

Hi-LITER

~ including McHenry County News

JAN. 31-FEB. 6, 2024 VOLUME 12 • NUMBER 39

DISPLAY ADS | CLASSIFIEDS | DELIVERY: (815) 877-4044

Email: news@hi-liter.com • Published By Southern Lakes Newspapers & Rock Valley Publishing

As of Feb. 9, 2022 Hi-Liter is the successor publication to McHenry County News

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New exhibition at Dunn explores restoration of local forest preserves

“Managing Healthy Landscapes” opens Saturday, Feb. 10 at the Dunn Museum, 1899 W. Winchester Road, Libertyville. The special exhibition runs through April 7 at the nationally accredited museum, a distinction held by only 3% of American museums.

Since 1958, the Lake County Forest Preserves has served as the principal guardian of open spaces and natural areas in Lake County, dedicated to the preservation and restoration of local landscapes. “This exhibition vividly showcases our many extensive projects and initiatives that have significantly enhanced the forest preserves in the county,” said Director of Education Alyssa Firkus.

“We restore your lands to make them more beautiful and welcoming to visitors,” said Angelo Kyle, president of the Lake County Forest Preserves, “but our work is about so much more. Whether you step foot in them or not, we are committed to ensuring your forest preserves function at their highest ecological level to support the quality of life we all enjoy in Lake County.”

Projects and initiatives in the special exhibition include:

- The transformation of an impaired, human-made lake to a healthy, meandering stream at Ethel’s Woods Forest Preserves in Antioch.
- Buckthorn, the bully of the forest, and effective methods for eliminating this invasive species.
- Prescribed burns are an efficient and cost-effective land management tool to restore and maintain natural lands.
- The native seed nursery at Rollins Savanna Forest Preserve in Grayslake yields between \$180,000 and \$230,000 worth of seed each year with the help of thousands of volunteer hours annually.
- Restoration of nearly 300 acres of former agricultural land to high quality wetland, prairie, and savanna habitat at Pine Dunes Forest Preserve in Antioch.

The Dunn Museum embraces environmental stewardship. “We strive to incorporate green practices in all operations, including exhibit design and installation,” Firkus said. “This is part of an agency-wide commitment to incorporating sustainable practices, from electric vehicles to net-zero energy facilities.”



LAKE COUNTY FOREST PRESERVES PHOTO Hi-Liter/MCN

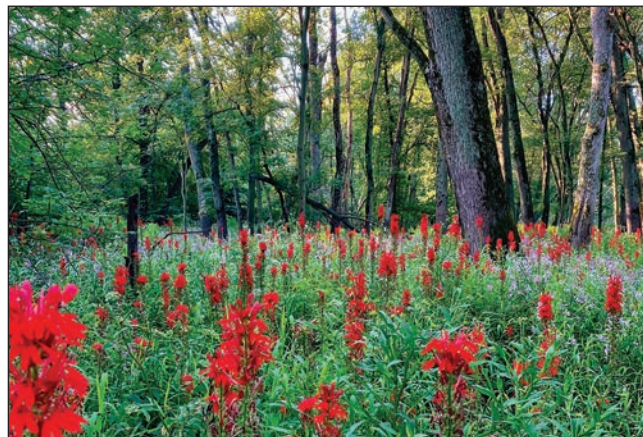
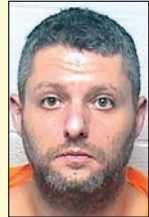


PHOTO COURTESY OF JASON CRISTINO Hi-Liter/MCN

Above: Prescribed burns play a crucial role in land management and conservation efforts. **Left:** Restoration projects are a focus in the “Managing Healthy Landscapes” exhibit at Dunn Museum in Libertyville that opens on February 10.

Jury convicts Ibrahim of murdering Fox Lake man with assault weapon

Late evening on Jan. 22, a jury convicted Azim Ibrahim of First-Degree Murder in connection to the 2022 shooting of a Fox Lake man.



Azim Ibrahim

The jury trial began on January 16, lasting five days. The jury heard from more than a dozen witnesses, including law enforcement officers, medical personnel, and expert witnesses.

Ibrahim, 38, was first charged in December 2022, after Fox Lake Police Department officers responded to a report of shots fired at an apartment building on Mineola Ave. When officers arrived, they found Roy Hoffman, 77, with a large gunshot wound to the head. Mr. Hoffman was pronounced deceased at the scene.

Law enforcement officers eventually learned through phone records, eyewitnesses, and surveillance video that Mr. Hoffman had arranged to have a “romantic relationship” with a woman on the night of the murder. This investigation led to the arrest of Ibrahim on

See MURDER, Page 3



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SUBMITTED PHOTO Hi-Liter/MCN

Puppets, magic and adventure await

Get whisked away to a world of wonder and imagination with PM&L Theatre's production of 'The Wizard of Oz'. This unique production infuses the timeless story with captivating puppetry, bringing a new dimension to Dorothy's adventure. The show runs from February 8-28, featuring the traditional evening performances and Sunday matinees. Tickets can be purchased on-line at pmltheatre.com or by calling the ticket office at 847-395-3055.

Volo Bog in need of bird volunteer instructors

Bring the joy of learning through birds this spring. Volo Bog State Natural Area is partnering with Openlands to bring a program to children in school classrooms in Lake and McHenry County.

No experience or bird knowledge is required – just a love of birds and a desire to share with youngsters. More volunteers are needed to expand the program to more schools.

Birds in My Neighborhood® is a volunteer driven science-based program for grades 2 through 5 that helps students see nature in their community through the observation of birds. Volunteers help run the program

by working with teachers to schedule two classroom visits and a field trip to a local natural area. New volunteers must attend trainings to participate in the program.

Become a volunteer instructor

Commitment is 15-20 hours per season. And responsibilities include: Attend two training sessions, work with teacher to set the schedule for visits and field trip, and lead three visits with students: in-classroom lesson, bird walk in the schoolyard, and a field trip to a local nature area.

Provide field trip support

Commitment is 5-10 hours per season. Responsibilities include:

Attend the field trip tutorial, and attend at least one field trip to support volunteer instructors by chaperoning students and helping them find and identify birds.

Spring 2024 training schedule for Lake & McHenry County volunteers

- Wednesday, March 6, 9:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. classroom and schoolyard tutorials at Volo Bog SNA
- Wednesday, March 20, 9:00 to 11:30 a.m., field trip tutorial at Rollins Savanna

For more information and to volunteer, contact Stacy Iwanicki at dnr.volobog@illinois.gov or 815-344-1294.

Additional Senior Real Estate Tax Deferral program presentations scheduled

McHenry County Treasurer Donna Kurtz has scheduled more countywide presentations to explain and promote the Senior Real Estate Tax Deferral Program, which offers tax relief for qualified senior citizens.

Upcoming presentations will be held at the following locations and dates:

- Huntley Area Public Library, 11000 Ruth Road – 1 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 30
- Marengo-Union Library, 19714 E. Grant Hwy. – 1:30 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 31
- Algonquin Township, 3702 Route 14, Crystal Lake – 10:30 a.m. Friday, Feb. 2
- Harvard Diggins Library, 900 E. McKinley St. – 3 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 7
- McHenry Township Senior Center, 3519 N. Richmond St., Johnsburg – 12 p.m. Monday, Feb. 12
- Crystal Lake Public Library, 126 W. Paddock St. – 2 p.m. Friday, Feb. 16

The tax deferral program provides tax relief for qualified senior citizens by essentially providing a loan up to \$7,500 to pay a senior's property tax bill. These funds are granted through the State of Illinois. Upon qualification, a lien for the deferred amount will be filed on the qualifying property. Deferred amounts are repaid upon the sale or transfer of the property, or within one year of the property owner's death.

To be eligible for this program, an applicant must be

at least 65 years old by June 1, and have a total household income less than \$65,000. Other program requirements include:

- Living on the property or other qualifying property for the last two years,
- Having equity in the property,
- Having no unpaid property taxes or foreclosures, and
- Having fire and casualty insurance for the property.

Kurtz and staff will be able to help attendees fill out the two forms required to apply for the deferral: Form IL-1017, Application for Deferral of Real Estate/Special Assessment Taxes, and Form IL-1018, Real Estate/Special Assessment Tax Deferral and Recovery Agreement. While Kurtz will have some copies on hand, she encourages people to print them out themselves – they can be found by visiting the Treasurer's website at treasurer.mchenrycountyil.gov, clicking "Senior Deferral," and then clicking on the application link. A notary public will be on hand at the Jan. 24 presentation to notarize completed forms, free of charge.

All applications for the senior tax deferral must be received by March 1; there will be no extensions. For questions, please visit the Treasurer's website or contact them at 815-334-4260 or treasurer@mchenrycountyil.gov.

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Pritzker touts climate investments despite renewables lagging state goals

State's top utility regulator up for Senate confirmation vote

By Andrew Adams
CAPITOL NEWS ILLINOIS

Boston-based Nexamp, a major player in the solar energy industry, is joining the growing list of renewable technology companies that have expanded or relocated to Illinois in recent months.

On Jan. 22, Nexamp announced its intention to spend \$2 billion in Illinois, including building a second headquarters in downtown Chicago.

While Gov. JB Pritzker said the company isn't receiving any direct state funding or new tax credits, its leadership was clear that state policy was a driving force in the decision.

Nexamp CEO Zaid Ashai on Jan. 22 said the company set up shop in the state in response to the 2016 Future Energy Jobs Act and expanded following the passage of the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act in 2021.

"Illinois is our fastest growing market," Ashai said in a statement. "But the state is far more than just an attractive market for solar generation—for Nexamp, it's a state which shares our vision of a more equitable energy future powered by a diverse, equitable, and skilled workforce."

Pritzker in recent months

has made several announcements regarding renewable energy investments in Illinois. These include Gotion's battery plant in Manteno, MicroLink Devices' solar cell factory in Niles, Prysmian Group's cable plant in Du Quoin, Manner Polymers' new facility in Mount Vernon, and Wieland's copper plants around the state.

"We are one of the nation's fastest growing solar and green technology markets," Pritzker said.

All of these projects were announced in the past eight months and all came with incentive packages through the state's Reimagining Energy and Vehicles Act, which passed in 2021 and has since been expanded. Altogether, those deals are worth just over \$360 million in tax credits paid out over decades, in addition to millions of dollars' worth of other state and local tax breaks.

Lion Electric, which did not receive a REV credit, also opened a large facility that will manufacture electric buses and other commercial vehicles this year in Joliet.

Problems with generation

The state's economic agenda is closely tied with a

broader climate policy goal: decarbonization. This goal is formalized in state law, which sets a target for transitioning the state away from reliance on fossil fuel-powered electricity generation.

State law currently says that by the 2025 delivery year, one-quarter of electricity purchased by the state should come from renewable sources. Goals laid out in CEJA are even more ambitious, upping that to 40 percent by 2030 and requiring the state's energy production to be carbon-free by 2045.

But the Illinois Power Agency, which handles energy procurement for the state's utilities, reports that the state is lagging behind its goals. The agency's current-year goal is for 22 percent of its energy procurement to come from its renewable portfolio standard. That's a collection of state programs through which the IPA purchases renewable energy. But IPA Acting Director Brian Granahan said that portfolio accounts for about 11 percent as of December.

Supply chain delays, construction timelines and ongoing interconnection delays create a "significant challenge" to meeting these goals, according

to the agency's current long-term plan, published in October.

In its fiscal year 2022 annual report, the agency reported that 18.6 percent of the state's energy generation capacity came from renewables sources. That figure is calculated using a broader definition of renewable projects which was outlined in CEJA.

The federal Energy Information Administration, which uses a slightly different method to calculate its figures, reports that 15.4 percent of Illinois' electricity generation came from renewables in October. That lags the state's statutory goal for this year of 22 percent and behind the nation's average renewable electricity generation of 22.3 percent.

The IPA is currently seeking approval for an updated long-term renewable energy plan from the Illinois Commerce Commission.

Utility crackdown

Pritzker made a key appointment last week to the ICC, which is the lead agency involved in carrying out many of the administration's climate goals. The ICC regulates gas and electric utilities, among other things, and over the past 12 months has issued several decisions lessening the rate hikes requested by the utilities while exercising greater oversight.

One of the key figures in

those decisions was ICC Chair Doug Scott, who advised the administration while it drafted CEJA and is now up for confirmation in the state Senate to oversee more of its implementation. Last summer, Pritzker appointed him to serve the last six months of outgoing chair Carrie Zalewski's five-year term.

On Jan. 19, Pritzker formally appointed Scott to a full term as ICC chair.

"We had, obviously, a lot of really big things happening, with all the rate cases at once and all the grid plans and rate plans coming at the same time," Scott told Capitol News Illinois on Tuesday.

Scott said the busy schedule for the ICC will continue, as the agency still has work to do with Commonwealth Edison and Ameren Illinois after rejecting the utilities' multi-year plans late last year.

This year, the commission will host a series of "future of gas" hearings aimed at spelling out the long-term plan for natural gas infrastructure as the state transitions away from the energy source.

"If the decarbonization goals of CEJA are to be met, the gas distribution system as currently operated will need to change," wrote the ICC's commissioners in their controversial December decision in a rate case brought by the Chicago utility Peoples Gas.

Scott noted the commission is also working on implementing

low-income rates for electric utility customers and continuing the renewable energy planning process with the Illinois Power Agency.

"A lot of it has to do with CEJA, but it's not like it's separated into different columns," Scott said. "It's all tied together."

Consumer advocates have noted that Scott and the other four commissioners—all appointed by Pritzker—are noticeably more consumer friendly and focused on protecting the climate than previous boards.

Unions, meanwhile, took issue with the commission's decision in the Peoples Gas case. Representatives of the statewide labor organization AFL-CIO and several local unions wrote letters to the board criticizing its decision to "pause" \$265 million in utility infrastructure spending.

Pritzker last week defended his appointments, saying their recent decisions have been "great for clean energy" and "good for consumers."

"I'm very pleased with the work they've been doing, and I look forward to them being confirmed by the state senate," Pritzker said.

Commissioners Stacey Paradis and Conrad Reddick await Senate confirmation sometime this spring. Scott's confirmation must come within 60 session days of his appointment, meaning his approval could be delayed past May.

• Murder

(Continued from front page)

on December 13, 2022.

After the verdict, Lake County State's Attorney Eric Rinehart stated, "First, let me commend the Fox Lake Police and the Lake County Major Crimes Task Force on their outstanding investigation of this horrible crime. The agencies worked together to solve this case quickly. Our trial team did an incredible job of keeping the jury focused on the critical facts — that Mr. Ibrahim controlled the situation with his firearm and that he chose to kill Mr. Hoffman in cold blood."

At the trial, officers testified that further investigation showed Ibrahim drove the woman to Mr. Hoffman's residence and waited for her outside. Eyewitnesses testified that at some point, Ibrahim retrieved the high-powered pistol from his vehicle and entered Hoffman's building.

The woman testified that when Ibrahim got up to Mr. Hoffman's apartment, Ibrahim knocked on the door and confronted Hoffman. After meeting resistance from Hoffman, Ibrahim forced his way into the apartment, ordered Hoffman to the ground, and shot him. After shooting Mr. Hoffman, Ibrahim walked out the residence and the woman followed him out.

An expert from the Northeastern Illinois Regional Crime Laboratory testified that the weapon used to kill Mr. Hoffman was an AK-47 style semi-automatic pistol.

Ibrahim gave inconsistent statements during his interrogation and eventually claimed to police that he was acting to defend himself and the woman after she claimed she had been sexually assaulted.

But at the trial, the woman denied telling Ibrahim she had been sexually assaulted. The woman also described how Hoffman was

unarmed and did not threaten Ibrahim or reach for any weapons.

Ibrahim decided to take the stand in his own defense and again claimed self-defense even though no weapons were found in Hoffman's apartment and Ibrahim entered the residence pointing his firearm at Hoffman.

The State was represented by Chief Deputy of the Criminal Division Jeffery Facklam and ASA Kyle Doyle from the Human Trafficking Task Force of the Lake County State's Attorney's Office. Lake County State's Attorney Human Trafficking Investigator Devin Roush and Special Investigator John Metcalf assisted in the preparation of the trial. Victim Specialist Kim Clark provided support to Mr. Hoffman's family through the investigation and trial and will continue to do so after the verdict.

Rinehart further noted,

"This case started with acts of exploitation against the woman in question and turned into a tragic murder. Our Human Trafficking Task Force was critical to this successful investigation and prosecution."

Ibrahim was represented by local defense attorneys James Schwartzbach and Kristian Norby.

Before the trial, Ibrahim was being held in the Lake County Jail on a \$5 million bond. (This cash bond was set by a judge in late 2022, before the effective date of bail reform which now prevents individuals charged with murder from posting bond if a judge so decides at the beginning of the case.) After the guilty verdict, Judge Lombardo revoked Ibrahim's ability to post bond.

Ibrahim is facing a minimum of 45 years in the Illinois Department of Corrections. His next court hearing is scheduled for February 20, 2024.

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SUBMITTED PHOTO HI-LITER/MCN

An all-female drumming ensemble, Diamana Diya, will perform at the Profiles in Excellence event on February 4 at the Greenbelt Cultural Center. For more information visit www.lcfpd.org.

Profiles in Excellence event presented this Sunday

The 41st annual Profiles in Excellence event takes place from 3-4:30 pm, Sunday, Feb. 4, at Greenbelt Cultural Center, 1215 Green Bay Road in North Chicago. The theme this year is "Music Roots."

Hosted by the Lake County Forest Preserves, the event commemorates Black History Month by recognizing notable African Americans in the area who will be remembered for their contributions to their community and society for years to come. The event is free and open to all ages.

Participants will experience the captivating rhythms and melodies of Guinea, West Africa, brought to life by an all-female drumming ensemble, Diamana Diya. "The dynamic performance is expected to transcend traditional boundaries, as the musicians communicate the exhilaration, energy and sheer joy embedded in the rich tapestry of Malinke music," said Director of Education Alyssa Firkus.

"The public is invited to join us for an unforgettable musical

journey, where Diamana Diya's percussion expertise takes center stage, promising an afternoon of cultural celebration and rhythmic enchantment," said Angelo D. Kyle, president of the Lake County Forest Preserves. "Experience the rich, interwoven melodies and polyrhythms of the ensemble, including resonant bass drums (dunduns), higher-pitched djembes and traditional songs from the Hamanah region of Guinea."

Co-founders Helen Bond and Amy Lusk intensively studied in Guinea with world-renowned musician Famoudou Konate, grand master of the djembe drum and its orchestra. Inspired by their immersive studies, Konate bestowed upon them the name "Diamana Diya," which translates to "make good music for the land."

Bond performs and teaches classes for children in the Lake County area. She is an adjunct-faculty member at Lake Forest College where she teaches the West African Drumming Ensemble and West African Chamber classes. Lusk, an avid musician all her

life, began hand-drumming as a stress release from graduate school. She then found that the drum had become much more than a hobby.

Three community members will be honored during the event. They include:

- Pastor Cory E. Ratliff, senior co-pastor at the Sign of Dove Church in Waukegan.
- Nikki Rung, Grammy nominated children's music recording performer known by many as "Nanny Nikki."
- Carlos Smith, a drill team director who has a podcast with more than 22,000 subscribers.

Established in 1983, the annual Profiles in Excellence program honors the history and achievements of Lake County African Americans. The goal of the program is to further an appreciation of the heritage and achievements of the local African American community and help improve the quality of life for future generations.

For more information visit <https://www.lcfpd.org/profiles-2024/>

State police report fewer deaths on Illinois highways in 2023

CAPITOL NEWS ILLINOIS

Fatal crashes on interstates and expressways in Illinois fell by 7 percent in 2023 compared to the previous year, and shootings were down more than 30 percent.

Illinois State Police report the declines came at the same time troopers were beefing up their enforcement on the state's transportation arteries. Arrests were up 3 percent, gun recoveries up 12 percent, and vehicle recoveries were up 7 percent.

"Over the past several years, we have really demanded more of ourselves, making the tough decisions, executing, and empowering the most effective law enforcement tool there is — the well-trained, professional, crime-fighting trooper," ISP Director Brendan Kelly said in a news release. "Challenges remain, but we are headed in a good direction."

ISP also confiscated more than 10,000 pounds of illegal drugs, and \$4.5 million in what they call "illicit criminal currency."

Technology also plays a large role in enforcement efforts, and ISP plans to install additional license plate readers—cameras which can identify license plates on vehicles that are wanted or suspected in crimes. Those automated readers can send alerts to law enforcement when a plate is recognized.

In 2023, ISP added 139 automated license plate readers to state roads, including 78 cameras in St. Clair County, four in Champaign County, four in Morgan County, and 53 cameras in Cook County. Those were added to an existing 289 cameras in the Chicago area. ISP plans to add cameras in Macon, Madison, Peoria, Bureau, Lake, and Winnebago counties in 2024.

Back wages totaling more than \$5 million owed to thousands of Illinois workers

The U.S. Department of Labor is currently holding more than \$5 million in wages owed to more than 7,000 Illinois workers, and the department has launched a new website in an effort to return it.

When an employee is underpaid for the work they do, the DOL's Wage and Hour Division can launch an investigation. If it finds that the employee is owed money, known as back pay, the department collects the unpaid wages and attempts to distribute it to the employee.

The new Workers Owed Wages website attempts to connect workers with potential unclaimed back pay.

"As you can imagine, sometimes the workers have moved or their addresses aren't known and therefore, those are the workers, we term unlocatables, that we search for based on the best information we can. But sometimes we are unable to locate them," Tom Gauza, district director of the U.S. Department of Labor, said.

The Department of Labor can only hold employees' back pay for three years. After that it is turned over to the Department of Treasury and the employee can no longer claim it. The department also cannot send money to people using tax filing information received each year since not all employees have social security numbers or live at their listed addresses, Gauza said.

Across the country over

222,000 workers can still claim more than \$161.4 million in back wages, according to the Department of Labor. Gauza said the most common industries in which the department investigates and finds unpaid wages are restaurant, home health care, agriculture and construction. Workers who think they are due back wages can go to the Workers Owed Wages website and follow the instructions on the main page to search the database. It is available in English and Spanish. If a worker finds they are owed money, they will be directed to a Department of Labor office that can send them a check.

Pritzker announces milestones for preschool program, industry development

The state recently announced it inked another tax incentive deal aimed at boosting manufacturing while Gov. JB Pritzker said his plan to add more preschool seats in early childhood "deserts" is ahead of schedule.

The deal was completed between Wieland Rolled Products North America under the state's Reimagining Energy and Vehicles Act, a law that passed in 2021 to incentivize electrical vehicle manufacturing in Illinois that has since been expanded to include other related components of EVs.

Wieland, a subsidiary of the Germany-based Wieland Group, will receive an estimated total REV Act tax incentive of \$122 million over 30 years, according to the governor's office. Including other tax incentives and infrastructure support, the total value of the state's contribution grows to \$231 million, according to the governor's office.

In exchange, the company announced it will invest \$500 million to modernize its East Alton facility that produces copper and copper alloy components found in electric vehicles and other products. The investment will expand Wieland's capacity as demands for copper products increase and will retain 800 jobs.

"The world needs copper today more than ever. Copper is an integral part of the energy transition," said Wieland CEO Erwin Mayr. "This investment represents a significant leap forward in our manufacturing capabilities here in the United States by enhancing our efficiency and precision and adding significant capacity output potential."

Pritzker visited Wieland's plant in Vöhringen, Germany, last January as part of his overseas trip to the World Economic Forum. He said at the time he was looking to convince the company to increase its presence in Illinois.

"We want Wieland to grow in Illinois as we want our state and its economy to grow," Pritzker said.

At a separate event, Pritzker also announced that his Smart Start initiative had exceeded its goal for new seats added this year.

The Smart Start program was included in Pritzker's budget proposal for the current fiscal year and approved by lawmakers last May. It includes \$250 million for early childhood programs, including expanded access to preschool, wage support for child care

See REPORTS, Page 5

Pancake breakfast set for Feb. 17

Cub Scout Pack 214 and Boy Scout Troop 459 will be holding an all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast on February 17 from 9-11:30 a.m. at the McHenry Moose Lodge.

Tickets are \$7 for adults, \$4 for kids and free for children 3 and

under.

The menu includes pancakes, bacon, sausage, fresh fruit, coffee, milk and juice.

Along with the breakfast a silent auction will be held. The auction will end promptly at 11:30 a.m.

For ticket and donation information visit <https://givebutter.com/c/PTWR7k>

The McHenry Moose Lodge is located at 2523 N. Richmond Rd., Johnsburg.

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• Reports (Continued from page 4)

workers, early intervention programs, and home visiting programs.

The program set a goal of adding 5,000 new pre-k spots in the current fiscal year, and Pritzker announced it has exceeded that by more than 800 spots. Pritzker said that with the additions, the state publicly funds over 82,000 preschool seats.

“Smart Start is about all of our futures, not just the littlest kiddos in the state, but all of us. It’s about where Illinois is go-

ing,” Pritzker said. “And I want to make sure that everyone understands why this is the right kind of investment and the best return on investment that we can make.”

New state task force aims to promote state’s Underground Railroad history

The Illinois Underground Railroad Task Force met for the first time recently to begin devising a strategy for shar-

ing, growing and celebrating the history of the Underground Railroad in Illinois.

The task force was created last year under a bill sponsored by Sen. David Koehler, D-Peoria, and Rep. Debbie Meyers-Martin, D-Olympia Fields, who also serve as its co-chairs. It currently consists of 5 legislators—three Democrats and two Republicans—and 5 Illinois history experts, all of whom are unpaid for their participation.

During the meeting, the task

force exchanged several ideas about how to best recognize Illinois’ connection to the Underground Railroad, including stories told by voices not commonly included.

Task force member Sen. Doris Turner, D-Springfield, said during a news conference that members want “to tell the entire story of the Underground Railroad.”

“So, we will be looking at not only the conductors, but also the freedom fighters that

were coming along the Railroad,” Turner said.

Jennifer Edginton, interim director of the Illinois State Museum, said people looking for more information or to get involved can find the Underground Railroad Task Force webpage on the Illinois Department of Natural Resources website under the Boards and Commissions tab. On the website, people will be able to share relevant historical stories and read meeting

minutes.

People will also be able to express interest in joining a subcommittee of the task force. There are currently four subcommittees focused on aspects such as economic and cultural impact for communities, and education and history.

Although the subcommittees themselves will be temporary, Koehler said incorporation of their ideas will be ongoing.



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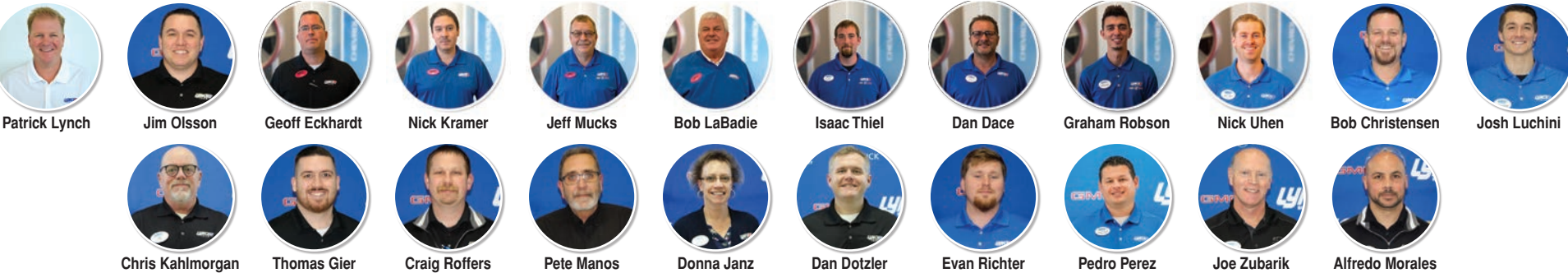
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State education board to seek \$653 million increase in upcoming budget year

Request includes \$35 million for 'newcomers,' comes amid projected state budget deficit

By Peter Hancock
 CAPITOL NEWS ILLINOIS

The Illinois State Board of Education endorsed a budget request Jan. 24 that includes a \$653 million increase in funding for PreK-12 public schools.

It's a request that lawmakers may find hard to accommodate in a year when the state faces a projected \$891 million budget deficit.

PreK-12 education spending currently makes up about one-fifth of the state's entire General Revenue Fund budget. The proposed increase, if approved, would bring the state's total GRF spending on public education to just over \$11 billion.

"We were pleased to hear that the board, even in a tight budget year, continues to prioritize necessary investments for districts and students across the state," Gerson Ramirez, a lobbyist for the advocacy group Advance Illinois, said during the meeting.

The proposed budget includes a \$350 million increase in Evidence-Based Funding, the minimum increase required under a 2018 law that calls for gradually increasing the state's share of the cost of public education while focusing new money on the state's most poorly funded districts. That includes \$300 million for direct funding for the qualifying districts and \$50 million that is distributed in the form of property tax relief grants.

That law calls for continuing to increase funding each year until all districts are funded at 90 percent or more of their target "adequacy" level.

When the law first went into effect, nearly one in five school districts were being funded at or below 60 percent of their adequacy level. Today, no districts are being funded below the 60 percent level, but the state still has a long way to go before reaching the goal of having all districts at or above 90 percent of adequacy.

According to a report that accompanied the budget proposal, it would take another \$2.5 billion in EBF to reach that goal.

In addition to the increase in Evidence Based Funding, which districts use to enhance their general operating budgets, ISBE's request includes about \$300 million in new or increased funding for several specific categories of school expenses.

The largest of those is a proposed \$112 million increase, or nearly 26 percent, for a program that reimburses school districts for the cost of providing transportation to students with disabilities. That would be enough to cover about 84 percent of the total cost for that category of transportation funding, which is roughly the same percentage the state was paying before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The package also calls for a \$75 million increase in early

childhood education funding to continue Gov. JB Pritzker's Smart Start Illinois initiative, a multi-year program that seeks to eliminate early childhood and preschool "deserts" for 3- and 4-year-old children by 2027.

That money would enable state-funded preschools to reach an additional 5,000 children next year. State officials estimate that total enrollment in those preschools will grow to nearly 114,000 in 2025, an increase of more than 17,000 since 2023.

Assistance for migrants

ISBE's budget plan also calls for addressing the pressures some districts are facing due to the large number of international migrants arriving in Illinois.

Over the last two years, state officials estimate the number of "newcomers" in Illinois has grown nearly 85 percent, to about 36,200. Since August 2022, more than 34,000 migrants have been bused or flown to Illinois by order of Texas Gov. Greg Abbott after crossing that state's southern border.

Newcomers are defined as students age 3 through 21 who were born outside the United States and who have been attending one or more schools in the U.S. for less than three full academic years.

The proposal calls for \$35 million in new funding for a line item called "supporting newcomers." That money would be available for such expenses as hiring bilingual teachers, paraprofessionals and other staff; buying materials written in the students' native languages; providing additional before- and after-school programming; and providing other supports for children and families.

Funding for ISBE is just one part of the state's overall annual budget, but it is one of the largest categories of state General Revenue Fund spending. It was unclear Wednesday whether Gov. JB Pritzker was endorsing the request.

The Governor's Office of Management and Budget issued a report in November projecting the state could face a budget deficit next year of \$891 million, assuming revenue trends remain stable and the state continues making all of its required payments into its rainy day fund and pension funds.

Pritzker is scheduled to deliver his budget proposal to the General Assembly on Feb. 21.

Meanwhile, Advance Illinois issued a statement that noted school districts will face their own budget pressures next year when federal pandemic-related relief programs come to an end.

"ISBE's proposal serves as a solid road map for investments Illinois must undertake to meet the comprehensive needs of every child and student in the state generally, and in the ongoing aftermath of COVID disruptions," the organization said.

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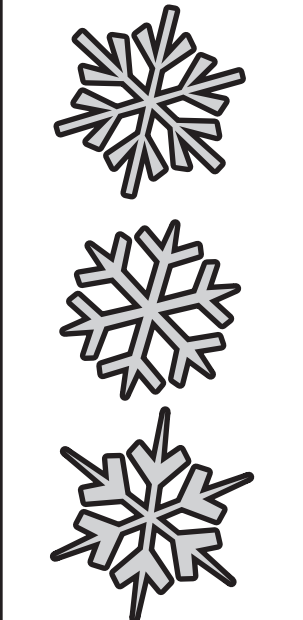
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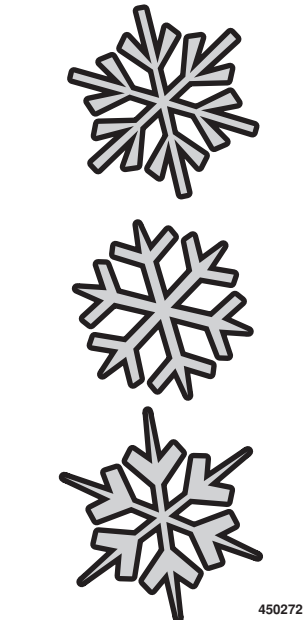
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McHenry County Conservation District events

Candlelight Ski/Hikes

Friday, Feb. 9, 5-9 p.m. and Saturday, Feb. 10, 5-9 p.m., Prairieview Education Center, Crystal Lake.

Don't miss your chance to cross-country ski on trails lit only by candlelight! Skiers of every experience level and age are welcome.

Bring your own equipment. Trails will be groomed for skiing if there is 4" of snow or more. If there isn't enough snow leave the skis at home and enjoy a candlelight hike. No pets please.

Research Roundup

Saturday, Feb. 10, 10 a.m. - noon. Lost Valley Visitor Center, Glacial Park, Ringwood.

Learn about the latest research being conducted in our county from a trio of experts. Coffee and a light snack will be served. Ages 14+.

- March and Sedge Wrens Study. Anastasia Rahlin (Ruban Biotic Assessment Manager & Ornithologist/University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign PhD Student, Illinois Natural History Survey)

- Bison Observation Field Study. Gina Roas (Executive Director/Ethnobotanist, Trickster Cultural Center)

- Local Plant Genetics & Restoration. Kevin Scheiwiler (Restoration Ecologist, McHenry County Conservation District).

Papermaking: Watch the Love Grow

Saturday, Feb. 3, 9-11 a.m., Prairieview Education Center, Crystal Lake.

Give a gift from the heart this Valentine's Day. Create a paper card and a paper seed heart as a gift for someone special to you. This is a be-

ginner class. Ages 8+.

History Hike: Glacial Park

Saturday, Feb. 10, 9:30-11 a.m., Wiedrich Barn, Glacial Park, Ringwood.

Learn about the former inhabitants of various areas of the park as you look for signs of their presence. Visit the Wiedrich Barn, the kettle marsh, the Thomas cemetery and more. Meet at the Wiedrich Barn parking lot. Ages 14+.

Winter Tree ID

Sunday, Feb. 11, 2-2:30 p.m., Harrison Benwell, Wonder Lake.

How do you tell tree species apart in winter when there are no leaves? Take a 1.6 mile hike and learn tricks and tips to identify some of the common tree and shrub species in the cold months.

Ages 12+.

Hike with Mike: Buehler's Day Outside

Saturday, Feb. 17, 10-11:30 a.m. Rush Creek Conservation Area, Harvard.

Curate conservation conversations with McHenry County Board Chairman Mike Buehler while exploring the trails at Rush Creek Conservation Area. All ages.

Crazy About Canines

Saturday, Feb. 17, 1:30-3:30 p.m., Rush Creek Conservation Area, Harvard

Learn about coyotes and foxes. Take a closer look at their skills and furs, and learn how they survive in our area before going on a short hike to see if you can find any evidence of wild canids. Ages 8-13.

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Dean's List honors are accorded to Carthage students who achieve a minimum 3.5 grade-point average while carrying at least 12 letter-graded credits in a given semester.

Students at Utah Tech University demonstrated remarkable academic performance during the Fall 2023 semester, with nearly 12 percent earning Dean's List recognition.

Skye Findlay of Antioch, was among the 1,489 students honored on the Dean's List for the fall semester.

Utah Tech University is located in St. George, UT.

Carthage College announces fall 2023 Dean's List

The students who have been named to the Carthage College Fall 2023 Dean's List in recognition of their outstanding academic achievement are as follows:

- Caitlynn Gsell of Antioch
- Carly McLaughlin of Antioch
- Clair Patrick of Antioch
- Daniel Dadivas of Antioch
- Emmy Parchment of An-

College news

Brewer named to President's List

Reagan Brewer of Antioch, was named to the Miami University fall 2023 President's List.

Miami University students ranked in the top three percent of undergraduate students within each division for the fall 2023 semester have been named to the President's list recognizing academic excellence.

Monmouth College announces fall 2023 Dean's List recipients

The following students made the Dean's List at Monmouth College, Monmouth, IL, for the Fall 2023 semester.

- Natalie Labicki of Antioch
- Emily Lewis of Antioch

To qualify for the Dean's List, students had to take at least 3.0 credit hours while achieving a grade-point average of 3.5 or higher on a 4.0 scale.

The University of Iowa awarded nearly 1,700 undergraduate, graduate and professional students degrees at the close of the 2023 fall semester.

Included in the list of graduates were:

- Joshua Nordhaus of Antioch, (College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Bachelor of Science, Data Science)
- Logan Chessick of Antioch, (Tippie College of Business, Bachelor of Business Administration, Business Analytics and Information Systems)

Thirteen percent of the undergraduates graduated with multiple degrees - a 2 percent increase over a year ago - and, as a group, undergraduates posted a cumulative GPA of 3.22 - another year-over-year increase - during their stay at Iowa. The oldest degree recipient was 72 years ago; the youngest 18. University of Iowa is located in Iowa City, IA.

Findlay recognized in Utah Tech University Dean's List

University of Iowa awards degrees at fall commencement

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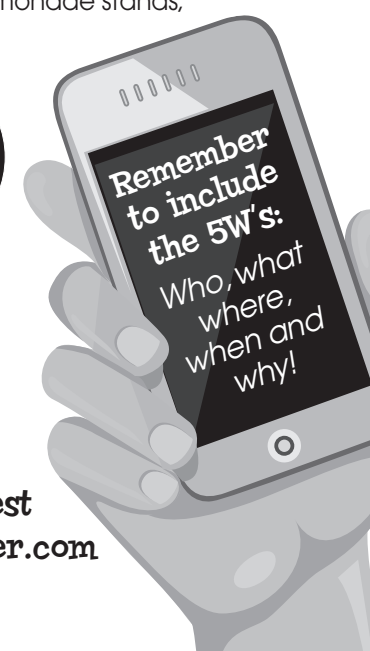
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QUEEN MATTRESS Starting at **\$259**

QUEEN SET STARTING @ **\$699**

TWIN \$499 FULL \$599 KING \$899

QUEEN SET STARTING @ **\$999**

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QUEEN SET STARTING @ **\$1599**

TWIN \$1049 FULL \$1349 KING \$1999

QUEEN SET STARTING @ **\$2099**

TWIN \$1399 FULL \$1949 KING \$2699

Every Verlo mattress is adjustable and comes with a **Lifetime Comfort Guarantee**.

If your body changes or you change your mind, we will adjust it so you can love your mattress again.

Take the risk out of mattress shopping with the assurance of adjustable comfort for the lifetime of your mattress.

SLEEP. LOUNGE. WHATEVER. BETTER.

Relieve pressure by raising your head or feet. Enjoy a relaxing massage at the touch of a button with Verlo's adjustable beds.



vMotion

- Great for watching TV or reading in bed
- Reduces snoring & acid reflux effects
- Alleviates lower back, knee & leg pain
- Aids in circulation

Adjustable Bed Bases*

Twin XL Starting @

\$399

*with Verlo Mattress purchase. Does not apply to previous purchases. See store for details.

SAVE UP TO **\$180 OFF**
v3 Set Purchase*

SAVE UP TO **\$270 OFF**
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v7 Set Purchase*

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