

# FACE OF POLK COUNTY

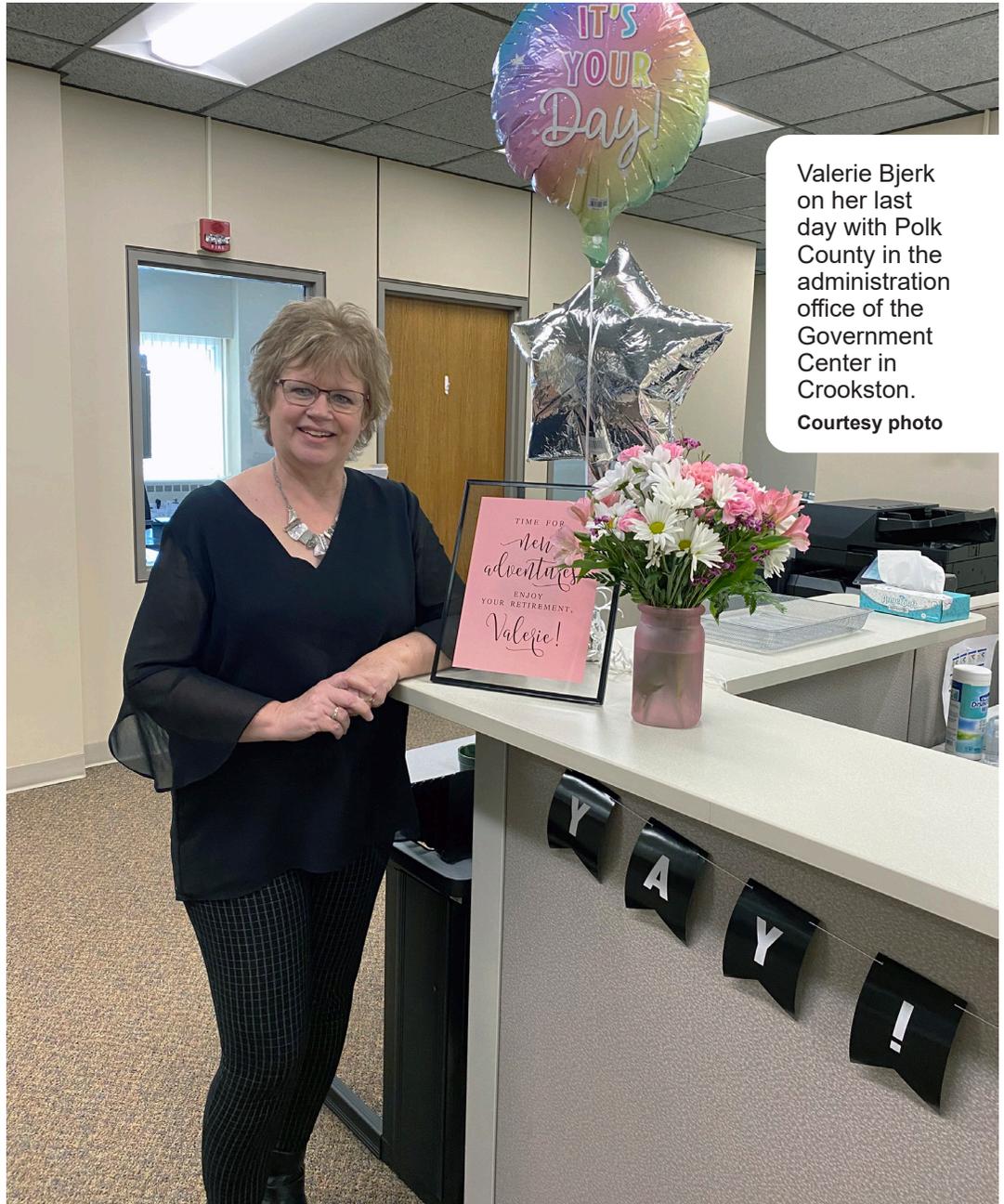
## Valerie Bjerk retires after 42 years of service

Many residents have probably heard her friendly voice and seen her smile within the Polk County Government Center. Answering questions and helping people in any way she could had become second nature for her. For many area residents she was the face of Polk County.

Her name is Valerie Bjerk, and she has spent the past 42 years in the Polk County Administrator's Office.

Raised on a farm in Norman County, near Gary, MN, along with her sister and two brothers, Bjerk attended the same school all the way through high school before graduating in 1979. After graduation she got her degree in Business from the University of Minnesota-Crookston.

Living on a farm while growing up Valerie knew she wanted to stay in a small-town atmosphere. A random outing to Crookston with her parents would set her on a path from which she never wavered. "I remember my mom saying why don't you stop in the Courthouse and pick up an application," says Bjerk. "The rest is history."



Valerie Bjerk on her last day with Polk County in the administration office of the Government Center in Crookston.

Courtesy photo

# Challenging times for Sheriff's Office

The Sheriff's Office is facing challenging times with recruiting deputies. The last couple of years have taken a toll.

We haven't been fully staffed since October 2020. We were short one to four deputies in 2021 depending on the month. In 2023, we were short three to five deputies.

We currently have five open positions and another deputy on military leave. I was recently advised that a seventh deputy has received a conditional offer from another agency, and they are currently conducting his background check.

## Hiring

We have attended colleges and career fairs, and an open deputy position is listed in the media and on the MN POST website. We are working to add a part-time Community Service Officer position to get assistance with routine tasks and to get them started with the office before graduation.

Another possibility that we are exploring is tuition assistance in the form of reimbursement towards coursework for their degree. This would require a three-year commitment to receive tuition reimbursement. I have been working with Human Resources to finalize this plan. I am excited to see if this will encourage more applicants and resolve the current shortage issue. However, this plan is going to take some time, and graduation is just around the corner in May.

## Retention

The Sheriff's Office created a new Deputy II position. Deputies must meet the following criteria to qualify for this position: five years of service and must complete the Minnesota Sheriff's Association Institute for Credible Leadership Development (ICLD) Training. ICLD is 179 POST Credited hours of training. We are optimistic that this new position will not only help with retention but will also help develop stronger leadership skills that enable deputies to promote into future supervisory

positions.

New deputies have goals set in front of them starting with their first day on the job. This new position allows deputies to develop professionally and work toward advancement within the agency. I want to thank the public safety board and the human resource office for working with me on this.

## Turnover

There are over 278 law enforcement agencies listed on the MN POST Website and many departments such as ours need multiple officers. There are a good handful of potential new candidates around us. Northland College Law Enforcement is graduating 13, Hibbing College has 13, and Alexandria College has 78 students. In past years those numbers have been much higher.

So, there are plenty of young officers coming through the ranks, yet it seems we can't keep them with the Sheriff's Office. Why? There are two reasons: First, because our starting position is a transport deputy. The majority of new hires want to be on the street answering calls for service and getting into action. New deputies are not content to bide their time waiting for a road deputy opening while working in the jail.

Second, they feel there are better opportunities or offers from other agencies.

We train and mentor them only to have them move to another agency. Some of this is inevitable due to each deputy's personal desires. However, there is a cost to this in that we spend between \$8000.00 to \$10,000.00 per new deputy to hire, equip, train, and for overtime their training officers work while getting them up to speed.

## Response Times

The shortage of manpower has made our job more difficult in that it is harder to be everywhere at once. The shortage of deputies has also led to an increase in response times to service calls. In days past, if there was an emergency call or critical incident and we were



JIM  
TADMAN  
Sheriff's  
Notes

respond as quickly and safely as possible. An injured deputy is not much good to anyone. Speed is dangerous for everyone. Nonetheless, it is a large county to cover and takes time.

## Delayed Backup

Law enforcement is experiencing a new generation of deputies and officers and with that generation a trend started about eight to nine-years ago.

New deputies and officers are not interested in working where they do not have immediate assistance or fellow officers are 10 to 30 minutes away. I know that we have lost deputies to other agencies because of this issue.

Although this is concerning, I cannot control the response times of other deputies. Recently, one of our deputies had a law enforcement student doing a ride along. One of their comments was, "Wow this is a big county. How long might you have to wait for back up?"

We must find the right deputy who has the self-confidence to respond to domestics, fights and critical incidents, and be able to control the situation until assistance arrives.

## Tough Spot

We are in a tough spot right now, but fortunately, we have dedicated deputies. They are hardworking and committed to serving the residents of this county.

I am asking the Polk County Commissioners to help me. How are we going to solve these personnel issues? We must continue to provide great law enforcement service for the county. I invite anyone to come to my office to meet on this issue and give me your ideas and suggestions.

not in the area, a town officer would usually be there if needed for first response or back up. Diminishing size of smaller towns in the county has led to the loss of full- and part-time officers.

- ▶ Fertile use to have up to 5 total full- and part-time officers.

- ▶ Erskine had 2 part-time officers.

- ▶ McIntosh had 1 full-time that transitioned to part-time.

- ▶ Mentor had 1 part-time officer.

- ▶ Climax had 2 part-time officers.

So, with small town police departments dwindling, the sheriff's statutory duties remain the same, patrolling and responding to emergency calls in the county.

Any sheriff's goal is to be able to provide the best law enforcement service for their county. Polk County isn't immune to crisis calls, critical incidents, and shootings. We have them all.

A Polk County resident addressed this very problem recently. They were not happy with the time it took for a deputy to respond to their house. We frequently must respond to a call in Gully when we are in Mentor, or a deputy is responding to a call in Trail then has to respond to a call in Fertile. There is no fast way to safely get to some calls if you are not in the area. Geography and weather can sometimes be our biggest enemy due to the size of the county.

Deputies are trained to

## County Board Meeting Times

8:00 a.m. on 1st Tues. of month

9:30 a.m. on the 3rd Tues.

8:00 a.m. on the 4th Tues.

**All meetings are open to the public. Visit [www.co.polk.mn.us/calendar](http://www.co.polk.mn.us/calendar) to confirm dates & times.**

**Polk County**

**Commissioners**

Dist. 1 — Paul Reese

Dist. 2 — Warren Standell

Dist. 3 — Gary Willhite, chair

Dist. 4 — Joan Lee

Dist. 5 — Mark Holy, v. chair

# An eclipse, and our place in the universe

As usual for me, it is easier to come up with a lofty headline than it is to make normal County business into some sort of metaphysical metaphor, but, well, here goes. The eclipse of the sun on April 8 was pretty cool even if for us it was only a partial eclipse. I could see it through the clouds out my office window, naturally thinking about what to write for the spring newsletter.

It is interesting knowing that these eclipses are predictable, right down to the day, location and minute if not the second they are going to happen. It will be two more decades until this happens again in North America, and considering multiple celestial bodies moving around in space are involved to create this “phenomenon,” I guess little is left to chance that it will happen from time to time, and we may see it again, if the weather cooperates. I hate to think it all means nothing in the end and apparently so do the news commentators who still seem unprepared for meaningful remarks, given we all know this stuff is going to happen.

So Whiting, where are you going with this?

A county budget can be kind of like an eclipse of the sun, I



**CHUCK WHITING**  
Polk County Administrator

guess. We know it’s coming, and we put a lot of energy and time preparing for it, we tell everyone about it, and we even know the date it will be approved and when to send out tax notices and so forth. We hope it means some things in retrospect, too.

But we have cloudy days to contend with. Those can be economic factors, legislative issues, electoral changes, and even international events. Just in the past few years we’ve seen things like the pandemic, election integrity, inflation, and even the weather itself affect budgeting and carrying out these budgets.

We strive to normalize these things to meet the needs of you, our county citizens, and I hope we do so while adapting to these things beyond our control. Maybe I am making a stretch here, but we work to make sure things continue on for our community. Or perhaps an eclipse, a partial

one at that, makes a guy think too much.

There are a few things in the budgeting weather forecast to be on the lookout for. First, in the spring forecast is what will come out of the Legislature in May. Polk County’s biggest interest is the bonding bill where we are working with our eight partner counties seeking \$61 million for development of a regional approach to landfilling construction and demolition waste. Go to <https://www.nwregionallhubandspoke.com/> for a full description.

We hope the Legislature and Governor comprehend the significance of this effort, first because it may be the only way for counties to meet the landfill requirements of the state, but second because we think it will be a model for the rest of state to follow.

The standards are so high for “C and D” landfills as to make them prohibitive for counties to develop and maintain. But, without them there are only limited and more costly alternatives to dispose of this type of waste. Understanding what is at stake is key to making this happen.

The summer budget forecast means carrying out 2024 budgeted projects. Road improvements,

reeroofing the Government Center and planning are the main ones, and the Board and department heads start their budget work for 2025. As I have noted, the planets continue to align as we know they will!

The fall forecast is where the real budget work will come. This year is a collective bargaining year for our eight bargaining groups. I like to think we have developed good relationships with our bargaining groups and employees as we all know we are in this together.

We are in a competitive labor market; we’ve seen inflation and insurance increases so like the cooling weather we do what we can to keep things going heading into winter. It is only April now but fall seems very close at hand in the budget cycle. The budget work is beginning, and likely my article in the fall newsletter will be more descriptive of the budget weather at that time than now.

Like an eclipse, we know it is coming, just as we know the sun will appear again shortly afterwards and life will return to normal. Anyway, I am glad the next eclipse isn’t for another twenty years. I can save my energy for the 2025 budget!

**Request for Proposals**  
*Now Open!*

**Polk County Opioid Epidemic Response**

Prevention • Treatment • Recovery • Harm Reduction

See the Polk County website for more information

**Due May 15, 2024**

**TOGETHER WE CAN** *prevent and stop opioid misuse and opioid use disorder.*

POLK COUNTY

# Highway 220, near EGF, to be reconstructed to concrete this summer

As summer is about to roll around it's time for construction season to begin across Minnesota. The Minnesota Department of Transportation recently announced nearly 200 road construction projects to improve roads, bridges, and transportation infrastructure across the state.

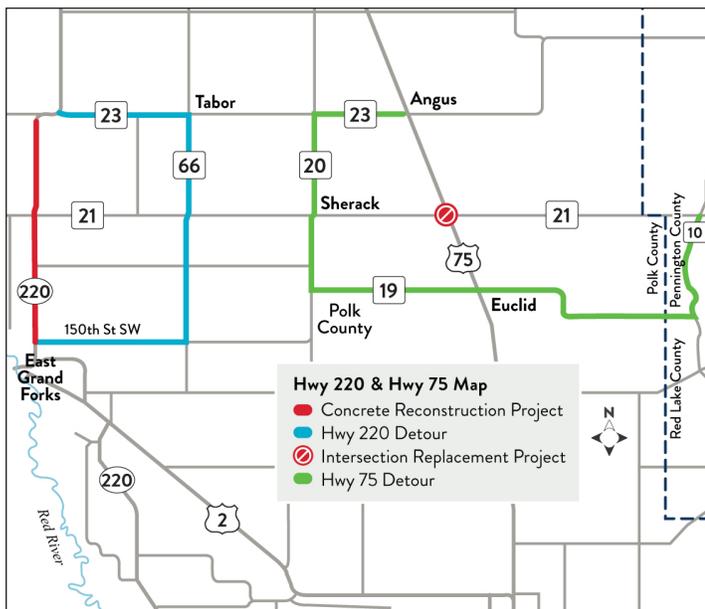
Two significant projects happening specifically in Polk County involve Highway 220 north of East Grand Forks and a partnership project between the County and MNDOT to install a roundabout at the intersection of Highway 75 and County 21 north of Crookston.

The Highway 220 project will stretch from Polk County Road 19 in East Grand Forks to County Road 22/23 and involves reconstructing the road to concrete and several culvert replacements to improve drainage. The \$15.7 million project will begin on May 20 and is expected to be finished by mid-late August. During this time traffic will detour onto County 66 via 150<sup>th</sup> St. and County 23. Because of the time frame it could have an impact on harvest season.

According to the MNDOT, the

roundabout project will increase traffic efficiency for vehicles crossing or getting onto Highway 75, while also making it safer. According to the MNDOT, the roundabout project will increase traffic efficiency for vehicles crossing or getting onto Highway 75, while also making it safer. TH 75 traffic will detour west on County 19, then north on County 20, and east on County 23 back to TH 75. CSAH 21 traffic will be detoured South on County 20, East on County 19 into Pennington County and then North on Pennington County 10 back to Polk County 21/Pennington County Road 3.

As always, the MNDOT is asking drivers to drive safely through construction zones. "We need everyone on the road to work together to keep our crews, and yourselves, safe in work zones," said Commissioner Nancy Daubenger. "When we all slow down and obey work zone speed limits, set aside our cell phones and other distractions, plan ahead and remain patient, we become safer together as we share the limited space inside work zones."



Graphic courtesy of MNDOT

A map showing the detours around summer road construction projects this summer.

## EMPLOYEE ANNIVERSARIES

<u>Hire Date</u>	<u>Employee</u>	<u>Department</u>
<b>35 Years</b>		
4/24/89	Teresa Genereux	Social Services
6/19/89	Betty Solie	Social Services
*11/1/88	Clarisse Miller	Social Services
<b>30 Years</b>		
1/4/94	Karen Warmack	Social Services
5/2/94	Karen Biermaier	Social Services
6/6/94	Nancy Shafer	Sheriff's Office
8/1/94	Randy Olson	Highway Department
8/29/94	Randy Huot	Highway Department
<b>25 Years</b>		
1/21/99	Ron Denison	Finance Office
7/8/99	Erik Sandberg	Environmental Services
8/9/99	Connie Desrosier	Taxpayer Service Center
9/1/99	Karen Broekemeier	Social Services
11/15/99	Todd Lewis	Highway Department
<b>20 Years</b>		
5/3/04	Debra Manecke	Solid Waste
8/13/04	Kathy Girdler	Public Health
9/7/04	Jesse Haugen	Sheriff's Office
11/22/04	Michele Ostgard	Social Services
<b>15 Years</b>		
3/9/09	Jaclyn Martin	Social Services
6/8/09	Brad Driscoll	Highway Department
<b>10 Years</b>		
1/2/14	Kyle Olson	Sheriff's Office
2/26/14	Scott Vilven	Environmental Services
4/9/14	Wayne Larson	Solid Waste
6/1/14	David MacDonald	Facilities Department
6/9/14	Thomas Brault	Sheriff's Office
8/4/14	Kristina Cowen	Social Services
9/8/14	Katharine Lerohl	Social Services
9/29/14	Thomas Hibma	Sheriff's Office
11/12/14	Holly Blilie	Public Health
11/17/14	Jamie Plante	Social Services
12/1/24	Amy Van Den Einde	Public Health
12/22/14	Ross Olsen	Solid Waste
<b>5 Years</b>		
1/28/19	April Hansen	Sheriff's Office
1/29/19	Danielle Mulcahy	Social Services
2/5/19	Matthew Benge	Sheriff's Office
5/13/19	Wyatt Beauchane	Sheriff's Office
6/17/19	Kevin Shibata	Social Services
6/24/19	Howard Nettum	Highway Department
6/24/19	Elizabeth Schmitz	Highway Department
7/29/19	Ann Butala	Sheriff's Office
10/1/19	Brittney Osen	Public Health
10/14/19	Amanda Lien	Public Health
11/25/19	Janet Mattison	Assessor's Office
12/23/19	Richard Drellack	Facilities Department
12/30/19	Zach Kozitka	Information Systems

\* We missed Clarisse Miller in last spring's anniversary list.

# Road construction season about to go into full swing

Well, it's the end of March and we still have lows below zero and snow up to our waist. Not. For the most part winter was tame. Although March has been a little colder and snowier. Road Restrictions are on so make sure your weight is in the allowable range. With the warming temperatures, I am pretty sure they will be coming off soon. One way to maintain our roadways is to apply bituminous overlays. They typically last 15 to 20 years.

This year's overlays that are scheduled are:

- ▶ CSAH 14 from CSAH 45 to TH 75
- ▶ CSAH 45 from TH 220 to TH 75
- ▶ CSAH 8 from TH 2 to N.

### Limits of McIntosh

▶ CSAH 105 in Erskin, MN With the overlay of CSAH 14, the state will be installing a new Weigh in Motion scale with cameras. This will allow State Patrol to better monitor weights on our roadway.

With the overlay of CSAH 45, we will be getting a new concrete railroad crossing at TH 75.

The roundabout at CSAH 21 and TH 75 north of Euclid has been submitted for final approval and is awaiting the go ahead to let it so it can be constructed this summer. It has been a long and drawn-out process, but I think we have finally crossed the line to avoiding Serious and Fatal Crashes at this

location. This doesn't mean we won't have crashes; they just won't be serious injury or fatal crashes.

Polk County will also be reconstructing CR 202 and CR 203 between McIntosh and Trail this summer. They are both two-mile roads that the county has owned and maintained for many years. They don't have termini at each end with another county road. For this reason, we will look to turn them back to the townships in which the roads are located. You ask why the county would want to do this? Because County Roads are paid for by Property Taxes only. Whereas Township Roads get State Gas Tax, Motor Vehicle Sales Tax

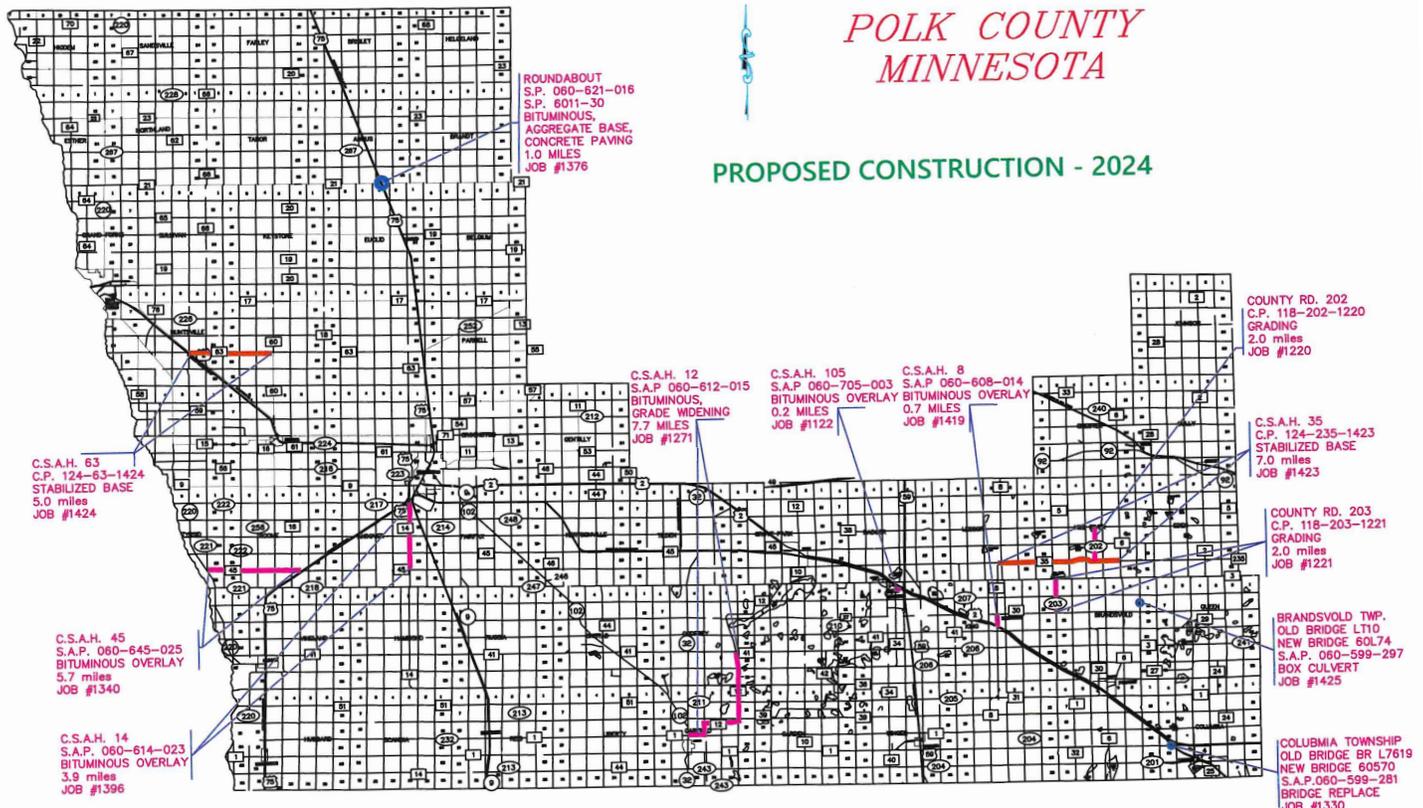
and Tab Fee Funding.

We may also let the grade widening of CSAH 12 from TH 32 to CSAH 41 later this year. If we do most of the construction will happen in 2025.

Polk County will also have four culvert replacements. Two in Hammond Twp, 1 in Russia and 1 in Brandsvold. These projects will hopefully be completed by October 1<sup>st</sup>.

If you have any questions concerning this year's construction program, please give our office a call at 218-281-3952 and talk with either Darin Carlstrom at ext. 8254 or Richard Sanders at ext. 8253.

**Rich Sanders,**  
Polk County Engineer



# P2P makes 171 arrests in 2023

The Pine to Prairie Drug Task Force made 171 arrests in 2023. That's more than three arrests each week across the eight-county area of northwest Minnesota.

The arrests resulted in the seizure of 1,519 fentanyl pills, 3.05 pounds of methamphetamine (meth), 218 grams of cocaine, 184 prescription pills, 40 grams of heroin, 1.6 pounds of marijuana, and 32 weapons.

The Task Force works to identify trafficking sources, both local and regional, and to assist in the apprehension of violent offenders in the eight-county area. It also works with other agencies in the greater region.

Made up of law enforcement officers that are provided by the counties and the three major cities in the service area, the mission of the Task Force is to identify, disrupt, and dismantle local drug manufacturers and distributors, and to assist local law enforcement agencies in violent crime investigations. Polk County and the cities of Crookston and East Grand Forks each provide one officer to the team, while the City of Thief River Falls and Pennington County cooperate to provide an investigator. Counties contributing full-time investigators to the team are Lake of the Woods, Marshall, Norman, and Roseau.

While not committing a full-time deputy, Kittson and Red Lake counties assist as needed. Polk County also makes available its two officers who manage drug dogs. Marshall and Norman counties and the cities of Thief River Falls and East Grand Forks also make their canine officers available to the Task Force.

The Task Force is guided by a 14-member advisory board. That board is made up of East Grand Forks Police Chief Mike Hedlund (president), Crookston Police Chief Darin Selzler (vice president), Polk County Sheriff Jim Tadman, Pennington County Sheriff Seth Vettleson, Thief River Falls Police Chief Marissa Adam, Crookston City Council member Clayton Briggs, East Grand Forks City Council member Mark Olstad, Polk County Commissioner Warren Strandell, Roseau County Sheriff Steve Gust, Assistant Roseau County Attorney Mike Grover, Norman County Sheriff Ben Fall and deputy Matt Wagner, Lake of the Woods County Sheriff Gary Fish, Lake of the Woods County Attorney James Austad, Marshall County Sheriff Jason Boman, and Marshall County Commissioner Jim Duckstad.

Advisory board (non-voting) mem-

## SIGNIFICANT CASES IN 2023

- ▶ The task force assisted U.S. Customs with a large seizure of cocaine, meth, mushrooms, and marijuana from a Canadian citizen who took wrong turn in Roseau County.
- ▶ In the execution of a search warrant in Roseau County for an ammunition violation, the task force seized 380 grams of meth, 38 grams of cocaine, marijuana, other drugs, two pistols, a pipe bomb, and \$13,000 in cash.
- ▶ Assisted the Ada Police Department with a threat incident that involved a shotgun. The suspect surrendered. A woman and child were found hiding under a bed. Meth was seized.
- ▶ In Pennington County, the task force responded to an overdose incident that led to the seizure of meth, mushrooms, and fentanyl pills. The source had been on probation following a previous overdose incident that resulted in the death of his girlfriend.
- ▶ In Crookston, the task force assisted in an incident where the male suspect in the stabbing of his mother had been using meth. She is recovering.
- ▶ The task force responded to a fentanyl overdose where a child was wandering around in a home in Crookston. Fentanyl was seized. Information from the case resulted on the seizure of additional fentanyl.
- ▶ Watched a drug deal take place

and conducted a traffic stop in East Grand Forks. The driver, who had a warrant against him, and his passenger were under probation in North Dakota for drug crimes. Both had drugs and were charged with second degree drug sales. Several weeks later surveillance on the same house resulted in a meth-DWI arrest of a person. A two-year-old child was crawling around on the floor of a cluttered, filthy house which had a room full of meth paraphernalia. Three children were placed in protected facilities. A man was arrested as he crawled out of a basement window and tried to flee.

- ▶ Combined efforts of Pine 2 Prairie Drug Face and the Grand Forks Drug Task Force disrupted a major drug trafficking organization when an undercover officer bought and seized over a half pound of methamphetamine. Three persons were arrested.
- ▶ The U.S. Postal Inspections Services has helped to investigate drugs that are coming to the area through the mail. One instance resulted in the interception of the controlled delivery of over 300 fentanyl pills. The arrest and confession determined that over 1,500 pills in a month had been received through the mail in this area.

bers include Polk County Attorney Greg Widseth, Red Lake County Sheriff Mitch Bernstein, Ada Police Chief Steve Hager, Kittson County Sheriff Matt Vig, a U.S. Border Patrol officer, Homeland Security Investigations Supervisor Josh Goldberg, and East Grand Forks fiscal assistant Alyssa Hammen, and Polk County Commissioner Joan Lee.

The Task Force receives approximately \$250,000 in state funding annually. The money is split between the cities and counties to reimburse them for a portion of the salaries of the investigators that they provide to the team. A portion of the grant is also used for training and for purchasing necessary equipment.

**Warren Strandell, 2nd District  
Polk County Board Commissioner**

**tip 411**

**HELP FIGHT DRUGS & CRIME.**  
Send an anonymous tip to the Pine to Prairie Drug Task Force  
Text keyword P2PTIP to 847411, add a space, type in your tip  
information, and hit send.

**DOWNLOAD FREE**  
**P2PTip app**  
for  
iPhone  
or  
Android

A service of  
**Pine to Prairie Drug Task Force**

## AROUND THE COUNTY

### Three Seats Open on County Board of Commissioners

It's election season and that means there will be a few potential races for the Polk County Board of Commissioners. The open seats will include the 1st, 3rd, and 5th Districts currently held by Paul Reese, Gary Willhite, and Mark Holy, respectively.

The two-week filing period for candidacy is May 21 until June 4 at 5 p.m. The primary election will be held on Aug. 13 with the general election following on Nov. 5.

### Edible Moratorium Expires

An edible moratorium that was passed on Feb. 7, 2023, by the Polk County Board of Commissioners has expired at the recommendation of Polk County staff.

The Board agreed with the expiration to see how things develop as the State of Minnesota moves forward on rolling out provisions of new legislation involving the

legalization of recreational marijuana usage and sales.

In July 2022, the sale of edible cannabinoid products became legal pursuant to a law passed by the Minnesota legislature at the end of the 2022 session. At that time, there were concerns that this new law did not establish a framework for the time, manner, and place of such sales or provide for any regulatory framework for such things as licensing criteria or labeling standards.

Because this law was passed at the very end of the session and without the typical opportunity to study it before passage, to engage in policy discussions, and to address apparent shortcomings of the law, the Polk County Board of Commissioners elected to pass an interim ordinance prohibiting the establishment of new uses or expanding existing uses related to the sales, testing, manufacturing, and distribution of these edible cannabinoid products.

That moratorium was effective for a

period of one year. The moratorium was designed to allow Polk County staff to further study the new law and make recommendations to the County Board regarding any proposed adoptions or changes to Polk County ordinances necessitated by the law.

At the time the moratorium was passed the Minnesota legislature was contemplating the adoption of legislation to legalize recreational marijuana usage and sales in Minnesota.

The recreational marijuana law subsequently was passed by the Minnesota legislature, and it became effective on Aug. 1, 2023. The new marijuana legalization law, which was set forth in nearly 250 pages of statutory language, made it evident to Polk County staff that the entire landscape with respect to cannabinoid products, including marijuana and other edibles, had completely changed.

**Greg Widseth, Polk County Attorney**

## K9 Jax receives new body armor

Polk County Sheriff's Office K9 Jax has received a bullet and stab protective vest thanks to a charitable donation from non-profit organization Vested Interest in K9s, Inc. K9 Jax's vest was sponsored by Polk County Board 4<sup>th</sup> District Commissioner Joan Lee and her husband Mark Lee of McIntosh, MN and embroidered with the sentiment "Born to Love - Trained to Serve - Loyal Always." This is the second vest sponsorship by Joan and Mark.

K9 Jax's partner Deputy Gunderson would like to add a special thank you to Joan and Mark Lee for their generous donation, which made it possible for him to receive his new gear. The ballistic vest features a heavy-duty zipper closure combined with a Velcro snap system. The vest contains certified ballistic panels to keep Jax safe while he is protecting our community. K9 Jax is a dog of few words, however, we could tell by his excited "WOOF" that he is grateful to have his new gear.

Vested Interest in K9s, Inc.,

established in 2009, is a 501(c)(3) charity whose mission is to provide bullet and stab protective vests and other assistance to dogs of law enforcement and related agencies throughout the United States. Since its inception, Vested Interest in K9s, Inc. has provided over 5,435 vests to K9s in all 50 states at a value of \$6.9 million, made possible by both private and corporate donations.

The program is open to U.S. dogs that are at least 20 months old and actively employed and certified with law enforcement or related agencies. K9s with expired vests are also eligible to participate. There are an estimated 30,000 law enforcement K9s throughout the United States.

For more information, or to learn about volunteer opportunities, please call 508-824-6978. Vested Interest in K9s, Inc. provides information, lists events, and accepts donations at [www.vik9s.org](http://www.vik9s.org), or you may mail your contribution to P.O. Box 9, East Taunton, MA 02718.



**Tim Albrecht / Polk County**  
Polk County Sheriff's Office K9 Jax poses in his new vest alongside his partner Deputy Gunderson and Polk County Board 4th District Commissioner Joan Lee.

# 'TIS THE SEASON

The Polk County Sheriff's Office/Emergency Management took part in the annual Shop With A Hero 2023 event Dec. 12. Local public safety stars partnered with Walmart Crookston in sponsoring our Shop With A Hero event.

The Polk County Sheriff's Office was joined by the Crookston Police Department, Crookston Fire Department, Crookston National Guard Army, and Crookston Area Ambulance to take children shopping.

The kids had a public safety hero as their shopping buddy while they cruised through the store with their Walmart gift cards. Their choices varied from toys and electronics to a few sugary treats. Some children purchased gifts for siblings.



**ABOVE:** First responders from the Crookston Police Department, Crookston Fire Department, and Crookston National Guard Army, and Crookston Area Ambulance pose for a group photo with area children before participating in the annual Shop With a Hero event.



**LEFT:** Polk County Sheriff James Tadman and his shopper check out with all the fits they purchased

**BELOW LEFT:** Polk County Sheriff's Office Deputy Hibma helps a shopper get his gift personally wrapped by a Walmart employee.

**BELOW RIGHT:** Crookston Police Department's Sergeant Grabowski sets off with his shopper.

Tim Albrecht / Polk County



# WCRWD to provide sustainable water supply

## Three area counties begin legal process to form water district

Clay, Norman, and Polk counties have taken a significant step forward to provide a long-term sustainable water supply for the region. On March 22, the three counties initiated the judicial process in Clay County District Court for the creation of the West Central Regional Water District.

This marks a crucial milestone in addressing the region’s drinking water needs. Once complete, the WCRWD will have the capacity to provide centralized drinking water service to rural residents and cities in Polk, Norman, and Clay counties.

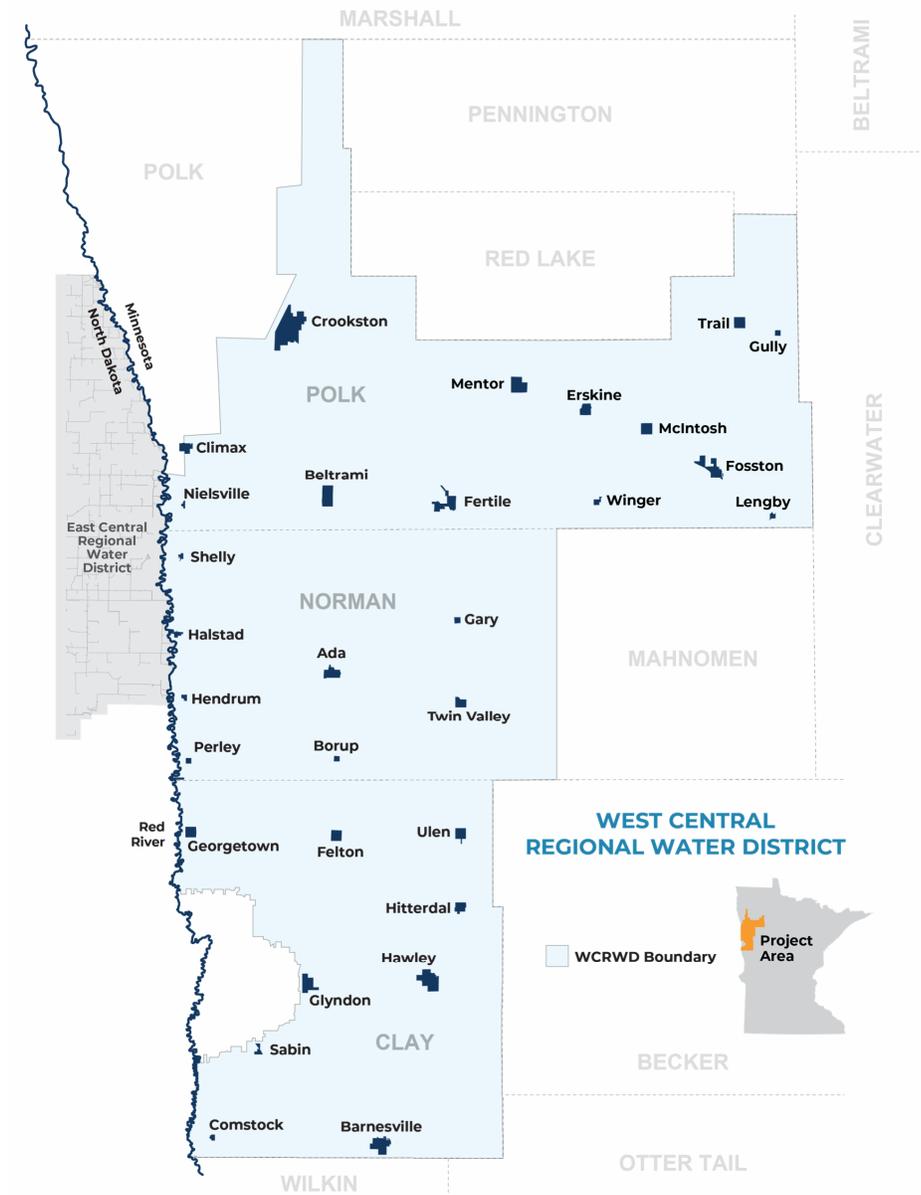
This effort was spurred by Polk County’s initial infrastructure investment of \$584,674 from its American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) federal funding. The WCRWD is pursuing additional funding at the federal and state levels. At the federal level, Senators Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith, as well as Representative Michelle Fischbach, have secured a total of \$3.5 million for the project in the federal budget via the Community Project Funding process.

At the state level, Senators Mark Johnson and Rob Kupec as well as Representatives Debra Kiel and Jim Joy are supporting legislation that would provide an additional \$9.25 million in bonding.

The water district formation process will involve a judicial process in Clay County, public hearings, collaboration with state regulators, state and federal legislators, and community engagement to ensure that the interests of the residents and businesses of the three counties are served. The three county boards will work to navigate legal requirements and timelines to establish the WCRWD in accordance with state statutes. The legal formation process is anticipated to last a year or more.

“The West Central Regional Water District is committed to ensuring a reliable and sustainable water supply for generations to come. The legal formation of the district marks a crucial step forward in achieving this goal and underscores our collective commitment to the wellbeing of our communities,” says Lucas Spaeth, superintendent of Halstad Municipal Utilities.

Ensuring public health and access to high-quality drinking water is at the core of the WCRWD. According to the Minnesota Department of Health, all three counties exceeded the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) maximum contaminant level of 10 micrograms per liter for arsenic among the private wells that were tested. Arsenic levels were found to exceed the EPA standard in 43% of private wells that



were tested in Norman County, 39% in Clay County, and 21% in Polk County.

### Why is the formation of WCRWD important?

► **Access to Clean Water:** The WCRWD will ensure that everyone in the region has access to safe and clean drinking water by addressing current water quality concerns.

► **Sustainable Future:** By establishing a regional water system, the WCRWD will lay the foundation for a sustainable water future, supporting economic growth and community development.

► **Community Resilience:** A reliable water supply is essential for the health and resilience of our communities, especially in times of drought, staffing shortages, or other emergencies.

### About WCRWD

The WCRWD is a collaborative effort between local governments, community stakeholders and water experts aimed at providing a reliable and clean water supply to residents, farmers and businesses in Norman, Clay and Polk counties. For more information, please visit <https://wcrwd-ae2s.hub.arcgis.com>.

You can also reach out to the county leads for the WCRWD: Polk County Administrator Chuck Whiting: [Chuck.Whiting@co.polk.mn.us](mailto:Chuck.Whiting@co.polk.mn.us); Clay County Administrator Steve Larson: [Steve.Larson@claycountymn.gov](mailto:Steve.Larson@claycountymn.gov); and Norman County Engineer Keith Berndt: [Keith.Berndt@co.norman.mn.us](mailto:Keith.Berndt@co.norman.mn.us)

**Warren Strandell, 2nd District  
Polk County Board Commissioner**

SOLID WASTE FACILITY UPDATES

Solid Waste Landfill

The Polk County landfill near Gentilly, MN, has been seeking wetland-related permits for its future growth since 2019. The process has been long, expensive, and exhaustive. One wetland permit became two, and additional plant-related concerns required an additional two permits. Navigating the similar, but sometimes conflicting, regulatory goals and guidelines became a challenge. The last municipal solid waste (MSW) landfill cell constructed would reach permitted capacity in 2024, and each of the next phases all had wetland impacts. Without these wetland permits; no future landfill cell could be constructed. The landfill's future was in jeopardy if wetland permits were not issued.

On Jan. 23, 2024, the Polk County landfill did receive the validated U.S. Army Corp of Engineers Wetland Permit – the last of the required permits necessary to keep the MSW landfill in operation. Polk is currently in the process of designing the next landfill expansion (Phase 15) and obtaining the permit modification needed as the wetland permit requires a change from the planned development previously permitted. Construction of the Polk MSW landfill Phase 15 project will occur in the Summer of 2024.

Becker County had been sending 10,000 tons of their MSW to the Fargo landfill. In 2022, the Fargo landfill put a cap on accepting Becker MSW. Becker approached Polk landfill asking for assistance to accept 2,000 tons of MSW immediately, and all 10,000 tons starting in 2023. In 2023, Fargo landfill extended their 2022 agreement for them to transition completely by 2024 in order to conserve the Fargo landfill capacity for themselves. During the summer of 2023 when Polk was working with all of the Wetland regulators and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) to modify the permits to accommodate Becker County, Becker was making arrangements to continue shipping waste to Fargo landfill. In November 2023, Becker County confirmed to Polk that they had reached an agreement to contin-

ue sending 8,000 tons of MSW to the Fargo landfill for 2024. Becker County failed to honor their agreement, and left Polk landfill with a \$800k budget shortfall for 2024. The revenue from the Becker County MSW was included in the budget for 2024 and beyond. As Becker County provided no reasonable notice of its alternative plans, Polk County landfill was not afforded the opportunity to plan accordingly. The unplanned loss of this revenue is being evaluated to determine if tip fees will be raised yet in 2024, and if so by what amount.

C&D Debris Landfill

The MPCA is currently in the process of drafting construction & demolition debris (C&D) landfill rules that will make wide-sweeping changes to the solid waste industry. The MPCA cite groundwater impacts at many C&D landfill facilities as the reason for these new rules. It has been stated by MPCA that any new rule will require the closure of all unlined C&D landfill's – most of which are located in rural areas – and require any new facilities to have a liner and leachate collection system. The cost of a liner and leachate system are extremely high for facilities that accept small volumes of C&D materials. The rules were supposed to be adopted in 2024, but have been postponed until 2025 when necessary MPCA resources were lost.

In 2023, Polk and eight other neighboring counties in northwest MN formed a partnership to search for answers to this looming issue. The partnership counties include: Beltrami, Cass, Clearwater, Hubbard, Mahnomon, Marshall, Norman, Polk, and Red Lake – and include portions of Leech Lake, Red Lake, and White Earth Tribal Nations. This partnership applied for, and received, funding to conduct a regional assessment (study) to look at the cost of unlined C&D landfill closure, cost to construct new lined C&D landfill's, cost to construct an alternative system of local collection sites and regional lined C&D landfill's, and C&D material reuse/recycling options. The study was completed in

May 2024 and was used to apply for multiple funding opportunities both Federal and State. The NW Regional Hub & Spoke Project applied for MN Bond Funds for 2024. Applications for \$61.5 million in bond funds, which is roughly 75% of the project cost, were filed with the MPCA and Minnesota Management & Budget (MMB) office. The project was on the Senate and House Bonding Tours in the Fall of 2023. Bills for this project have now been introduced. HF5339 is being carried by Rep Knudsen, Rep Kiel, Rep Weiner, Rep Davis, Rep Burkel, Rep

Grossell, and Rep Bliss. SF5398 is being carried by Sen Utke, Sen Johnson, Sen Green, and Sen Eichorn. Their support of our project is much appreciated.

Polk County, and the rest of the partnership, realize the Governor's 2024 Bonding Bill recommendation failed to appropriate money for the project. As such, likelihood of receiving full funding for the project is not good. However, multiple smaller MPCA Grants have been released this spring, and those components of the project which

WASTE Page 11

Would you enjoy a work-at-home career in child care?

Polk County families are in need of Family child care homes (previously called daycare homes). Children under school age, infants, and toddlers of working families have the greatest need for child care. Parents choose home family child care for many reasons.

• Family child care offers a more close knit setting than a larger day care or center (which are also limited locally).

• Family child care usually consists of one provider caring for up to 10-12 children in the comfort of their own home. Providers are required to do day to day activities with each age group which provide for the physical, intellectual, emotional and social development of children.

The licensing process for a Family child care is less complex than opening a center. It takes roughly 6-8 weeks to obtain training, background studies, and complete the inspection of the child care home. Licensing for Family child care is a very thorough process. Family child cares are licensed by the State of Minnesota to comply with health and safety regulations, however, Polk County Social Services can help with the application process and will be the agency that works with a new applicant on licensing and will make a final recommendation to the state. The goal of the Polk County Licensor is to make sure that a licensed provider meets all requirements to ensure that they will provide quality and safe care to children. The Licensor is also available to answer questions and guide a new applicant through the whole process.



Polk County is in need of individuals who have the special gift of caring for children

There are many resources to assist you if you are interested in this career. Start-up grants are available.

More information can be found on the Polk County website www.co.polk.mn.us /269/ Child-Care-Licensing If you would like to speak to someone or receive additional information, please contact Polk County Social Services Licensing Unit 612 N. Broadway, Rm #302, Crookston, MN 56716 218-281-3127 pccs.intake@co.polk.mn.us



## WASTE From Page 10

can be separated out as sub-projects for receiving these grants is being pursued. Because these grants are competitive, and the Request for Proposals (RFPs) are open, disclosure of those initiatives at this time is not advisable. However, one proposal that will have been submitted for an RFP that will be closed by the publication of this newsletter is to establish a regional collection and processing system for gypsum board (sheetrock) which is traditionally disposed of in unlined C&D landfill's. Polk and other members of the partnership plan to make an additional 3-5 proposals to address 5-7 different materials or other parts of the project. If one or more of these sub-projects are successfully funded, it will reduce the demand for bond funds this session and allow for a transition to an alternative system.

### Resource Recovery Facility

The Polk Resource Recovery Facility (RRF) in Fosston, MN, has been faced with multiple challenges in 2023 which have continued into 2024. Staffing shortages, escalating costs, depressed steam sales, and recyclable material markets all negatively impacted the 2023 budget and threaten the 2024 budget. Polk has been pursuing a Phase III Project which would impact the RRF and the compost facility at the landfill. The Phase III Project would provide upgrades to the material recovery facility (MRF) in Fosston which would permanently install artificial intelligence (A.I.) robots into the quality control (QC) areas for cleaning the recyclable materials for market, improve existing equipment efficiency, and enhance recovery of recyclables. Another part of the Phase III Project would impact the organics composting facility by changing the compost system from a static pile (mechanically

turning windrows) to aerated pile (blowing air into piles). By going with the aerated static pile (ASP) system the composting process is sped-up allowing more material to be composted faster on a smaller footprint. The ASP increases capacity and reduces burden on staff, equipment, and fuel needed to operate.

In August 2023 Polk RRF leased a new technology from AMP Robotics – the Micro-Jet. The Micro-Jet uses the traditional A.I. robotics system to scan and detect materials to target for removal, but instead of the mechanical apparatus to remove the material as it passes by on a conveyor it uses a small blast of air to remove it. The Micro-Jet made its debut to the marketplace at the Polk RRF. In October 2023 Micro-Jets were installed on the other three optical QC areas. As a result, Polk RRF now can consistently process and market Plastic #1 (PET), Plastic #2-Natural (HDPE-N), Plastic #2-Color (HDPE-C), and Plastic #5 (PP).

The inclusion of Plastic #5 (PP) is a new addition to the recycling stream that is now offered in all six partner counties of Beltrami, Clearwater, Hubbard, Mahanomen, Norman, and Polk.

### More Information

You can see video of the AMP Micro-Jet system in action, and additional information on other portions of the entire Hub & Spoke Project such as the ASP system, by visiting the NW Regional Hub & Spoke website at: [www.nwregionallhubandspoke.com](http://www.nwregionallhubandspoke.com) or at the QR code below.

Jon Steiner, Environmental Services Director



# Need for child foster homes in Polk County

Polk County Social Services has a critical need for child foster care homes across the county.

It is important to have foster homes in all communities as we try to be less disruptive in children's lives and prefer to have children entering foster care remain in their communities that are close to their siblings, and other family members and friends, while attending the same schools, team events, cultural, and social activities.

Foster care is a temporary living situation for children providing a safe place to be if a child cannot live with his/her family, or on their own. Foster Parents help by providing stability, affection, consistency, and nurturing. Foster parents also provide for the child's educational, health, cultural, and social needs.

In child foster care foster parents open their homes to children whose families are in crisis. They help children heal and become productive, self-sufficient members of our society. In both child and adult foster care, they provide a safe, stable, nurturing

environment that is needed at a very critical time in their lives.

When children must leave their homes, placement with relatives is considered first. If this is not a plausible option, the placing agency then looks to licensed foster homes.

Foster parents are as diverse as the children they care for. Some are married; some are single; some are grandparents; some are parents with young children, adolescents, or grown

children; some hope to eventually adopt children. The characteristics foster parents have in common are a love for children, an ability to commit to challenges, and a desire to make a difference children's lives. It can be very rewarding but is also something that is not to be taken lightly.

Foster homes are licensed through the Minnesota Department of Human Services when the licensing process is complet-

ed. Orientation and training are provided by Polk County Social Services.

Foster care parents receive a monthly reimbursement for the care of a foster child. Further information can be found on the Polk County website at [www.co.polk.mn.us/275/foster-care](http://www.co.polk.mn.us/275/foster-care) or by calling intake at 218-470-8483.

Molly Paulsrud, Polk County Social Services Supervisor

*Make a Difference*  
*Change a Life*  
**Become a Foster Parent!**  
Polk County Social Services  
**1-877-281-3127**

**AQUATIC INVASIVE SPECIES UPDATES**

The Polk County Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Task Force purchased a CD3 wayside solar watercraft boating cleaning station to help protect waterways in Polk County. The Polk County Commissioners authorized the Task Force to purchase the boat cleaning station from MN-based company CD3 Systems. CD3 Systems products aim to give the public tools and equipment to combat AIS spread throughout the country via the Clean, Drain, Dry philosophy.

The MN clean, drain, dry initiative aims to keep boats and watercrafts free of water which ultimately keeps aquatic invasive species where they are. Responsible lake and river users need to take necessary steps to take the time to look over all watercraft equipment when recreating on lakes and rivers. Aquatic hitchhikers continue to spread all throughout MN on boats and watercrafts. The cleaning stations will help lake and river users have the necessary tools to combat aquatic invasive species from hitching rides on watercraft.

The AIS taskforce knows how important our lakes and rivers are for people to enjoy in Polk County. They aim to keep our waterways clean and productive for future generations of lakes and river users. We are proud to have a CD3 system in our toolbox to combat AIS spread in Polk County. In the 2024 boating season the CD3 can be found at East Shore public launch area located on the NE side of Maple Lake off County Highway 10. This access provides sufficient space to use the unit without hindering people from using public access sites throughout Polk County. Even if you are not launching in Maple Lake, stop in to test out the new cleaning station, its easy and free to use on all types of watercraft as well as boating equipment. For more information visit [www.co.polk.mn.us](http://www.co.polk.mn.us) or join us on Facebook under Polk County Environmental Services group.

**Jacob Snyder, Assistant Environmental Services Administrator**

# Polk County expands organics at-home collection program

The Polk County Resource Recovery Center in Fosston is announcing a new organics compost program aimed to collect household organic wastes and pet wastes. The new program will allow Polk County residents to drop-off food scraps, compostable household items, and household pet wastes for composting purposes. Residents that are interested will receive a free organics

waste kit that has everything they need to keep food scraps and pet waste out of the normal bagged household garbage or littered all over the countryside.

The first step in composting is the collection of food waste, household compostable products, and pet waste that naturally will compost in the right conditions. Polk County Environmental Services urges households to stop in the

recycling center to get your free organics and/or pet waste pail kit. If interested, please call us at 218-435-6501 or for more program information visit our website at <https://www.co.polk.mn.us/> under the Environmental Services Department, "NEW Organics Program"

**Jacob Snyder,  
Assistant Environmental Services Administrator**

# Septic system fix-up grant program

Polk County Environmental Services is pleased to announce the availability of a cost-share grant program that is available to property owners in Polk County that have an existing noncompliant septic system. Funds are intended to fix septic systems that are currently failing codes or functionality. These dollars are made possible through a grant received from the Minnesota Clean Water Legacy Act.

There is a limited amount of funding available and preference for funding will be determined based on household income status, condition of existing system, and proximity to priority surface waters. Income restrictions do apply. A major goal within the fix-up program aims to fix "imminent public health threats." Polk County uses HUD low-income guidelines to group funding grant contributions.

Households must not exceed these income guidelines and must be the landowners homestead, not a second dwelling or rental. Applicants will be required to pay any match requirement upfront if approved. No holding tank septic systems can be installed, and SSTs for new construction of a dwelling does not qualify for the program. The County will provide a cost share grant contributing 60%, and up to 80%, of installation cost up to

a maximum of \$12,000 grant dollars.

To learn more about this program, please call Polk County Planning and Zoning at (218) 281-5700. Program applications can also be found on our website at [www.co.polk.mn.us](http://www.co.polk.mn.us) under the Environmental Services and Planning and Zoning Department page.

The deadline to apply for the Septic System Fix-Up Grant Program is June 1, 2024. After this date, remaining funding will be available on a first come first serve basis.

**Jacob Snyder,  
Assistant Environmental Services Administrator**



## CHILDREN'S DENTAL SERVICES MONTHLY DENTAL CLINIC

Children's Dental Services (CDS) is a non profit dental health clinic that offers dental hygiene services to people of ALL AGES. CDS accepts Medical Assistance and offers an income-based sliding scale for income eligible families.

**May 28th  
10am - 4pm**

**Polk County Public Health**  
816 Marin Ave  
Crookston MN, 56716



**TOGETHER WE CAN** *build a better future!*



# SHERIFF HOSTS FISH FRY



**ABOVE:** Polk County Sheriff James Tadman talks with a resident as they wait for fish to be delivered to the drive-thru line. Sheriff Tadman hosted the last fish fry of the season March 22 at Sacred Heart School in East Grand Forks, MN. There were 1,272 total meals served between drive-thru, dine-in, take-out, and workers.

**LEFT:** Sheriff Tadman hands two bags of meals to a customer in the drive-thru.

**BELOW:** Several volunteers prepare meals for the drive-thru line.

Tim Albrecht / Polk County



# Students appointed to Polk County Youth Advisory Board



Tim Albrecht/ Polk County

**ABOVE:** The Polk County Public Health Youth Advisory Board visited the Polk County Board of Commissioners in November to be appointed. Pictured from left to right: Amrit Bhutani, Sacred Heart; Joan Lee, 4th District Polk County Board Commissioner; Teagan Duppong, Fosston; Mark Holy, 5th District Polk County Board Commissioner; Sidney Erickson, Fertile-Beltrami; Lauren Kaupang, Win-E-Mac; Warren Strandell, 2nd District Polk County Board Commissioner; Kadence Korynta, Fisher; Peyton Larson, Fisher; Brynlea Mahlen, Fosston; Paul Reese, 1st District Polk County Board Commissioner; Ella Strom, Win-E-Mac; and Kirsten Fagerlund, Polk County Public Health Lead Coordinator. Youth Advisory Board members not pictured are Erin Bowman, East Grand Forks; Lilah Zavoral, Sacred Heart; Julia Buhler, Crookston; Sarah Thoreson, Climax-Shelly; Olivia Ystenes, Fertile-Beltrami.

**BELOW:** The Youth Advisory Board visiting the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center in the Fertile Sand Hills on March 28. Pictured left to right: Erin Bowman, East Grand Forks; Lilah Zavoral, Sacred Heart; Ella Strom; Win-E-Mac; Brynlea Mahlen, Fosston; Teagan Duppong, Fosston; Peyton Larson, Fisher; Kadence Korynta, Fisher; Amrit Bhutani, Sacred Heart; Olivia Ystenes, Fertile-Beltrami; Sidney Erickson, Fertile-Beltrami; and Sarah Thorenson, Climax-Shelly.



The latest group of students from around the county were appointed to the Polk County Public Health Youth Advisory Board.

They visited the Polk County Board of Commissioners on November 28, 2023, to be appointed. The advisory board provides a vehicle for young people in Polk County to become involved in governmental public health services, merging civic engagement and leadership development for high school students.

The board consists of students from high schools across Polk County from grades 10-12.

On March 28th, the 2023-24 Polk County Public Health Youth Advisory Board met for the 2nd time in 2024 at the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center in The Fertile Sand Hills.

The group spent time learning about and discussing:

- ▶ Effective meetings
- ▶ Data from the 2022

Minnesota Student Survey, its impact, and how youth might advocate for participation in 2025.

▶ Protective Factors - risk factors leading to a higher likelihood of unhealthy choices/how protective factors can reduce the impact

▶ Nature Based Activity/ Hiking/Stress reduction tools - impacts on physical, emotional, and social health

▶ Wellbeing - mind-body exercises

## CORRECTIONS UPDATES

## Staffing Challenges Persist Amid RRVJC Reopening

The Red River Valley Juvenile Center, which was closed for nearly two years due to water damage, reopened in March 2023. While the reopening has created an option which local social service, probation, and law enforcement agencies can utilize for placement of at-risk kids, staffing challenges have created unanticipated obstacles.

During the 13 months that the Red River Valley Juvenile Center has been re-opened, restrictions on the ability to accept secure detention placements have been in effect for much of that time. The self-imposed restrictions are driven by on-going staffing shortages. The staffing challenges and the subsequent operational difficulties that created have dampened the enthusiasm to reopen the Juvenile Center and provide a much-needed placement option and services for at-risk adolescents.

During the initial reopening process that began in March 2023, a phased reopening plan was developed. This plan consisted of reopening the residential side of the facility for a month, followed by the reopening of the secure detention side of the facility in mid-April. Only one month into the facility being fully re-opened, multiple staff resignations resulted in the need to close secure detention and only operate the residential side of the facility until new staff could be hired and trained. The temporary closure of the secure detention portion of the facility lasted much longer than originally anticipated.

The secure detention section of the Red River Valley Juvenile Center was finally reopened in February 2024; however, the reopening has been short-lived. Like what was encountered in 2023, unexpected staff resignations have again resulted in the planned temporary closure of the secure detention side of the facility.

Staffing challenges, especially in the corrections field, are not isolated to the Red River Valley Juvenile Center. Several juvenile facilities throughout the state have been forced to limit

the number of adolescents they can serve due to staff shortages. These staff shortages have created a near statewide epidemic for law enforcement and social service agencies who are unable to locate agencies to provide services to at-risk kids.

Recruitment efforts for both part-time and full-time juvenile custody officers is currently taking place. It is the hope that the secure detention portion of the juvenile facility will resume operations early this summer.

## TCCC Awarded Grant Funding

Tri-County Community Corrections (TCCC) has been awarded two separate grants which will be utilized to expand services within the jail and probation department.

### *Reaching Rural Initiative – Implementation Funding*

The Polk County Team, which recently concluded their year-long participation in the *Reaching Rural: Advancing Collaborative Solutions* initiative, was awarded grant funding in the amount of \$100,000. Tri-County Community Corrections will act as the fiscal host of this grant award. The funding will be used to support a substance use disorder response project titled “The Fork in the Road Initiative” developed during the Polk County Team’s participation in the Reaching Rural planning initiative.

The Fork in the Road Initiative is a project intended to create long-lasting and systemic change by providing a pathway for substance use disorder (SUD) screening, assessment, treatment opportunities, and release coordination in the early stages of involvement with the criminal justice system.

The planning phase of the Reaching Rural initiative allowed for the development of a comprehensive approach to addressing substance use disorders for people entering the criminal justice system. The approach which has been developed maintains several similarities to the SBIRT (Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment) approach to:

- ▶ Screen new jail admissions to assess the severity of SUD

- ▶ Refer individuals assessed as moderate or severe for care coordination services (Brief Intervention) intended to increase insight and awareness of SUD and assess motivation for change

- ▶ Identify treatment funding sources, refer to treatment and coordinate release.

The grant money will be utilized to fund a position which will be responsible for coordinating completion of SUD assessments, coordinating treatment placement in the community, and working with the court and prosecuting authority to expedite program participants access to treatment services and release from custody.

### *Community Crime Intervention and Prevention Program Grant*

Tri-County Community Corrections was awarded \$500,000 through the Community Crime Intervention and Prevention Program Grant through the Department of Public Safety and Minnesota Office of Justice Programs. Grant funding will be used to continue a pre-trial supervision program for individuals who are newly arrested and ordered by the court to participate in pre-trial supervision as a condition of their release. TCCC will utilize grant funding to expand pre-trial supervision services by maintaining an existing pre-trial supervision caseload while adding a specialized pre-trial supervision caseload for those who are placed under pre-trial supervision and in need of SUD treatment in an outpatient or residential setting.

TCCC desires to expand the capabilities of the Pre-Trial Supervision program within Norman, Polk and Red Lake Counties by maintaining the current pre-trial supervision caseload while adding a pre-trial supervision caseload that focuses on individuals who struggle with SUD. It is anticipated that the creation of a pre-trial supervision caseload with an SUD focus will create opportunities for expedited treatment access and better long-term outcomes for those who would previously have languished in jail under pre-trial status while waiting for resolution of their court proceedings.

The overarching goal of

pre-trial supervision is to improve outcomes for persons under pre-trial status, specifically by ensuring attendance at court hearings and by limiting commission of additional crimes. This initiative desires to expand on the idea of improved outcomes through the creation of a specialized caseload that will work with jail staff to identify pre-trial candidates with SUD, facilitate expedited involvement in SUD treatment, and provide on-going pre-trial supervision services and supports in the community.

## Lisa Larson Receives Presidents Award

Tri-County Community Corrections (TCCC) Career Probation Agent Lisa Larson received the President’s Award at the Minnesota Association of Community Corrections Act Counties (MACCAC) Agent Conference held in Waite Park, MN, on Feb. 15-16. This award recognizes individuals who have furthered the mission and values of community corrections in the state through their commitment to community supervision and client change.

This award recognized Larson for her exemplary service to TCCC and the field of probation along with her commitment to evidence-based practices. The nomination highlighted Larson’s passion for those she supervises, her desire to enhance motivation for all agents, participation in the creation of core standards within the department, and development of opportunities to improve outcomes for those under supervision. Larson regularly devotes her time to assist agents within the department and across the state. Larson is a certified trainer for the Level of Service Case Management Inventory (LSCMI) which is a risk-assessment tool used by probation departments across the country. Larson also facilitates cognitive behavioral programming within the probation department and regularly uses intervention strategies ranging from motivational interviewing to Carey Guides.

**Andrew Larson,  
Executive Director of Tri-County  
Community Corrections**

## VAL From Page 1

Bjerk was initially hired as a Clerk Typist Cashier in 1981, which was her first official job. She was a little nervous on her first day, but she quickly found her way, "I didn't know anyone in the building at the time, but everyone was very kind and helpful," Val says. "It made me feel welcome and comfortable. I knew I was going to like it here."

### Changes

During her time many things have changed across four decades, including technology, the people, and her office, but one thing that has remained unchanged was Val's love and commitment to the work she was doing for the County.

She's worked through ever evolving workspaces, between the Auditor's Office, County Coordinator's Office, and Administrator's Office, and two different County Administrators.

Bjerk was hired at the age of 20 by then Polk County Coordinator John "Jack" Schmalenberg with whom she worked for 31 years before his retirement in 2012. Charles "Chuck" Whiting followed Schmalenberg as Polk County Administrator.

"I worked with Chuck up until my retirement," says Bjerk. "Although their styles were very different, I worked well with both of them."

One of the largest changes during her career was technology. Initially starting with a typewriter and adding machine then moving all the way to email and the internet.

She smiles while recalling, "If someone needed a considerable amount of copies, I used a stencil machine and made copies on a mimeograph machine," Bjerk says. "I also made our own scratch and message pads, using a special glue and press board. Times have really changed."

Once computers hit Polk County, Bjerk self-taught herself how to use word and spreadsheet programs. "I re-

member when we got our first fax machine," she exclaimed. "That was a big change in the right direction for us."

### Where She Belongs

Despite all these changes Bjerk never looked elsewhere either outside or within the County. Advancing from a Clerk Typist Cashier to Administrative Assistant II and finishing her career as a Confidential Administrative Assistant II was the only movement, she made with Polk County.

She wouldn't have it any other way though. "It didn't cross my mind to switch departments and try something else within the County," says Valerie. "I was comfortable where I was and liked my job, as well as my co-workers. This is where I belonged!"

Her fondest memory of Polk County was working with the employees from past to present and she cherishes the friendships she has made over the years, "I've had a lot of good times and laughs with employees willing to offer a helping hand when needed, which was much appreciated," glows Bjerk. She even stays in contact with some of the people she first met when she was hired.

"I really appreciated it when past and present Commissioners would stop in for a quick visit, as well as current and retired employees," Bjerk says with a smile. "It really meant a lot that they would take the time to come and see me."

She found joy in helping the public in any way possible, whether they stopped by her office or called on the phone. She's met many memorable people from the public and it was always nice to see familiar faces in the building, Valerie beams. "I always tried to make everyone feel comfortable and welcome when they would come into our office. As long as I could get my work done in a timely manner, I always felt that people came first."

### Retirement

As 42 years with Polk County approached Bjerk didn't have a sudden desire

to retire but gradually knew the time was coming.

"My biggest concern is - am I going to get bored, as working and being on a schedule has been my life for so long, but I also realize change is good," Valerie says. It was a hard decision for her as she loved her job, but as her final day grew close, she was at peace with her decision, she says.

Valerie's last week with the County was business as usual with a slight variance. She was training her replacement. It was bittersweet for her, but she knew her replacement was going to be a good fit for the office. That made training enjoyable.

"There were times I'd think this is the last time I will be doing this or that, but I was okay with it," Bjerk says.

"I did get asked frequently by others if I was counting down the days until I retire," Bjerk says. "I was just taking it one day at a time, because before I knew it my last day would be here."

Her husband Bob, whom she married in 1985 after meeting in the Courthouse and who also worked for Polk County in the Highway Department, has been retired for 7 years so she figured it was time for her as well.

"I'm looking forward to not

being on a schedule and having some free time for Bob and I to do things we enjoy," Valerie says.

As Bjerk starts this new chapter in her life, it sounds like she will be just as busy in retirement as she was with Polk County. Valerie is looking forward to spending more time with her two children Tyler (Cassandra) and Sara (Matt) and two grandchildren. They also have a tripped planned to Virginia to visit Bob's sister and her family.

"I plan on spending time at the lake and with family," she says. "There are also some home projects I'd like to get done. Most of all I'm looking forward to relaxing and enjoying my morning coffee without rushing."

Val says she truly enjoyed her time with Polk County and working with the employees, department heads, Board of Commissioners and the public. "I'm very grateful for the friendships I've made," she says. "To Chuck Whiting and all my co-workers, thank you for everything. It's been a pleasure. Working with such an amazing group of county employees sure made my job more enjoyable."

She bids farewell to Polk County, but says, "I'll be back to visit."

## Day At The Capitol



Courtesy photo

Public Health participated in the MN Local Public Health Association Day at the Capitol on Feb. 15th. NW MN Public Health representatives pictured with Sen. Mark Johnson.