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Fall Festival Fun
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BRIAN WILSON/THE STAR NEWS

The sun was shining and the asphalt was hot Monday afternoon as members of the city of Medford public works department took advantage of the American Asphalt plant being in Prentice to make repairs to a number of roads in the city. Here, crew members repair a cut made to access broken utility lines earlier this summer.

Easing the way

City cuts bartender license application form from 7 to 2 pages

BY BRIAN WILSON
 NEWS EDITOR

The city of Medford is making getting a bartender's license a little easier. At Monday's committee of the whole meeting, council members recommended adopting a new operator license form which takes the application from seven pages into a two-page document.

According to city clerk Ashley Lemke, the existing seven-page form has been a struggle with a number of boxes for the person filling it out to provide information. She said a lot of time the people filling out the applications would miss certain boxes requiring additional staff time to review them. She said they took the existing form and streamlined it so the information that is actually needed to fill out is on the two pages with a third page for internal use noting if it was approved, denied and the reasons.

The other information was condensed into an operator's license policy which is provided for the applicants to be able to read and review and will have to sign off on doing that.

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County ambulance costs climbing

Switch from paid-on-call to full time cited as cause

BY BRIAN WILSON
 NEWS EDITOR

Taylor County taxpayers will soon get a wake up call as to the value of vol-

unteers. Over the past year the county shifted from a primarily paid on call model for delivering ambulance services to having full time professional daytime crews in each of the three ambulance garage locations supplemented with on-call night crews. The service is authorized to have up to 16.2 full time equivalent positions

with 12 of them full time and the remainder the paid-on-call volunteers.

While the switch to full time crews has guaranteed reliable emergency medical service coverage throughout the county and kept average response times to under 14 minutes, it comes with an additional cost of about \$300,000 in

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Mayor Mike Wellner

Page 9: School honors milestone staff

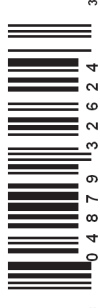


SPORTS: Gilman volleyball action



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DHS: Make a plan to get boosted against COVID-19 this Fall

People 12 and older are now eligible for updated COVID-19 boosters that target the original virus and newest Omicron subvariants.

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) is urging Wisconsinites to make a plan to get boosted against COVID-19. People 12 and older are now eligible to receive updated COVID-19 boosters (also known as bivalent boosters). Doses of the updated COVID-19 boosters have started arriving in Wisconsin and will continue to be delivered to providers over the next several weeks. Pharmacies, health centers, and clinics are expected to make appointments available as their booster doses arrive.

"As we head into the fall and winter respiratory virus season, we encourage all Wisconsinites to make a plan to boost their protection against COVID-19," said DHS Secretary-designee Karen Timberlake. "Everyone 12 and older is eligible for the added protection of the updated boosters. This is especially important for people 50 and older and those who are immunocompromised."

The updated boosters have been authorized by the FDA and recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and are the first Omicron-specific vaccines to be made available in the United States. They target the original strain of COVID-19, as well as the BA.4 and BA.5 Omicron subvariants. The highly contagious BA.5 Omicron subvariant is the dominant strain of COVID-19, making up about 90% of cases nationally.

The updated boosters are recommended as a single (1) dose for people 12 and older who have received their primary COVID-19 vaccine series and have not received a COVID-19 vaccine dose in the last two months. People 12 and older are eligible to receive the updated Pfizer COVID-19 booster, and those 18 and older are eligible to receive the updated Moderna COVID-19 booster. In these age groups, these boosters replace the original boosters. The Pfizer and Moderna updated boosters can be administered after any primary series, including Pfizer, Moderna, J&J, or Novavax.

Children ages 5-11 continue to be eligible for the original COVID-19 booster, which provides protection against the original strain of COVID-19. It is anticipated that this age group will be eligible for updated boosters in the coming months.

Everyone 6 months and older is recommended to get vaccinated to protect against COVID-19. If you have not yet received your primary series of COVID-19 vaccines, it is never too late to get vaccinated.

"Getting vaccinated and staying up to date on COVID-19 boosters remains the best way to protect against severe illness from COVID-19," said Stephanie Schauer, Ph.D., DHS Division of Public Health Immunization Program Manager. "COVID-19 vaccines continue to show that they are effective at reducing severe symptoms that can result in hospitalization and death. The updated boosters can help restore protection that has waned since previous vaccination or infection, and provide broader protection against newer variants."

People can safely get their COVID-19 vaccines and other vaccines at the same time, including the annual flu vaccine.

COVID-19 vaccines remain available to all Wisconsinites at no cost regardless of immigration or health insurance status. Anyone can schedule an appointment for the vaccine using a variety of options, including with their health care provider, at community-based vaccination clinics, local and tribal health departments, or pharmacies. Vaccination sites across Wisconsin may choose to provide vaccines to specific age groups. People are encouraged to check with their local health clinics or visit vaccines.gov to find vaccination sites for specific age groups.

For free, confidential support finding health care and community resources near you, dial 211. For information, resources, and data related to Wisconsin's COVID-19 vaccination program, www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/vaccine.htm.

★ County taxpayers see increase in ambulance costs due to personnel

Continued from page 1

the amount taxpayers pay to subsidize the department compared to last year. Overall the county's subsidy of the ambulance service is projected to increase to \$692,000. The actual amount of the subsidy will not be determined until the end of the hospital's fiscal year.

"That is a lot," said committee member Lori Floyd during the September 9 law enforcement and emergency services meeting.

Finance director Larry Brandl noted while the county's subsidy was about \$300,000 last year in the past it has been as high as \$498,000.

While Taylor County owns the ambulance service, it contracts with Aspirus to operate it. Under terms of the agreement with Aspirus, the county is responsible for up to 45% of the operational cost of the ambulance service as well as the purchase of the ambulances and durable equipment.

According to EMS manager John Deal, the amount of the projected subsidy is after revenue from billing to patients is accounted for. He said the standard projected cost for ambulance services is about \$500,000 per year per base of operations. Taylor County has ambulances stationed in Gilman, Medford and Rib Lake.

One of the challenges facing the county is the large percentage of patients whose transports are billed to Medicare

(63%) and Medicaid (15%). Together they account for nearly 80% of all calls. Deal also noted that the vast majority of ambulance calls come during the day when their full-time staff is on duty.

Medicare has a set amount it will pay out for an ambulance call, Deal explained that other entities such as insurance companies follow a similar process. Historically the subsidy amount has been the difference between what Medicare will pay for the patient services provided, compared to what the actual cost to Aspirus was of providing the service.

Deal said the real driver for this year's projected subsidy increase was in wages and personnel expenses.

Floyd questioned the need to switch from paid-on-call to full time positions. Deal explained that when he took over last fall there were large shortages in the number of volunteer responders. Floyd questioned if Aspirus was still requiring EMS personnel to get COVID vaccines, suggesting that peoples' unwillingness to get the vaccine was why there were staffing issues.

Deal said that the vaccine requirement was cited by only four people as reason for them leaving. Floyd disputed that, noting she has heard differently and suggesting that if the rule was eliminated others would be willing to come back.

"It is a mandate, not a law," Floyd said.

Aspirus representatives explained that the rule is not set by them, but is a mandate set by the Center for Medicare Services as a requirement for any health providers getting reimbursements from the federal program. Deal said that while the vaccine mandate is in place, staff members are able to get religious

and medical exemptions and a number of staff including those currently on the ambulance crew have done so. Committee chairman Lester Lewis also noted that the numbers showing the overall number of on-call personnel included a number of people who no longer took shifts.

"My only squabble is the total expense," said committee member Ray Soper.

Brandl explained that the subsidy will have an impact on the county tax rate, but clarified that this is outside of the overall tax levy limit so will not impact the other portions of the county budget.

After a lengthy discussion, committee members approved the subsidy projection and passed along to the county's finance and personnel committee to be included in the county budget.

Emergency management

A request to increase the emergency management budget to allow coordinator Daniel Gellert to go from 35 to 40 hours per week divided committee members.

According to Gellert, the additional hours would translate into being \$9,689 in additional wage and benefit costs for the department. He noted he was already working on average more than 40 hours per week to get the work completed.

"Being a one-man office there is plenty of work for my position," Gellert said.

However Soper noted he felt this should be a personnel issue versus a budget issue. He said he would like to see Gellert make his case to the county's finance and personnel committee. That committee will ultimately be the one to make the decisions on it.

Lewis said the option for the committee is to approve the department budget with 35 hours or with 40 hours. Gellert



Daniel Gellert

had presented proposed budgets with both options.

With committee member Chuck Zenner absent for that portion of the meeting, motions to send it with 35 hours failed on a tie vote and a motion to send it 40 hours also failed on a tie vote.

Finally a compromise measure was reached to send it with 35 hours while also ensuring it was on the finance and personnel committee agenda for action prior to the budget review. That motion passed 3-1 with Floyd opposed.

In other business, committee members received an update from sheriff Larry Woebbeking about feedback from recent jail inspections and the steps being taken to remedy areas of concern.

With the county about four jailers down in staffing, Woebbeking said there is concern that the sergeants are working shifts and not able to provide the needed oversight of personnel. He said they are looking at adding a corporal position to the jail staff to provide additional oversight on shifts without a sergeant or someone from department administration on duty.

"They would fill in the gap," Woebbeking said. He said it would give someone a little bit of supervisory authority.

He also updated committee members on new devices they are looking at which are about the size of a smartphone and will be used to have reminders and log things such as when medications are delivered to inmates or to make sure those on suicide watch are being checked. He said there would be something by the cells that the devices would have to scan. He said they are working to have this data flow into the sheriff's department existing data records system.

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