

Hi-LITER

~ including McHenry County News

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<p>WRITE DOWN \$3,000</p> <p>2015 Chevrolet Impala LT Rear View Camera, NAV, Parking Assist Bluetooth, Entertainment System. #35042B INCLUDES 2 BUCKS TICKETS \$9,995 OR \$219 Mth*</p>	<p>WRITE DOWN \$4,000</p> <p>2014 Chrysler Town & Country Touring L Leather, Heated Seats & Steering Wheel, Remote Start, Rear View Camera, Power Tailgate. #P3105A INCLUDES 2 BUCKS TICKETS \$9,995 OR \$219 Mth*</p>	<p>WRITE DOWN \$5,000</p> <p>2015 Dodge Grand Caravan SXT 4WD/AWD, Heated Seats & Steering Wheel, Rear View Camera, 3rd Row Seat, Power Tailgate, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto. #35054A INCLUDES 2 BUCKS TICKETS \$10,995 OR \$239 Mth*</p>	<p>WRITE DOWN \$5,005</p> <p>2018 Volkswagen Atlas Auto, Bluetooth, 3rd Rear Seat, 4x4, Moonroof, Cruise Control, & Satellite Radio. #4469B INCLUDES 2 BUCKS TICKETS \$15,990 OR \$279 Mth*</p>	<p>WRITE DOWN \$4,000</p> <p>2015 Ford Explorer Auto, Remote Start, Heated Seats, Bluetooth, Power Lift Gate, & 3rd Rear Seat. #45050A INCLUDES 2 BUCKS TICKETS \$14,995 OR \$279 Mth*</p>

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Forest Preserves Board elects new leadership

At a special meeting in December, the Board of Commissioners elected Jessica Vealitzek (District 10) to serve as president of the Lake County Forest Preserves. The Board also elected Gina Roberts (District 4) to serve as vice president. Both will serve two-year terms ending December 2026.



Jessica Vealitzek

"I'm honored to be elected by my peers to this role," said Vealitzek, who has been on the board for six years. "Lake County Forest Preserves is a world-class institution led by experts in their fields and I look forward to working with each of them," she said during the special meeting.

Vealitzek, who served as chair of the operations committee, reflected on her early connection with nature, which began at age 4 during annual family trips to the Northwoods. More than 35 years later, "I fulfilled my lifelong dream when my family and I moved to a patch of land in Lake County surrounded by nature."

Vealitzek holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Lake Forest College, a Master of Fine Arts from Roosevelt University and a certification in secondary English education from National Louis University.

She also thanked former President Angelo Kyle for his six years of service leading the Forest Preserves. "During his tenure, the Preservation Foundation received record donations, we expanded forest preserve lands and trail connections and received consistent high marks from the public. You led with kindness and compassion," Vealitzek said.

Roberts joined the board four years ago. She served as chair of the finance committee, vice chair of the legislative committee and is a member of the ethics, rules and diversity and cultural awareness committees.

"I want to thank everyone for having the confidence in me to serve as vice president of the Forest Preserves," Roberts said. "I look forward to this new position."

As the newly elected leaders of the Forest Preserves, they will oversee more than 31,200 acres of natural lands, more than 200 miles of trails and a budget of \$85,817,709 for the 2025 fiscal year, which runs from January 1 through December 31.

Along with the rest of the Board of Commissioners, the pair is also tasked with overseeing the expenditure of \$155 million in capital funding approved by Lake County voters on November 5. The funds will be used over the next decade to expand preserves, improve water and air quality, restore wetlands, prairies, savannas and forests to mitigate flooding and develop key trail connections while opening or redeveloping preserves.

To learn more about Lake County Forest Preserves and its programs visit lcpfd.org.

Illinoisans may be able to file federal taxes for free; state announces Apple ID licenses

Pritzker announces state's participation in federal Direct File program

CAPITOL NEWS ILLINOIS

Many Illinois residents will be able to use the IRS Direct File service to electronically prepare and file their 2024 federal tax returns for free.

Almost 2 million eligible Illinois taxpayers will be able to use Direct File starting Jan. 27. Gov. J.B. Pritzker said this service will "put money typically spent on tax preparation services back into the pockets of hardworking families across Illinois."

After users file their federal taxes, Direct File will connect user to MyTax Illinois, Illinois' free state income tax filing system where they can file their Illinois state returns. The program is accessible on mobile phones, laptops, tablets or desktop computers and users will have access to help through a chatbot in both English and Spanish.

"We understand that a significant amount of time and money is spent every year to ensure personal income tax returns are filed accurately and on time," said Illinois Department of Revenue Director David Harris. "This integration will help relieve stress and financial burden for taxpayers."

The IRS created Direct File as a result of the Inflation Reduction Act, which was signed in 2022 by President Joe Biden. It began as a test program in 2024 and will become permanent in 25 states this year. The IRS estimates that over 30 million taxpayers will be eligible for Direct File in 2025.

To check eligibility and to use the service, visit <https://www.irs.gov/filing/irs-direct>

file-for-free. Individuals may not qualify if they:

- Have unreported cash income, such as tips or alimony.
- Have income from sources such as gig work that's reported on other tax forms.
- Have added or used money from a Medical Savings Account.
- Have taken distributions from employer-sponsored retirement plans, like a 401(k), pension, annuity, 403(b), or governmental 457(b).
- Have made contributions to or taken distributions from an IRA.
- Exceed \$200,000 in wages (or \$168,600 if they had more than one employer).
- File as Married Filing Jointly, and their spouse's wages exceed \$200,000 (or \$168,600 if the spouse had more than one employer).
- File as Married Filing Jointly, and have combined wages exceeding \$250,000.
- File as Married Filing Separately, and wages exceed \$125,000.
- Claim additional tax credits for college tuition or other higher education expenses, energy efficient home updates or adoption expenses.
- Take itemized deductions.

Mobile driver's licenses and state ID's

Illinois Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias says he hopes to bring mobile driver's licenses and state IDs to iPhones by the end of the year.

Giannoulias has announced that his office has officially started working with Apple to allow users to access their

driver's licenses and state IDs digitally on their iPhone or Apple Watch. He said in a news release he expects to expand these features in the future for additional digital wallets, such as Google Wallet for Android users.

Lawmakers passed House Bill 4592 last spring, allowing the secretary of state to issue mobile IDs and driver's licenses. When it rolls out, Illinois will be the 11th state to adopt mobile IDs.

But a mobile driver's license and ID would not replace physical cards.

The cards would be issued "in addition to, and not instead of" a physical ID, under the law. The law allows agencies and private entities to choose if they want to accept electronic IDs in place of physical ones, but "upon request by law enforcement, a credential holder must provide the credential holder's physical credential."

The secretary of state's office has a sign-up page for Illinois residents to receive updates about the program, including when mobile IDs become available for iPhone users.

The move toward digital IDs is part of Giannoulias' "commitment to modernizing the office," according to his office.

Nursing home protections

State lawmakers have approved a bill aimed at protecting nursing home residents from retaliation if they report violations at the facility.

House Bill 2474 aims to prohibit nursing home staff from taking "retaliatory actions" against residents who engage in protected activities, such as speaking out about rule or law violations in their facilities.

The bill specifically protects residents who: talk to a supervisor of the facility, the public, or to an outside authority about a rule or law being broken by the facility staff; give information or testimony during an investigation of a facility; or seek help to leave the facility. It gives residents a private right to sue if they believe the facility broke the law.

The bill would also require nursing home facilities to file any resident complaints that they've been improperly retaliated against with the Illinois Department of Public Health and to give a brief description of any complaints filed to the resident's next of kin once a year.

The measure passed 48-2 in the Senate and 89-16 in the House.

Treasurer offers property tax workshops to help taxpayers save money

McHenry County Treasurer Donna Kurtz is holding 10 county-wide workshops to share valuable information with taxpayers about the tools and processes for reducing their property tax burden, making tax payments more conveniently, and protecting their property deeds. A number of the workshops will also focus on property tax relief opportunities available to seniors, including information on the Senior Citizen Real Estate Tax Deferral Program.

The Property Tax Workshops will take place at the following locations and dates:

- Woodstock Public Library, 414 W. Judd St. – 6 to 7:30 p.m., Thursday, Jan. 23
- Harvard Diggins Library, 900 E. McKinley St. – 1 to 2 p.m. Monday, Jan. 27
- Algonquin Area Public Library, 2600 Harnish Dr. – 2 to 3 p.m., Wednesday, Feb. 5
- Algonquin Area Public Library, 2600 Harnish Dr. – 7:30 to 8:30 p.m., Monday, Feb. 10
- Dorr Township, 1309 Lake Ave., Woodstock – 1 to 2:30 p.m., Wednesday, Feb. 12
- McHenry Senior Services, 1519 N. Richmond Road, Johnsburg – 11 to 12 p.m., Friday, Feb. 14
- Crystal Lake Public Library, 126 W. Paddock St. – 2 to 3 p.m., Monday, Feb. 17
- Marengo-Union Library, 19714 E. Grant Hwy. – 2 to 3 p.m., Wednesday, Feb. 19
- Crystal Lake Public Library, 126 Paddock St. – 7 to 8 p.m., Monday, March 3
- Huntley Area Public Library, 11000 Ruth Road – TBD

For more information about property taxes and upcoming programming through the Treasurer's Office, visit <https://www.mchenrycounty-il.gov/departments/treasurer/treasurer-events>, call the libraries listed above, or call our office at 815-334-4260.

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State Board of Education seeks \$11.4 billion for PreK-12 spending

Requested 4.6 percent increase comes in face of projected revenue shortfall

By Peter Hancock
CAPITOL NEWS ILLINOIS

The Illinois State Board of Education voted Jan. 15 to approve a budget request for the upcoming fiscal year of nearly \$11.4 billion, a 4.6 percent increase over this year's budget, despite projections that the state will face a substantial revenue shortfall next year.

The request includes a \$350 million increase in "Evidence-Based Funding," the minimum annual increase called for under the 2017 law that focuses new education spending on the neediest districts.

It also includes a \$142 million increase in what's called "mandatory categorical" aid for expenses such as transpor-

tation and special education, and \$75 million in new funding for early childhood education.

"This year's budget recommendation recognizes the tight fiscal projections faced by the state of Illinois, while continuing to invest in things that we know that are critical for school districts and that have a direct impact on student learning," State Superintendent of Education Tony Sanders told the board.

Funding for PreK-12 education is one of the largest categories of spending in the entire state budget, accounting for about one-fifth of all General Revenue Fund spending. That money is used to help fund the budgets of more than

850 school districts, which serve an estimated 1.9 million students.

State funding, however, makes up only part of the total amount spent on public education. In 2021, the most recent year for which complete numbers are available, state funding made up only about 26 percent of total school spending while about 65 percent came from local sources such as property taxes and the rest came from federal sources.

Over the years, the state's heavy reliance on local property taxes to fund public schools produced vast inequities among districts. The Evidence-Based Funding formula was intended to address that over time by establishing

a "hold-harmless" mechanism by which no district would ever see its funding reduced, then directing new funding to the districts most in need.

The law created a formula for estimating the cost of providing an adequate education in each district based on certain factors such as total student enrollment, the number of students from low-income families and the number of students from non-English speaking backgrounds. The goal of the law is to bring all districts up to at least 90 percent of their adequacy target.

Since the law went into effect, according to ISBE, nearly \$2.2 billion has been distributed to districts through the Evidence-Based Funding

system and overall funding for the neediest districts—known as Tier 1 districts—has grown from 59.2 percent of their adequacy target to 73.4 percent.

Still, however, seven out of 10 students in Illinois attend a school in a district that is funded at less than 90 percent of its adequacy target. According to ISBE, bringing all districts up to 90 percent of adequacy would cost an additional \$2.6 billion.

In November, the Governor's Office of Management and Budget reported that the annual increases in education funding called for under the Evidence-Based Funding law, combined with other rising costs and overall flat growth

in revenue, would lead to a projected \$3.2 billion budget shortfall in the fiscal year ahead.

Gov. JB Pritzker will outline his plan for plugging that hole when he delivers his budget address to the General Assembly Feb. 19.

Sanders, however, said he remains confident Pritzker and lawmakers will find a way to balance the budget and still fund the agency's budget request.

"While most of state government's going to be looking at potential freezes, we are really pleased to see a governor and legislature that is committed to public education funding, even in tight fiscal times," he said.

Two finalists named for circuit court associate judge vacancy

The Circuit Judges of the Nineteenth Judicial Circuit have selected two finalists to fill the current associate judge vacancy. This opening results from the retirement of Associate Judge Theodore S. Potkonjak last October after 22 years of dedicated service to the people of Lake County. Chief Judge Daniel B. Shanes is pleased to announce that these finalists are Deborah J. Menas of Libertyville and Sari W. Montgomery of Riverwoods.

Ms. Menas received her Bachelor of Arts in Public Policy from the University of Chicago in 1990. She earned her Juris Doctor from Northern Illinois University School of Law in 1994 and was admitted to practice law in Illinois that year. Ms. Menas is a member of the Jefferson Inn-American Inns of Court, the Lake County Bar Association, and the Women's Bar Association of Lake County. She previously served as a Principal Assistant Public Defender with the Lake County Public Defender's Office, as a sole practitioner, as a Principal Assistant State's Attorney with the Lake County State's Attorney's Office, and is currently an Illinois FOP Labor Council attorney.

Ms. Montgomery received her Bachelor of Arts in Public Policy Studies from the University of Chicago in 1991. In

1994, she earned her Juris Doctorate from the Loyola University Chicago School of Law. She was admitted to practice law in Illinois in 1994 and is a member of the American Bar Association, Association of Professional Responsibility Lawyers, Illinois State Bar Association, Lake County Bar Association, Association of Women Attorneys of Lake County, Chicago Bar Association, and Chicago Council of Lawyers. Ms. Montgomery previously was Litigation Counsel at the Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission of the Supreme Court of Illinois, a Special Assistant Public Defender with the Lake County Public Defender's Office, an adjunct professor at Loyola University Chicago School of Law, and currently an Adjunct Professor at Northwestern Pritzker School of Law and a Partner at Robinson, Stewart, Montgomery & Doppke LLC.

The Lake County Bar Association's Judicial Selection and Retention Committee evaluated and recommended both finalists. Each Nineteenth Circuit Judge will cast a secret ballot, with the results tabulated by the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts in Springfield. Chief Judge Shanes is notified of the results.

Lake County recognized as a 2024 Digital Inclusion Visionary Trailblazer

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) named Lake County as a 2024 Digital Inclusion Visionary Trailblazer. This national program recognizes the County's efforts to close the digital divide.

Recognizing the array of interests and unique barriers of its community members, Lake County joins a record number of Digital Inclusion Visionary Trailblazers this year. NDIA awarded a total of 60 recipients representing municipal, county and regional governments, paving the way for digitally inclusive communities across the country. Lake County was awarded the Visionary Trailblazer, the NDIA's highest honor for communities, integrating digital inclusion throughout their government.

In an increasingly connected society, access to affordable high-speed internet, devices and digital skills training is essential to participate in today's world and to find greater opportunities to thrive using tools to navigate

the internet confidently and independently.

"Building a digital ecosystem that supports every resident no matter your race, language, background or zip code is imperative. Participating in tasks like telehealth, email, ecommerce and education all require some level of digital skills. We're excited and steadfast in our efforts to make Lake County a place where no one is left behind," said Jennifer Clark, Technology Committee Chair and Lake County Board Member for District 15.

"In the past decade, we've seen local governments step into the important role of building digital inclusion ecosystems where organizations that provide services can connect and thrive," said Angela Siefer, NDIA executive director. "NDIA's Digital Inclusion Trailblazers celebrate these critical efforts to bring digital opportunities to all residents."

Trailblazers provide models for other local governments to aspire to as com-

munities build digital inclusion networks. Lake County achieved Visionary Trailblazer status by prioritizing digital inclusion for residents through:

- Creating a Digital Equity Coalition composed of County stakeholders who learn about digital skills, broadband and resources, equipping them with the tools to further the Initiative in their own communities.
- Hiring specialized, local personnel known as Digital Navigators to support residents impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic by helping to increase their digital skills and confidence.
- Partnering with Northstar Online Learning, a Literacy Minnesota program, to offer free digital skills training to community partner organizations and Lake County residents impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The programs we've created in Lake County are proven to be effective in closing the digital divide. With the

confidence of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, residents can be absolutely sure that if they need help getting connected, we're here to help," said Lake County Board Chair Sandy Hart.

NDIA's Digital Inclusion Trailblazers have set the national standard for excellent digital inclusion work since 2016. Each applicant's materials are verified for accuracy, assessed for community impact and posted in an interactive map and searchable database on NDIA's website at www.digitalinclusion.org/digital-inclusion-trailblazers/. By sharing materials with open sourcing, NDIA provides community advocates and local governments with ways to continue learning, connect with trailblazing peers and plan their own digital inclusion solutions.

For more information, visit Lake County's Digital Growth Initiative webpage at www.lakecountyil.gov/4930/Digital-Growth-Initiative.

Sheriff's Office releases holiday enforcement numbers

McHenry County Sheriff's Office conducted a traffic safety campaign December 13, 2024 - January 2, 2025, reminding motorists to buckle up and drive sober. The "Click It or Ticket" and "Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over" mobilization was conducted by The McHenry County Sheriff's Office and other state and local law enforcement agencies across Illinois to reduce highway fatalities.

During the campaign, The McHenry County Sheriff's Office issued: 13 seat belt citations, 1 DUI arrest, 4 suspended/revoked license citations, 1 no valid

driver's license citation, 16 uninsured motorist citation,

74 speeding citations, 7 suspended registration citations, 1 Scott's Law citation, 11 electronic communica-

tion citations and 38 other various citations.

The Christmas and New Year's Eve enforcement effort was made possible by federal traffic safety funds

administered by the Illinois Department of Transportation and is part of the statewide "Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over" and "Click It or Ticket" campaigns.



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Lake County Regional Office of Education secures prestigious \$9.9 million EIR grant to enhance student well-being and achievement

The Lake County Regional Office of Education (ROE) is proud to announce it has been awarded a \$9.9 million grant under the highly competitive Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Program. The five-year grant will fund the ISF-SHINE 2025-2029 Project (School Health and Interventions for Nurturing Excellence), an innovative program aimed at transforming student well-being, behavior and academic success in elementary schools across Lake County. As one of only 33 recipients nationwide this year, Lake County joins prestigious institutions such as Johns Hopkins University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the American Insti-

tutes for Research in receiving funding for educational research and programming. Mid-phase grants, like the one awarded to Lake County ROE, are designed to fund the implementation and rigorous evaluation of programs that have already demonstrated success at a local level. This grant underscores Lake County ROE's leadership, innovation and commitment to meeting the needs of all learners. The ISF-SHINE 2025-2029 Project aims to enhance student well-being, behavior and academic achievement in Lake County elementary schools by refining the Inter-connected Systems Framework (ISF) that integrates Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).

PBIS is a proactive, evidence-based framework schools can utilize to establish clear expectations for student behavior, reward positive actions and provide behavioral support for those who need it. MTSS leverages a data-driven approach to ensure each student receives the right level of support, from general classroom strategies to intensive interventions. In this approach, all students begin at tier one support and those with identified needs receive increasingly targeted individualized support to reach their academic, so-

cial-emotional and behavioral expectations. Under the ISF framework, Lake County ROE assists local schools in implementing PBIS and MTSS to create a unified system of social, emotional and behavioral support for students while fostering collaboration and staff excellence. "This investment will improve student well-being, behavior and academic achievement while expanding critical mental health services for our students," said Dr. Michael Karner, Lake County Regional Superintendent of Schools.

This \$9.9 million grant means more than funding; it's an investment in the future of Lake County. By bringing these dollars to the region, the ROE is making high-impact educational improvements without adding costs to taxpayers. Every resident in Lake County stands to benefit from this initiative, which will strengthen schools, expand mental health resources and foster innovation that could serve as a model for other regions nationwide. By securing this funding, the ROE delivers a powerful return on investment to the community, bringing national resources directly into Lake County classrooms and creating opportunities for

lasting positive change. **More about the EIR Program** The EIR Program, established under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), is rooted in innovation. It supports groundbreaking ideas that address persistent educational challenges and foster equity, particularly for underserved and high-need students. Unlike grants supporting established practices, EIR funding is awarded to programs with the potential to create, validate and scale innovative solutions to long-standing problems.

Protect your family and community from radon

Health Department encourages residents to check radon levels in their homes

Radon can build up in any home or building, whether new or old, with a basement or not. It cannot be seen, tasted, or smelled. The Lake County Health Department and Community Health Center recommends that residents test the radon levels in their homes and apartments during the winter, when radon levels are highest.

"Radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the U.S., and it easily goes undetected," said Mike Adam, the Health Department's Deputy Director of Environmental Health. "Testing your home for radon is a simple and inexpensive way to keep your family healthy."

The Health Department offers short-term testing kits for \$10.00, available at 500 W. Winchester Rd., Libertyville, or for \$13.00 by mail. The cost includes return postage, laboratory analysis and interpretation by Health Department staff. Test kits are also available from area hardware and building supply stores.

If test results reveal elevated levels of radon in your home, contact a radon professional to evaluate and fix the problem.

Radon is a radioactive gas naturally found in rock and soil. It typically moves up through the ground to the air above and into your home through cracks and other holes in the foundation. Your home traps radon inside, where it can build up. Any home may have a radon problem. This means new and old homes, well-sealed and drafty homes, and homes with or without basements.

For more information and to request a short-term testing kit, contact the Health Department at (847) 377-8020 or visit <http://www.lakecountyl.gov/2450/Radon>.

Budget constraints, caucus tensions face House Speaker Welch in his third term

Recent caucus erupted into shouting, drawing criticism from governor

By Peter Hancock
CAPITOL NEWS ILLINOIS

When state Rep. Emanuel "Chris" Welch was sworn in for another term as speaker of the Illinois House this month, he called on his colleagues to "rise to the occasion" and confront the moment that faced them.

"We are all defined by the moments in our lives and by our responses to them," Welch said in his inaugural address. "There are young people here today witnessing a very special moment. How we lead in that moment is so important. What we say in that moment is so important."

In many ways, Welch's political career has been defined by his handling of critical moments. That was especially true in January 2021, when then-Speaker Michael J. Madigan, struggling under the weight of a burgeoning corruption scandal, began losing the grip on the power he had held for most of the previous 40 years.

It was Welch, a Democrat from the western suburb of Hillside then in his fifth term, who rose from a crowded field of potential contenders to take over one of the most powerful positions in Illinois govern-

ment. In a recent statement from his office, Welch pointed to several legislative achievements that occurred during his first four years as speaker—a series of balanced budgets and increases in the state's credit rating; increased funding for K-12 and higher education; promotion of renewable energy; and criminal justice reform measures, to name a few. But now, as he enters his third term as speaker, Welch and the Democratic caucus he leads face several new challenges, including significant budget constraints and divisions within the caucus itself. Those divisions erupted in a closed-door caucus meeting during the recent lame duck session and spilled over into public view during contentious negotiations over a bill to regulate the hemp industry. That caucus meeting reportedly included shouting, name-calling and accusations leveled against state agency staff members, leading to open criticisms from Gov. JB Pritzker over Welch's handling of the situation. During a recent interview with Capitol News Illinois, however, Welch downplayed the significance of those ten-

sions and insisted his relationship with the governor's office remains in good shape. "Let me say that we had a caucus on a very divisive issue," Welch said. "We've had three caucuses in three different years now on that particular issue, and it gets very emotional. And I have talked to members who, I think, crossed the line and asked them to apologize. And it's my understanding, at least one member has reached out to a staffer and tried to apologize." As for the governor, Welch said, "our relationship is great." "I love and respect the governor. In my four years as speaker, we've accomplished some great policy victories," he said. "I've got two more years here as speaker again, thank God, and we're going to land more big policy victories. You know, the governor has a job to do, but I have a job to do too." One of the most challenging tasks ahead for Welch could be holding the Democratic caucus together on budget and revenue issues during a time when the state faces significant fiscal pressures. For most of Welch's time in the speaker's office, Illi-

nois has enjoyed a period of sustained revenue growth. That has enabled lawmakers to fund such popular things as increased school spending, financial aid for college and university students, and expansion of health care coverage under Medicaid. But revenue growth has been slowing in recent months. During the 2024 regular session, lawmakers struggled to pass a revenue package needed to close a roughly \$1 billion budget gap. Even with Democrats' supermajority in the House, it took three votes on the final night of the session in May to pass a bill that included tax hikes on sportsbooks and businesses. This year could prove even more challenging as lawmakers face a projected \$3.2 billion budget shortfall. But Welch said he is confident lawmakers will work through the budget challenge. "I've been speaker four years now. We balanced the budget every year I've been speaker, and some of those years we had very grim forecasts and we still managed to produce budgets with surpluses, make additional payments to our pension obligations and receive credit upgrades," Welch said. "And I do believe that we're going to continue to pass balanced budgets that are compassionate and responsible, like we've done the last four years that I've been speaker," he added. "You know, I'm looking forward to the next credit upgrade we receive after we do it again." To help meet the challenge, Welch announced the formation of a new leadership team shortly after being reelected speaker, including the appointment of a new team of lead budget negotiators. For the past four years, Rep. Jehan Gordon-Booth, D-Peoria, served as the House Democrats' lead negotiator—what lawmakers refer to as the "budgeteer." But starting this year, Welch will rely on a team of three "co-budgeteers," all Chicagoans: Reps. Kam Buckner, Eva-Dina Delgado, and Will Guzzardi. Gordon-Booth will remain a part of the leadership team as an assistant majority leader. She previously held the title of speaker pro-tempore, a position that will now go to Buckner. Rep. Robyn Gabel, of Evanston, will continue to serve as majority leader.

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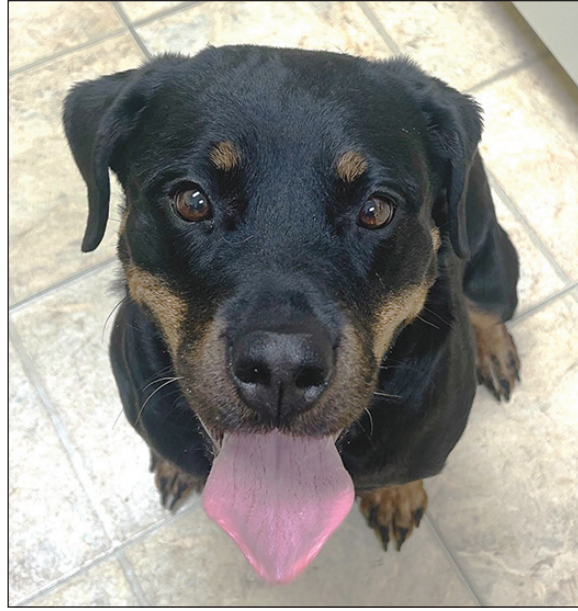
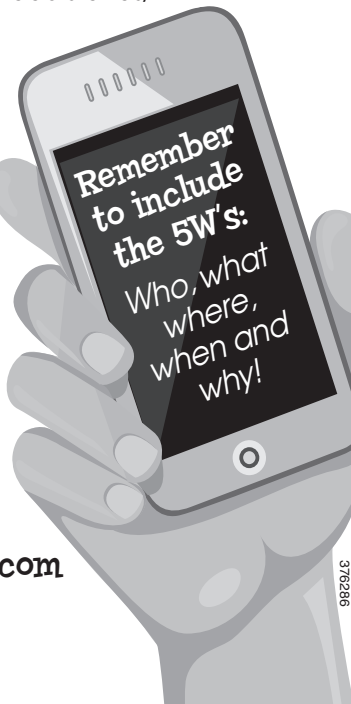
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Pet of the week

Juniper, is about 2 years old, spayed, up-to-date on routine shots (incl. rabies), tested negative for heartworm and on preventative and microchipped. While walk-ins are welcome, adoptions are by appointments only to ensure we have the staff available to help adopters. For information and/or to complete an online application, please visit www.saveapetil.org/adopt.

E-mail your photos at the highest possible resolution to: news@hi-liter.com BY NOON ON FRIDAY

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\$17,590



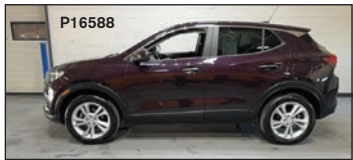
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2023 MAZDA CX-30
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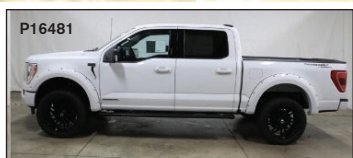
P16500
2022 CHEVY BLAZER RS
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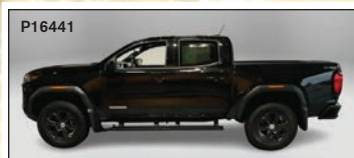
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2024 DODGE DURANGO GT PLUS
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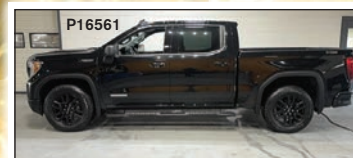
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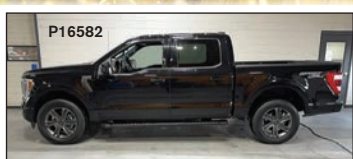
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2024 CHEVY BLAZER RS
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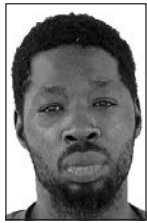
Court & crime news

Jail inmate charged in attack against correctional officer

A Lake County Jail Inmate has been charged with multiple counts of aggravated battery to a correctional officer along with other charges, stemming from an attack on a correctional officer.

On January 3, a correctional officer was conducting his rounds in a jail pod when he noticed an inmate, Raymond L. Smith, 46, of the 2300 block of Gabriel Avenue, Zion, who is being held on homicide charges, had an excessive number of books from the library in his cell. The officer informed Smith that he could keep five books but needed to return the rest to the book checkout area.

Smith became enraged and clenched his fists. The correctional officer backed out of Smith's cell and called over the radio to report a disruptive inmate in his pod. Smith then lunged at the officer, striking him in the face multiple times with closed fists. At one point during the incident, Smith attempted to choke the correctional



Raymond L. Smith

officer. The officer was able to create distance and used pepper spray on Smith, causing him to retreat to his cell.

Additional personnel responded, and Smith was transported to the jail's maximum-security pod.

The correctional officer sustained several contusions and lacerations. He was transported to an area hospital, where he was treated for his injuries and released. Demonstrating exceptional dedication to his duty, the officer returned to work the following day.

Sheriff's detectives reviewed the incident and worked with the Lake County State's Attorney's Office, which approved the following charges against Smith: Three counts of aggravated battery to a correctional officer, Resisting a correctional officer causing injury, and Resisting a correctional employee.

Smith appeared in court January 17 on these new charges and was ordered to remain in custody.

Sheriff John D. Idleburg said, "Correctional officers perform one of the most challenging and underappreciated jobs in law enforcement, often facing unpredictable and danger-

ous situations. This incident highlights the very real risks they encounter every day to maintain order and safety within the jail. While the injuries our correctional officer sustained were serious, we are very grateful they were not worse, and I commend him for his strength and resilience in returning to work the day after the attack."

Brown sentenced to six years for drug induced homicide

The McHenry County State's Attorney's Office announces that Jeramee Brown, 22, of Crystal Lake, Illinois, was sentenced to six years in the Illinois Department of Corrections. The sentence was handed down on January 9, by the Honorable Judge Mark Gerhardt after Brown plead guilty to one count of Drug Induced Homicide, a Class X Felony.

On March 11, 2024, officers of the Crystal Lake Police Department responded to a 911 call reporting there was an unresponsive man outside a residence. Upon arrival, they immediately began life saving measures until Crystal Lake Fire and Rescue arrived on scene. The

man was transported to the hospital, where, despite the efforts, he was later pronounced dead having suffered a drug overdose. A thorough investigation by detectives of the Crystal Lake Police Department were able to determine that Brown was the source of the fatal drugs.

The McHenry County State's Attorney's Office continues to work with law enforcement to investigate the source of every illegal drug overdose in the county that results in a life lost. Whenever possible, the State's Attorney's Office is committed to the aggressive prosecution of those who provide fatal doses of drugs to others.

McHenry County State's Attorney Randi Freese congratulates the officers and detectives involved from the Crystal Lake Police Department on their investigative efforts that helped bring justice to this tragedy. This case was successfully prosecuted by Assistant State's Attorney Brian Miller.



Jeramee Brown

Sheriff's Special Investigations Group arrest drug trafficker

The Lake County Sheriff's Office Special Investigations Group (SIG), a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) funded task force, concluded an investigation that resulted in the arrest of a Zion man for drug trafficking.

SIG began the investigation after developing information that Anthony M. Love, 43, of the 2300 block of Elim Avenue, Zion, was selling narcotics. SIG detectives initiated an undercover operation and, as a result of that operation, obtained a search warrant for Love's home.

On January 14, members of SIG conducted the search warrant at Love's home. During the search warrant, detectives located and seized:

- An AK-47 DRACO Pistol
- Over 420 grams of heroin
- Over 110 grams of cocaine
- 70 grams of methamphetamine
- Over 40 grams of oxycodone
- Psilocybin mushrooms

After reviewing the facts and circumstances of the case, the Lake County

State's Attorney's Office approved the following charges: Four counts of unlawful possession of a controlled substance with intent to deliver (class X felonies) and Unlawful possession of a firearm by a felon (class 2 felony).

The Lake County State's Attorney's Office filed a petition to detain Love while awaiting trial.

Sheriff John D. Idleburg said, "Once again, our Special Investigations Group—comprised of sheriff's detectives, federal agents, and local law enforcement—has successfully arrested a dangerous individual selling drugs in our community. I am proud of SIG for their hard work and dedication, which resulted in removing dangerous drugs and a firearm from our streets. The efforts of SIG, along with all staff at the sheriff's office, continue to make a positive impact on the safety and well-being of our community."



Anthony M. Love



Solar lit trails are accessible in some Lake County forest preserves through March 9. Visit LCFPD.org/solar-lit for more information and locations.

SUBMITTED PHOTOS
Hi-Liter/MCN

Solar-lit trails open until March

Feeling the pinch of earlier sunsets? You can now enjoy nature after dark by exploring two Lake County forest preserves with illuminated trails.

With small solar lights to guide the way, hikers, skiers and snowshoers can get some evening exercise along the 1.3-mile fitness trail at Old School Forest Preserve in Mettawa, and along a hilly 1.65-mile section of the Millennium Trail adjacent to the Winter Sports Area at Lakewood Forest Preserve in Wauconda.

"Experiencing these trails after sunset gives visitors a whole new way to connect with nature," said Angelo Kyle, president of the Lake County Forest Preserves. "We've seen a rise in trail use, with more people turning to nature to support their physical and mental well-being."

The solar lights serve as a guide along the trails. Visitors are encouraged to bring a flashlight or headlamp for added illumination.

Though regular preserve hours are 6:30 a.m. to sunset, the illuminated trails and adjacent parking lots will remain open until 9 p.m. daily through March 9. Bicycles and horses are not permitted on the solar-lit trails after sunset. Dogs are allowed but must be leashed. Please be courteous and avoid stepping on groomed cross-country ski trails.

To access the solar-lit trails, park at Lakewood's Winter Sports Area located on the east side of Fairfield Road just south of Route 176, or at Old School's main entrance lot located on the east side of St. Mary's Road south of Route 176. Lake County Forest Preserves Ranger Police regularly patrol the areas.

Join an educator for guided evening hikes on solar-lit trails to learn about the site's history and animals that are active at dusk: LCFPD.org/solar-lit-walks

Visit LCFPD.org/solar-lit for more details.

Hoff named new Lake County Health Department and Community Health Center Executive Director

The Lake County Board of Health is pleased to announce Christopher Hoff, MPH, will become the new Executive Director of the Lake County Health Department and Community Health Center effective March 10. Hoff is currently the Deputy Director, Public Health for the DuPage County Health Department where he has made significant contributions for over 10 years.

"Chris has extensive experience in public health and brings a focused vision for its future in Lake County," said Board of Health President T.E. Sashko. "He is a trusted leader with a proven track record. Chris is well-known regionally for his work in strengthening community relationships, over-

seeing new initiatives, and addressing priority health issues."

During his time at the DuPage County Health Department, Hoff led large community coalition efforts, oversaw core public health functions, and coordinated multiple public health emergency responses. Prior to joining DuPage County Health Department, Hoff served in a variety of roles at the Kane County Health Department for more than seven years.

"I am honored to be joining the Lake County Health Department and Community Health Center as its next Executive Director. I'm excited to be leading a dedicated team of public health professionals in Lake County

as we work to improve the health and quality of life for the Health Department's clients, staff, and all residents of Lake County," said Hoff. "I will continue the great work that is already being done at the Health Department and look forward to new ways we can work together with the community to advance the health of all who live, work, and play in Lake County."

Hoff holds a Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Science from Marquette University and a Master of Public Health in Health Services Management from Northern Illinois University. He succeeds Mark Pfister as Executive Director who led the agency for over 8 years until his retirement in August 2024.

Sheriff's office statement on aiding federal agencies

The McHenry County Sheriff's Office remains steadfast in its commitment to the rule of law and the safety of all residents in our community. However, the Illinois Trust Act, which was originally signed into law in 2017, and then modified in 2021 creating significant hurdles for local law enforcement agencies to work effectively with federal partners, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

This legislation prohibits local law enforcement from honoring ICE detainers or taking action on an individual's immigration status without a judicial warrant. These restrictions hinder our ability to assist in removing dangerous criminals from

our neighborhoods, creating unnecessary barriers to ensuring public safety.

Our office strongly believes that the first duty of government is to protect its people. To accomplish this, local and federal law enforcement must be able to collaborate without the constraints of politically motivated policies. The Illinois Trust Act places undue limitations on our efforts, compromising the safety and security of the very communities we are sworn to protect.

The McHenry County Sheriff's Office will cooperate with ICE in cases where a judge has issued a criminal warrant and will continue its official duties in investigating violations of criminal

law and cooperating in such investigations with federal and other law enforcement agencies to ensure public safety and maintaining the trust of our community.

We will continue to maintain public safety and advocate for policies that prioritize the well-being of our residents. It is our hope that lawmakers will revisit the Illinois Trust Act and work toward commonsense solutions that enable law enforcement to focus on protecting law-abiding citizens.

Public safety is not a partisan issue—it is a shared responsibility. We remain committed to doing everything in our power to serve and protect the people of McHenry County.

Lake County Sheriff's arrest bulletin

The Lake County Sheriff's Dept. reported the following arrests in Lake County. Suspects are considered innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

Dec. 19
Jefferson Herrera-Martinez, 23, Denver, CO, was cited for a warrant obtained: retail theft;

Neylis Lovera-Reyes, 23, Denver, CO, was cited for a warrant obtained: retail theft; Nelson Mora-Parra, 25, Denver, CO, was cited for a warrant obtained: retail theft; Marthesha M. James, 41, Chicago, was cited for a warrant arrest: counterfeiting, theft (Porter County, IN); Diego J. Pillco Gutama, 32, Elk Grove Village, was cited for driving while license suspended;

Dec. 20
Janish Desai, 40, Lincolnshire, was cited for domestic battery;

Ibraheem K. Abdel-Rahman, 33, Mokena, was cited for a warrant arrest: driving while license suspended (DuPage County);

Dec. 21
Joseph R. Ignoffo, 35,

Lake Villa, was cited for domestic battery;

Meliton Ramirez-Felix, 48, Island Lake, was cited for DUI – alcohol, and open transportation of alcohol;

Emerson A. Nunez, 30, Waukegan, was cited for no driver's license;

Alejandro A. Moran, 36, Highwood, was cited for DUI – alcohol;

Dec. 22
Gary W. Rabon, 47, Deerfield, was cited for aggravated driving while license suspended and no insurance;

Rafael Miranda, 45, Round Lake Beach, was cited for a warrant arrest: DUI;

Nathan A. Ricks, 22, Zion, was cited for unlawful possession of a weapon;

Dec. 23
Anthony Rivera, 37, Gurnee, was cited for a warrant arrest: possession of a controlled substance;

Rick Vazquez, 28, Gurnee, was cited for DUI – alcohol, and no insurance;

Dec. 24
Christie Kelly, 50, Kenosha, WI, was cited for DUI – alcohol, no driver's license and no insurance;

Juvenile, cited for no driv-

er's license;

Dec. 25
Jose Y. Zambrano, 25, Chicago, was cited for a warrant arrest: driving while license suspended (DuPage County); Elicia M. Elias, 36, Volo, was cited for a warrant arrest: violating an order of protection;

Dec. 26
Jakira A. Burden, 23, Inglewood, was cited for a warrant arrest: violating an order of protection;

Dec. 27
David A. Cygan, 67, Lake Barrington, was cited for domestic battery;

Rodrigo Perfecto, 20, Chicago, was cited for DUI – drugs, suspended registration and no insurance;

Jovanni D. Sanchez, 18, Round Lake Beach, was cited for unlawful possession of a firearm, unlawful possession of a controlled substance;

Dec. 28
Douglas D. Harris, 48, North Chicago, was cited for driving while license revoked, suspended registration and a warrant arrest: driving while license revoked (Douglas

County); Jason I. Andersen, 50, Grayslake, was cited for battery;

Dec. 29
Roger T. Smith, 43, Inglewood, was cited for a warrant arrest: driving while license suspended (McHenry County);

Brett T. Optiz, 33, Palatine, was cited for criminal trespass to residence, and criminal trespass to vehicle;

Nardish Shacora, 25, Sauk Village, was cited for a warrant arrest: retail theft (Will County);

Dec. 30
Guadalupe B. Jacobo, 24, Waukegan, was cited for driving while license suspended, suspended registration and no insurance;

Jan. 1
Christopher Turner, 45, Wausau, WI, was cited for disorderly conduct;

Jan. 2
Elijas J. Castrejon, 29, Beach Park, was cited for driving while license suspended, and unlawful use of a driver's license.

Annual Lake County Rising event planned for Feb. 11

Every February, Lake County Rising organizes a dynamic "rising" event, where the community converges through activities. The aim is to raise awareness about gender-based violence and foster solidarity within the community.

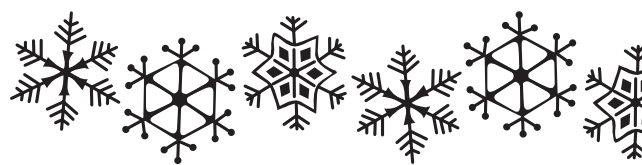
This year, the event will take place on Tuesday, Feb. 11, at College of Lake County, Grayslake Campus, Auditorium A011. There will be a resource fair that will take place from 5:30 p.m. to 6:45 p.m. and the program will begin at 7:00 p.m.

Lake County Rising is currently seeking poem, essay, and poster contest entries from

Lake County high school students and middle school students. Winning entries will be highlighted at the Lake County Rising event on February 11. Contest forms and rules can be found online at lcsao.org/380/Lake-County-Rising.

The event is sponsored by the Lake County State's Attorney's Office, Nicasa Behavioral Health Services, Mano a Mano Family Resource Center, A Safe Place, the LGBTQ+ Center of Lake County and the Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center.

For more information visit www.lcsao.org/380/Lake-County-Rising.



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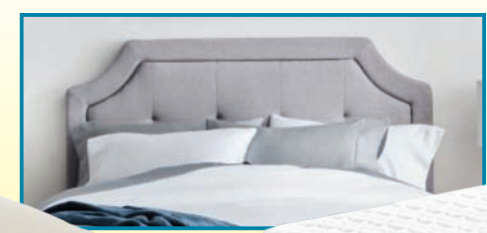
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