Josh Staloch photo

Meeting held on Libal Street project

BY JOSH STALOCH
STAFF WRITER

ALLOUEZ – Residents got a chance to hear plans for a major reconstruction along a section of Libal Street at an informational meeting Sept. 22.

About 30 people were on hand at Village Hall to learn more about the project, which consists of a 1.6-mile section of Libal, from 172 up to Kalb Avenue.

The section from Highway 172 to Allouez Avenue is slated for a full reconstruction, with all existing roadway, curbs, gutters and sidewalks replaced, along with the storm sewer system.

The section north of Allouez Avenue up to Kalb Avenue will be a pavement replacement

project only, with the goal to reconstruct the pavement between the curb lines while keeping the existing curbs and sidewalks in place.

“There was a lot of good discussion,” Brian Andreas, project manager at Strand Associates, said. “There were people for and against what was proposed. We’re at a very early point in the project so we were really there to start to identify concerns.”

Andreas said environmental concerns were voiced at the meeting.

“From an engineering standpoint, it’s all relatively straightforward,” Andreas said. “If we’re going to have any impact on park lands or wetlands, we have to address those environmen-

tal concerns. Initially, our thought is that we’re not going to have to deal with that because we don’t think we’ll have to go through any wetlands. But that’s definitely a challenge we’ll be watching.”

Andreas said the intent is to re-stripe the road to add bike lanes, which will limit the street’s width and restrict parking to one side of the road.

There is also talk of adding sidewalk from Green Avenue up to Allouez Avenue on the west side where there is no sidewalk.

The design phase of the project is scheduled to wrap up in Summer 2023 with construction beginning in 2024 following a bid process.



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