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Wild about Willy

Photos by Eric Fisher

WILLY WILDCAT was back in action Friday night for Wilmington's season-opening football game, and the popular mascot proved he hasn't lost a step — or a fan. One minute Willy was flying through the air with an impressive spread jump at midfield during half-time, and the next he was greeting youngsters, signing autographs and posing for photos in the stands. When it comes to firing up the Wildcat faithful, Willy remains one of the best in the mascot business.



Learn more on city's use of Flock cameras

BY ROSE PANIERI
STAFF WRITER

On Aug. 18, Mayor Ben Dietz addressed the hot-button issue of flock cameras. Flock Safety automatic license plate reading cameras have faced intense national controversy over issues of mass surveillance, privacy violations and misuse.

Dietz acknowledged the controversy, admitting the technology has generated questions and some

misinformation in the community.

"Flock Cameras have been a hot topic around the area," Dietz said. "There have been quite a few questions asked about the program here in Wilmington and how it's used."

Dietz said some concerns about the program are legitimate, while other comments have included inaccurate information about how the system operates in Wilmington.

SEE FLOCK PAGE 2

Reents may set milestone at Morrison

BY ERIC FISHER
PUBLISHER

The Wilmington Wildcats will venture into unfamiliar territory Friday night, making the roughly two-hour, 20-minute trip west to Morrison for a non-conference matchup against a Mustangs team they know relatively little about.

There will, however, be plenty at stake for Wilmington.

The defending Class 2A state champions enter Week 2 with an opportunity to give head coach Jeff Reents career victory No. 300, placing him among an elite group in Illinois high school football history.

Reents entered the

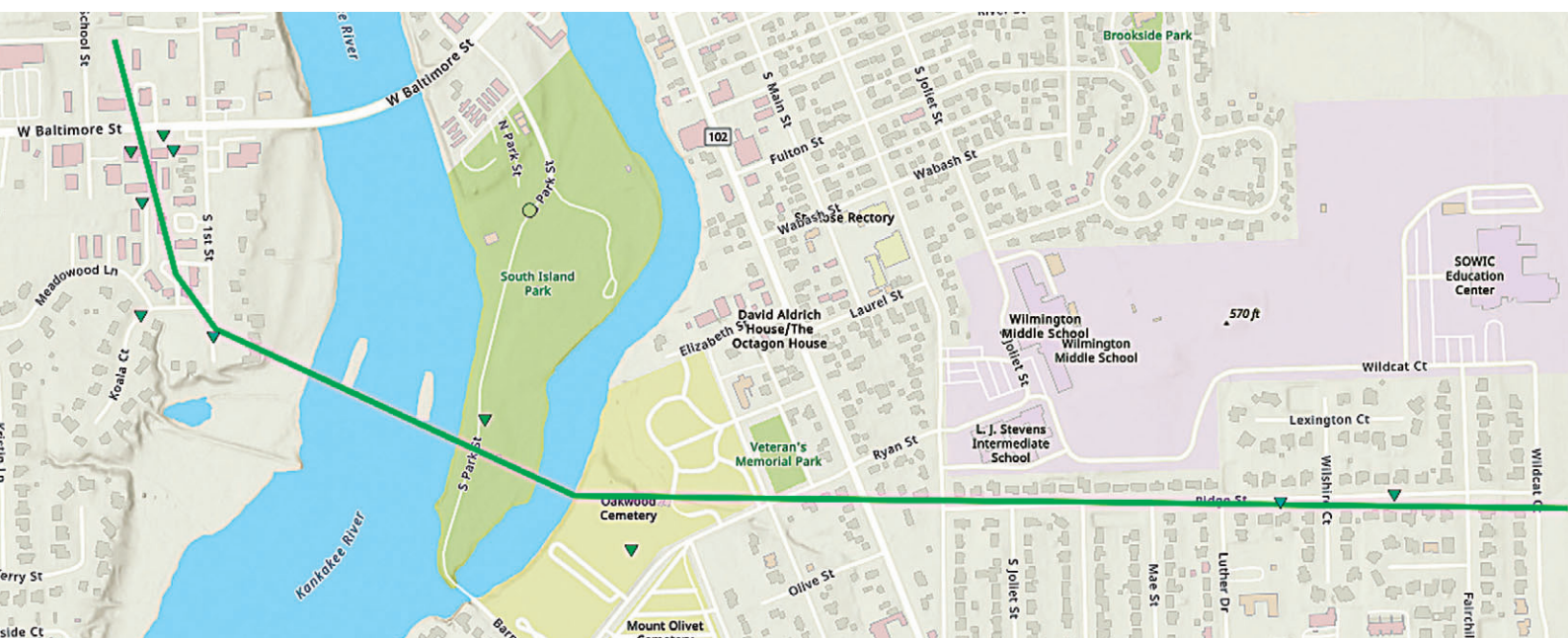
season with a 298-66 career record after guiding Wilmington to a 13-1 season and the 2025 Class 2A state championship. The Wildcats' season-opening victory over Bishop McNamara on Friday pushed him to 299.

According to Illinois High School Association records, only nine coaches have reached the 300-win mark in Illinois. A victory at Morrison would put Reents into a tie with Matt Senffner of Providence Catholic and Chris Andriano of Montini at 300 victories.

The milestone would come in Reents' 33rd season at Wilmington, where he has built one of the

SEE MILESTONE PAGE 2

Tornado's path of destruction confirmed



THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE issued the path of a EF1 tornado that hit Wilmington on the morning of Tuesday, Aug. 11. The path of destruction is highlighted in green.

STAFF REPORT

The National Weather Service in Chicago released a map last week tracing the 1.52-mile path of an EF1 tornado that cut through Wilmington on Aug. 11, leaving damaged buildings, uprooted trees and downed power lines in its wake.

The tornado touched down around 10:38 a.m. in the 500 block of West Baltimore Street, where it tore a section of roof from the Tire Tracks building. It traveled south for a short distance before turning southeast and crossing the

SEE TORNADO PAGE 2



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Tornado, continued from page 1

Kankakee River.

National Weather Service investigators determine a tornado's path by conducting ground surveys of damaged areas and combining their findings with eyewitness accounts, photos, videos and reports from the public. The direction in which trees, structures and other debris fall can help survey teams identify where a tornado began, the route it followed and where it eventually lifted.

South Island Park was among the hardest-hit locations. Fencing was knocked down, plywood signs were destroyed and nearly two dozen trees sustained extensive damage. Two weeks after the storm, the city-owned park remains closed.

The tornado continued through Oakwood Cemetery, uprooting trees and snapping large branches from mature oaks. An estimated 40 trees in the cemetery were destroyed or damaged.

Power was knocked out to homes near South Water Street and throughout the downtown district at 10:39 a.m. when a massive tree fell onto a utility line and transformer in the 800 block. The fallen tree also blocked traffic along Illinois Route 102.

Wilmington wasn't the only community where tornadoes were confirmed from the Aug. 11 storms. National Weather Service survey teams also identified two EF0 tornadoes in Grundy County near Morris.

One touched down on the northeast side of Morris, damaging crops before eyewitnesses reported seeing it cross Interstate 80. The tornado then struck a trailer retailer along U.S. Route 6, peeling sheet metal roofing from the main office and damaging about 50 trailers, some of which were rolled by the wind. A semi-truck was blown into a ditch and power lines were knocked down.

The tornado continued southeast, damaging trees near the Grundy County Rod and Gun Club.

A second EF0 tornado touched down in Norman Township northwest of Dupont and Verona roads. Investigators found a narrow path of damage through a cornfield before the tornado struck a property along Dupont Road, tearing away a large portion of a barn roof, pushing a grain bin off its foundation and downing several trees.

Additional tree damage was found near Dupont and Gorham roads before the tornado lifted.

No injuries were reported from either of the tornadoes.

Milestone, continued from page 1

state's most consistently successful small-school football programs. His .819 career winning percentage entering this season is particularly impressive, and all of those victories have come while leading the Wildcats.

The trip to Morrison presents a different challenge.

Located in northwestern Illinois, not far from the Iowa border, Morrison is well outside Wilmington's normal football territory. The Mustangs also enter Friday's game without having played a Week 1 contest, leaving the Wildcats with little current game film to study.

Morrison is a Class 1A-sized program with an enrollment of approximately 267 students and is coming off a 2-7 season in the Northwest Upstate Illini Conference.

While last year's record wasn't impressive, the Mustangs were a young team. Their 25-player roster included a number of juniors and sophomores who return this fall with another year of experience.

Among the players Wilmington will have to account for are senior two-way linemen Caleb Carroll and junior Noah Stout, along with senior Josh McDearmon, a wide receiver and defensive back.

Morrison is also expected to get significant contributions from juniors Charles Pruis at quarterback and defensive back, Xavier Baldwin at running back and linebacker, and Ethan Bush on the offensive line and at linebacker.

That experience could make Morrison a considerably different team than the one that won just twice a year ago.

There will also be a Wilmington connection waiting when the Wildcats arrive. Morrison is the alma mater of Wilmington assistant coach Chad Farrell, adding another interesting twist to a rare road trip for the Wildcats.

For Wilmington, the long bus ride will be about adjusting to an unfamiliar opponent and continuing to build after opening the season with a victory over Bishop McNamara.

And should the Wildcats make the long ride home with another victory, they'll bring back something else — career win No. 300 for the coach who has been on the Wilmington sideline since 1994.

Illinois shatters tornado record as storm season continues to brew

BY ROSE PANIERI
STAFF WRITER

Illinois has already experienced more tornadoes in 2026 than in any other year on record, with more than 203 confirmed twisters reported across the state before the middle of August.

As of Aug. 12, the National Weather Service confirmed more than triple the state's annual average of approximately 66 tornadoes. The previous state record was 142 tornadoes, set in 2024.

The extraordinary number of tornadoes follows months of unusually severe weather across Illinois. Meteorologists have pointed to a combination of persistent heat and humidity and weather patterns that repeatedly brought favorable conditions for severe thunderstorms and

tornadoes to the Midwest.

The activity continued Aug. 11 when a powerful derecho swept across northern Illinois and northwest Indiana.

Wilmington tornado

Wilmington was among the communities struck on Aug. 11. The National Weather Service confirmed an EF-1 tornado touched down just north of Wilmington at about 10:35 a.m. Aug. 11 and traveled 1.52 miles before lifting about two minutes later east of the city.

The tornado had estimated peak winds of 90 mph and a maximum width of 150 yards.

The tornado spawned near West Baltimore Street and North First Street, where it removed part of the roof of Tire Tracks automotive shop, and threw the roofing material into an adjacent strip mall. It then crossed

the Kankakee River before moving through Oakwood Cemetery, resulting in uprooted trees and other debris that damaged grave makers.

The tornado eventually tracked east along Ridge Street before lifting near the Forked Creek Preserve.

The Wilmington tornado was one of several confirmed tornadoes produced by the Aug. 11 derecho. The National Weather Service ultimately confirmed eight tornadoes within the Chicago-area area including two in Grundy County north and then south of Morris.

Not necessarily over

For Illinois, the Aug. 11 tornadoes represent only part of an extraordinary year. The state's 2026 tornado count has already surpassed the previous annual record by more than 60 tornadoes, and tornado season is not necessarily over.

Lions Club secures long-term lease for use of the Civic Center

BY ROSE PANIERI
STAFF WRITER

During the public comment sector of the Aug. 18 Wilmington City Council meeting, Paula Ekstrom reminded officials of the role of the Lions Club in the city. Her words were a prelude to the city council voting on whether to renew the Lions Clubs' lease of the city's Civic Center.

"I want to remind you that the Lions have never turned away anyone who wanted to temporarily use the facility," she said. "Anybody that wanted to use the facility can."

The deed is done

After uncertainty surrounding the future use of

its longtime headquarters, the Wilmington Lions Club has secured a new lease agreement allowing the organization to continue operating from the historic city-owned building at 805 River Street.

The council, with the exception of Rachel Conforti, voted to renew the lease.

The agreement formalizes a partnership between the City of Wilmington and one of the community's most visible civic organizations, ensuring the Lions Club can continue using the building for charitable activities, community service projects, meetings and storage of donated supplies and equipment.

The lease provides

continued access to the building while outlining responsibilities for both the city and the organization. Under the agreement, the Lions Club will maintain insurance coverage naming the city as an additional insured, coordinate building repairs with the city's Building Department, provide annual reports to the city council detailing activities and operational costs, and maintain the property immediately surrounding the building.

The organization will also continue using the facility as a hub for its charitable operations, including the storage and distribution of donated items and equipment used to support community programs throughout Wilmington and the surrounding area.

Under the terms of the agreement, the City of Wilmington will continue paying utility costs, carrying insurance on the building, conducting annual inspections and handling major interior and exterior maintenance. The city will also allow the Lions Club to

retain donations and proceeds generated through its activities for the purchase of janitorial supplies and routine maintenance needs.

The agreement establishes clear guidelines regarding building improvements, maintenance standards, safety requirements and use of the premises while preserving the structure as a community asset.

Providing stability

For many, the lease represents the culmination of a long-awaited effort to provide stability for the Lions Club, which has occupied the River Street facility for years while carrying out volunteer projects that benefit the Wilmington community.

The lease creates a formal framework for the future relationship between the city and the Lions Club and provides a path forward for continued community use of one of Wilmington's most recognizable civic gathering places.

Flock, continued from page 1

"I want to get your questions and concerns addressed, as well as dispel some of the inaccurate information about the how and why behind our use of the program here."

Dietz invited residents to attend an open learning session about the cameras at 6 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 2, at Wilmington City Hall, 1165 S. Water Street.

Wilmington Police Department representatives and a representative from Flock Safety will be on hand to answer questions.

The city has also launched a transparency dashboard providing information about the camera system, including data on how long information is stored, who the city shares data with and the number of searches conducted through the system.

The transparency portal is available at the city's Flock Safety dashboard: <https://transparency.flock-safety.com/wilmington> -ilp.d.

Chevrolet Coupe Nova to be sold to satisfy mechanic's lien

PUBLIC NOTICE

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN ON Oct. 1, 2026 at 9 a.m. CST a sale will be held at Hopkins Towing Inc., 32173 Markle Rd., Wilmington, IL 60481 on the following vehicle to enforce a mechanic's lien unless owner or lienholder pays lien prior to sale date. Shawn Douglas (owner) 428 N. Roosevelt Ave., Sun River Terrace, IL 60964 and Loan Max, (lienholder) 4608 75th St. Kenosha, WI 53142. 1976 Chevrolet Coupe Nova VIN 1X27D6L11279, Total due \$1,715.00.

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Attorney McGrath files Leader estate notice

PUBLIC NOTICE

STATE OF ILLINOIS
IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE TWELFTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT, WILL COUNTY, ILLINOIS
PROBATE DIVISION

In the Matter of the Estate of MARILYN I. LEADER, Deceased.
Case No.: 26 PR 208

CLAIM NOTICE

Notice is given to creditors, of the death of MARILYN I. LEADER, of Manhattan, Illinois. Letters of Office were issued May 13, 2026, to Elizabeth Labriola, Independent Executor, whose address is 11616 Flagstone Turn, Frankfort, IL 60423, whose attorney of record is Timothy J. McGrath, of 440 S. State Street, Manhattan, IL 60442. The estate will be administered without court supervision unless under Section 5/28-4 of the Probate Act (IL. Compiled Stat. 1992, Ch. 755 par. 5/28-4) any interested person terminates independent administration by mailing or delivering a petition to terminate to the clerk.

Claims against the estate may be filed with the Clerk of the Court at the Will County Courthouse, 100 W. Jefferson Street, Joliet, Illinois, 60432, or with the representative, or both, on or before the day of *February 19, 2027, or 3 months from the date of mailing or delivery, whichever is later, and that any claim not filed on or before that date is barred. Copies of a claim filed with the Clerk must be mailed or delivered by the claimant to the representative and to the attorney within ten (10) days after it has been filed. * Six months from date of first publication

E-filing is now mandatory with limited exemptions. To e-file, you must first create an account with an e-filing service provider. Visit <http://www.illinoiscourts.gov/faq/gethelp.asp> or talk with your local circuit clerk's office. If you cannot e-file, you may be able to get an exemption that allows you to file in-person or by mail. Ask your circuit clerk for more information or visit www.illinoislegalaid.org.

Elizabeth Labriola, Independent Executor of the Estate of Marilyn I. Leader, Deceased

Timothy J. McGrath - 6193170
McGrath Law, P.C.
440 S. State Street
Manhattan, IL 60442
(815) 478-4020
mcgrath@tmcgrathlaw.com

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Attorney McGrath files Mundt estate notice

PUBLIC NOTICE

STATE OF ILLINOIS
IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE TWELFTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT, WILL COUNTY, ILLINOIS
PROBATE DIVISION

In the Matter of the Estate of RUTH IRENE MUNDT, Deceased.
Case No.: 26 PR 342

CLAIM NOTICE

Notice is given to creditors, of the death of RUTH IRENE MUNDT, of Manhattan, Illinois. Letters of Office were issued July 23, 2026, to Gordon K. Mundt, Independent Executor, whose address is 900 Kimberly Way, Lisle, IL 60532, whose attorney of record is Timothy J. McGrath, of 440 S. State Street, Manhattan, IL 60442. The estate will be administered without court supervision unless under Section 5/28-4 of the Probate Act (IL. Compiled Stat. 1992, Ch. 755 par. 5/28-4) any interested person terminates independent administration by mailing or delivering a petition to terminate to the clerk.

Claims against the estate may be filed with the Clerk of the Court at the Will County Courthouse, 100 W. Jefferson Street, Joliet, Illinois, 60432, or with the representative, or both, on or before the day of *February 19, 2027, or 3 months from the date of mailing or delivery, whichever is later, and that any claim not filed on or before that date is barred. Copies of a claim filed with the Clerk must be mailed or delivered by the claimant to the representative and to the attorney within ten (10) days after it has been filed. *Six months from date of first publication

E-filing is now mandatory with limited exemptions. To e-file, you must first create an account with an e-filing service provider. Visit <http://www.illinoiscourts.gov/faq/gethelp.asp> or talk with your local circuit clerk's office. If you cannot e-file, you may be able to get an exemption that allows you to file in-person or by mail. Ask your circuit clerk for more information or visit www.illinoislegalaid.org.

Gordon K. Mundt, Independent Executor of the Estate of Ruth Irene Mundt, Deceased

Timothy J. McGrath - 6193170
McGrath Law, P.C.
440 S. State Street
Manhattan, IL 60442
(815) 478-4020
mcgrath@tmcgrathlaw.com

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Attorney Meents files Barnett estate claim

PUBLIC NOTICE

STATE OF ILLINOIS
IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE TWELFTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT, WILL COUNTY, ILLINOIS

IN THE MATTER OF THE ESTATE OF DOUGLAS ALAN BARNETT, Deceased;
No. 2026 PR 435

CLAIM NOTICE

Notice is given of the death of **DOUGLAS ALAN BARNETT**, Letters of Office as Independent Executor were issued on July 31, 2026, to Paula Marie Barnett, whose address is 521 Fairlane Drive, Joliet, Illinois 60435; whose attorney is Meents Law, P.C., 25158 West Eames Street, Unit A, Channahon, Illinois 60410. Claims against the estate may be filed in the Office of the Clerk of the Circuit Court at the Will County Courthouse, 100 W. Jefferson Street, Joliet, Illinois 60432, or with the representative, or both, on or before February 15, 2027, or if mailing or delivery of a notice from the representative is required by Section 18-3 of the Probate Act of 1975, the date stated in that notice. Any claim not filed on or before that date is barred. Copies of a Claim filed with the Clerk must be mailed or delivered by the claimant to the representative and to the attorney within ten (10) days after it has been filed.

E-filing is now mandatory with limited exemptions. To e-file, you must first create an account with an e-filing service provider. Visit <http://efile.illinoiscourts.gov/service-providers.htm> to learn more and to select a service provider. If you need additional help or have trouble e-filing, visit <http://www.illinoiscourts.gov/faq/gethelp.asp> or talk with your local circuit clerk's office. If you cannot e-file, you may be able to get an exemption that allows you to file in-person or by mail. Ask your circuit clerk for more information or visit www.illinoislegalaid.org.

Paula Marie Barnett
Independent Executor of the Estate of DOUGLAS ALAN BARNETT, Deceased

Frank J. Meents
Meents Law, P.C.
25158 W. Eames Street, Unit A
Channahon, Illinois 60410
Telephone: (815) 534-9515
Facsimile: (815) 534-9516
Attorney Code: 06298859
E-mail: Frank@MeentsLaw.com

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District 203 to hold hearing for purported permanent fund balance

PUBLIC NOTICE

Notice is hereby given by the Board of Education Community Consolidated School District #203 in the County of Will, State of Illinois, that a public hearing for the presentation of proposed permanent fund balance transfers will be held at 6:05 p.m. on the 8th day of September, 2026, at Elwood School, 409 North Chicago Avenue, Elwood, Illinois.

BOARD OF EDUCATION OF ELWOOD SCHOOL DISTRICT 203 in the County of Will, State of Illinois.

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Eric D. Fisher, publisher

One of Wilmington's oldest residents, the paper mill

Looking at the north end of Water Street, the area seems abandoned - now. But 150 years ago the joint was jumping. Most folks just call it the old paper mill. It was more than that.



TIME WAS....
Sandy Vasko

Let's set the way-back machine for the summer of 1873. Step aboard.

A company of local men, among them E. W. Willard and C. J. Jukes, formed a stock company to build a factory on the east bank of the Kankakee about a half mile above the town. The factory was to produce nuts and bolts.

The building was solid stone, with a footprint of 82' x 100'. The basement of 7 feet high with an elevator that connected it to the main floor, which was divided into two rooms. Overhead was three lines of shafting connecting to a turbine water wheel which could produce 80 horse power, in the mill race.

These rooms were filled with the latest advanced machinery. A machine which could turn out 5,000 plow bolts a day, one that clipped nuts from an iron rod punching a hole simultaneously, and a tumbler that smoothed out the wiry edges.

Two years later, with a depression and a declining

market, all the machinery was sent back to Chicago, the business had gone bust, and the building was abandoned. In 1876 a violent storm removed the roof - it looked like there was no hope.

As early as 1872 the Advocate wrote, "Wilmington would be an excellent point for a paper mill. Why don't some enterprising man embark in the business?" No one immediately took the challenge.

In August of 1875, we learn, "It appears that Dr. Trott has purchased the "nut and bolt factory" property, and is casting about with a view to establishing a paper mill in that building. The doctor is in correspondence with practical men and it is to be hoped that his efforts will be successful. Now, gentlemen, is an opportunity for organizing a stock company in an enterprise that will pay."

Finally, in January 1876 we read, "Yes, Wilmington is to have a paper mill, and that within six months. The ponderous machinery of the mill will be brought to this city as soon as navigation opens, and it is thought will be in operation on or about

August 1st. It will be located at the nut and bolt factory place, and will manufacture what is known as "straw board," for boxes, etc. As to its requirements, it will consume an average of eight tons of straw, and seven tons of coal, daily. As to the number of operatives to be employed, we are not posted."

By 1877 the mill was finally up and running, "On last Saturday the Enterprise mills turned out seven tons of lined straw board, which tallies well for the new enterprise. The average daily product of the mills these times is about six tons. It is hoped that the straw supply for the coming year will be equal to the demand. Our farmer friends realize now that straw is straw, and it pays them handsomely to raise it."

Business was booming. Teams with huge loads of straw lined up like a parade outside the mill. "Billy Stewart, the "boss" driver of the "boss" mule team in town, hauled the "boss" load of straw to the paper mill last Friday. The load weighed 5,200 pounds, net. Billy says the boys needn't kill their teams trying to beat that, for they can't do it, still, if anyone is foolhardy enough as to put on an extra ten pounds, he will go out and show them what a four-ton load looks like."

All was not skittles and beer though. It was a dangerous place to work, even the owner was injured. "M. D. Keeney, of the Enterprise paper mills, sustained severe injuries last week by an accident. It appears that one of his furnace doors, of 250 pounds weight, was temporarily suspended by a rope; at an unlucky moment, while "the boss" was underneath, the rope gave way and Mr. K. received the brunt of the falling door on his head and shoulders. His escape from far more serious injury was almost miraculous."

And then, "May 3, 1879, Fire at Wilmington - Sunday morning about 7 o'clock a fire broke out in the Enterprise Paper Mill, at Wilmington, and before assistance could arrive, it was destroyed. The loss is estimated at \$30,000, insurance \$10,000. This is the third time Mr. Keeney has met with a similar loss. The mill will be rebuilt."

By 1883 the old building was outdated. A brand new one was built closer to the train tracks to facilitate shipping. It was huge, "The smoke stack of Keeney's paper mill will reach 70 feet above the railroad track, and will contain brick enough to build six ordinary cottages."

However, once again there was problems, "On tomorrow evening the Enterprise paper mill will

**3,000 Tons of Straw
WANTED
At the New Paper Mill
in Wilmington.**

**Good, Dry Straw, for the present
years' business, for which I will pay
\$5 per ton for Rye Straw, and \$4 for
Oat Straw, delivered at the mill.
Farmers will bear in mind that the
Straw must be stacked equally as good
as hay or it will not keep. I am now
ready to receive straw at the mill.**

M. D. KEENEY.

AN AD FOR straw for the new paper mill from 1906.

shut down, possibly to remain closed for one year. 10,000 tons of cardboard was now on the general market for which there was no demand."

At this point we lose track, as newspapers from 1884 through the early 1900's are missing. I do

know that by 1904 it was back up and running, now under the name of the American Straw Board Company.

Next time we will continue the story of the paper mill, and how it survived into the 20th century.

Wilmington Coalition renews push for ban on Kratom

BY ROSE PANIERI
STAFF WRITER

The surrounding communities of Coal City, Braidwood and Morris have taken action. Paula Ekstrom of the Wilmington Coalition for a Healthy Community believes it's time for Wilmington to join the effort to ban illicit substances.

During the Aug. 18 Wilmington City Council meeting, Ekstrom, the Coalition's program director, provided alderpersons with information gathered from a recent webinar attended by Dr. Kathleen Burke, coordinator of substance use initiatives in the Behavioral Health Division of the Will County Health Department.

Ekstrom shared information from the health department regarding kratom and products containing 7-hydroxymitragynine, commonly known as

7-OH, a concentrated kratom alkaloid that federal officials say can produce opioid-like effects.

Pills, gummies, powders, liquid shots

According to information presented to the council, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration announced in July that it would place certain highly concentrated and synthetic kratom-related substances into Schedule I under the Controlled Substances Act.

The action specifically targets products containing elevated levels of 7-OH and several synthetic derivatives, while natural kratom leaf products containing only trace amounts of the compound are not included in the temporary scheduling order.

The affected products include pills, gummies, powders, liquid shots and other formulations containing concentrations of

7-OH that exceed naturally occurring levels. Federal health agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, have supported the action, citing concerns over abuse potential and opioid-like effects.

Educating leaders

Ekstrom said her goal is to increase awareness about the substances and eventually see Wilmington consider restrictions similar to actions recently taken by neighboring communities.

She noted that municipal leaders in Morris and Braidwood have recently moved to restrict the sale of kratom and related products. Coal City already has enforced a ban.

Several council members expressed interest in learning more about the issue before any potential action is considered.

Alderwoman Rachel Conforti, a pharmacist by trade, said she was particularly interested in understanding the effects the substances can have on users. Alderman Marty Orr also voiced interest in receiving additional information.

"I'm going to try to educate myself on it because I think it's something that's worth looking into for our community," Conforti said. "In the meantime, this is something that we need to do here. I think it's worth looking into."

During the discussion, council members questioned whether local restrictions would simply push sales to online retailers or the black market.

Ekstrom acknowledged that possibility.

"My feelings are once it's removed from the shelves and the gas stations, online ordering will probably uptick," Ekstrom said. Still, she believes a ban will cut down on substance abuse in town.

Starting preparations for Volley for a cure

Preparations are underway for Volley for a Cure, taking place Tuesday, Sept. 22, and organizers are asking the community for help in making this year's fundraiser bigger and better.

Raffle basket donations needed

Raffle baskets are always a favorite at Volley for a Cure, and we are looking for donations to help fill this year's baskets. Proceeds will benefit Megan's Mission Foundation, helping raise money and awareness for children and families affected by childhood cancer.

Community members, families, and local businesses are encouraged to create and donate a

themed raffle basket. Ideas can include family fun, date night, game night, self-care, sports, local favorites, or anything else you can dream up. Get creative and have fun with it!

Don't have time to put a basket together? No problem! If you have items you would like to donate but don't have time to wrap or assemble a basket, simply donate the items and we'll do the work for you!

Raffle basket donations are due by Sept. 11.

Dollars for Dogs

Before the big Volley for a Cure event, Whitmore Ace Hardware in Wilmington will host Dollars for Dogs on Saturday, Sept. 5.

Stop by and support

the fundraiser while enjoying hot dogs, chips, pop, baked goods, and raffle baskets. It's a great way to grab a bite, support local fundraising efforts and get an early look at some of the exciting raffle opportunities.

Every donation, purchase, and contribution helps us raise funds and awareness for an important cause. We are incredibly grateful to the community for continuing to come together in support of Megan's Mission Foundation.

Let's fill those baskets and join us in the fight against childhood cancer!

For raffle basket donations or questions, contact Stephanie at 815-252-6269 or sstickel@209u.net.

Sheriff warns residents of phone scam

BY ROSE PANIERI
STAFF WRITER

The Grundy County Sheriff's Office is warning residents about a phone scam involving a caller falsely claiming to be a lieutenant with the Sheriff's Office Civil Division.

According to the Sheriff's Office, the scammer has been calling people about alleged outstanding warrants. One of the phone numbers used in the scam is (815) 249-2428.

Authorities emphasized that the Sheriff's

Office will not call individuals to discuss warrant information.

Residents are urged not to return calls to the number and not to provide any personal or financial information if they receive such a call.

Anyone who receives a suspicious call claiming to be from the Grundy County Sheriff's Office is encouraged to hang up immediately and contact the Sheriff's Office directly using its official phone number, (815) 942-6645 if they have concerns.

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MEMBERS OF THE Wesley 4-H Hustlers prior to judging at the Orr Building on the Illinois State Fairgrounds in Springfield (from left) Jacob Floyd, Caleb Floyd, Caleb Merkel, Josiah Merkel, Benjamin Floyd, Henry Merkel, Charlotte Merkel, Caroline Merkel, Samantha Merkel and Tracy Jones.

Wesley 4-H Hustlers represent southern Will County at State Fair

Members from the Wesley 4-H Hustlers club of Wilmington and Braidwood attended and competed in the 173rd Illinois State Fair in Springfield.

On Saturday, Aug. 15, club members that had their projects selected at the Will County General Project Show, to represent Will County, at the state fair, competed against 4-H members from around the state in their respective project categories.

The results from their showing at the state fair are:

- Samantha Merkel;

Beekkeeping 3 – 2026 Champion Award

- Josiah Merkel; Woodworking 3 – 2026 Reserve Champion

- Tracy Jones; Tractors – 2026 Champion Award

- Caleb Floyd; Visual Arts/Mixed Media – 2026 Reserve Champion

- Benjamin Floyd; Civil Engagement – 2026 Champion Award

The state fair is always a time of reflection for 4-H'ers as the activity year ends on Aug. 31 each year. With the 2027 4-H year starting in September, new members are always welcome, as the Wesley 4-H

Hustlers continue on the tradition that 4-H in general has had of "Individual Learning and Development; through Group Service", and follow the 4-H motto of "To Make the Best Better".

Membership is open to any youth between those ages of 5-18 years old.

About Wesley 4-H Hustlers

Wesley 4-H Hustlers is one of the oldest continuously operating 4-H clubs within the State of Illinois; dating back to 1928.

This club was formed

in Wesley Township, and today is based out of Wilmington. The primary area of focus for this youth organization is Wilmington, Wesley, Florence, Reed, and Custer Townships in Southern Will County, but is open to all individuals regardless of location of residence.

Learn more about 4-H at www.4-H.org, find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/4-H.

Higgins graduates Coe College

Max Higgins was among a group of truly exceptional graduates this past year at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, IA.

Higgins, of Wilmington, was awarded a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in computer science and data science.

aged to register. Registration includes an event T-shirt, finisher medal, admission wristband to Elwood Community Days beer ticket for participants 21 years of age or older, and the opportunity to honor America's heroes while supporting a meaningful cause.

Community members can purchase an official In Memory of Our Fallen Heroes event T-shirt online. Shirts are available for anyone who wants to proudly wear them throughout Elwood Community Days while honoring our Fallen Heroes.

Community members who are unable to participate are also encouraged to support the event through sponsorships, volunteer opportunities, or donations.

Registration is now open. For race registration, sponsorship opportunities, volunteer information, donations, or to purchase an official event T-shirt, visit: <https://runsignup.com/Race/IL/Elwood/ElwoodCommunityDaysK>.

Library to hold book sale

The Wilmington Public Library District will hold a used book sale on Friday and Saturday, Aug. 28 & 29 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Sunday, Aug. 30 from noon to 4 p.m. Patrons can fill a library-provided bag with books for just \$3 per bag.

The library will accept donations of clean, smoke-free, and mold-free books and DVDs until Aug. 26.

Please note that encyclopedias, VHS tapes, outdated medical or textbooks, and other obsolete materials will not be accepted.

All proceeds from this book sale will benefit ShareFest of Will County. Thank you for supporting the library and helping us give great books a second chapter.

P.E.O. walk day held

P.E.O. Chapter GK participated in an international "Walk Today for Women Tomorrow" event.

This event was both a friend raiser and a fundraiser as members walked and visited as well as raised money for P.E.O. Educational programs and services for women around the globe. Members were able to choose the area they walked in.

Mum flower fundraiser

The First Presbyterian Church of Braidwood is holding a Fall Mum Flower Sale.

These huge 9 inch pots will be delivered to the church on Wednesday, Sept. 16, and will be ready to bloom beautifully for your fall decorating.

They are \$12 each and are available in orange, yellow, purple, pink, bronze & white.

Call or text LuAnn Bolatto at 815-790-7134, Lora Grant 815-955-9927 or Joyce Bauer at 815-584-7239, by Sept 9 to order.

Registration underway for Fallen Heroes run & walk during Elwood Community Days

The Bradley Veerman Charity Fund is proud to announce the annual In Memory of Our Fallen Heroes 5K Run & Walk, taking place on Friday, Sept. 1, at Lloyd Erickson Park in Elwood.

The event begins with a special remembrance ceremony at 5 p.m., followed by the 5K Run & Walk at 6 p.m.

This year's event holds special significance as the nation commemorates the 25th anniversary of September 11, 2001.

Participants will gather to remember the lives lost, honor the courage and sacrifice of first responders and public servants, and celebrate the enduring spirit of service that continues to unite communities across America.

Hosted in conjunction with Elwood Community Days, the event benefits the Bradley Veerman Charity Fund, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting first responders, advancing public safety initiatives, providing EMS education, and assisting charitable organizations that serve our communities.

The charity was established in memory of Bradley Veerman, a dedicated firefighter, paramedic, police officer, Executive Director of the Laraway Emergency Telephone System Board (Will County 9-1-1), and public servant whose passion for helping others continues to inspire the organization's mission.

The Bradley Veerman Charity Fund has provided educational scholarships, supported emergency responders and partnered with organizations committed to improving public safety throughout the region.

"Our goal is to bring our community together to remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice while continuing Bradley's legacy of compassion, service, and commitment to helping others," said April Veerman, President of the Bradley Veerman Charity Fund.

"Every participant, volunteer, sponsor, donor, and supporter helps us honor our fallen heroes while making a lasting difference in our communities."

Participants of all ages and abilities are encour-

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OBITUARIES

Bruce S. Kester



PONTIAC—Bruce S. Kester, 90, of Pontiac, IL, passed away Sunday, Aug. 16, 2026, at Aperia Care in Wilmington. Born Feb. 3, 1936, in White Haven, PA, Bruce was the son of Gilbert and Amanda E. (née Wagner) Kester. On Feb. 15, 1958, Bruce married Flora Smith in California. Together, they shared 68 years of marriage and a lifetime of memories. Bruce proudly served his country in the United States Air Force from July 1954 until his honorable discharge in April 1958. During his nearly four years of active-duty service, he served as a Still Photographer, using his skills in photography in support of Air Force operations. He was stationed with the 3535th Air Base Group at Mather Air Force Base in California and attained the rank of Airman First Class. In recognition of his honorable and dedicated service, Bruce was awarded the National Defense Service Medal and the Good Conduct Medal. Throughout his career, Bruce worked as a project manager for several chemical companies. He was an avid reader and particularly enjoyed the works of John Grisham and Tom Clancy. Bruce was of the Presbyterian faith. Surviving are his wife, Flora Kester; five children: Sherry (Robert) Kontes, of



Idaho Falls, ID; Brian (Trenna) Kester, of Idaho Falls, ID; Aaron (Corinne Ptacek) Kester, of Roselle, IL; Amanda (Jim) Passafiume, of Channahon and Sidney (Jennifer Williams) Kester, of Mazon; nine grandchildren: Deanna Riggs, Brayden (Marie) Passafiume, Quintin Kester, Joshua Passafiume, Ema Kester, Sean Reavley, Kevin Reavley, Kaitlyn Mainard, and Makenzi Williams and two great-grandchildren, Reese Stukel and Brooklyn Stukel; and one brother, Carl (Alice) Kester, of Florida. Bruce was preceded in death by his parents, Gilbert and Amanda Kester and five siblings: Clayton Kester, Berle Kester, Janet Snyder, Gilbert Kester, and Raymond Kester. In accordance with Bruce's wishes, cremation rites will be accorded. A memorial visitation will be held Thursday, Aug. 27, 2026, from 2 p.m. until 5 p.m. at R.W. Patterson Funeral Home & Crematory in Braidwood. To share memories or offer condolences, please visit Bruce's online guestbook at www.rwpattersonfuneralhomes.com or find them on Facebook. R.W. Patterson Funeral Home & Crematory, 401 E. Main St., Braidwood is in charge of arrangements.

Nancy Skowron

ROMEONVILLE—Nancy Amalie (Rehor) Skowron, 94, of Romeoville, IL, passed away peacefully on Aug. 20, 2026, in Joliet. She was born on Nov. 22, 1931, in Chicago, to Frank and Ana (Pokorny) Rehor, and grew up in the Chicago area. Her parents eventually moved to Hayward, WI, where they operated a fishing resort. This is where she met the love of her life, Mitchell J. Skowron. She was working seasonally for the resort and he was there with his fishing buddies. They were married on Oct. 5, 1951, and were married for 63 cherished years until his passing. They lived in Chicago for a few years before moving to a home that they built in Lyons, IL. After raising a family of six children in Lyons, they retired to life in the country in Wilmington. Nancy loved gardening, and she turned a three acre cornfield into flower gardens, vegetable gardens, and fruit tree orchards. She put many miles on her golf cart riding around the property. She was very proud of the 50 foot long stone wall that she built, rock by rock. She worked as a librarian in Lyons, and then at the libraries of Morton College and Argonne National Laboratory. Nancy loved reading, and probably read hundreds of books in her lifetime. She was always up for a game of cards with friends and loved ones, but above all, she treasured every moment spent surrounded by her family. Eventually, Nancy moved to assisted living at StoryPoint in Romeoville, IL. While it was not the dream home she built



in Wilmington, it was home because the nurses and aides were friends as well as caretakers. She was a devoted mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Known for her positive outlook, sharp humor, and uplifting nature. Nancy had a gift for offering wise, caring advice to those around her. Nancy is survived by her loving children: Robert (Rebecca) Skowron, of Franktown, CO; Loretta Skowron, of Champaign, IL; Annette Skowron, of Salem, OR; Paul (Nancy) Skowron, of Loveland, CO and Janet (Skowron) (Dan) Jay of Wilmington; 10 cherished grandchildren: Michael Skowron, Nicolette Day, Joseph Taylor Gooch, Mitchell Benjamin Gooch, Natalia (Gooch) Newman, Svetlana Gooch, Elizabeth Skowron, Mariah Skowron, Cody Jay, and Shane Jay and four beloved great-grandchildren. She was preceded in death by her husband, Mitchell Skowron; her daughter, Natalie Skowron and brother, Franklin Rehor. A graveside burial service will be held at 12 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 29, 2026, at Resurrection Cemetery, 7201 Archer Rd., Justice, IL. Family and friends will have an opportunity to share their memories during the service. A reception meal will follow; please RSVP to Janet. Casual attire is fine. In lieu of flowers, please donate to the charity of your choice. Funeral arrangements are provided by Damar-Kaminski Funeral Home. For more information or to leave online condolences, please visit www.KaminskiFamilyFuneralHomes.com.

Mary T. Grygiel

BRAIDWOOD—Mary T. "Pee Wee" Grygiel, of Braidwood, passed away Aug. 17, 2026. Born June 26, 1929, she was the daughter of Mabel and History Danzero. She went to Reed-Custer High School and was a member of Immaculate Conception Church. She lived in Braidwood her entire life. On June 26, 1948 she married Chester Grygiel. They together had two sons Michael (Karen) and Gregory (Sue) and one daughter, Mary Ellen (Gary) Sanches. She worked for Grinchucks Pants

Factory then the Joliet Arsenal making bombs for WWII. After that she went to work for Reed-Custer School District and retired from there. She has one special brother-in-law, Jerome Grygiel, 10 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren. Mary was preceded in death by her husband, Chester; son, Gregory and son-in-law, Gary Sanches. Cremation Rites were accorded by her request. A celebration of life will be held at a later date.

High schoolers can compete in Voice of Democracy contest

High school students from Wilmington, Coal City and Reed-Custer now have an opportunity to compete for scholarships through the Illinois VFW Auxiliary's 2026-2027 Scholarship Program, which recognizes students for their patriotism, creativity and commitment to honoring America's veterans. Among the opportunities available to area students is the Voice of Democracy Audio-Essay Competition, which is open to students in grades 9-12. This year's theme is "What a Veteran Taught Me About America." Students will submit an original recorded essay reflecting on the topic. The deadline to enter the Voice of Democracy competition is Oct. 31, 2026. Students with artistic talents may also participate in the Young American Creative Patriotic Art Contest, open to grades 9-12. The contest invites students to create original patriotic artwork, including both traditional two-dimensional pieces and three-dimensional art. Entries for the art competition are due by March 31, 2027. In addition to student competitions, the VFW Auxiliary offers a Continuing Education Scholarship for VFW Auxiliary members and their immediate family members pursuing higher education, technical school, trade school or vocational training. Applications for that scholarship are due Feb. 15, 2027. The scholarship program is sponsored by the VFW Auxiliary Department of Illinois under the theme, "Their Fight. Their Story. Our Voice." The organization says the program is designed to honor veterans while inspiring students through education, patriotism and community involvement. Students interested in entering any of the competitions or learning more about eligibility and application requirements can contact Barbara Sweger, Department Scholarship Chairman, at deputy-louth@yahoo.com or 815-481-8288 for additional information. Local contacts include Kathryn Keller at 815-823-4324 or Barb Howard, 815-685-0399.

members pursuing higher education, technical school, trade school or vocational training. Applications for that scholarship are due Feb. 15, 2027. The scholarship program is sponsored by the VFW Auxiliary Department of Illinois under the theme, "Their Fight. Their Story. Our Voice." The organization says the program is designed to honor veterans while inspiring students through education, patriotism and community involvement. Students interested in entering any of the competitions or learning more about eligibility and application requirements can contact Barbara Sweger, Department Scholarship Chairman, at deputy-louth@yahoo.com or 815-481-8288 for additional information. Local contacts include Kathryn Keller at 815-823-4324 or Barb Howard, 815-685-0399.

Lynn Kratochvil



COAL CITY—Lynn W. Kratochvil, 84 and a lifelong resident of Coal City, passed away Aug. 20, 2026 at his home. Born June 16, 1942, in Morris, Lynn Wayne was a son of Frank James and Irene (Emanuelson) Kratochvil. He was raised in Coal City, a community he was proud to call home throughout his life. Lynn graduated from Coal City High School with the Class of 1960 and went on to honorably serve his country in the United States Army. Following his military service, Lynn built a long and dedicated career with Mobil Oil Corporation, retiring after more than 20 years of service. Lynn was a member of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Roman Catholic Church in Coal City, the Coal City Area Club, Area #1 Miners Recreational Club, the National Rifle Association, and Ducks Unlimited. He also gave back to his community through his service on the board of the Braceville-Gardner Cemetery Association. Those who knew Lynn will remember a man who found great happiness in the simple things in life. He loved being outdoors, whether hunting, fishing, tending to his garden, or simply enjoying the world around him. He also enjoyed cooking and sharing what he made with the people he loved. Above all, family was at the heart of Lynn's life. Time spent with his family, and especially with his grandchildren, brought him some of his greatest joy. The memories made around the table, outdoors, and during the ordinary moments of everyday life will remain a treasured part of his legacy.



Lynn will be remembered for his love of family, his connection to the Coal City community, his appreciation for the outdoors, and the many traditions and memories he leaves behind. Survivors include his sons: Alan (Jennifer) Kratochvil of Braceville and Brian Kratochvil of Coal City; step-children: Keith (Terri) Scerine, Kristy (Chip) Cerovac and Joe Vinyard; granddaughter, Brianna Kratochvil; grandson, Paul Wilczak; several step-grandchildren; his sister, Cathy (Henry) Kuchenbacher of Wilmington and numerous nieces and nephews, as well as cousins. Lynn was preceded in death by his parents Frank and Irene Kratochvil; wife Cathy (nee Skubic) on March 10, 2006, and his sister, Joanne Ulivi. Funeral services were Tuesday Aug. 25, 2026 at the funeral home with Deacon William Dunn from Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish presiding. Burial was in Braceville-Gardner Cemetery, where Lynn will be laid to rest with his late wife, Cathy. Preferred memorials may be made as gifts in Lynn's memory to the Braceville-Gardner Cemetery Association, P.O. Box 246, Braceville, IL 60407. Family and friends are encouraged to log onto www.ReevesFuneral.com to sign the guest book, upload photographs and share Lynn's memorial page online through social media. Funeral services and arrangements have been made under the direction and care of Reeves Fruland & Baskerville Funeral Homes and Crematory.

Judith Grygiel

Wilmington—Judith Grygiel, a woman who was truly beautiful inside and out, peacefully began her next journey on Aug. 15, 2026, at the age of 83. Born on Nov. 1, 1942, in Joliet, she was a deeply loving mother, a remarkably gifted artist, and a bright light to everyone who knew her. Judith approached life with an independent, hands-on spirit and a heart full of imagination. She loved taking on home improvement and DIY projects, finding pure joy in transforming spaces with her own two hands. Her incredible artistic talent shone brightly through her paintings and sketches, leaving a beautiful, lasting reflection of her soul. Her greatest joy was her family, and she loved nothing more than bringing everyone together. She was the heart of family gatherings, creating warmth and laughter through holiday celebrations, as well as joyful outdoor family picnics. Throughout her life, Judith found her greatest happiness in the simple, wonderful pleasures of the world. She loved the music she listened to, the pages of good



books, camping under the stars, and the thrill of catching a big fish. More than anything, she filled her children's lives with beautiful, unforgettable memories and a foundation of love that they will hold dear in their hearts forever. In keeping with her naturally generous heart and lifelong desire to help others, Judith made the beautiful, selfless decision to donate her body to medical science. Rather than a traditional funeral, Judith wished for her life to be honored with smiles and happy memories. A joyful celebration of her life will be scheduled at a later date, where family and friends can gather to share stories and celebrate the wonderful woman she was. She leaves behind a legacy of love in her children: Joseph Tafoya, Monica Grant, Marcie Tafoya, and Megan Stevens; her cherished grandchildren; and her dear brothers and sisters. She is reunited in peace with her parents, Leroy and Wilma (Mallott) Purdy, and her brother, Leroy Purdy, who preceded her in death.

New law will allow state to review insurance rate hikes

BY PETER HANCOCK
CAPITOL NEWS ILLINOIS

Gov. JB Pritzker signed legislation that will give the Illinois Department of Insurance authority to review and approve rate changes for homeowners and automobile policies. "It's not asking too much to say to insurance companies, if you're telling your customers that rate hikes are necessary, you should be able to prove why," Pritzker said at a bill signing ceremony in Chicago. Prior to the bill signings, Illinois was one of only two states, with Wyoming, that did not exercise regulatory control over insurance rates. The new laws, which take effect July 1, 2027, prohibit companies from charging "excessive, inadequate, or unfairly discriminatory" rates and prohibit them from shifting the cost of losses in other states onto Illinois consumers. The new laws come a little more than a year after State Farm announced it was raising homeowners insurance rates an average 27.2% statewide. They also come two years after Illinois motorists saw an average 18% hike in their auto rates, according to Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias. In both cases, insurance industry officials said the rate increases were necessary due to inflation, the rising cost of repairs and, in the case of homeowners insurance, the increasing frequency of extreme weather. In addition, State Farm recently noted that auto insurance rates have been

falling in Illinois and that it lowered its premiums by an average 15% in 2025. Insurance Department Director Ann Gillespie agreed there often are legitimate reasons for rate increases. But she said the new laws will help make sure that rate increases in the future are justified by reliable data. "While no state legislation can fully eliminate these impacts to insurance premiums, these bills today hold insurance companies accountable for addressing their cost increases by requiring rates to reflect Illinois-specific losses and considerations," she said. House Bill 4273, the homeowners insurance bill, requires companies to give their customers 60 days' notice before raising premiums more than 10%. It also requires them to use credible state-specific claims data to develop their rates when it is available, but companies will be able to supplement that data with national, regional or out-of-state data if needed to meet actuarial standards of credibility. Companies will still be able to charge new rates once they are filed with the Insurance Department. But the new law gives the department authority to review those rates and order rebates of any excess premiums collected if the rates are found to be excessive or unfairly discriminatory. Senate Bill 714, the auto insurance bill, requires companies to give customers 30 days' notice before raising premiums more than 10%. It also gives the department authority to review rates and order rebates if the rates are

found to be excessive or unfairly discriminatory. Giannoulias pushed for that bill, criticizing companies for basing rates on factors unrelated to a person's driving record, such as their credit score or ZIP code. But while those practices are not specifically prohibited in the final legislation, the new law does ban rates that are "unfairly discriminatory." Insurance industry organizations, however, remain opposed to the new laws. In a joint statement issued after the bill signing, the Illinois Insurance Association, the American Property Casualty Insurance Association and the National Association of Mutual Insurance Companies warned the new laws will lead to higher costs and fewer choices in the insurance market because they do not address the economic realities behind premium increases. "Instead, the laws impose a fundamental shift in Illinois' regulatory environment, moving the state toward a more rigid rate approval system similar to struggling insurance markets like California," the organizations said. "This shift will make it harder for insurers to respond in real time to market conditions and adjust rates up or down based on actual claims experience." *Capitol News Illinois is a nonprofit, nonpartisan news service that distributes state government coverage to hundreds of news outlets statewide. It is funded primarily by the Illinois Press Foundation and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation.*

Good or bad? Concerns over bird feeders

Dear EarthTalk: How has the prevalence of bird feeders in the U.S. affected birds' evolution? Is putting up a bird feeder good or bad for ecosystems and the planet?

-Estelle Louis, Twin Falls, ID

EARTH TALK

Questions & Answers About Our Environment

In America, an estimated 50-60 million people maintain backyard bird feeders, a device often hung on yard trees or outdoor decks. Residents deploy these to intend to supply birds with the necessary foods.

Although many hang up these feeders in hopes of helping wildlife through harsh seasons, research suggests that this well-intentioned habit may reshape bird behavior beyond the intended benefits.

Feeders are one of the

most significant factors in modern bird evolution, contributing to new selective pressures found in urban and suburban environments. For example, the access point of many feeders has caused physical and genetic adaptations among many birds.

Studies suggest that some urban bird populations have been found with altered beak shapes and bolder foraging behaviors, a shift researchers attribute to bird feeders. Though this trait may help them exploit human-provided food, it can also significantly reduce their survival in the wild.

Many feeders also favor certain species over others and can cause population instability. Dominant, more adaptable birds such as jays or house finches can gain a competitive advantage over human-provided resources, often at the expense of shyer or less aggressive birds.

As a result, feeders can contribute to biodiversity loss and significantly marginalize quieter species,

contributing to unbalanced ecosystems across bird populations.

Environmentally, feeders create artificial dense areas that introduce several well-documented risks. Domestic cats, raccoons, and predatory birds hang around these food sources in addition to the targeted birds, often as unwanted guests that can threaten vulnerable bird populations.

In addition, illnesses such as avian influenza, salmonella, and conjunctivitis can spread more easily in these crowded spots. Excess seeds and droppings beneath feeders can contribute to localized nutrient pollution.

Researcher Andrew Abraham, from Aarhus University in Denmark, notes that when "the nutrients in bird feed are washed into rivers...they may also exacerbate issues of eutrophication." (Eutrophication is an excessive growth of algae that is suffocating for all wildlife.)

That said, bird feeders should not be entirely abolished from backyards.

Indeed, they can provide a huge survival boost for bird populations after natural disasters, helping wildlife through tough winter storms, droughts, or other severe conditions.

Moreover, bird feeders can partake in citizen science, allowing scientists to track and monitor bird populations through local resident feeders.

The final verdict on bird feeder viability is complicated, but having attentive responsibility over feeders is one of the best ways to manage its benefits and consequences.

Observers should clean them and provide proper food to avoid disease, while also ensuring that they only supplement natural sources and not replace it. If you would like to learn more about how to eco-consciously set up a bird feeder, consider contacting local wildlife centers or Audubon Society chapters near you.

EarthTalk® is a 501(c)3 nonprofit EarthTalk. Send questions to: question@earthtalk.org.



Courtesy photo
YOU MAY NOT be doing birds a favor giving them access to your bird feeder.

Illinois State Police seeks public assistance on anniversary of Tammy Zywicki murder

The Illinois State Police (ISP) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have a new lead regarding the kidnapping and murder of Tammy J. Zywicki. Aug. 23, 2026 marked the 34th anniversary of Tammy's disappearance.

Her case remains active as ISP and FBI continue exploring new leads, examining 200 pieces of evidence, and retesting items with modern DNA technology.

Tammy was reportedly last seen with her car on Interstate 80 at mile marker 83 in LaSalle County, IL between 3:10 and 4:00 p.m. on Aug. 23, 1992. She left Evanston, IL for college in Grinnell, IA where she was expected to arrive that evening. Later that day, Tammy's car, a 1985 White Pontiac T1000, was found by an ISP Trooper and marked as being abandoned. On August 24, 1992, ISP towed the vehicle.

That same evening,



TAMMY ZYWICKI was last seen Aug. 23, 1992 while driving Interstate 80 on her way to college.

Tammy's mother contacted ISP and advised that her daughter had not arrived at college. On September 1, 1992, Tammy's body was found along Interstate 44 in rural Lawrence County, MO, which is located between Joplin and Springfield, MO.

She had been stabbed

to death. It was also reported that a semi-truck was seen near Tammy's vehicle during this time period. The truck driver was described as a white male between 35 and 40 years old, over six feet tall, with dark, bushy hair.

Special agents are looking for information about a person who may have a connection with the unknown truck driver. Theresa "Teri" Belenske (maiden name Theresa Vega) was known to hitch hike and may have been traveling with the unknown suspect at some point prior to Tammy's death. Belenske would have been 32 years old at the time of Tammy's death. She passed away in 2014 at the age of 54.

Belenske is not a suspect, but a person of interest. Special agents are looking for information about Belenske from the late 1980's through the mid 1990's. Belenske has ties to cities in California, including Oceanside, Vista, Pomona, San Bernadino, and Fontana.

Anyone with information about Tammy's killing, or Belenske and who she traveled with during the late 1980's and early 1990's, can leave a crime tip at our ISP Investigative Tips [4] page or call 1-800-CALL-FBI.

Callers can remain anonymous.

The FBI is offering a reward of up to \$50,000 for information leading to the



THERESA "TERI" BELENKE

identification of the individual or individuals responsible for this crime.

Below are photos of Tammy and some of her personal property known to be missing, along with a photo of Belenske taken in 2009, as well as an AI generated image of what she may have looked like in 1992.

Missing items include a Cannon 35mm camera and a Lorus brand musical wristwatch, which played the tune "Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head." Also taken was a red and white soccer patch monogrammed with "St. Giles Soccer Club, Greenville, SC."

To hear more about the latest in the investigation, listen to the Illinois State Police Podcast, which can be found on many streaming platforms. <https://lnk.bio/illinois-statepolicepodcast>.



TAMMY ZYWICKI was reportedly last seen with her car on Interstate 80 at mile marker 83 in LaSalle County, IL between 3:10 and 4:00 p.m. on Aug. 23, 1992.

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WHY PARTICIPATE?

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IMPORTANT INFORMATION

- You must have the vehicle title or be able to prove ownership.
- This program is completely voluntary.
- Do not wait!** Once a Code Enforcement case has been initiated and a citation has been issued for a junk or inoperable vehicle, Broadway Auto Salvage will not purchase the vehicle through this program.
- The City of Wilmington will continue enforcing all applicable property maintenance and junk vehicle ordinances throughout the program period.

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE!
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Wilmington EST 1836
 THE ISLAND CITY ILLINOIS

Inspector General deems another sexual harassment allegation as unfounded

Yet another sexual harassment allegation has been made against an Illinois House Democrat. But this time, the House Speaker's operation is fully supporting its incumbent.

Rep. Murri Briel's former deputy chief of staff Laura Jackson claims that, among other things, Briel (D-Ottawa) sexually harassed her, supplied "unlimited" amounts of Adderall to her and the campaign staff and gave "bonuses in marijuana," Jackson said she ultimately had a three-hour meeting with the Legislative Inspector General.



Rich Miller

Before we go any further, you should know that Jackson made her claims in a 44-minute video released by Linc Strategy, a Republican consulting group that has worked for Rep. Briel's Republican general election opponent Liz Bishop.

The interview was conducted by Marjorie Kline of Wilson Grand Communications, a national Republican advertising agency.

A district office employee in former Rep. Harry Benton's office claimed she resigned after repeated sexual harassment by Benton in the spring of 2023. His ultimate resignation this summer set off a firestorm of criticism against House Speaker Chris Welch for waiting so long to do anything, which has metastasized into criticism of Welch's service as House Speaker.

Ironically, a Benton staffer reached out to Benton's Republican opponent around the time of her fellow staffer's resignation, saying via text that Benton "needs to go." A meeting never took place, however, and that staffer, Jessica Dixon Heitman, eventually replaced Benton in the House.

According to Jackson, "Rep. Briel almost daily told me that I needed to take an older woman lover," telling the Republican consultant Kline it was "difficult to focus on tasks while knowing that my boss has these feelings that she's openly sharing."

"It was probably every day that I talked to her there was something about me that was sexualized, to the point that on the night of inauguration, I stood in front of her with tears in my eyes and said that I wish that she would see me as something more than just my looks, than just physically," Jackson said during the GOP interview.

"During the campaign, there was a lot of extreme Adderall use," Jackson claimed in the Republican video. "I take accountability on my part for taking it, but there was also a supply of unlimited Adderall to keep us going through that campaign," she told Kline, referencing Rep. Briel's first Illinois House campaign in 2024.

Briel won by a slim margin of just 595 votes in 2024. Jackson told Kline that the Adderall kept coming while votes were being counted. "After that, Rep. Briel never gave me another Adderall at all, which made it very difficult for me because, yes, I was partaking."

Jackson also claimed that Briel "would give bonuses in marijuana, up to two ounces that she would drive back from Michigan."

Rep. Briel released a statement a day later claiming these were all disproven allegations.

"The statements in the video produced by her MAGA political operatives were previously taken to the Legislative Inspector General in 2025 and were found to be without merit. I am calling for the immediate release of the Legislative Inspector General's report on this matter," Briel said.

Legislative Inspector General Michael McCuskey told the Sun-Times last week that he deemed Jackson's complaint unfounded a month after she filed it in April of last year.

Jackson has a different version of events. "[The LIG office] just told me

that I was an at-will employee and that there wasn't really anything that they could do for me," she told my colleague Isabel Miller last week, adding, "I was never told that anything was unfounded or anything like that. I was just told the at-will employee part."

The "unfounded" declaration gives the House Democrats license to move full speed ahead. The Sun-Times quoted the executive director of the House Democrats' political operation as saying, "We will not allow a misleading political attack to distort Rep. Briel's record or diminish our commitment to the values she has consistently fought for."

However, the Republican Bishop's campaign spokesperson Steven Shearer made it clear that the LIG's decision will not be accepted as the final say. "It should not be up to one man to be the cross-examiner, the judge, the jury," Shearer said of the inspector general.

"We're going to let the voters be the jury on this, and they can decide how credible it is that Rep. Briel hired her twice, hired her on her campaign and then hired her as the chief of staff in her legislative office."

If the House Republicans can raise the money, this could be one of the hottest legislative races of the fall campaign.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax, a daily political newsletter, and CapitolFax.com.

Deadline is Aug. 29

Mazonia-Braidwood State Fish and Wildlife Areas to host youth firearm deer hunt

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources invites youth hunters to participate in the youth firearm deer hunt Oct. 10-12 at Mazonia-Braidwood State Fish and Wildlife Area in

Braceville. To participate, applicants must mail a letter with the hunter's and guardian's names, address, email address and phone number to the site superintendent at Mazonia State

Fish and Wildlife Area, P.O. Box 126, Braceville IL 60407. The deadline to apply is Aug. 29.

A random drawing will be held, and successful applicants will be contacted and provided with site rules, regulations and maps. Participants will be required to purchase a youth firearm deer permit from an over-the-counter vendor.

The youth firearm deer hunting season is open only to hunters who have not reached their 18th birthday by Oct. 10, the opening day of the 2026 season. For more information, call the site office at 815-237-0063.

Seated Yoga at the Forest Preserve

The Forest Preserve of Will County is hosting Seated Yoga and Seasonal Sights on Sunday, Sept. 13 from 11 a.m. to noon at Four Rivers Environmental Education Center in Channahon.

Take part in a 30- to 35-minute all-levels seated yoga session followed by a 25- to 30-minute exploration of the natural world. Bring water and wear comfortable clothing. Ages 12 or older; free. Register by Sept. 12.

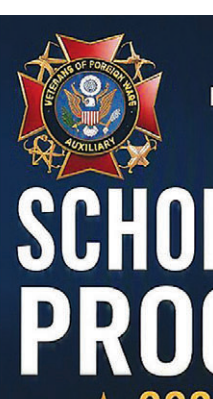
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★ ★ ★ ★ **THANK YOU VETERANS!** ★ ★ ★ ★

SBA offers relief to those affected by severe storms

The U.S. Small Business Administration announced the availability of low interest federal disaster loans for Illinois small businesses, private nonprofit organizations, and residents affected by severe storms occurring July 27.

The SBA issued a disaster declaration in response to a request received from Governor JB Pritzker on Aug. 17.

The declaration covers Illinois counties of Grundy, Kankakee, Will and four others, which are eligible for both physical damage loans and Economic Injury Disaster Loans from SBA.

Businesses and private nonprofits are eligible to apply for business physical disaster loans and may borrow up to \$2 million to repair or replace disaster-damaged or destroyed real estate, machinery and equipment, inventory, and other business

assets.

Homeowners and renters are eligible to apply for home and personal property loans and may borrow up to \$100,000 to replace or repair personal property, such as clothing, furniture, cars, and appliances. Homeowners may apply for up to \$500,000 to replace or repair their primary residence.

Applicants may also be eligible for a loan increase of up to 20% of their physical damage, as verified by the SBA, for mitigation purposes. Eligible mitigation improvements include strengthening structures to protect against high wind damage, upgrading to wind rated garage doors, and installing a safe room or storm shelter to help protect property and occupants from future damage.

"When disasters strike, SBA's Disaster

Loan Outreach Centers play a vital role in helping small businesses and their communities recover," said Chris Stallings, Associate Administrator of the Office of Disaster Recovery and Resilience at SBA. "At these centers, SBA specialists assist business owners and residents with disaster loan applications and provide information on the full range of recovery programs available."

The SBA's Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program is available to eligible small businesses, small agricultural cooperatives, and private nonprofits — including faith-based organizations — impacted by financial losses directly related to this disaster. The SBA is unable to provide disaster loans to agricultural producers, farmers, or ranchers, except for aquaculture enterprises.

Interest rates are as low as 4% for businesses, 3.625% for private nonprofits, and 2.875% for homeowners and renters, with terms up to 30 years. Interest does not begin to accrue, and payments are not due until 12 months from the date of the first loan disbursement. The SBA determines eligibility and sets loan amounts and terms based on each applicant's financial condition.

SBA customer service representatives are on hand at the Disaster Loan Outreach Centers in Will County to answer questions about SBA's disaster loan program, explain the application process, and help individuals complete their application. Schedule an in-person appointment in advance at appointment.sba.gov.

CLASSIFIEDS

CLASSIFIED DEADLINES

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Deadlines

Classified Ads &

Classified Display Ads

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The Free Press Newspapers will be responsible for the first incorrect insertion, and its liabilities shall be limited to the price on one insertion. The Free Press Newspapers reserves the right to classify correctly, edit, reject or cancel any advertisement at any time in accordance with its policy. All ads must be checked for errors the first week of publication by the advertiser.

Phone (815) 476-7966 or (815) 634-0315 for details.

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1 wk. - \$17; 2 wks. - \$21;
3 wks. - \$25; 4 wks. - \$29*
\$1.00 Extra per line for bold or caps on classified
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The Braidwood Journal — The Coal City Courant — The Free Press Advocate



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RELIABLE FARM WORKER needed full-time. Duties include cutting grass, small engine maintenance and repair, dog training and more. Year-round position pays hourly wage. Wilmington. Call 630-399-4982. ch34-36

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Have you found a lost pet or lost a pet in Will County? Please call Will County Animal Control. We may have your pet. We want to reunite your family, 815-462-5633.

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Run a classified ad and get results!

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HELP WANTED

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CITY OF BRAIDWOOD, ILLINOIS is seeking a dependable and detail-oriented individual for a full-time union position in the Finance Department. This position will report to the City Clerk, City Administrator and Finance Commissioner.

Responsibilities include accounts payable and receivable, invoice and payment processing, payroll, deposits, account reconciliations, financial recordkeeping, and assistance with audits and financial reporting. The position will also provide customer service to residents, employees, and vendors. Responsible for other tasks assigned.

Qualifications: High school diploma or equivalent required.

Associate's or Higher in Accounting, Finance or Business preferred. Previous accounting, bookkeeping, accounts payable/receivable, or payroll experience required. Municipal or governmental accounting experience preferred. Strong computer, Excel, organizational, communication, and math skills required. Must be able to maintain confidentiality and meet deadlines.

Pay Scale: \$20.75-22.04

Benefits: Insurance, PTO, and IMRF

Applications can be found on the city website, or you may get a paper copy at City Hall. Submit resume and completed application to:

CITY OF BRAIDWOOD

Attn: Finance Department

141 W. Main Street

Braidwood, IL 60408

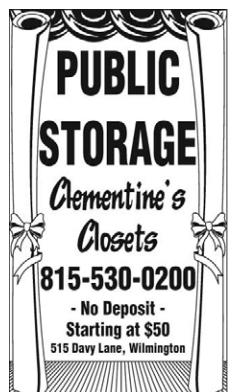
ldixon@braidwood.gov

www.braidwood.gov

Application Deadline: September 4, 2026

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Resources available for food, meals

CLA Food Pantry. Christian Life Assembly, 2960 E Division St Diamond IL. Available Tuesday 2:30 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., Wednesday 11:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and Friday 9:00 a.m. to noon. By appointment only 815-578-5441.

Braidwood Food Pantry at Community Care Center. Open Tuesdays 8 to 11:45 a.m. 112 S. Center Street, Braidwood. Info: 815-325-0779

Ignite Christian Church, 1180 W 1st St. Braidwood. Micro-pantry open 24 hours front of church Info: (815)-390-5040

Top Fuel Saloon Food Pantry. Open Fridays from 1 to 2 p.m. 275 S. Hickory St., Braidwood.

Secret Pantry, for hours and location see: The Original Secret Pantry Facebook page

Coal City Food Pantry at Coal City United Methodist Church. (Use south entrance) Closed all Federal holidays. Open Mondays 9-11 a.m. and

Thursdays 1-3 p.m. 6805 E. McArdle Road, Coal City. Information: 815-216-3288.

We Care of Grundy County Food Pantry. Office Hours: Mon.-Wed. and Fri.: 8:30 a.m.-12 p.m. and 1:00-4:00 p.m. Pantry Hours: Monday-Friday 1:00-3:00 by appointment. Please call to schedule your time to come 815-942-6389. 530 Bedford Rd., Morris.

Kuzma Care Cottage, food pantry. 635 S. Main Street, Wilmington. Hours: M-F 9-11 a.m. and 1-3 p.m. and the 2nd Saturday of each month, 8-11 a.m. 815-476-2030

Local Meals:

St. Vincent Table Hot Meals. Coordinators Cindi Grove 815-735-1432 and

Laura Marizza 815-325-8605. Hours for pickup for shut ins 4:00-4:30 p.m. Dine in hours 4:30 until 5:30 p.m.

From August through October meals will be distributed at Immaculate Conception, 220 S. School St., Braidwood; Nov. - Assumption of the BVM, 180 S. Kankakee St., Coal City. Dec. through Feb. - Closed and will resume in March, 2027.

If you would like to help with this ministry or know of anyone in need of meals, please contact our coordinators for more information.

We are always looking for more churches or organizations to help.

Cieszkiewicz named to president's list

Camdyn Cieszkiewicz, of Wilmington, was named to University of Bridgeport's Spring 2026 President's List.

To be named to the President's List, a student must maintain a term grade point average of 3.7 or higher.

Gas at highest level ever recorded this late

Average gasoline prices in Illinois have risen 7.6 cents per gallon in the last week, averaging \$4.36/g Monday, according to GasBuddy's survey of 4,378 stations in Illinois.

Prices in Illinois are 10.7 cents per gallon higher than a month ago and stand 97.5 cents per gallon higher than a year ago.

That means saying farewell to gas under \$4/g, with Mohsen in Wilmington charging \$4.06/g (cash), all the way up to \$4.19/g (cash) at BP.

In Braidwood, expect to pay from \$4.29/g at Casey's to \$4.49/g at BP.

Coal City gas runs the gamut from \$4.29/g at BP up to \$4.49/g at other nearby stations.

Traveling to Morris or Bourbonnais won't save you much, with gas ranging from \$4.07/g at Pilot to

\$4.39/g at Shell in Morris.

Bourbonnais prices are unusually high with gas ranging from \$4.24/g at Gulf to \$4.29/g at Kroger.

"Average gasoline prices moved higher in the majority of states over the last week, with fewer than 10 states seeing declines, while diesel surged nearly 17 cents per gallon nationally, leaving it less than 25 cents away from an all-time record high," said Patrick De Haan, head of petroleum analysis at GasBuddy.

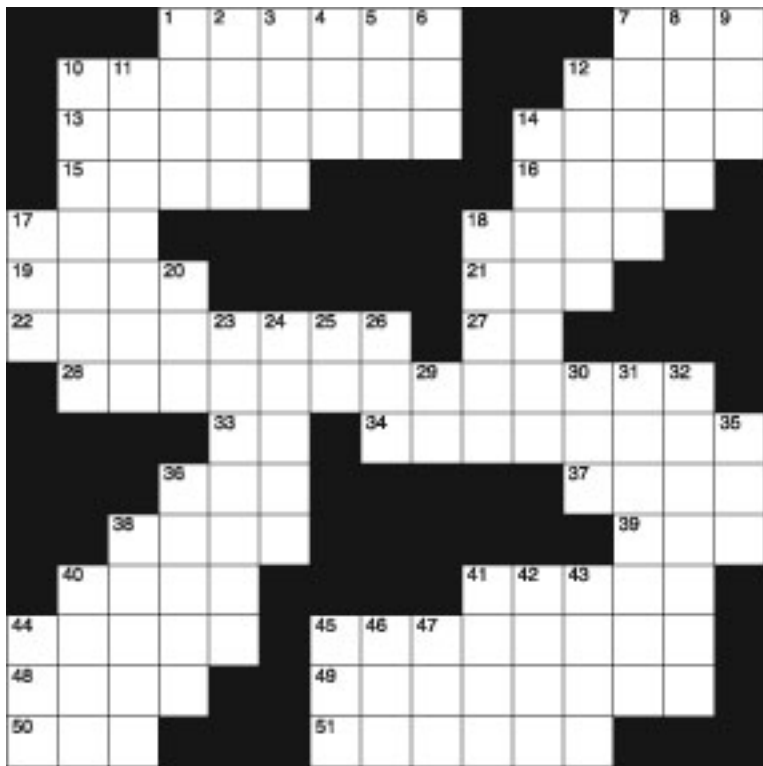
"Gasoline, while not at all-time records, is at its highest level ever recorded this late in the calendar year, meaning Americans could for the first time ever see a national average price of gasoline above \$4 per gallon on Labor Day — eclipsing the previous record of \$3.83 per gallon

set in 2012.

"While some oil shipments are apparently getting through the Strait of Hormuz, the dominant force propping up both gasoline and diesel prices is increasingly the growing loss of Russian refinery capacity, as continued Ukrainian attacks knock more facilities offline and constrain the global supply of refined fuels. Until that refining supply picture improves, both gasoline and diesel prices face continued upward pressure."

The lowest price in the state yesterday was \$3.75/g while the highest was \$5.69/g.

The national average price of diesel has increased 16.6 cents compared to a week ago and stands at \$5.584 per gallon.

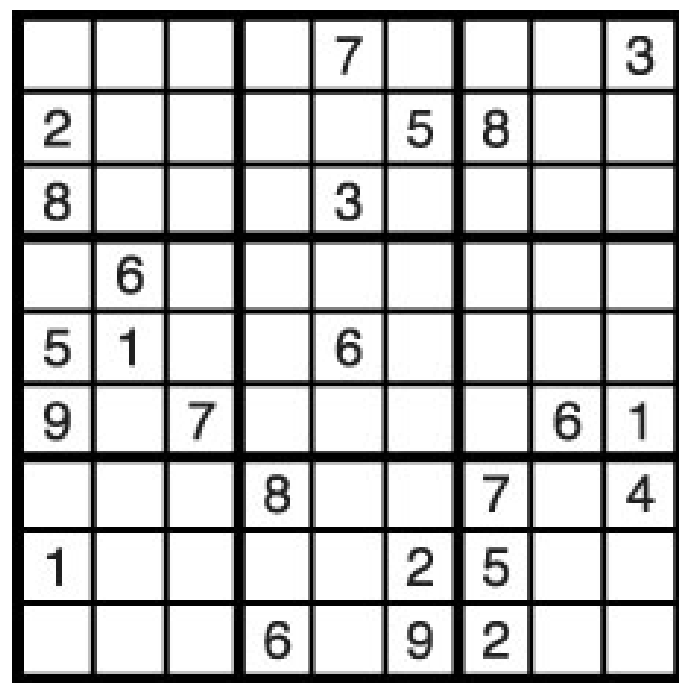


CLUES ACROSS

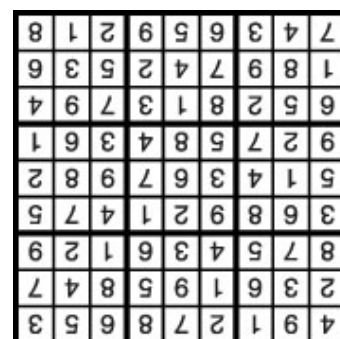
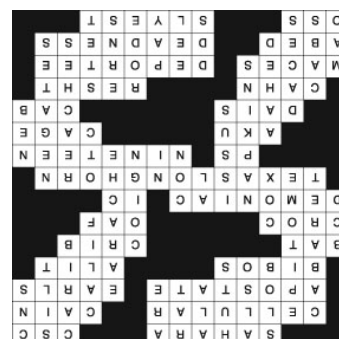
1. A vast desert in Africa
7. Reciprocal of a sine
10. Type of phone
12. Biblical figure
13. One who renounces a religious belief
14. Warren and Monroe are two
15. Wild ox
16. Dismounted a horse
17. Cave dweller
18. Where infants sleep

CLUES DOWN

1. Slovenly person
2. In addition
3. Hovels
4. Pie ___ mode
5. Subway rodent
6. They ___
7. Indigenous S. American people
8. Fine sand
9. Central nervous system
10. Nightclub entertainment
11. The perfect example of something
12. Supreme Islamic leader
14. Pain
17. Binary-coded decimal
18. Projecting corner of an angle
20. "Succession" actor Brian
23. Dinner table decor
24. Ancient settlement in modern Turkey
25. You can call Paul Simon this
26. Opposite of a pro
29. Atomic #28
30. Type of drug (abbr.)
31. Arrives at
32. Nullifies
35. Bird's beak
36. Partner to "oohed"
38. Ray-finned fishes
40. Taxis
41. Sat on and controlled
42. Sea eagles
43. Remain as-is
44. Chinese revolutionary
45. Tooth caregiver
46. Snake-like fish
47. Compensate



Level: Intermediate



WILDCAT SPORTS



Photo by Eric Fisher

DANE VAN DUYNÉ gains ground for the Wildcats against Bishop Mac on Friday. Van Duyné rushed for a total of 145 yards and had two touchdowns.



Photo by Eric Fisher

PURPLE D REIGNS—Wildcats Colin Van Duyné (53), Will Wilson (62) and Cooper Holman (7) prevent the Bishop McNamara ball carrier from gaining ground on Friday. The Wildcat defense held the visitor to just 23 yards rushing in 12 attempts.

Wildcats get gritty in season-opening victory

BY ERIC FISHER
PUBLISHER

Let's face it, we were spoiled in 2025 when the state champion Wildcats thrashed their opponents so early and so often that the starters were rested by the second half in 13 of 14 games.

Wildcat fans got used to such lopsided wins, with the exception of a 27-20 Week 1 loss to Morris, that it may have felt like a let-down Friday night when Wilmington fans witnessed three scoreless quarters against Bishop McNamara during the season opener.

Still, all the traditions of Wildcat football were present: running out of the woods between revved-up Harley motorcycles, the screaming fan tunnel, the marching band, the cheer team and everyone's favorite, Willy Wildcat.

Also present was a Wildcat defense that held the Fighting Irish to just one touchdown and scored a safety against them to earn a hard-fought 16-7 victory.

"We saw a lot of great effort out there tonight," praised WHS coach Jeff Reents. "Just a lot of hustle from our kids, and I thought their effort was outstanding against a good Bishop Mac team. I like playing a really tough team early. We know where our questions are and we've got to get them answered and move on from here."

Fast start, then defense takes over

All of the offensive scoring came during a back-and-forth first quarter.

Wilmington recovered a Mac fumble on the opening kickoff then struck first when senior Dane Van Duyné capped an early drive with a 7-yard touchdown run. Evan Ostheim added the extra point to give the Wildcats a 7-0 lead.

Bishop McNamara answered with its only touchdown of the night when quarterback Micah Lee connected with Rontez Smith on a 40-yard scoring pass. Bo Shalley's extra point tied the game 7-7.

The Wildcats responded with Van Duyné again doing the damage, this time scoring on a 6-yard run. Ostheim's second PAT put Wilmington ahead 14-7, a lead it would never surrender.

The score stayed that way through the second quarter before Wilmington's defense added the only points of the second half. A third-quarter safety gave the Wildcats a little breathing room at 16-7, and the defense made the nine-point advantage stand the rest of the way.

Van Duyné, who led the Wildcats with 145 yards on 20 carries and two touchdowns, said he came ready to prove his worth as a senior running back.

"It being my first game

as a varsity starter I knew I had to play my butt off and just show what I can really do in order to keep going this season," Van Duyné said. "It's all those linemen and blockers up front. They deserve the credit because without them I wouldn't have been able to score."

Van Duyné took three pounding hits on his way to scoring the first touchdown of the season.

"I knew I wanted it. Just actually getting it felt really good. I had to keep driving, I had to get there," he said. "Our coaches preach about get those gritty yards by pounding away and I was able to do that."

Grinding out yards was exactly what Wilmington did.

The Wildcats ran the ball 48 times for 277 yards while not attempting a pass. Hunter Kaitschuck contributed 115 yards on 25 carries, giving Wilmington two backs with more than 100 yards. Quarterback Brysen Meents added 13 yards on two attempts and Flynn Bryant carried once for four yards.

Bishop McNamara, meanwhile, was limited to just 23 rushing yards on 12 attempts. The Fighting Irish found more success through the air, with Lee completing 9-of-16 passes for 116 yards, one touchdown and one interception.

"We knew we have to

get those gritty yards this season with a bunch of our O line from last year graduating," Van Duyné said. "I think our O line in this game did very well and everyone played to the best of their ability."

Defense buckles down

While Wilmington's offense controlled the ball on the ground, its defense made sure Bishop McNamara never got the big play it needed after the first quarter.

The Wildcats forced four fumbles, recovering one, and intercepted Lee once. Bishop Mac managed only seven first downs compared with Wilmington's 15. The Fighting Irish were also just 1-for-4 on third-down conversions while Wilmington converted four of nine.

Reents was especially pleased with how his defense adjusted after seeing things it hadn't expected.

"Kids were very coachable on defense, particularly because we had to make some quick changes," Reents said. "Mac came out with some things that we hadn't seen before and so we had to try to contain their special athletes."

"But there's definitely a lot we can improve on. You know the old scenario, a lot of improvement happens from Week 1 to Week 2, and we need that to happen for us."

Meents sealed the win

early in the fourth quarter when the visitors, in Wildcat territory, went for a long pass. The Wildcat senior intercepted the ball at the 27-yard line and scrambled about 60 yards before being pulled down short of a pick-six.

Unfortunately for Meents, the return was brought back because of a penalty. More importantly, the interception stood, and the Wildcats kept the ball out of Irish hands the rest of the game.

"It felt awesome making that interception," Meents said. "I had some running room and saw the end zone so I took off. Too bad it got called back after that big gain, I was tired after that one," he joked.

Meents, a three-year letterman, admitted he had a few jitters before the game, not knowing how the defense would stand up against a quick Bishop Mac team.

"As soon as we got the ball back on the opening kickoff, I knew we were back. We lost a lot of key guys on defense from last year, especially DB (defensive backs) wise," Meents said. "Our new guys had to learn to step up and I feel we showed it tonight."

"If we proved anything tonight it's that we're coming back for another state championship after winning it last year. We're coming to fight."

Reents singled out both Meents and Van Duyné, along with the

work up front, as keys to the victory.

"I thought Brysen and Dane both did a heck of a job for us," Reents said. "I thought Dane ran the ball really hard. Overall, I thought Kaitschuck and our defensive line did a really good job. And after that touchdown, I thought our secondary really buckled down and did a heck of a job versus their passing game."

"They have some very special athletes on that team, and we were able to contain them."

Wilmington also got a boost in the field-position battle from punter Cooper Holman, who averaged 34.3 yards on three punts with a long of 40. Kaitschuck returned two kickoffs for 50 yards.

It wasn't the type of runaway victory Wildcat fans became accustomed to during last year's championship run, but that may make the opener more valuable as Wilmington works to replace several key players from that team.

Reents said the coaching staff will study the film to determine why the Wildcats weren't moving the ball the way they wanted and where improvements need to be made defensively.

"Defensively, we had some blown assignments. But you know, it's first-game stuff," Reents said. "We'll move forward from here."

And they'll do so 1-0.

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