

SOUTHWEST Connector

NEWS FOR EVERYONE, DELIVERED TO EVERYONE • JANUARY 2025 • VOL. 4 • NO. 2 • 25,500 CIRCULATION



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ORGANIC
REDUCTION

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WHO GETS CAREER TRAINING IN HIGH SCHOOL?

Not everyone, although MPS CTE staff are working to change school policies

By **Tesha M. Christensen**

Minneapolis Public Schools Career and Technical Education (CTE) program aims to match students with real-world skills, but some high schools are restricting access.

Even though students register, hundreds of students are turned away by their high schools because of schedule misalignments.

This includes students at Roosevelt High and Edison High, who can't take the career and technical education classes being offered at the CTE centers nested in their own buildings.

"The schedules are all over so kids have to thread the needle just right," observed Minneapolis Public Schools Tech Center Principal Michael Luseni.



MEET THE CHALLENGERS

Four vie to unseat Mayor Frey

By **Cam Gordon**

City elections will be held in November 2025, and by the time Mayor Jacob Frey kicked off his reelection campaign in January, four candidates had already stepped forward to challenge him.

Two challengers currently hold office, and all four have connections to south Minneapolis. Omar Fateh is the state senator for the southside's District 62. Emily Koski is the Ward 11 City Council Member, and Brenda Short ran unsuccessfully for the Ward 9 City Council seat in 2021.



Posters for Parks, an art show featuring work inspired by the city's parks, and LoveMplsParks merch sales have made \$120,000 over the last 10 years for city parks. Of each poster purchase, 50% goes to the artist and 50% to the Minneapolis Parks Foundation's People for Parks Fund. (Photo by Murphy Byrne)

East Harriet resident reflects on past 10 years of raising money for parks through merch and posters

By **Justin Melander**

Nearly 20 years ago, Dan Woychick learned Minneapolis' perennially acclaimed parks were in a precarious position. Woychick, then a board member for his East Harriet neighborhood's organization, became aware the city's parks were in need of millions of dollars to complete vital maintenance projects.

"I've done everything from coach and run and propose marriage in our neighborhood parks – they've meant a lot to me and I was kind of discouraged that they were sort of threatened and I think a lot of

people didn't know about that," Woychick said.

Woychick realized there wasn't any organized branding for Minneapolis parks. He came up with the idea to design branded merchandise and sell it to create a new revenue stream to support the parks.

"I found that the funding was not sufficient to take care of all the needs, or a lot of, just the general maintenance things, they were hard to keep up," Woychick said in a phone interview. "They had to pick and choose which things got fixed."

Woychick's idea actualized in 2014 after finding a feasible service to print designed merchandise on-demand. He started LoveMplsParks.org, a website where he sells his designs inspired by Minneapolis parks and donates half of the profits to support the parks.

Posters for Parks, an annual one-day art show featuring work inspired by the city's parks from about 40 artists, was launched by LoveMplsParks and the Min-



Often people say national parks is America's greatest idea. I think, in a smaller way, the vision behind, and care and maintenance of Minneapolis' parks as an amenity for everybody, is part of what makes this city very livable."

Dan Woychick

10 years since LoveMplsParks started selling designs, according to Woychick.

Posters for Parks sold 370



neapolis Parks Foundation in 2016 as another means to support the city's green spaces.

LoveMplsParks and the Posters for Parks show have donated over \$120,000 in the



WHAT'S THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE FOR INDEPENDENT PHARMACIES?

As more pharmacies close, pharmacists point to low reimbursements and issues with PBMs that affect how people are getting their medications

By **Tesha M. Christensen**

The policies of health insurance companies today are making it harder for pharmacies to stay in business, according to Jim Stage, and that affects the people who need prescriptions.

Stage owns and operates two of the shrinking number of independent phar-

macies in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Lloyd's Pharmacy (720 Snelling Ave., St. Paul) and Setzer's Pharmacy (1685 Rice St.). He also operated Schneider Drug Store at 3400 University Ave. but closed it in 2019 and consolidated operations.

Stage points to the middlemen - the pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs) - as the reason pharmacies are closing.

A big problem is that pharmacies never know how much they are going to get paid for a drug. "We are a downstream business," Stage pointed out. "It's hard for a small pharmacy to stay in business because the reimbursements are low."

It's a complicated system. The amount the pharmacy is reimbursed for varies depending on



1 PHARMACIES

which insurance company is involved and which specific plan a customer has.

There are some drugs that are consistently being reimbursed for less than it costs the pharmacy.

Stage said he has made the tough decision to stop selling some medications because he can't afford to take the loss.

For a popular weight-loss drug, Lloyd's spends \$1,200 and loses \$30 on a claim. "People don't see that. All they see is what they pay," Stage observed.

He appreciates the loyalty people have and how they are trying to keep independent pharmacies in business by sending their prescriptions to them. His customers are flabbergasted to learn that even if he's busy and fills prescriptions all day that he can still be losing money.

"People think that because you come into the store that we're making money but that's not true anymore."

WHO IS MAKING MONEY IN HEALTHCARE?

Today's health insurance system using pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs) emerged in the 1990s to manage the prescription side of things for health insurance plans. Prior to that, this area of healthcare was directly managed by the insurance companies. PBMs negotiate drug prices with manufacturers and structure medication benefits within health plans. PBMs provide these services for insurance companies and employers alike. United Healthcare's PBM is OptumRx, based in Eden Prairie, where pharmacists staged protests the past two years. Prime Therapeutics, headquartered in Eagan, is one of six largest PBMs in the country and is affiliated with Blue Cross and Blue Shield.

These middlemen manage what is paid or not paid, and how things are paid, pointed out Stage.

"Now they have become big conglomerates," Stage observed. "They have become so big and powerful that they control the market."

Simply put, they are significantly deflating reimbursements for pharmacies, he observed.

They are also operating their own on-



On a level playing field, if I get to compete with the big boxes on service and taking care of my patients, I will beat them every time. And that's all we're asking for, is the opportunity."

Deborah Keaveny

line pharmacies.

PBMs argue that they lower prices. However, it isn't the local pharmacists that are seeing the results of the savings. Instead, they're closing locations.

The number of independently owned pharmacies in Minnesota has dropped from 478 to 156 in the past two decades, according to the Minnesota Board of Pharmacy. Large chain stores have decreased from 552 to 451. Twenty years ago in the Twin Cities, there were 142 small pharmacies and 307 chain locations. Today, there are 48 independent pharmacies and 252 chain locations.

"It's staggering," said Stage.

The CVS at Snelling and University in St. Paul was shuttered in 2022, part of 600 stores that were shut down nationally, many of them in low-income neighborhoods and those with theft problems. Another 300 were closed in 2024, and the location at Franklin and Nicollet in Minneapolis will be closed on Feb. 11.

In 2024, Walgreens, another large pharmacy company, announced plans to close 1,200 stores over the next three years. Of those, 500 stores will be shuttered in 2025.

"When I hear that, I know I'm not the only one in a tight space," said Stage. When it's not only the independents struggling, but also the larger chains, it's a larger issue, he said.

"Something has to change. It's not sustainable."

While pharmacies are closing down and citizens are traveling longer distances to get prescriptions filled (or waiting for them to come in the mail), healthcare in-



People think that because you come into the store that we're making money but that's not true anymore."

Jim Stage

insurance companies are making money.

"They're doing it on the backs of the consumer and the pharmacies," Stage said.

UnitedHealth Group reported \$22 billion in profits for 2023, and its chief executive officer Andrew Witty made \$23,534,936 in total compensation. Its CEO, Maple Grove resident Brian Thompson, was shot and killed in New York City in December 2024 while attending a company event. Under his leadership UnitedHealth Group made \$16 billion in profits last year. The man charged with his killing, Luigi Mangione, criticized health care companies.

PBMs have been embroiled in lawsuits alleging that they are limiting access to some drugs and promoting others.

In 2017, Mylan, the manufacturer of EpiPen, was accused of illegal schemes to favor the drug over competitors. The lawsuits alleged that Mylan offered PBMs large rebates in exchange for giving EpiPen preferential placement on their formularies. This allowed Mylan to raise the price of EpiPens.

"They demand we fill a certain brand of Epi and they inflate the price," said Stage. The insurance company reimburses very little, and the cost to consumer and pharmacy is high. "There is no accountability for them," stated Stage. "They need more accountability. They need more transparency with the consumer." The problem is found in many aspects of healthcare, he observed, as people don't know what services cost before they start receiving multiple bills.

PHARMACIES SHIFTING

Pharmacy is a proximity business,

Stage pointed out. People want to get their prescriptions from a pharmacy near where they are, and that is the prime driver of business. But more than that, independent pharmacies believe they are fulfilling a critical role for their communities, said Stage.

During his time in the industry, he's watched pharmacies need to increase their volume and employ fewer people to stay in business.

They've added more merchandise in the stores, selling over-the-counter medications, gifts and cards. Pharmacies are also doing vaccinations.

MNINDYS WORKING ON REFORM

Minnesota Independent Pharmacies, known as the MNIndys, seeks to bring awareness to the problems local pharmacies and their patients face due to PBM abuse and through educating Minnesotan patients, employers, unions, and legislators on PBM-related issues, according to the website www.mnindys.org/. In addition to education, MNIndys is dedicated to seeing both meaningful legislation and actionable enforcement regarding PBMs take place in Minnesota.

They seek regularly reforms to address potential loopholes and ensure that PBMs operate in a way that benefits pharmacies, patients and healthcare. They are also working to encourage competition among PBMs to ensure fair negotiations with pharmacies and medication manufacturers. MNIndys support regulations that enhance transparency about PBM practices, including pricing arrangements and rebates.

"Let us compete on our merits. Let us compete on our service. We'll never be able to buy drugs as cheap as the Walmarts, the Walgreens, things like that, and that's fine. That's the market. That's how a free market's supposed to work. But on a level playing field, if I get to compete with the big boxes on service and taking care of my patients, I will beat them every day. And that's all we're asking for, is the opportunity," said Deborah Keaveny, founder of MNIndys and owner of Keaveny Drug in Winsted, Minn.

Nationally, H.R.9096, the Pharmacists Fight Back Act, is winding its way through committees.

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RETHINKING I-94 DISCARDS FILL-IN-THE-TRENCH OPTIONS

Four options likely to remain after winnowing in January

By Jane McClure

Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) recommendations headed to the Rethinking I-94 project policy advisory committee are provoking debate. Recommendations to set aside at-grade parkway or boulevard options have drawn a mixed reaction in area neighborhoods.

The policy advisory committee, which is made up of elected officials and appointed representatives, has looked at 10 alternatives since 2023. The proposal, if adopted, would narrow that list to four.

The MnDOT recommendations were published in the Star Tribune just before the Christmas holiday. That surprised advocates for filling in the freeway trench.

Ricardo Lopez, MnDOT spokesperson, released a statement:

"The information shared recently by the Star Tribune contains draft recommendations that are not yet final. MnDOT is continuing to work with agency partners and established working groups to finalize recommendations and will share information about both the alternatives evaluation and the final recommendations once they are complete. As we have been throughout the entirety of this project, MnDOT is committed to robust community engagement and allowing ample opportunities to provide feedback on this important project. In addition to a public comment period that is currently planned for late 2025/early 2026, members of the public can provide feedback on the project at any point by contacting the Rethinking I-94 Project Team at rethinkingI94project.dot@state.mn.us."

The transportation advocacy group Our Streets, which has promoted the notion of a Twin Cities Boulevard to replace the freeway, is strongly objecting. The group accused MnDOT of taking action in bad faith.

"This move, rushed before the holidays, effectively denies the public a chance to explore a transformative alternative that re-connects neighborhoods and addresses decades of harm," Our Streets said in a statement released before Christmas.

Yet another point made against at-grade options is the need for federal approval for such a change. Our Streets has countered that changes to I-94 require

Aerial photo from 1954 (before I-94)



Aerial Photo from 1969 (shows I-94)



municipal consent from Minneapolis and St. Paul.

On its website, Our Streets pointed out that the announcement to drop the at-grade options comes just weeks before the U.S. Department of Transportation is to announce federal Reconnecting Communities grant recipients. "The Twin Cities Boulevard campaign has a strong chance of receiving those federal funds, especially with a funding match from Hennepin County and the city of Minneapolis," the web posted stated.

Our Streets has long touted the idea of highway property being returned to surrounding communities for new affordable housing, small businesses, community centers, parks and other uses. The at-grade proposals ranked highly in a recent MnDOT survey.

Area district councils and business groups are also looking at the recommendations and preparing to weigh in.

Lopez said in an interview that MnDOT staff working on Rethinking I-94 looked at many factors when deciding which alternative should move forward.

A MnDOT summary states that the at-grade options are being dismissed due to concerns related to safety, mobility, impacts to environmental justice communities, and short- and long-term costs.

"The at-grade alternatives do not address the number and severity of crashes for people in motorized vehicles. At-grade alternatives push additional traffic to surrounding roadways, which have higher crash rates than the existing freeway," the MnDOT summary stated. Another red flag is that the at-grade options would require expanding Interstates 494 and 694.

"MnDOT heard both strong support and strong opposition to the at-grade options from community members and

stakeholders via community events, open houses, the public survey in 2023, and in written communications to the project team. For example, while local advocacy groups expressed the most interest in and support for at-grade alternatives, other community members, such as corridor commuters, expressed opposition against at-grade alternatives more frequently than support," the summary stated.

10 CURRENT OPTIONS

Options for the Rethinking I-94 project have been winnowed down in recent years, with another round of cutbacks passed committee approval at the Jan. 17 meeting. At the five-hour virtual meeting, 145 people signed up to speak but there was not enough time for everyone.

Options set aside in 2023 included that of having transit down the middle of the freeway. Interesting enough, that was an idea studied in the 1980s and early 1990s leading to what became Green Line light rail. Proposed was a series of park and ride lots near key University Avenue intersections, as well as so-called "kiss and ride" drop-offs by the freeway where motorists would drop off passengers who wanted to ride transit.

The committee Jan. 17 focused on 10 options, with discussion of winnowing down the list. While a Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) proposal to eliminate two at-grade options has drawn the most attention, four other options are also on the chopping block. Those include two freeway expansion options.

MnDOT's summary of options cites pros and cons for each one.

Four options would remain on the table if staff recommendations are approved. Those include:

1) No Build – I-94 would remain as is. Existing transit service would continue without improvements. No-build moves forward as a baseline for the study.

2) General Maintenance B – Updates the existing infrastructure to current standards with consistent shoulders. This would allow transit to run on bus shoulders between downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul. The MnDOT overview stated that this option provides notable improvements compared to no build as pavement and bridges are reconstructed, creating an opportunity for bicycle and pedestrian crossing improvements. Bus shoulders are extended through the whole corridor, to improve mobility for transit users.

However, there are concerns about the ability of this alternative to fully address project goals outside of infrastructure condition due to the limited changes to the corridor.

3) Reduced Freeway A – Rebuild the existing freeway, reducing to three lanes throughout in total. Of the three lanes made available in both directions, two lanes would be general purpose lanes with one lane being converted to a managed lane in each direction for bus rapid transit (BRT) and E-ZPass.

4) Reconfigure Freeway – Rebuilds the existing freeway to provide four consistent lanes in each direction, with one lane being converted to a managed lane in each direction for BRT and E-ZPass.

A MnDOT overview stated that "because these alternatives demonstrate significant opportunities to achieve a more sustainable and safer future for I-94 and the community, while meeting the critical transportation needs of our region, it is our recommendation that they move forward for further evaluation."

Both could increase traffic congestion, and have negative air quality impacts.

Besides the at-grade proposals, MnDOT staff recommend that other options be shelved including both freeway expansion options. "While the expanded freeway option would improve mobility in the corridor, this option would have negative impacts on public health and the environment – particularly to those most vulnerable such as environmental justice populations along the corridor," the MnDOT overview stated.

A fifth option to be set aside is called General Maintenance A. It would simply maintain the existing infrastructure and transit services.

The sixth option slated for dismissal is described as "local/regional." It would separate the freeway into two roadway systems, providing a separate local traffic roadway and freeway space for through trips with limited access for regional traffic. It would accommodate transit on the shoulder. It would also mean expanded use of the frontage roads. This option would increase travel times and shift traffic closer to homes and through residential neighborhoods, increasing noise and air pollution.

LABOR STANDARDS BOARD DERAILED

By Cam Gordon

Despite months of research, hours of debate, and a 9-3 city council vote of approval, a new Minneapolis Labor Standards Board will not be established, at least not this year.

On Dec. 5, the city council failed to override Mayor Jacob Frey's veto of the resolution they approved to create it.

"Today is a victory for small businesses and the economic future of Minneapolis," a joint statement from the Minneapolis Regional Chamber, Downtown Council, Hospitality Minnesota, Minnesota Retailers Association, and the Minnesota Licensed Beverage Association said after

the veto was upheld.

The establishment of the board was supported by many unions, labor groups and other organizations, representing 1000s of workers and residents, including CTUL, Kids Count On Us, Unite Here! Local 17, Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, TakeAction Minnesota, MFT 59 – the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, SEIU Healthcare Minnesota and Iowa, New Justice Project MN, ISIAIAH, Faith In Minnesota, SEIU Local 284, and LIUNA Minnesota & North Dakota.

It was not supported by 384 people, most who operate businesses, who wrote in a letter: "This Minneapolis Labor Standards Board was passed without allowing for public testimony, and through a pro-

cess that ignored what little feedback was allowed to be given from businesses. It's unfair and works against the businesses that keep our city moving. Plus, we believe this board is unfairly weighted against the voice of business while directly impacting how we operate every day, without taking into account how different businesses operate, even within the same sector."

"Instead of working to lift up the needs of workers and small businesses," said Greg Nammacher, President of SEIU Local 26, "over the course of the past several months corporate interest groups and lobbyists spread misinformation about the board and weaponized the hardships faced by small businesses and small business owners of color as a shield for their

Mayor Frey's veto stands after Jenkins and Osman change earlier votes

own nefarious interests."

The veto override failed by one vote, getting only 8 of the needed 9 votes. Council members Andrea Jenkins and Jamal Osman, who voted for the measure in November, joined with council members Linea Palmisano, LaTrisha Vetaw and Michael Rainville to uphold the veto.

After the years long debate and effort, it is unclear if any council members other than Jenkins and Osman, or any other stakeholders, have the energy or interest in working with the mayor to redesign it.

Read more online at www.swconnector.com

Hundreds of people gather on first day of 2025-26 legislative session to cry, "All the way with ERA!"

On Tuesday, Jan. 14 amid a tectonic start to Minnesota Legislature 2025-26 Session, one bright spot emerged: a resounding collective voice for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) echoed throughout the hallowed halls of the Minnesota Capitol exclaiming: "All the way with ERA!"



By **Betty Foilliard**

Hundreds of participants from all across the state gathered for Forward Together: Rally for Equal Rights in the Capitol Rotunda to declare that equal rights are non-negotiable: they are our birthright, our inalienable right, and they must finally be constitutionally protected in both our state and federal constitutions. Anything less is simply that: less.

The Rally for Equal Rights was the launch of a brand new, greatly expanded coalition called "Minnesotans for Equal Rights" <https://www.genderjusticeaction.us/era/> (#MN4ER), that intends to pass a state ERA to allow the voters to decide whether to include Minnesota values in our state constitution. The message is clear: let the people vote!

It was made crystal clear that activists and the myriad organizations are simply not going to lie down and play dead for the next four years while watching our rights eroded away by reactionary legislatures, judges, and courts. A wide array of partner organizations in this diverse new MN4ER coalition include organizers ERA Minnesota & Gender Justice; AAUW MN, the Asian American Organizing Project, Compassion & Choices, FairVote MN, Indivisible North Metro; Island of Discarded Women, Jewish Community Action, League of Women Voters of MN, MN AFL-

MINNESOTANS DEMAND EQUAL RIGHTS



On Tuesday, Jan. 14, 2025 hundreds gathered at the Minnesota State Capitol, exclaiming, "All the way with ERA!" (Photos submitted)



CIO, Minnesota Council on Disability, Minnesota Move to Amend, Minnesota NOW, National Council of Jewish Women Minnesota, OutFront Minnesota, TakeAction MN, The ARC Minnesota, The Paper Lantern Project, RISE-Reviving the Islamic Sisterhood for Empowerment, Voices for Racial Justice, Women's Foundation of MN, Women's March MN, and YWCA Minneapolis.

Currently 29 states have some form of state ERA, but not Minnesota. At a time when the rights of citizens are under systemic attack, the purpose of this ERA effort is to provide constitutional safeguards against discrimination and to protect Minnesotans' hard-won fundamental freedoms. The Minnesota ERA will explicitly safeguard against discrimination based on race, color, sex, disability, gender identity or sexual orientation, pregnancy and pregnancy outcomes, and more. This charged political environment has brought about

rollbacks of people's rights happening on an epic scale, making it critically necessary to pass the ERA to protect our freedoms.

Equality speakers at the rally included Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan; MN State Auditor Julie Blaha; Senator Bobby Joe Champion, President of the Senate; Minnesota ERA bill chief author Senator Mary Kunesch; Bernie Burnham, President of Minnesota AFL-CIO; Tenzin Choesang, Strategic Partnership Manager at AAOP; the Rev. Dr. DeWayne Davis, Senior Pastor at Plymouth Congregational Church; OutFront Minnesota President Kat Rohn; High School Students Max Nguyen, Kyle Chen, & Dheekshi Jayaprakash representing The League of Women Voters MN; Gloria Perez, President & CEO of Women's Foundation of MN & Janett Jimenez, WFMN fellow in the Young Women's Initiative; Megan Peterson, Gender Justice Executive Director; Trevor Turner, Director of Public Policy at

Minnesota Council on Disability; AAUW MN President Kelsey Waits; Shelley Carthen Watson, President & CEO of YWCA Minneapolis; and MCs for the rally were Kate Quinlan-Laird, Co-President of ERA Minnesota & Iman Hassan, Advocacy Director from Gender Justice.

Equality is not a partisan issue. After 102 years of fighting to add the now fully ratified federal ERA into our federal constitution, and 42 years of pushing to add an ERA into our state constitution neither party has yet succeeded - though both have tried. This is indeed the longest, hardest, most arduous movement in America, the movement that touches all other movements. It began as a Republican initiative for decades in the 20th Century; was embraced by the Democrats along the way, then 50 years ago the country got caught up in the Culture Wars.

Things have only worsened in recent years after the abhorrent Dobbs decision, and of late we are witnessing women's rights, immigrant rights, and LGBTQIA rights being systemically stripped away in other states. Much of this playing out through the unprecedented rancor at the Minnesota Capitol. To secure future protection against discrimination, we need the ERA now.

We invite all sides to unite around principles and virtues that are at the very bedrock of the American experience - that all people are created equal. Equal rights are a moral imperative, they are our inalienable rights and we will persevere until they are explicitly protected in our highest legal document - our constitution.

Organizations and individuals who wish to join in this effort can email us at info.eramn.org

Betty Foilliard is the founder of ERA Minnesota, a coalition of activists and allied organizations dedicated to passing and Equal Rights Amendment into our state and federal constitutions. For more information, go to www.eramn.org

STORIES & JOURNEYS

Stories and Journeys is three years old. Happy Birthday! An amazing human being by the name of Amy once observed that writing is how I process my life. Others have claimed to have made the same observation. So, here I am still processing my life as the writer of Stories and Journeys. And still I am grieving as I write with a sense of loss as a result of the presidential election - loss of our democracy and the emergence of an American oligarchy with its ruling class and Trump as authoritarian president.



By **Donald L. Hammen**

THE HUMBLE BEGINNINGS OF MY INTEREST IN DEMOCRACY

I was in junior high (maybe high school). I had discovered a book in the Des Moines North High library on marriage and family. One of the chapters discussed the idea of a family council. Once a month a family sits down and has a meet-

STILL PROCESSING. STILL GRIEVING.

ing. The purpose of the meeting would be to talk about how family life is going. A chance to talk about what's going well, air grievances and propose changes to which every one can agree. I pitched the idea to my mother, father and brother. They did not reject it. They just did not seem to get what I was trying to say. Looking back I believe our family's behaviours were so ingrained that something like regular family meetings seemed foreign. I thought it was a chance to take time out to give everyone a chance to have their voice heard without judgment, identify and work out conflict. An exercise in family democracy. Fast forward to a much larger universe today.

MEDICARE OPEN ENROLLMENT COME AND GONE

It is still the case that Medicare Advantage plans are not Medicare. They are insurance plans using the name Medicare to market themselves. I consider them a threat to actual Medicare. Messenger reader Joel wants to have a conversation about the three columns I wrote during Medicare Open Enrollment last year. I have invited him to Elder Voices at Turtle Bread.

So, dear reader, if you have read this

far you have taken the plunge into the river(flow) of life experiences that is Stories and Journeys.

BRIEFLY:

I am aware of a blind man who wants to read Stories and Journeys. It is possible if he goes online, according to owner Tesha M. Christensen writing in her Too Much Coffee column called "We've Got Audio - Check Out Our Website."

I chair the All Elders United for Justice Care Giving Committee. At its last meeting we agreed to take up the topic of how the policy and practices of United Health and other like insurance organizations contribute to the health outcomes of elders.

Judith Graham is the Navigating Aging columnist for KFF Health News, a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues. Recently she interviewed me. My story and picture were the lead in one of her columns that appeared in the Washington Post newspaper.

Alex Lawson is the executive director of Social Security Works. He spoke at the November monthly meeting of the Min-

neapolis Regional Retirees Council (AFL-CIO). I missed the meeting because I was testifying before the Minnesota Legislative Task Force on Aging.

The Minneapolis Advisory Committee on Aging held an open house meeting for Jan. 15, 1 p.m. at Westminster Presbyterian Church. It was open to the public to come learn about the work of the committee and the process for joining. There are open seats from several wards.

ELDER VOICES (TELLING OUR STORIES/SHARING OUR JOURNEYS) IS SCHEDULED TO MEET JAN. 31, 10-11 A.M. AT TURTLE BREAD, 4205-EAST 34TH STREET.

Look for the table with the All Elders sign. I missed in November due to a combination of illness and inclement weather. If you are processing your life or sensing a loss, do show up.

IN GRATITUDE ALWAYS.

Donald L. Hammen is a longtime south Minneapolis resident, and serves on the All Elders United for Justice leadership team.

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The Connector is for profit and for a purpose - and we don't sacrifice one for the other. We consider ourselves a zebra company, one that is both black and white, both/and. As a media company, we work to highlight issues, solve real, meaningful problems, and repair existing social systems. We are working with our readers and advertisers to create a more just and responsible society that hears, helps and heals the customers and communities we serve.

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WELCOME TO THE LAND OF 10,000 GARDENS

Imagine if everyone could raise their own food and feed themselves.

Focus on what's strong. Not what's wrong.

This is the essence of asset-based community development. It's also what sustainable community building looks like and how we can create positive change. By leveraging our strengths, we can provide better tools to tackle challenges and find solutions.



By Eric Ortiz

Parks are one of Minnesota's best assets. In Minneapolis, we have 185 neighborhood parks and a world-class urban park system with 7,059 acres of parkland and water, 55 miles of parkways and trails, 102 miles of Grand Rounds biking and walking paths, 22 lakes, seven golf courses, and 49 recreation centers.

The Minneapolis park system also has 12 formal gardens. Those gardens include the beautiful themed gardens of Lyndale Park, the magical JD Rivers' Children's Garden at Theodore Wirth, the naturalistic Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden, the iconic Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, and more.

Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) gardeners maintain the gardens with volunteers, while residents can grow their own food at community gardens.

Community gardens are one of the underrated gems of Minneapolis parks. Today, there are 11 community garden locations managed by MPRB, seven future community garden sites, and four gardens on MPRB-owned land.

Minneapolis Parks and Recreation wants to establish more community gardens in parks throughout the city. They are not alone.

"I want to see my neighbors raising food in their yard," says Jimbo Lovestar, the founder of The Intitute for Men's Health and Well-Being and a north Minneapolis resident. "I want to see gardens up and down [the city]. I've had a garden in my yard for 32 years so I want to see other people picking up on that."

"I want to see community gardens on empty lots. I want to see community gardens in city parks. There are a few. I want to see people working together to feed of themselves and each other. Allowing peo-



MPRB senior planner Colleen O'Del (at left) works with youth at Wedge Point Park Youth Engagement Workshop. (Photo by Eric Ortiz)



Jimbo Lovestar, Princess Titus of Appetite for Change, and Cole Depierre of Sisters Camelo share thoughts during the January episode of "Youth Community Journalism."

ple allowing. When people raise their own food, the sense of empowerment that's down inside is, how to put it, it can't be denied. It's so incredible and deep to raise your own food."

Jimbo Lovestar has been raising his own food without pesticides since 1980. By preserving his own produce, he has been able to eat an excellent quality diet year-round for very little money. He has been teaching classes on food preservation since 1985.

Lovestar shared his thoughts during the January episode of "Youth Community Journalism." The show's topic was the power of food and using food as a tool to build health, wealth, and social change.

Other guests included Princess Titus, the cofounder of Appetite for Change, a

nonprofit creating better access to healthy food since 2011, and Cole Depierre, the kitchenbus coordinator for Sisters Camelo, a nonprofit feeding the hungry since 1997.

"Food is power," explains Titus. "I believe that food has the power to bring people together across cultures, across socio-economical separations, and zip codes and things that we celebrate. I think food is the tie that binds us."

But not everyone has access to food. According to Feeding America, hunger affects over 500,000 people in Minnesota, including more than 180,000 children. In 2024, Minnesotans visited food shelves a record 9 million times. That's an increase from 7.5 million visits in 2023, which was a 2 million increase from 2022.

"Anyone can relate to the feeling of scarcity," says Depierre. "That feeling of scarcity is a fundamental groundwork for the sort of things that we don't want to have happen in our lives. It's kind of the root of almost all things that go wrong. We just aren't getting the things that we need, let alone want. ... Food is such an essential component to our everyday life, and so if we feel scarcity, scarcity around food, it can really be detrimental to people's ability to function on every level."

We have a food crisis. Many people cannot afford groceries.

Community gardens can ensure that no one goes hungry.

This is a cause for celebration. But the benefits of community gardens go beyond food.

Community gardens also can help reduce global warming by reducing carbon emissions, improving water management, lowering urban temperatures, improving air quality, and increasing plant biodiversity.

Minneapolis is adding a new park, Wedge Point Park, at 1920 Aldrich Avenue South in the Lowry Hill East neighborhood (the Wedge) of Minneapolis. MPRB asked youth to help with the park planning of Wedge Point Park. Green space is one of the things they want to see.

More community gardens are on the way in Minneapolis. Anyone interested in community gardening with MPRB can apply for a plot of land by Feb. 15.

After the due date, preference will be given to Minneapolis residents without access to land who plan to grow food.

Food is fuel. Food is medicine. Food is life. And life begins the day you start a garden.

For more information about starting a new community garden in Minneapolis, contact MPRB's planning division at 612-230-6472 or planning@minneapolis-parks.org. To help with managing a community garden, contact the community gardening coordinator at 612-704-7948 or communitygarden@minneapolis-parks.org. You can watch the "Youth Community Journalism" show about the power of food on the Strong Mind Strong Body Foundation's YouTube channel at bit.ly/youthcommunityjournalismfoodpower.

Eric Ortiz lives in the Wedge with his family. He is executive director of the Strong Mind Strong Body Foundation, a national youth and community development nonprofit based in Minneapolis, and associate director of research for The Pivot Fund, a venture philanthropy organization that invests in community newsrooms serving underserved communities.

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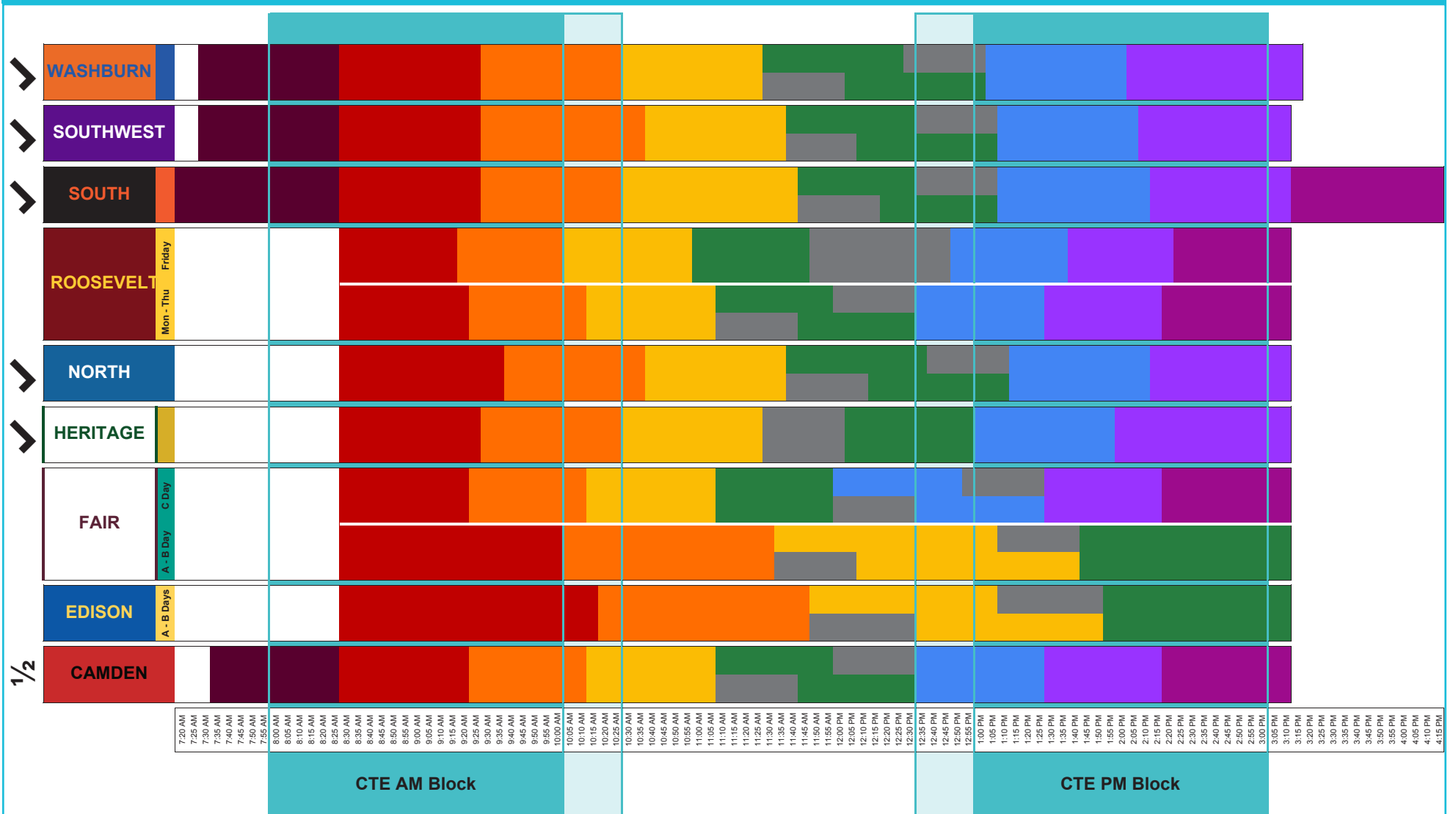
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MINNEAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOL BELL SCHEDULES PREVENT STUDENTS FROM TAKING CTE CLASSES



1 CAREER TRAINING

MPS moved the costly, federally funded CTE programs to become district-wide offerings, and provided full two-way transportation, only to have students who enrolled in the courses find them struck from their schedules due to incompatibility with their school's different class hours.

The district's nine high schools have varying class period schedules. One starts the day at 7:20 a.m., two at 7:30 a.m., one at 7:35 a.m., and five at 8:30 a.m. One ends at 3 p.m., five at 3:10 p.m., another at 3:15 p.m., and the last at 4:12 p.m. (See illustration above.)

Complicating things further is that class periods range from long block days to shorter class periods. Some schools have the same class times per day, while Fair operates on A-B Days with some C Days; and Roosevelt has the same schedule Mondays to Thursdays and a different one on Fridays.

The district has issued a recommended bell schedule of 8:30 a.m. to 3:10 p.m. for its schools that would standardize times and allow students to attend CTE classes. Some high school leadership have made it a priority for their students to access CTE programming, while others have not, as the diagram shows. The school board is the only entity that can mandate a schedule in the district.

The CTE class schedule, commonly referred to as the bell schedule, has an a.m. block class from 8:05-10 a.m., a mid-day block between 10:05 a.m. and 1 p.m. (this varies depending on the tech center), and a p.m. block from 1:05-3 p.m. This gives students time to travel back to their high schools from 10:05-10:25 a.m. and from high school to a tech center from 12:35-1 p.m. Breakfast is available at the tech center and students eat lunch at their home high schools.

The light turquoise block in the graphic above shows the 25-minute minimum travel time to and from a home school. If that 25-minute time interrupts another class, students can't take CTE classes without missing a class out of their schedule. — essentially taking a free hour. That isn't possible in most student's schedules.

Some classes are also offered online. Because they are asynchronous, they can be taken at any time. Students can take general courses online to make room for CTE classes in person, but students report varying levels of support for registering for those depending on individual high school policies.

Currently, students from only five of the district's high schools can access some CTE classes because their schedules line up enough to do so (Washburn, Southwest, South, North, and Heritage), and

Camden's students can make the p.m. block work.

REAL SKILLS FOR THE REAL WORLD

Getting trained in high school for well-paying jobs is the goal of the Minneapolis Public Schools CTE program.

"Real skills for the real world," said Luseni.

There are over 70 CTE courses that lead to pathways at the overlap of the



CTE is not an elective. CTE is for kids that want to see a career in a specific area."

Michael Luseni

most high-paying and high-demand careers in the metro area, according to the objectives of the federal Perkins grant that funds the program. Students can earn college credits and industry credentials, and are connected to a variety of career exploration activities including industry professional meetings and panels, worksite and company tours, and immersive apprenticeships and internships.

"The whole idea of CTE is that it's a full circle," stated Luseni.

"I want every student that comes

through Minneapolis to be able to say, 'I can graduate from high school with my diploma and also have the confidence and skills for my next step. I have all the connections. I want a job. I can get it.'"

Luseni aims to create options for students so they have skills to work part-time earning serious money and pay their way while attending college.

One of the biggest myths CTE staff seek to dispel is that the only way to get a high-paying job is by doing a four-year university program. But emerging careers that require technical degrees for hands-on jobs are on the rise and among the best-paying jobs in America today. CTE courses prepare students for four-year degrees, two-year degrees, and jobs directly out of high school.

The shift in how the district's CTE classes are offered comes when there is an all-time high of 66 percent of high school graduates attending colleges, but only a quarter of them are actually earning degrees. Instead, they're disengaged because they don't see a connection between their coursework and their future career, as noted in CTE promotional materials.

Of those that do graduate, half find themselves in gray-collar jobs, roles they are underemployed in, and that continues for 33 percent of graduates into their 30s.

CTE programs help address



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8 CAREER TRAINING

the misalignment between education and the workforce. They focus on this question: What knowledge and skills do you need to get a job today?

Georgetown University predicts only 33 percent of all jobs will require a four-year liberal arts degree or more in the future while the majority will be highly skilled jobs requiring professional and technical training. These are jobs that AI can't do.

Emerging occupations in every industry now require a combination of academic knowledge and technical ability.

"We still need to ask the question: What do we see is the purpose of high school?" remarked Luseni. "As a district, we have to answer that question."

MORE THAN FILLER CLASSES

Career and technical education (CTE) classes can be much more than filler classes, according to Luseni. CTE courses are eligible for college credit, and MPS has articulation agreements with 21 Minnesota colleges so students can seamlessly transition into their programs.

"CTE is not an elective. CTE is for kids that want to see a career in a specific area," observed Luseni.

As the perspective of parents shifts, "they're looking at CTE as an extension of their kids' next steps," said Luseni.

CTE staff also connect with large state employers to train students so that they are ready for jobs as soon as they graduate from high school.

"If you decide I don't want to go to college, I want to get a job, we will make sure you are trained," observed Luseni.

CTE uses a pathways approach that explores 15 various careers available in agriculture, automotive tech and collision repair, business entrepreneurship and marketing, computer science, construction, cybersecurity, education, engineering, healthcare, law and public safety, machine technology, media arts, robotics and drone technology, and welding. These jobs have been identified federally as growing areas in the Twin Cities that will have high pay.

Those fascinated by media arts help



"I want every student that comes through Minneapolis to be able to say, 'I can graduate from high school with my diploma and also have the confidence and skills for my next step. I have all the connections. I want a job. I can get it,'" said Minneapolis Public Schools Tech Center Principal Michael Luseni. The district's tech centers offer 15 pathways that have been identified as leading to jobs at the overlap of high paying and high demand. (Photo by Tesha M. Christensen)

dents do not get the opportunity for some of the programming."

He acknowledged that there will be growing pains as they transition to this model, including the misalignment with school bell schedules that interferes with the ability of some students to take the classes.

Other districts in Minnesota have also moved to centralized CTE, including Anoka-Hennepin and Wright County (which supports the eight neighboring school districts of Annandale, Big Lake, Buffalo-Hanover-Montrose, Delano, Howard Lake-Waverly-Winsted, Maple Lake, Monticello, and St. Michael-Albertville).

SKILLS, CAREER DEVELOPMENT FOR K-8, TOO

MPS CTE has piloted a new program with Junior Achievement so that its younger students can begin exploring careers in addition to the importance of personal finance, and the value of work. There are programs for grades kindergarten to eighth grade. It includes the popular BizTown, an immersive day-long visit to a simulated town where students operate banks, manage restaurants, write checks, and vote for mayor. Students are able to connect the dots between what they learn in school and the real world. JA Learning Experiences support national and state standards in reading, mathematics, social studies, and work and career readiness.

"Kids as early as kindergarten can ask who they want to be," said Luseni.

run the KBEM radio station, learn sound tech, and create podcasts. Students who want to be police officers can get hands-on experience through service-learning opportunities to ready them before entering the local police force. Engineering students recently toured the Minnesota Department of Transportation to learn about infrastructure and the high-end computer systems used to manage it.

TRANSITION TO 3 CTE CENTERS

The shift from offering various CTE classes at individual high schools was part of the Comprehensive District Design. It was cited as a way to equitably offer the same classes to all students, as previously only some schools had the equipment or qualified staff who could teach these classes. The change was effective for the 2023-2024 school year when a 282,794-square-foot addition to house the largest tech ed center on the North High campus was ready for student with indoor areas for flying drones, classrooms and flexible spaces.

There are smaller tech ed centers at Edison and Roosevelt.

Before the 2023 fall semester, CTE class offerings at individual schools varied greatly. Some had them and others didn't. The classes require teachers with specialized skills and equipment, and not every school was able to fill enough classes to make that work.

"The center-based approach creates equity in the system," said Luseni. "This way, every kid in the district has an option to say, 'I want to take a CTE course no matter where and the district will get me there.'"

He added, "When you are not doing a center approach, then most of the stu-

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▶1 LOVEMPSPARKS

posters total in its debut year and now consistently sells about 1,000 posters at each show, according to Woychick. The show began as a one-day, on-site event where people could buy the posters and then they were off the market. In 2020, due to the pandemic, the show was an online sale and was the highest-selling event up to that point. The current format sees the in-person show followed by a one-week online sale after the event.

Woychick, 61, grew up in Mankato, went to the University of Idaho and has been in Minneapolis since 1986. He has resided in Southwest Minneapolis, near Lake Harriet, for over 30 years.

Woychick said he's had a connection with Minneapolis parks for a long time. He remembers going to Lake Harriet with his grandmother when he was a child and golfing with his father at Hiawatha Golf Course near Lake Nokomis and Hiawatha Park.

"The beautiful thing about the parks is that they're outdoors-focused and they're for everybody, instead of just your own personal nice backyard," Woychick said. "Often people say national parks is America's greatest idea. I think, in a smaller way, the vision behind, and care and maintenance of Minneapolis' parks as an amenity for everybody, is part of what makes this city very livable."

MEET THE ARTISTS

The Posters for Parks artists share Woychick's admiration for Minneapolis'



Posters for Park artist Yahya Rushdi (left) and Michael Jacobsen share an admiration for Minneapolis green spaces. (Photos submitted)

green spaces.

Yahya Rushdi, 33, a University of Minnesota graduate and senior studio artist for a marketing agency, had his art showcased in the Parks show for the first time this year.

"Minnehaha Falls was like, a really big thing for me. I really loved going to the park there and just really enjoying the falls," Rushdi said in a phone interview. "I called it 'My Happy Place' - it is the name of the piece."

Michael Jacobsen, 45, a freelance illustrator featured six times in the Posters for Parks show, also said his favorite Minneapolis park is Minnehaha.

"I know that people in the Twin Cities, especially both Minneapolis and St. Paul, really appreciate their parks, and I think it's just a reminder of that, kind of that necessity that you don't want to take



for granted," Jacobsen said in a phone interview. "I think having some fiscal responsibility going back to the parks is a value."

Woychick said he is looking forward to the LoveMplsParks website being revamped in 2025, and that it may be time for him to look for an heir to run the Parks show.

"This next year'll be the 10th year of the Poster show and I'm kind of looking for someone to take over my wing and eventually take it over. I don't think I will do it forever," Woychick said. "I hope and I think it will keep going 'cause the Parks Foundation is interested in it as an event and as a celebration of artists and parks."



Justin Melander is a University of Minnesota student majoring in journalism.



LOCALLY-THEMED ARTWORK SUPPORTS MINNEAPOLIS PARKS THROUGH LOVEMPSPARKS

▶1 THE CHALLENGERS

DeWayne Davis has been a pastor at two southside churches; first at All God's Children Metropolitan Community Church and, currently, at Plymouth Congregational Church. He is seeking elected office for the first time.

WHERE THEY COME FROM

Davis was born and raised in Indianola, Miss. in a family with 15 children. After high school, he moved to Washington, DC and lived there for 24 years before becoming a minister in 2012 and moving to Minneapolis in 2013. He has lived in the Willard-Hay neighborhood ever since. He was recently chaplain of the Minnesota State Senate, and co-chair of Mayor Frey's Community Safety Workgroup from Dec. 2021 to June 2022 when it presented its final report.

Fateh was born in Washington, DC and grew up in Annandale, Va. He moved to Minneapolis 10 years ago and currently lives in Stevens Square. His parents immigrated from Somalia before he was born. He holds a master's degree in public administration from George Mason Univer-

sity and has worked as a community engagement specialist for the city, as well as with the Minnesota Department of Transportation, Minnesota Department of Revenue and University of Minnesota. In 2020, he was elected to the state legislature and became the first Somali American and first Muslim to serve in the state senate.

Frey grew up in Oakton, Va., graduated from the College of William and Mary and the law school at Villanova University. Then he moved to Minneapolis. He was elected to represent Ward 3 on the city council in 2013, and was elected mayor in 2017 and again in 2021. He lives in the Nicollet Island East Bank neighborhood.

Koski was born and raised in Northeast Minneapolis and has lived in the city all her life, except for when she attended the University of St. Thomas and lived in St. Paul. She now lives in the Page neighborhood by Pearl Park.

"My family raised me on the value of public service, and that is the grounding I have in politics," said Koski, whose father, Al Hofstad, is a former council member and mayor. Koski worked in corporate marketing and owned a small business prior to joining the city council in 2021.

Brenda Short grew up in Iowa and worked on farms and in meat processing

plants. She moved to Minneapolis following a childhood tragedy, which led to a period of homelessness before she found her first apartment on 34th and Chicago Ave. She later bought a house in the Powderhorn neighborhood where she ran two small businesses and lived for over 30 years.

PROUDEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS

"One of my greatest accomplishments was opening a 24/7 daycare in my home, which my parents lovingly referred to as the 'dream daycare,'" Short said. "Now, over 20 years later, grown-up children still run up to me, hug me, and share how much they loved being in my daycare. One of my last daycare kids even works for the city of Minneapolis, and I get the joy of giving her a big hug every time I attend a city council meeting. It reminds me of how important community support is for single families."

Koski is particularly proud of her work on the city council that created the city's Community Safety Audit Division, supported the Behavioral Crisis Response Teams, enhanced the Domestic Violence Navigators Program, created pilot programs supporting small businesses, and advanced climate action and water initia-

tives.

Fateh noted several bills he has written and worked to get passed, including Northstar Promise Act that provides free tuition for residents from families making less than \$80,000 to attend public colleges in Minnesota. "I am proud to have championed this bill that has allowed thousands of students all across the state to be able to attend college for free," said Fateh.

One of Davis' proudest accomplishments was co-chairing the mayor's Community Safety Workgroup. "With respect and collegiality," said Davis, "we were able to agree upon a series of recommendations that would help the mayor address the city's public safety challenges head-on and provide the mayor with a set of recommendations that would set the foundation for substantive changes in policing and safety within our city."

POLITICAL BEGINNINGS

Davis first got involved in politics when people at his junior high school were protesting a school board decision not to hire a Black man as superintendent in the school district that served a majority of Black students. Later he participated in the Close-Up Foundation and American Legion

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► 8 THE CHALLENGERS

Boys State and Boys Nation. After college he worked for members of Congress, including as the appropriations director for then-House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer.

Koski was introduced to politics early. "I watched my dad, a former mayor of Minneapolis, care deeply for residents and neighbors – that was his motivation to work hard for our city every day and I share that." She also grew up with a childhood friend, Kari Dziedzic, living just blocks away from her. "She was also a mentor of mine, a steady perspective I could rely on when I needed it the most," Koski said.

Short was inspired "to bring real change to my city" by the police officer killing of Justine Damand and the lack of reform that followed. She remembers watching the trial seeing "the mayor make false promises to [Damond's] family, saying that police reform would happen, despite his background in criminal justice." This motivated her to run for city council in 2021 with a "campaign focused on Justine Damond and the urgent need for police reform."

Fateh recalls following local and national politics from a very young age. "It was always apparent to me that politics had a great impact on the lives of my family and the people in my community," he said. "I witnessed and experienced firsthand the harm and marginalization that immigrants, people of color and working-class people experience in this country."

TOP PRIORITIES

The four candidates have all identified priorities they hope to share in the months ahead. They all include housing and safety.

WHO IS ONE LEADER YOU ADMIRE AND MIGHT TRY TO EMULATE?

"Bishop Yvette Flunder, the founder of Ark of Refuge, Inc."
- Dewayne Davis



"Shirley Chisholm and former State Representative of Ohio, Mr. Les Brown."
- Brenda Short



"The working people that fight tirelessly for justice and positive change in our communities."
- Omar Fateh



"The late Senator Kari Dziedzic."
- Emily Koski

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Fateh, for example, supports enacting rent stabilization, the Community Opportunity to Purchase Act, the Affordable Housing Right of First Refusal ordinance, increased funding for shelters and adopting "a compassionate response to encampments that centers public health and human dignity, rather than our current mayor's practice of criminalizing homelessness."

"Minneapolis desperately needs innovative public safety solutions that transcend traditional policing," said Fateh, who wants to invest in the Behavior Crisis Unit, strengthen the fire department, and implement the city's Safe and Thriving Communities Plan. "We must pursue bold and transformative approaches to public safety to end the cycle of violence and brutality that has held our city captive for so many years," he said.

In the area of energy and the environment, Fateh supports a city carbon emissions tax, 24-hour bus lanes on Hennepin

Avenue, closure of the HERC incinerator, and the I-94 Twin Cities Boulevard project.

Davis, Short and Koski also highlight a more respectful and inclusive approach to governance.

Davis lists "dignity" as the first priority. "We need leadership that treats everyone with dignity, recognizing that all too often, in the pursuit of economic growth and prosperity, there is a risk that working people and families may get left behind," he said. "As mayor, I would keep the lines of communication and engagement to every part of the city so that we can hear the stories and concerns of the people from every corner of the city."

He also prioritized "opportunity" which, to him, includes "the opportunity to earn a living wage, have access to adequate affordable housing, and a responsive city that will partner with them to realize their aspirations for the good quality of life."

In terms of safety, he hopes to "coordinate a collective effort to pursue police and public safety reform and discern and implement best practices in community safety and violence prevention and intervention."

Short puts affordable housing, including homeownership, rental housing, and safe spaces for our unhoused neighbors and "financial growth that benefits everyone, no matter your zip code or background" at the top of her list.

She also prioritizes public safety. "Our city has not healed after four long years, and we need a leader who can build a bridge between the community and our peace officers," she said.

She also prioritizes the establishment an "Ebony Alert" alert program. "Women and children of color, including Native, Latino, and African American communities, are not prioritized when they go missing, and this must change," she said. "The Amber Alert system has failed these communities."

Short observed, "We cannot rebuild our city if we cannot all come together. I understand this will be a difficult conversation, but as your mayor, I promise to allow everyone a seat at the table to voice their concerns, and I will stand by my word."

Koski agrees that safety, housing and supporting the local economy are critically important, and stresses working in collaboration, calling herself a "bridge builder." She supports investing in "comprehensive public safety that leads to effective oversight," stable, affordable housing and "bringing humanity and care to our homelessness crisis," supporting our local economy, including small businesses and working families, and "running a city government that works better, together."

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- Patricia Ohmans, Frogtown Green

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BRANDT ANNOUNCES REELECTION BID FOR BOARD OF ESTIMATE

Steve Brandt announced that he's seeking a second term this year on the Minneapolis Board of Estimate and Taxation, the body that sets the city's property tax cap annually and approves the city's issuing of debt.



"I'm running because I believe that the principle that I promoted in my first campaign--balancing the needs of the city against the ability of property owners to pay -- continues to serve the city well," Brandt said.

In a second term he'd like to:

- Get creative on reducing the city's dependence on property taxes to balance its budget;

- Promote city charter changes involving the board; and

- Mentor the board's sole staffer who will be hired this year to research financial topics as directed by the board.

Brandt currently serves as board president. He was elected to the board in 2021 as the leading vote-getter in the election to fill the two seats on the board directly elected by the public.

Here's what he's worked on during his first three years on the board:

- Won commitments this year from Mayor Frey and Council President Payne to systematically investigate alternative taxes that the city could use to relieve the reliance on an ever-more burdensome property tax. He's heard the complaints of those on fixed incomes, such as many seniors, and he's open to a variety of ideas. Brandt thinks that the city needs to explore the feasibility of income-based taxation to avoid excessive future property tax increases. This could raise tens of millions of dollars, which should be devoted to property tax relief and to absorbing the cost of new spending. Brandt also favors a review of city spending, as many residents suggest, either by an outside blue-ribbon committee or by pursuing zero-based bud-

geting so that current spending is justified.

- Quizzed city finance officials persistently when they present quarterly finance reports or levy requests to the Board. "I ask more questions than any other board member and perhaps as many as all other members combined. It's a habit that I learned as a reporter -- be relentless in getting the facts," Brandt said.

- Supported the reactivation of a public housing levy that will provide money to renovate public housing units that the federal government has neglected through inadequate funding. This also will create small clusters of new units for qualified applicants.

- Supported efforts to open up the BET to the public. Each meeting agenda now has a time for the public to weigh in on topics in that meeting's agenda, something previously allowed only at the annual levy hearing. Meetings now are webcast live and also are archived on YouTube.

- Led an effort to save money on city borrowing in the face of the Fed's planned interest rate increases in 2022 and 2023. Some city projects like utility work are funded year after year by a combination of borrowing and cash from sewer and water bills. His proposal would have moved some 'out year' borrowing ahead a year to beat interest rate increases, shifting an equivalent amount of cash to the 'out year' to compensate. That's complicated, and would have required city council action, but would have saved the city substantially. It fell one vote short of winning board approval.

- Promoted two proposed City Charter amendments. One would give BET a seventh member to replace the one lost when the Library Board was abolished in 2009. BET now the only elected body in Minneapolis that lacks an odd number of members to break ties. Brandt proposed that the number of members elected by

voters increase from two to three, maintaining the current tripartite split in which neither City Hall, the Park Board or directly elected public representatives hold a majority of seats. The companion charter proposal would change the board's name to the Board of Debt and Taxes, which more accurately reflects its duties.

- Led an effort that will restore the BET's sole staffer, its executive secretary, as provided for in the charter. The board employed a full-time staffer for almost a century until 2019, when the 38-year incumbent retired. Those serving then on the board tried to employ a highly qualified finance professional at half time pay and no benefits. Not surprisingly, neither person hired stayed long. This destroyed the Board's institutional memory, which is vital with a rotating group of elected officials moving onto and off of the Board. This staffing is vital if the Board is to fulfill its role of giving city finances an independent look separate from a mayor and his or her finance department. Brandt's initiative authorized a full-time staffer.

Brandt is seeking DFL endorsement for his reelection bid. He is a 48-year resident of the Kingfield neighborhood, and a retired Star Tribune reporter who spent most of his 40 years there focused on Minneapolis issues. He leads habitat restoration crews at Coldwater Spring, serves on the District 62 DFL central committee, is on the Great Northern Greenway Coalition board, and served on CLIC, the city's capital budgeting task force, for five years.

"My decision to run again for a four-year term was not taken lightly," he said. "I did some soul-searching, weighing the demands of the job against personal considerations. But I know city finances well, maintain a balanced approach to property taxes, I'm committed to the Board's role as an independent watchdog for city finances, and I'm eager and able to serve."

NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS

WINTER FEST AT CFPA

The Center for Performing Arts (CFPA) invites you to warm up winter weekends with the vibrant energy of the Winter Festival. Held over four Sundays from Jan. 19 through Feb. 9, 2025, this free festival takes place at CFPA, located at 3754 Pleasant Ave in Minneapolis, with performances from 3 to 7 p.m. each evening.

ART SHANTY PROJECT

Art Shanty Projects is returning to the frozen water of Bdé Umán / Lake Harriet in South Minneapolis Jan. 18 - Feb. 9, 2025. This year's program includes 20 Shanties that stay up all month, and more than 20 performances and art actions that pop up throughout the village at different times throughout the run. Shanties will again be a mix of classic, enclosed structures and the new open-air style of projects that artists developed during the pandemic.

KENNY CHILI COOK-OFF FEB. 1

The 2nd annual Kenny chili cook-off returns on Saturday, Feb. 1, 1-3 p.m., at City Church, 1501 W 54th Street. This event will be free to eat and compete. The winner will receive the highly sought-after 2025 KNA Chili Cook-Off Trophy, gift card to South Lyndale Liquors & Market, and bragging rights. The Kenny Neighborhood Association currently has openings on its board and committees. E-mail info@kennyneighborhood.org for more information

LEARN ABOUT WALKERS ON JAN. 27

The Linden Hills History Study Group will be learning about T.B. and Harriet Walker and their contributions to Minneapolis on Monday, Jan. 27 at 7 p.m. at St. John's Episcopal Church.

KINGFIELD SAP TAP PROGRAM

Kingfield's Sap Tap program is back for its seventh season of reaping the sweet gifts of area maples. Residents may sign up to tap their non-boulevard maples. Mark your calendar to participate in a community day of maple-based fun on March 22. All neighbors are encouraged to attend the community pancake breakfast fundraiser at MLK Park from 9-11:30 a.m.

MOBILE FOOD MARKET, FOOD SHELF

The mobile market (a grocery store on a bus) is back in Stevens Square for 2025. Anyone can shop for a full selection of fresh fruits, vegetables, meat, and more. The mobile market will be visiting the Stevens Square area weekly. It will be at Third Avenue Towers (1707 3rd Ave. S.) every Tuesday from 2:05-3:05 p.m.

Groveland Food Shelf (1900 Nicollet Ave.) in the basement of Plymouth Congregational Church provides emergency groceries for those in need. If you have a need, you are eligible. Hours are Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 9:30 a.m. to noon, Tuesdays and Thursdays 3-6 p.m.

NEW FARMERS MARKET COMING

Lynnhurst Neighborhood Association is excited to welcome the Southwest Farmers Market to Mount Olivet starting May 17, replacing the Fulton Farmers Market.

CITY BRIEFS

BET LEADERSHIP

The Board of Estimate and Taxation (BET), which sets the maximum property tax levy and coordinates taxing and borrowing for the city, has reelected Steve Brandt as president and Samantha Pree-Stinson as vice president. Cathy Abene was also reappointed to serve as the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board member. The other members are Council Vice President Aisha Chughtai, Mayor Jacob Frey, and Council President Elliott Payne.

NICOLLET MALL TRANSIT CHANGES

The city and Metro Transit have developed three options to remove buses from the Nicollet Mall. They can be found on the project website and at an open house set for Tuesday, Jan. 28 at 12-1:30 p.m. at the IDS Crystal Court (717 Nicollet Mall). To take a survey about the options and access the project website at <https://linktr.ee/downtowntransit>.

MPD OFF-DUTY FEES

The City Council's Public Health and Safety Committee will hold a public hearing on a proposed off-duty fees ordinance on Jan. 22 starting at 1:30 p.m. People can testify in person or submit comment in

writing any time to CouncilComment@minneapolismn.gov. The city council is expected to vote on the ordinance on Jan. 27. For more information visit <https://lms.minneapolismn.gov/File/2024-00147>.

GAS AND ELECTRIC FRANCHISE AGREEMENTS

The city has published draft franchise agreements with the current electric and gas utility companies, Xcel and CenterPoint. The agreements, if approved by the city council, will allow the companies to continue having exclusive rights to provide natural gas and electricity in the city until Dec. 2034. They also include memorandums-of-understanding that re-establish the Minneapolis Clean Energy Partnership, a collaboration between the city and the utilities to help Minneapolis reach its climate equity plan goals. The documents are available on the city website for review prior to the public hearing before the city council's climate and infrastructure committee tentatively set for Feb. 6.

STEP UP INTERNSHIPS

Applications are now open for 14-21-year-olds to apply for the city's Step Up summer employment program. Internships at public, private, nonprofit and community organizations will be available, with applications are open until Feb. 14.

PARTNERSHIP ENGAGEMENT FUNDS


The city is now accepting applications from community-based groups and individuals to fund small-scale projects aimed at making communities more socially connected, healthy and safe. Those interested are required to complete an interest form before starting applications. Interest forms are due by Feb 19.

CAPITAL LONG-RANGE IMPROVEMENT COMMITTEE APPOINTMENT

The city council has approved the two-year appointment of Andreas Gaston as a Ward 13 representative on this committee that makes recommendations to the mayor and city council on capital improvement program development and annual capital improvement budgets.

ARTS COMMISSION APPOINTMENTS

The city council has voted to appoint southwest residents Doug Moore and Zachary Colby, as well as Kelly McKay who works in the area as the Director of Education at The Museum of Russian Art, to the Minneapolis Arts Commission.

 Briefs compiled by Cam Gordon.


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NATURAL ORGANIC REDUCTION A greener burial option is coming to Minnesota

By Margie O'Loughlin

Live On Minnesota is working to become the first provider of Natural Organic Reduction (NOR) in the state of Minnesota. Also known as "human composting," NOR is the safe and peaceful transformation of the body into nutrient-rich compost after death.

South Minneapolis resident Erik Halaas wants to become garden compost himself one day. Through his social venture Live On Minnesota, he is exploring how this natural alternative to cremation and conventional burial can become viable in Minnesota.

Halaas has 10+ years of experience building partnerships to research, test, and apply new approaches to programming in public health and education. He uses the term "intrapreneur" to describe his role: that of a person exploring new opportunities inside longstanding institutions.

HOW IT WORKS

There aren't many institutions older than funeral care. According to the Green Burial Council, coffin burial and cremation account for 94% of all funerals in the US. Both have significant negative impacts on the environment. Coffin burials account for 64,000 tons of steel, 1.6 million tons of concrete, and 4 million gallons of embalming fluid annually. Cremation has an annual carbon output equivalent to burning roughly 400 million pounds of coal.

Like all composting, NOR creates new life through death. Leaning into the principles of nature, NOR layers the body with organic material (wood chips, straw, alfalfa, wildflowers) in a reusable vessel, adds oxygen and movement to facilitate microbial activity, and breaks the body down into its natural and nutrient-rich elements. Inorganic materials like artificial joints are sifted and removed and the final product is ready to support new life. Once decomposition is complete, about a cubic yard of organic material can be returned to the family.

TABOO SUBJECT



Erik Halaas is founder of Live On Minnesota, which aims to return the body to the earth after death, while conserving land and reducing carbon emissions. (Photo by Margie O'Loughlin)

In addition to bringing NOR to Minnesota, Halaas hopes to support a culture of open communication on the topics of death and dying. He said, "Even though there's nothing as normal as death, it can create real challenges for families. I think we could all learn to live better if we deepened our understanding of death and its inevitabilities."

Halaas added, "NOR provides a unique opportunity to process loss and grief. We typically rush through the preparations for memorial services and final disposition. Because this process is slow, usually around two months from start to finish, there's just a lot more time to reflect."

DISPOSITION

Disposition, in end-of-life vocabulary, means the disposing of the body. All have to go somewhere when we die.

Seven years ago, Halaas' mother-in-law died and his family had their first close-in experience with death. At the time, NOR was in its infancy. Without plans for her burial, the family defaulted to cremation. He said, "She was an avid gardener and would have welcomed the chance to be returned to her garden. I wish we had had this option then."

The NOR movement began in Washington state in 2014, when an architecture student named Katrina Spade started looking at different systems of disposition for a thesis project. She went on to create her own company, called Recompose, which has one of the few NOR facilities up and running in the country. Washington, Nevada, and Colorado are the only three states with operational NOR facilities to date, but that will likely start to change soon.

11TH STATE TO LEGALIZE NOR

Governor Tim Walz signed the bill that legalizes human composting in Minnesota six months ago, giving Minnesota residents the option to choose NOR for their end-of-life plans. The Minnesota Department of Health license goes into effect on July 1, 2025. This is part of a broader trend in the US towards more environmentally-conscious burial practices. Minnesota is the 11th state to legalize NOR. This legislation signifies a shift toward sustainable end-of-life options that reflect a commitment to making one's last carbon footprint as small as possible.

Halaas is working to make his business, Live on Minnesota, the state's first NOR facility. He said, "I started the design of a vessel with students at the University of Minnesota last spring. My hope is to continue exploring that option. Opening a facility is a capital intensive process; the entry point is a hurdle. I have heard of other folks, both within and beyond the state of Minnesota, who have an interest in investing."

In the meantime, he's hopeful that people will start having more conversations around death and dying. He said, "Funeral costs are the third largest life expense on average for people living in the U.S. In Minnesota, the average cost for a full-service burial is over \$9,000, and can easily cost far more. In states with NOR facilities, the cost is around \$6,000. The average cost for direct cremation is around \$3,000."

Halaas concluded, "I don't expect NOR to be the burial method that all Minnesotans choose, but it's an option many may feel comfortable with. I'm excited by the possibility of offering a more sustainable alternative."

For more information on Natural Organic Reduction and the work of Erik Halaas and his team, visit www.liveonmn.com. Mueller Memorial, a funeral home with locations in St. Paul and White Bear Lake, offers NOR coordinating resources: www.muellermemorial.com/dust-to-dust.



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