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JFC trashes Evers's budget

Panel axes
545 spending,
policy proposals

By Richard Moore
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

Republicans on the state Legislature's Joint Finance Committee (JFC) made quick work last week of Gov. Tony Evers's proposed state budget, tossing into the political dumpster 545 spending and policy proposals the governor had offered.

Among the proposals sent to the landfill were the legalization of recreational marijuana, repairs for the Milwaukee Brewers' stadium, paid family and medical leave, Medicaid expansion, PFAS standards, several gun control provisions, school-based mental health programs, and a whole lot more.

If the Republicans were quick to throw hundreds of spending proposals into the dumpster, Democrats were even quicker in starting a dumpster fire in response.

State Sen. Jeff Smith (D-Brunswick) said the

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DNR shares results of additional PFAS testing in Stella, recommendations coming

By Heather Schaefer
OF THE RIVER NEWS

As of April 21, a total of 39 wells in the Town of Stella in eastern Oneida County have been found to have PFAS (per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances) levels

exceeding the proposed drinking water standard of 20 parts per trillion.

As of late January that number stood at 24, however additional testing has since led to the discovery of more contaminated wells,

according to the Department of Natural Resources.

In a phone interview Thursday, DNR Northern Region Remediation and Re-development program supervisor Chris Saari said a number of Stella residents

chose to avail themselves of the DNR's recent offer to test their wells.

In March, the agency sent letters offering cost-free well testing to 56 year-round

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RENEE DRASZKIEWICZ/RIVER NEWS

CAREERS ON WHEELS

On Thursday morning, May 4, approximately 70 elementary students from Nativity Catholic School and Zion Lutheran School participated in the "Careers on Wheels" event organized by Rhinelander Partners in Education. This unique and exciting career exploration program for fourth- and fifth-grade students allows them to learn about different careers that use vehicles, large and small. Cars, trucks, tractors, emergency vehicles and people representing a variety of careers set up their vehicles outside Nativity school, giving students an opportunity to examine, explore, and learn about a variety of careers "on wheels."

OVTC authorizes federal grant application

Funds would be used for space needs analysis, architectural and engineering work

By Brian Jopek
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

The Oneida Vilas Transit Commission (OVTC) has authorized the filing of an application for a federal grant associated with the commission's ongoing search for a new home for Northwoods Transit Connections (NTC). The public transportation entity is currently housed in a building near the intersection of State Highway 47 and River Street in Rhinelander but the panel has been looking for a new location for some time.

The vote to authorize the grant application took place on April 26, after OVTC committee member Richard Logan provided an update on the April 24 meeting of the commission's building committee.

"We talked about, as a committee, how to proceed with acquiring a building," he said, adding that Steve Hirshfeld, transit planning program manager for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT) attended the building committee meeting.

"We learned some things," Logan said. "We learned there is a grant that we would be eligible for ... it's a federal transit planning grant (TPG). That grant would provide money for a space needs analysis, architectural and engineering services."

He said Hirshfeld indicated there was a "one hundred point zero" chance the commission would be awarded the grant.

"What it came down to was a recommendation for this commission to apply for the grant," Logan said.

Also needed is committee approval from the Oneida and Vilas county aging and disability resource centers

as the 20 percent match needed would come from them.

Regarding a timeline for the grant, Logan said Hirshfeld indicated things would proceed fairly quickly as it's what's referred to as a "rolling grant" and the commission could be notified as soon as June, which is when the application is due.

"They (the DOT) will look at it and they will basically give us a thumbs up, 'You're good to go,'" Logan said. "At that point, we can proceed with our part but the actual approval may take a bit longer but they can basically tell us early on. They have a grant specialist there at the DOT."

Commission chairman Marv Anderson asked if there would be a need as part of the grant application process for the commission to have a building or "piece of property to buy before these services would be engaged?"

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Stella

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residents of the rural township who live within 2.5 miles of the intersection of County Highway C and Stella Lake Road.

Two summer camps located within 2.5 miles of the Highway C and Stella Lake Road intersection also received letters, according to the DNR.

An initial sampling, conducted in late 2022 as part of a statewide project, involved wells and households located within approximately 1 mile of the Stella Town Hall.

In total, Saari noted that approximately 90 wells have been tested in Stella since last July, 88 by the DNR. Some residents chose to privately test their wells and a small number of wells were tested both by the DNR and through a private entity, he added, noting that some of the new results are from wells located within the original one-mile radius as some of the households located within that boundary did not initially take part in testing.

“Ultimately, we’re trying to figure out some kind of long-term solution here,” Saari said, noting that the results of the testing done in the summer made it clear that “a mile out was not far enough” in terms of a testing radius.

“We’re trying to find the edges of it and in a reasonable fashion figure out how wide-spread it is,” Saari

explained.

Those whose wells showed PFAS levels above 20 parts per trillion — the current proposed drinking water standard — are eligible to receive water delivery via an agreement involving the DNR and Culligan.

Saari also said the DNR arranged for additional pallets of water to be delivered to the town in mid-April after the most recent batch of test results were received.

Some of the results from Stella represent some of the highest PFAS readings found in the state to date, according to the DNR. One woman who spoke during a January public meeting with DNR officials on the contamination issue said her next door neighbor’s well showed PFAS contamination at more than 40,000 ppt (parts per trillion) and Saari indicated a sample from the expanded (2.5-mile radius) testing area showed detections of 30,000 PFOA and 1,600 PFOS (nanograms per liter/parts per trillion).

As with the testing done in the summer, the results continue to be something of a mixed bag. According to Saari, 24 wells had PFAS levels that fell below the drinking water standard and 28 wells showed no detectable PFAS.

PFAS are a group of human-made chemicals used for decades in numerous products, including non-stick cookware, fast food wrappers, stain-resistant sprays and certain types of firefighting

foam. These contaminants have made their way into the environment through accidental spills of PFAS-containing materials, discharges of PFAS-containing wastewater to treatment plants and certain types of firefighting foams, according to the DNR. These chemicals are known to accumulate in the human body, posing several risks to human health including certain cancers, liver damage and decreased fertility.

DNR officials have stressed that it may take years, if ever, to definitively determine what caused the contamination in Stella. “(PFAS) marches to the beat of its own drummer in the environment,” DNR remediation and redevelopment program manager Christine Sieger stated during a late January media briefing on the Stella PFAS investigation. “It doesn’t behave like other things in the environment and so investigation into PFAS... like any other contaminant, can take years. In some cases we’re not going to find a responsible party. We’re going to look and we might find that we can’t tell where it’s coming from. We could find that there are multiple sources responsible. It’s an iterative process and it’s one that takes time.”

One potential source of the contamination mentioned by Stella residents during the January public meeting was the use of sludge on agricultural fields in the town.

On Feb. 7, in response to an inquiry from the River News, the DNR confirmed the City of Rhinelander and the Ahlstrom-Munksjo paper mill spread sludge in Stella from the late 1990s to 2011, in the case of the city, and 2021 in the case of the mill.

“We can confirm that both sewage sludge (also known as biosolids) from the Rhinelander Wastewater Treatment Facility and Paper Mill Sludge from the Ahlstrom-Munksjo Specialty Solutions Facility (also known as Expera Specialty Solutions) was spread in the Town of Stella,” DNR field operations manager Tim Ryan said in response to a request from the newspaper for information on the agency’s documentation of the use of sludge in Stella. “The City of Rhinelander has spread biosolids on 8 different sites in the Town of Stella between 1997 and 2011. Ahlstrom Munksjo (or previous owners) have spread paper mill sludge on 63 different sites in the Town of Stella between 1996 and 2021.”

In disclosing the information on the past use of sludge in Stella, the agency was careful to note it cannot definitively say the spreading of sludge caused the contamination.

“The Department does not have PFAS data for the paper mill sludge or sewage sludge/biosolids that was land applied,” Ryan said. “The Department is in the process of identifying

potential sources.”

In response to the report, Addie Teeters, head of marketing communications & public affairs for Ahlstrom Munksjo, stressed that the company received permits from the DNR for its “landspreading activities.”

“Since Ahlstrom acquired the Rhinelander mill in 2018, it has continued participating in a regulated biosolids landspreading program administered by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources,” Teeters wrote in response to an email request for comment on the DNR report. “As part of that program, we have received and operate pursuant to permits issued by the Department. We maintain records which are provided to the Department relating to our ongoing landspreading activities.”

“Ahlstrom has led the marketplace in developing PFAS-free technology for more than a decade and utilizes our FluoroFree® technology at the Rhinelander mill,” she added.

“At this time the City cannot validate what spreading the DNR may have authorized in the 1990s and early 2000s,” city attorney Steve Sorenson wrote in response to a request for comment from the city regarding its past history of spreading sludge in Stella.

“Since I have been with the City there has been no spreading of biosolids in the Town of Stella by the City,” Sorenson added.

“Even though I was not involved nor were any of the current staff

of the City involved it is the desire of the City of Rhinelander to maintain the quality of our water supply. This is where the city is directing its efforts. The City is looking at new filtration systems and a potential new well or wells to insure safe water to the citizens of Rhinelander. The City is looking to the future rather than spending time in the ‘blame game’ environment that so many others are supporting. Our most recent tests of the City water supply demonstrates that the City’s commitment to safe water is working.”

Indeed, the City Council voted earlier this year to retain the services of MSA Professional Services for investigation and development of a location for a proposed Well No. 9. A new well has been deemed necessary as two city wells located near the Rhinelander-Oneida County Airport — No. 7 and No. 8 — have been offline since 2019 due to unsafe levels of PFAS.

The city currently has three functioning wells.

Saari said the department is evaluating the new data from the most recent testing and determining next steps. The goal is to provide “recommendations for long-term solutions” in the near future, he added.

“We know that people are concerned about this, and rightfully so, and we want to share as much information as we can,” he said.

Digest

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compensation claims for injuries connected to the Covid-19 vaccines.

As of April 1, 2023, the CICP has provided \$4,634.89 in compensation to individuals who filed Covid-19 vaccine injury claims. More than 8,130 claims have been filed relating to Covid-19 vaccine injuries or death.

“It is surprising to see such a low number of Covid-19 vaccine CICP claims because according to the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, as of March 31, 2023, there have been 1,541,275 adverse events and 35,048 deaths associated with the Covid-19 vaccines,” Johnson wrote.

The senator asked, “Does HRSA expect an increase in Covid-19 vaccine CICP claims?”

Although the government appears to be providing very limited compensation to individuals who have filed Covid-19 vaccine injury

claims, Johnson said, the process by which HHS evaluates these claims or even advertises the existence of this compensation program remains opaque.

“HHS owes the American people a complete explanation of its administration of the compensation program for individuals who have suffered Covid-19 vaccine injuries,” Johnson added.

Steffen introduces Kids Online Safety Act

State Rep. David Steffen (R-Howard) has formally introduced legislation that he says will establish important protections for Wisconsin kids who have social media accounts.

Steffen says the Kids Online Safety Act comes in response to the overwhelming volume of evidence connecting unrestricted social media use by kids to a wide range of mental and physical harms.

Increased depression and anxiety, poor body image, cyberbullying, and online grooming

are all well-documented risks kids face while navigating the current online environment, he says.

“This legislation is truly about empowering parents by providing them with a number of evidence-based tools to help their child safely navigate through social media,” Steffen said. “Our kids are no match for the addictive, relentless social media environment they face today, and parents have very few options at their disposal.”

Steffen’s proposal, which is modeled after a recently signed bipartisan Utah law, would establish a number of optional restrictions on social media accounts held by minors — it would be up to the parents to decide what works best for the child.

Specifically, the legislation would allow parental oversight and access to their child’s account; require age verification to ensure optional restrictions are only placed on accounts held by kids;

protect children during the overnight hours by establishing a nighttime curfew on their accounts; restrict the type of advertising and direct messaging targeted at minor accounts; and impose penalties on social media companies for noncompliance.

“The amount of unrestricted, extended online access our kids have is only continuing to grow,” Steffen said.

A study from Common Sense Media showed that kids ages 13 to 18 spend about nine hours a day looking at a screen—and Steffen called for people to start getting more engaged on the issue.

“Just as our kids count on us to protect them here in the real world, we have to be taking a hard look at how to do a better job of this in the virtual world,” he said.

The bill will be circulating to gain co-sponsorship support over the next several weeks.

WMC Litigation Center expands to protect

public from government overreach

The WMC Litigation Center — an affiliate of Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce (WMC), the combined state chamber of commerce and manufacturers’ association — recently announced its expansion as Nathan Kane joined the organization as deputy director.

Kane is a 2022 graduate of the University of Wisconsin Law School, where he earned his Juris Doctor. During his undergraduate years, he interned at the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce, where he gained experience in business operations and advocacy.

“We are delighted to have Nathan Kane bolster our efforts in protecting against government overreach,” said WMC Litigation Center

executive director Scott Rosenow. “His background and expertise are a perfect fit for our team as we defend the rights of Wisconsin businesses and

the public against excessive and unlawful regulation.”

Before joining the WMC Litigation Center, Kane served as a law clerk for justice Rebecca Grassl Bradley of the Wisconsin Supreme Court. His work there gave him insight into the workings of the court system and valuable experience in legal research and writing, Rosenow said.

“I am honored to join the talented team at the WMC Litigation Center,” said Kane. “I look forward to using my skills and experience to protect Wisconsin’s business community and free enterprise system.”

The WMC Litigation Center works to defend the business community and the public from government entities that act beyond their authority, in support of WMC’s mission to make Wisconsin the most competitive state in the nation to do business.

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