

Chamber welcomes  
new business



Wildcats put up a  
fight during Regional



\$1.00

Vol. 50, Issue 9

1 section • 12 pages

Not over 75% advertising  
www.freepressadvocate.com

# FREE PRESS ADVOCATE .COM

WILMINGTON, IL | WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2024 | A FREE PRESS NEWSPAPER (815) 476-7966



THE ROADWAY in the South Island park near the mill race bridge awaits repair after the guard rail and pavement were lifted during recent ice jams and flooding.

## Elwood school board eyes Wilmington High School for students

BY ROSE PANIERI  
STAFF WRITER

At its Feb. 13 board meeting, the Elwood Community Consolidated School District board suggested exploring "issues and processes" on whether it may be feasible to send approximately 120 students to Wilmington High School rather than to Joliet Township High School District 204.

"The school board brought it up as a possibility," said Tim Page, District 203 superintendent. "By no means is this a done deal. We are merely exploring the possibility at this time. We have quite a way to go."

The Herald-News of Joliet, on Feb. 21, stated the reason Elwood may consider Wilmington High School as an alternative to Joliet, is issues with traffic, especially the increase in warehouses and

truck traffic between Elwood and Joliet.

Some feel the commute is not only dangerous, but more time-consuming. Page noted that both schools are similar distances from Elwood, but there is less truck traffic from Elwood to Wilmington.

Kevin Feeny, Superintendent of Wilmington School District 209U, shared his thoughts on the possibility, stating he had just recently learned of the proposal and had spoken only briefly with Page on the matter.

"At this time, the Wilmington School District Board of Education has yet to discuss this matter," he said on Feb. 21. "Before making any other statement, Wilmington's board of education will gather more information to discuss the topic at future board meetings."

## Month after flooding, North and South Island parks still closed

BY ROSE PANIERI  
STAFF WRITER

At its meeting on Feb. 20, the Wilmington City Council stated that due to the damage from the record flooding in January, both North and South islands will remain closed until further notice.

"The question on everyone's mind is, 'When will the parks be open,'" City administrator, Jeannine Smith, said. "We have no answer, but we're working feverishly to repair the extensive damage."

Mention was also made of the islands being flood zones, and as such, structures that

have four walls are most vulnerable to flood waters.

Meanwhile, residents are asked not to attempt to access either island by land or via water until the islands are opened to the public.

"This is for the safety of everyone, including our first responders who will have to

come and save you from the frozen flood waters," the Wilmington Police Department warned. "We will let everyone know when they have been reopened to the public."

Smith said the city met with the insurance adjuster on

SEE CITY COUNCIL PAGE 2

## Prom dreams will become reality at Melissa's Closet and Crystal's Jewelry Box

Godley Park District's gymnasium will transform into a prom boutique this weekend to prepare for the influx of hundreds of local high school girls and their parents searching for the perfect formal dress.

This Saturday, March 2, marks the 11th year of Melissa's Closet and Crystal's Jewelry Box, an annual event held to provide girls with prom dresses for just \$5, as well as jewelry, shoes and purses to complete their look.

Over the years the organization has helped dress 4,500 girls at an affordable cost for one of the biggest days of their high school careers.

While they're at the event hunting for the perfect dress, the girls can also get their hair and makeup done.

"The total intent is to make them feel special for a day," said Laurie Becker, coordinator of Melissa's Closet and Crystal's Jewelry Box.

Last year, Becker said they sold 706 prom dresses. Dresses are available in all sizes, long and short, and the selection this year could be upward of 2,000 dresses.

Each year, some dresses are purged from the collection and donated to local charitable organizations.

Becker said over 100 volunteers usually come out to help hang up and sort dresses in the days leading up to the event.

Staff at Whitmore Ace Hardware began Melissa's Closet and Crystal's Jewelry Box to honor Melissa Michalowski and her friend Crystal Carr. The two friends were Reed-Custer High School seniors when they were killed in a car accident in 2008.

Michalowski worked at Whitmore Ace Hardware in Braidwood, and she's remembered for her happy attitude and smile. The staff wanted to do something positive in honor of Michalowski, and knew that many students her age struggled to afford the high cost of prom.

Gently used prom dresses to new are accepted all year long in preparation for the big event each year in March. Donations can be dropped off at any Whitmore Ace Hardware location.

Melissa's Closet and Crystal's Jewelry Box will take place on Saturday, March 2 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Godley Park District, 500 S. Kankakee St. For more information visit [www.melissascloset.org](http://www.melissascloset.org).

Volunteers are needed Friday in Godley starting at 9 a.m. Many hands are needed to set up dressing rooms and tables for jewelry, shoes, purses and the stage area for the beauticians. Also all the dresses need to be displays on racks.

On Saturday volunteers start at 8 a.m. entering through Door C. They help with checkout, kitchen coffee and cookies, returning dresses from the dressing room, assisting students and more.

Take down begins at 1 p.m. Saturday when volunteers will condense and bag dresses, box up shoes, take down decorations and move racks into storage. The clean up is usually completed by 3:30 p.m.

## Voters to decide if Custer Fire should dissolve

BY ROSE PANIERI  
STAFF WRITER

It's a sunny, Spring-like day in town. At the Braidwood fire station, firefighters are conducting training to better serve Custer Township. They're working hard, doing their best. After a long, cold winter, all is well.

It has been four months, a third of a year, since Braidwood Fire Protection District (BFPD) officially took over Custer Fire Protection District (CFPD). Braidwood Fire Chief Christopher Jude is relieved that it's over and looks to the future with considerable optimism.

"I'm very happy that things have calmed down," Jude said. "It was a rocky road there for a while, but there's a significant benefit to Custer Park residents and to those of us in Braidwood, as well."

While the transition is nearly complete, there are loose ends, including the possible dissolution of the CFPD. On Dec. 14, 2023, plaintiff Carl Davies, of Custer Park, with

attorney, Thomas Mazur, petitioned the Will County Circuit Court to "dissolve and consolidate the Custer Fire Protection District with the Braidwood Fire Protection District."

The court recommended the issue be voted on by legal voters within the CFPD at the general primary election that will take place within the district on Tuesday, March 19.

"We have an IGA (Intergovernmental Agreement) with them for 10 years, but it still leaves them (CFPD) as a tax-collecting entity, and they turn the money over to us," Jude said. "Basically, what I think it is the taxpayers are saying, 'Just dissolve it, period.'"

Though the likelihood of residents voting against dissolution of the fire district is low, might there be issues with the IGA if they vote not to dissolve the district?

"Nothing's going to really change if they decide not to dissolve," Jude said. "Bottom line is we will continue to serve Custer Park as we have since Oct. 1."

### Historic struggles

Though Jude is optimistic about the IGA, he acknowledges that there have been hard feelings.

"I get it; they were trying to save their fire department," Jude said. "They didn't have the manpower to provide that volunteerism, and that's why they approached us. There wasn't a hostile takeover that many people thought it was."

CFPD was established in 1965 as a private entity. Custer Park ceased operations in 2013 when the former Custer Fire Department, Inc., became defunct.

In 2013, CFPD sought assistance from Braidwood, with positive results.

Wayne Erdmann, the fire district's president at that time, was quoted as saying Braidwood beat Custer Park's fire department to fire calls on about nine out of 10 occasions.

Despite a successful working relation between the two fire districts, a referendum for tax increase for the district was passed in 2018, and CFPD reopened. At that time, CFPD

entered into an agreement to Riverside EMS for ambulance and paramedic services. The contract expired in the autumn of 2022.

Still, CFPD attempted to tough it out. Friends of Custer Fire, a 501 charitable group, was established to raise awareness and money to keep the district running. Nevertheless, the expenses and upkeep of the district far outweighed the capabilities of Friends of Custer Fire to keep the district afloat.

Without adequate funds, the future of the district was uncertain. And residents, still hurting from the 2018 increase, were not open to approving another referendum. In their minds, a tax increase would be akin to placing a Band-Aid over a mortal wound.

In addition, because Custer Township did not have what insurer's refer to as a functioning fire department, homeowners insurance premiums would go through the roof.

SEE CUSTER VOTE PAGE 2

i  BERKOT'S  
SUPER FOODS  
CORNERED BEEF

AVAILABLE TODAY - CHECK OUT OUR WEEKLY AD AT [BERKOTFOODS.COM](http://BERKOTFOODS.COM)

