

# PEN CITY CURRENT

It's Black & White and Read all over

Wednesday, January 6, 2020 | 14 pages | Volume 5 • Issue 12



www.pencitycurrent.com

**TOP POST:** Rally at Keokuk PD brings police, protestors together

## PROTESTORS, POLICE UNIFY



Photo by Chuck Vandenberg

Keokuk resident Leslie Brown holds up a sign in front of the Keokuk Police Department Monday night as protestors chanted “No Justice-No Peace, No racist police” as part of a peaceful march through the town in the wake of the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis Police officer.

**JUNE 1, 2020 - 73,916 views, 10,539 engagements**

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG  
PCC EDITOR

KEOKUK – A small black child gave a high-five to a Keokuk Police officer to wrap up a peaceful protest Monday night that ended in front of the Keokuk Police Department.

The march was organized by Davion McGhee of Keokuk and included about 40 men, women and children, black and white. It ended the way it started, unlike many episodes of violence in the nation over the past week, with handshakes and high fives between protestors and law enforcement.

McGhee said she insisted that the march be peaceful in protest, because racism continues to tilt the balance of justice in America.

“We want everyone to go home safe and sound,” McGhee said as members of the protest chanted “No Justice – No Peace, No racist police”

“I’ve lived here for four years with my family and we’re trying to start a new life. And ever since we’ve been here we’ve encountered racist people, including police officers, and for what, just the color of our skin?” I just thought we needed to

be heard.”

McGhee said she was in Wal-Mart in Keokuk earlier in the afternoon and heard that they were thinking of closing due to rioting.

She said she went up to store employees and told them the protest she was organizing was going to be a peaceful protest. Wal-Marts around the region closed up stores early and piled pallets in front of doors as unsubstantiated rumors of widespread vandalism were being planned in the area.

Hy-Vee’s in Fort Madison and Keokuk closed at 8 p.m., In Fort Madison, Walgreens’ also closed at 8 p.m. and McDonalds was closed early.

“I stopped and told them that there wasn’t going to be any riot at all. That it was a peaceful protest. We came down here for George Floyd because that was injustice, and he still needs justice.”

Floyd died May 25 as a result of a injuries sustained after Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, pinned him to the ground and held his knee to Floyd’s neck for more than eight minutes. Floyd was accused of trying to pass a fake \$20 bill at a nearby market

### LOOKING BACK ON 2020

## COVID keeps area off balance in May, June

Editor’s Note:  
See ya 2020.

There was little to smile about in 2020 and the loss of our beautiful Kelsey made this past year at times insurmountable, unbearable, and improbable - often all at the same time.

But pressing on we managed to continue to provide local coverage of the events that matter most to you.

From crime, politics and business, to sports, obituaries, and yes, health, we put together 224 E-editions, while maintaining 24/7 website traffic and social media channels.



VANDENBERG

Each year as we start the new year we look back at the news and events that shaped the lives of those in north Lee County.

The coronavirus will carry a heavy presence editorially this year. With daily reports on 14-day positivity rates, and the actions taken at all levels of government to help the public stay clear of the virus that is being connected to almost 4,000 deaths in Iowa alone in 2020 took up a lot of column inches this year.

We’ve lost loved ones, watched others suffer from afar, and heard the heroic tales of the front line health care professionals.

We’ve written about schools scrambling to serve the interests of not just students and staff, but families across Lee County.

And we’ve seen the gaping holes the virus has uncovered in our ability to stay connected in and between our rural communities.

The criteria for selecting the stories is based on Google analytics and social media traction on a month-to-month basis. We will combine two months per issue for the next six issues.

Current news will continue to be posted on our website and social media channels.

We hope you enjoy looking back on the year with us as we usher in a new year with a glance to regressing coronavirus and the peace that should follow along.

We thank you for your patronage and wish you a wonderful new year.

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### WEATHER

OpenWeatherMap

WED 06 Jan.....Overcast, 37° F/ 30° F
THU 07 Jan.....Overcast, 32° F/ 28° F
FRI 08 Jan.....Overcast, 32° F/ 27° F

### IOWA LOTTERY

LUCKY FOR LIFE 01/04.....2 12 21 26 46, Lucky Ball: 7
PICK 3 01/04 MIDDAY.....176
PICK 3 01/04 EVENING.....819
PICK 4 01/04 MIDDAY.....9952
PICK 4 01/04 EVENING.....6351

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## 2020 – A Year in Review: May & June

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**Charles Vandenberg, Editor**  
(319).371.1670  
editor@pencitycurrent.com

**Lee K. Vandenberg, Sales Manager**  
(319).371.4125  
sales@pencitycurrent.com

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# PEN CITY CURRENT

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## 2020 – A Year in Review: May & June

**MAY 23, 2020 - 7,636 views, 1,063 engagements**



Photo by Chuck Vandenberg/PCC

### Tell me about it...stud

The Fort Madison City Senior Cruise was held through Fort Madison on May 23. Mayor Matt Mohrfeld handed out cards to seniors showing the most pride and enthusiasm. Above Mohrfeld gives a Starbucks card to FMHS senior Raven Harriott who dressed up as Sandra Dee from the movie Grease.

**MAY 23, 2020 -**

**4,978 views, 2,333 engagements**

### Search group finds Argyle man's body near DM river

**BY CHUCK VANDENBERG**  
PCC EDITOR

ARGYLE – The body of an Argyle man was recovered by a search team at 9:20 a.m. Saturday morning in southern Lee County.

57 year-old Jacob Pezley was discovered deceased by members of the search party. Preliminary information indicates Pezley had fallen from a 50-foot wall near a bridge, but the official cause of death has not been determined as of this publishing

Lee County Sheriff Stacy Weber called for a canvass of the area surrounding the railroad tracks just off the Des Moines River near Belfast Road Saturday at 9 a.m.

About 80 people joined in the search on foot and ATV/UTVs, while deputies manned the railroad tracks to relay information from the search teams.

“Mr. Pezley was located near a Railroad Bridge, nearby the area the vehicle was located this week, and it appears he died from a fall, of which, the height was approximately 45-50 feet,” Weber said.

**JUNE 25, 2020 -**

**5,434 views, 1,402 engagements**

### Chase lands FM man in county jail

**BY CHUCK VANDENBERG**  
PCC EDITOR

LEE COUNTY – A high speed chase Thursday afternoon has resulted in the arrest of a Fort Madison man on multiple charges stemming from a vehicle theft in Fort Madison.

Simarius Jefferson, 22 of Fort Madison was arrested and taken into custody following a trip to Fort Madison Community Hospital after the silver Ford he allegedly stole had tires damaged from stop sticks and he collided with another vehicle.

Local police and a sheriff's deputy were alerted to the stolen vehicle shortly after it was reported stolen from Casey's in the 1200 block of Avenue H in Fort Madison.

A civilian spotted the vehicle heading north out of Fort Madison on Hwy. 61 and deputies were soon chasing the vehicle through Lee County toward Des Moines County, where law enforcement there deployed stop sticks.

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## 2020 – A Year in Review: May & June

**JUNE 16, 2020 - 50,896 views, 3,013 engagements**

# COVID forces cancellation of Sweet Corn Festival

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG  
PCC EDITOR

WEST POINT – The West Point Community Club voted 27-10 Monday night to cancel this year’s summer festival.

A group of about 50 met under the shelter house in the park that annually hosts thousands of people munching on sweet corn and other festival offerings for four days each year in August.

Justin Mehmert, one of the chairs of this year’s event said the move was all about safety in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that’s rained on summer parades...

and festivals, across the country.

“We weighed out the pros and cons and there was just too much risk in having it this year,” Mehmert said following the vote.

“We had to put public safety first and we couldn’t put everyone in this park and feel we were acting responsibly.”

The club voted 27-10 to not have the event this year with six other club members voting for an abbreviated fair that featured the carnival and some carry out food.

Deina Merschbrock, of Sonny’s Supermarket told the group she advocated for an abbreviated festival.

“People think that the festival just helps the bars in town, but it goes way deeper than that. I’ve heard in the

past that even salons get an uptick in business.”

West Point Mayor Paul Walker, who’s a member of the club abstained in his vote, and said he was torn on the issue.

“We have to be safe, but this impacts so many people and requires so many volunteers. What if we would have went ahead but didn’t get those volunteers this year. That would have been a huge problem.”

A representative with the amusement company that brings in the carnival was on hand and said festivals across the Midwest were starting to reopen, and even some that had cancelled their plans were now reaching back out to see if the carnival was still available.

**MAY 3, 2020 -**

**6,024 views, 1,408 engagements**

# Flower Cottage closes as COVID pounds retailers

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG  
PCC EDITOR

FORT MADISON – She was thinking about closing anyway after more than 12 years running her own business, but the COVID-19 pandemic and the hurdles of securing any assistance didn’t help the situation.

Diane Spiekermeier, owner of The Flower Cottage located at 12th Street and Avenue E, said she will have to shutter The Flower Cottage business as a result of the pandemic.

Spiekermeier said some staffing issues had her thinking about closing the business anyway, but when the state put restrictions on things like prom, graduation, and Easter. When groups were restricted to less than 10, she lost revenue from funerals as well.

“I was thinking about closing the flower shop due to some staff issues. I’m not foolish enough to think I can do my own,” Spiekermeier said. “June 1 was target date to make a decision and now I’ve lost all those holidays and there’s no sympathy work because no one can go to the funeral homes”.

So the handwriting may have been on the wall, but Spiekermeier said trying to secure loans and grants from the state has been a nightmare.

With the staffing issues, Spiekermeier said she was extremely busy trying to keep everything going herself and then trying to navigate through websites of the Iowa Economic Development Authority and Small Business Administration to try and find some assistance during the closures.



Photo by Chuck Vandenberg/PCC

Fort Madison Police Officer Joshua Wade mans a hose while Fort Madison firefighters look for occupants of a house fire Monday night in Fort Madison.

**MAY 11, 2020 - 8,941 views, 1,626 engagements**

# Police, firefighters battle house fire on Avenue L

PCC STAFF

Fort Madison firefighters were called to the scene of a home on fire Monday night just after 9 p.m. in the 1900 block of Avenue L.

When firefighters arrived flames were coming from the inside of the home at 1924 Avenue L and had engulfed the front porch due to something catching on fire on a pool table in the home, according to witnesses and LeeComm dispatchers.

The fire resulted in an all-call which pulls in all city fire-

fighters. Emergency crews from Lee County Ambulance, as well as Fort Madison police officers at different times were manning hoses as firefighters searched the home for occupants.

Lee County Assessors indicate the home is owned by Denise Kempker and is valued at \$26,650.

Preliminary reports indicated there were no injuries and the exact cause of the fire remains unknown as of this posting.

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## 2020 – A Year in Review: May & June

**MAY 19, 2020 - 5,878 views, 672 engagements**

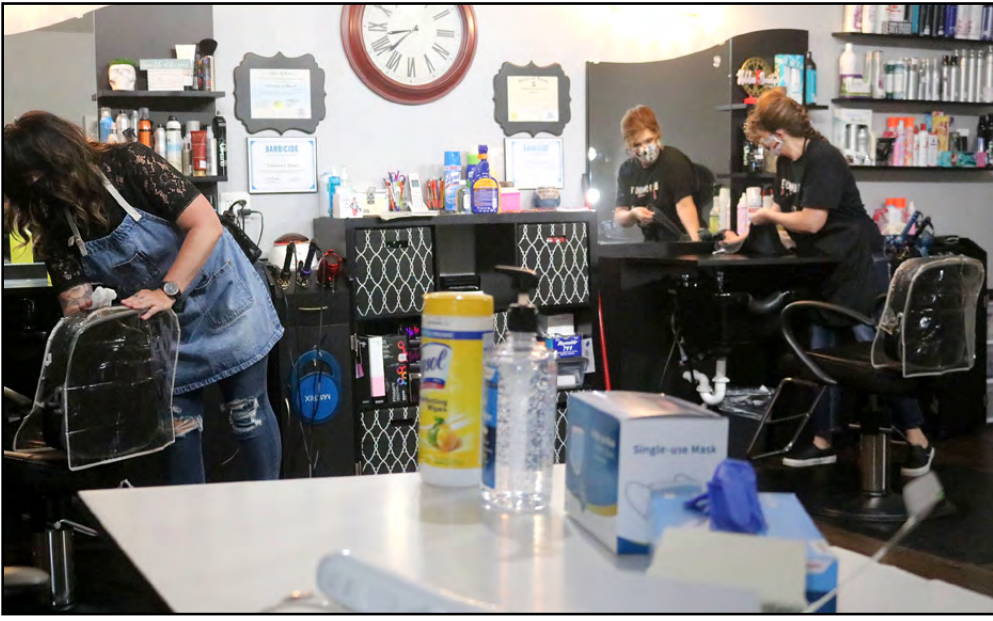


Photo by Chuck Vandenberg/PCC

### Sanitized salon

Hidden Beauty owners Tina Hauck and Davette Jurgenson sanitize the salon Friday morning as Gov. Kim Reynolds reopened the salons across the state in May at 50%. She extended that to full service again in June.

**MAY 5, 2020 - 5,470 views, 1,700 engagements**

### Keokuk PD makes arrest in 2004 murder

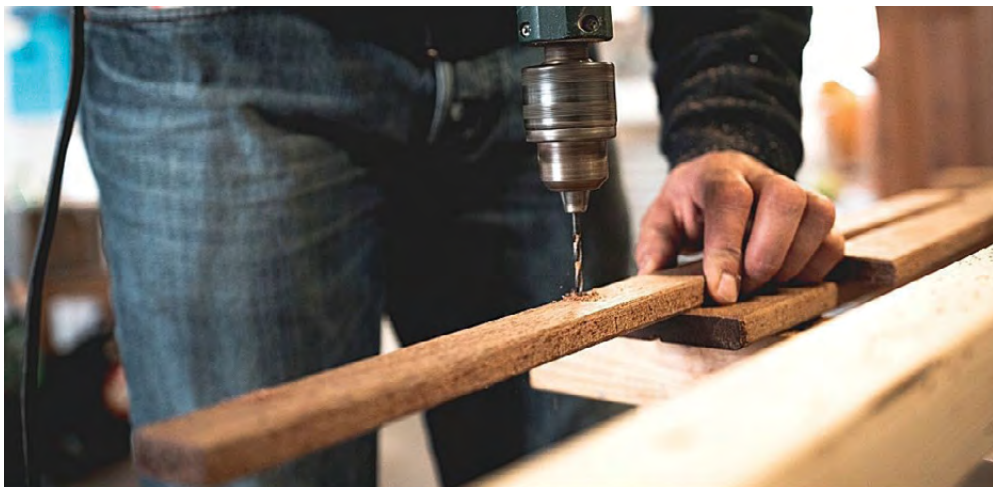
BY PCC STAFF

KEOKUK – In April of 2017, the Division of Criminal Investigation’s (DCI) Major Crime Unit and the Keokuk Police Department reopened the investigation into the June 2004 death of Bonnie Callahan, 73, of Keokuk.

On June 15, 2004, family members reported Callahan missing. Later in the day, Callahan’s body was found along the bank of the Mississippi River in Keokuk. The circumstances surrounding Callahan’s death were considered suspicious. The investigation identified Nathaniel Leo Ridnour, 34, as a suspect in Callahan’s homicide.

The Keokuk Police Department and the DCI’s Major Crime Unit provided an updated case briefing to the Lee County Attorney’s Office and the Iowa Attorney General’s Office (Area Prosecutions). On May 4, 2020, an arrest warrant was issued for Ridnour for the murder of Callahan. Murder in the First Degree is a violation of Section 707.2(1) of the Code of Iowa, a Class A Felony. If convicted, the charge carries a life sentence without the possibility of parole. On May 5, 2020, Ridnour was taken into custody by the Delaware County Sheriff’s Office on the arrest warrant.

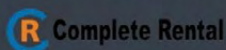
This was a joint investigation by the DCI’s Major Crime Unit, the Keokuk Police Department, the DCI Crime Scene Team, the Delaware County Sheriff’s Office, the Lee County Sheriff’s Office, the Iowa State Medical Examiner’s Office, the Lee County Attorney’s Office and the Iowa Attorney General’s Office (Area Prosecutions).



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**JUNE 10, 2020 - 5,432 views, 920 engagements**

## Reynolds reopened Iowa businesses on June 12

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG  
PCC EDITOR

DES MOINES – Most state businesses can go back to full capacity starting Friday, June 12 at 8 a.m.

At a Wednesday morning press conference from the state capital, Reynolds made the announcement and said businesses need to still adhere to six foot social distancing guidelines, while enhancing hygiene and sanitation practices.

“Eliminating capacity restrictions will allow businesses the flexibility to adjust their specific operations accordingly to best meet the needs of staff and clients,” Reynolds said.

She said the move also applies to salons, barbershops, tattoo parlors, swimming pools and senior centers, casinos, racetracks, malls, venues, and other businesses the limitation applied to.

Iowa has seen more than 200,000 residents tested, or 1 of every 16 Iowans. Reynolds said since the end of April numbers have been trending down. Overall, test of the state’s residents are coming back with an 11.1% positive rate. Reynolds said even with the increased number of tests being done the positivity rate for Tuesday was 5.4%.

Iowans hospitalized with the virus stood at 245 across the state as of Tuesday with 73 in Intensive Care Units. Those numbers compare to 394 hospitalizations one month ago, 152 of whom were in ICUs.

“Changes are a result of the positive forward momentum that were generating in Iowa and we must keep it going,” Reynolds said.

“We know COVID will remain in our state for a while, but we also know what we can do to mitigate, manage, and contain it while we safely and responsibly move forward with life.”

**JUNE 10, 2020 - 5,432 views, 920 engagements**

## FM Post office sees coronavirus outbreak among workers

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG  
PCC EDITOR

FORT MADISON – A spokeswoman for the United States Postal Service confirmed Monday that the Fort Madison Post Office has two confirmed cases of COVID-19.

Nicole Hill, a communications specialist with the Northland and Hawkeye Districts of the USPS confirmed the cases via email Monday afternoon and said the employees are currently recovering.

The Pen City Current had received several messages of up to five postal workers out of a staff of 27 at the facility have been put in self-isolation.

As of Sunday evening, Lee County has had 18 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with no deaths. Thirteen of those

cases are classified as recovered. Des Moines County has had 40 confirmed cases and one death with 15 reported as recovered. Henry County now has had 43 confirmed cases with one death and 29 reported recovered.

Hill wrote that under current law, she couldn’t comment on any other staff under self isolation.

“We are working in conjunction with the local public health office (and) are following their guidance,” Hill wrote. “We believe the risk is low for employees who work at the facility, but we will keep our employees apprised as new information and guidance becomes available.”

“The mail and the public is safe. Coronaviruses are thought to be spread primarily through airborne respiratory droplets

resulting from a sneeze, cough or ordinary speech. Although the virus can survive for a short period of time on some surfaces, both (Centers for Disease Control) and the United States Surgeon General have indicated that it is unlikely to be spread from domestic or international mail, products or packaging.”

Hill said the Postal Service is also currently working to overcome the challenges in securing hand sanitizer, surgical masks and gloves, as well as reinforcing workplace behaviors to ensure that contact between workers, and the public is minimized.

Heather Trimble, the postmaster at the Fort Madison office declined to comment on the situation when reached Thursday afternoon. She directed all questions to the district office in St. Paul, Minn. However Trimble did submit a letter to Pen City Current that can be located at the following link: <https://www.pencity-current.com/2020/05/11/postmaster-keeping-postal-employees-safe-letter-to-the-editor/>.

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## 2020 – A Year in Review: May & June

**JUNE 7, 2020 - 5,250 views, 476 engagements**

### Courtney comes out of retirement to join Pothitakis dental group

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG  
PCC EDITOR

FORT MADISON – “It’s good to be home.” Those were the words from Dr. David Courtney Thursday afternoon from behind a desk at Family Dentistry West in Fort Madison. Courtney’s clearly comfortable being back where he wants to be – helping Fort Madison families.

The renowned Fort Madison dentist came out of retirement on June 1 to help with clients at Dr. Mark C. Pothitakis’ Family Dentistry West at 4723 Avenue J.



COURTNEY

It takes about five seconds to realize that Courtney, who operated his own dental office for 37 years at 525 Avenue G, is completely at ease coming out of retirement.

You won’t see his trademark lightning bolt head dress or the super soakers... yet, but the Fort Madison native is still happy to be around the people he calls family.

Courtney joins Dr. Pothitakis and Dr. Stephanie Heyland and staff at Pothitakis’ newest office just east of the Baxter Sports Complex, across from Lost Bear Coffee on 48th Street. The office can be reached at 319-372-4882.

“It’s just been great,” Courtney said of his first two days back in the office. “I was surprised how good it felt. It’s good to see people I hadn’t seen in years.”

Courtney retired in October of 2016 and moved to St. Louis, but he said the small town kid in him brought him back to Fort Madison.

“I don’t like the city. I’m a small town kid. I went to high school here and everything. This is just coming back home.”

Convincing Courtney to come back to work was a small hurdle.

“People were talking to me about it and Dr. Pothitakis talked to me about it and I said, “Sure... it sounds like fun.”

Courtney is an avid cyclist having done RAGBRAI about seven times, and Rocky Mountain runs in Colorado. Daily he still rides either 18.5 miles or 26 miles. He said the coronavirus has pulled him back a day here and there, but he says cycling is part of his life.

“I’m just addicted. This is my 32nd or 33rd year of riding that much every day,” Courtney said.

**JUNE 9, 2020 - 5,044 views, 479 engagements**

### LCCB opens Pollmiller at no charge for summer

BY PCC STAFF

MONTROSE – Area residents will have access to the Pollmiller Beach at Pollmiller Park at no charge this year.

At Tuesday’s regular meeting of the Lee County Conservation Board, the board discussed Pollmiller Park operations going forward in the hopeful wake of the coronavirus and COVID-19 illness.

The board approved opening the beach from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. and moving from five days a week to seven days a week starting Friday at the latest, according to Lee County Conservation Director Nathan Unsworth.

Several residents encouraged the Lee County Conservation District to open the Pollmiller Park

beach as the state continues to reopen sectors of the state’s economy on a limited basis.

Ashley Grinnell said her family has camped at Pollmiller the last couple years every weekend.

“The beach is something we utilize every day especially during the hot weather. I think just having it at the discretion of the parent and knowing social distancing is important,” Grinnell said.

Several other residents on the teleconference meeting said they too favored having the beach open under the discretion of parents.

Unsworth said it’s important to look at the Pollmiller Park operations for a standpoint of public safety and not just financially.

The district would normally charge \$1 per person to use the beach and would average 100 to 150 people per day, with heavy usage at 250 people.

## Lee County sees first COVID-related death

**JUNE 7, 2020 - 5,140 views, 1,068 engagements**

FORT MADISON – Today the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) and Lee County Health Department (LCHD) announced the first death from Lee County related to COVID-19.

LCHD extends their deepest sympathy to this individual’s family, and would like to encourage the public to remain respectful of this family’s privacy during this difficult time. Due to Iowa Code Chapter 22 no other information or details will be released.

IDPH and LCHD have also identified two additional cases of COVID-19 in the county, one middle-age adult and one older adult who are currently in isolation. This makes 37 confirmed cases in Lee County to date with 25 reported cases as recovered.

We encourage interested residents to access the Iowa Coronavirus website at <https://coronavirus.iowa.gov> if interested in county testing data, confirmed case counts, and other useful information.

**JUNE 7, 2020 - 5,140 views, 1,068 engagements**

### Panel recommends Dallas ambulance firm

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG  
PCC EDITOR

LEE COUNTY – You wouldn’t say it passed with flying colors, but a county advisory panel voted 6-2 on Friday afternoon to recommend a Dallas-based ambulance service to county supervisors.

The committee met after an hour-long Q&A with reps from American Medical Response Friday morning, to hash out a recommendation for the Lee County Board. That board will have the final vote on whether to move forward with the service.

Supervisors Gary Folluo and Rick Larkin both voted for the move, although both indicated that it’s a difficult decision and the county is running out of time.

The county’s current contract with Lee County EMS Ambulance Inc., runs out on June 30, and officials there said they will not sign a new contract unless the county ponies up an additional \$450,000 bring the county’s subsidy to \$950,000 annually.

AMR is asking for \$450,000 annually to provide three ambulances with a paramedic and EMT in each rig running 24/7.

Fort Madison and Keokuk Fire Departments both submitted bids asking for more than \$900,000 each to cover the county. Fort Madison Fire Chief Joey Herren said those were large numbers, but the cost would very likely come down year over year, with the city having access to public funds that private services don’t.

In addition, Iowa legislators could be considering a bill when they resume session, to make ambulance services essential services which would change the whole landscape of private and public ambulance services by allowing governmental agencies to assess a tax to cover cost associated with providing the service.

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# 2020 – A Year in Review: May & June

**JUNE 29, 2020 - 4,856 views, 1,243 engagements**

## Design error slows part of Hwy. 61 rehab

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG  
PCC EDITOR

FORT MADISON – Crews have poured concrete on most of the stretch of Hwy. 61 from 2nd to 6th, but a gaffe in plans caused about 200 feet of new west bound concrete had to be torn out last week.

On June 11, workers with Jones Contracting out of West Point started laying concrete at Business 61 and Avenue G running west around the curve toward the former Sheaffer building.

Several days later officials noticed an error in the design plans and had to tear out several hundred feet, according to Fort Madison Mayor Matt Mohrfeld, had to be torn out.

City Public Works Director Mark Bousselot and City Manager David Varley were both out of the office Monday and couldn't respond to questions on the issue, but Mohrfeld said the city will not be on the hook for any additional expenses, and the project is still on schedule.



This section of Hwy. 61 that was poured on June 11, had to be torn out due to a design error, the cost of which was absorbed by the engineering firm on the project.

According to Mohrfeld, who's comments were based on an update he received from Bousselot last week, there was some misunderstanding between the city's engineer on the project, HR Green of Cedar Rapids and the surveyor for the work – Bruner, Cooper, and Zuck Inc. with offices in Galesburg, Burlington, and Bettendorf.

"When they picked a line for the elevations, it would appear that either they picked the wrong line or the ele-

ventions were wrong and it was at the point where there was no other recourse than to take it out and repour it," Mohrfeld said.

Mohrfeld couldn't put a dollar figure on the cost to replace the concrete, but he did say that the engineer and the subcontractor have worked that out and the city will not be on the hook for the cost. He also said the project will not be set back as far as time because of the error.

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## 2020 – A Year in Review: May & June

**JUNE 19, 2020 - 5,100 views, 667 engagements**



### Offender sweep

Photo by Chuck Vandenberg/PCC

Lee County Sheriff's Deputy Steve Sproul, left, & Det. Clint Wray, look over results of a sex offender sweep Wednesday. The sweep netted several arrests and additional warrants for offenders not being in the registered locations.

**MAY 28, 2020 - 5,025 views, 980 engagements**

## Prairie Farms donates dairy boxes

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG  
PCC EDITOR

FORT MADISON – Volunteers with the Fort Madison Food Pantry helped hand out 96 boxes of free Prairie Farms dairy products in less than a half an hour Thursday morning.

The program was announced earlier this week and even before 9 a.m. area residents were lined up in the Holy Trinity Catholic High parking lot to receive the free boxes.

The giveaways will take place on Thursdays through July 2nd and Lin Cramer, president of the food pantry board said next week the supply will increase to 400 boxes.

Each box contains two gallons of 2% milk, two individual servings of chocolate and strawberry milk each, cottage cheese, french onion dip, sour cream

and cream cheese.

“Just heard from the Pantry volunteers that the dairy boxes were all given out in the first 30 minutes,” Cramer wrote in an email to Pen City Current this morning.

“As our maiden voyage, we had no idea there would be so much interest! Next week Prairie Farms will send 400 boxes so there should be enough for everyone!”

Cramer apologize for the pantry's underestimation of the desire and need for the products.

“We started signing people up early because when volunteer started showing up here at 8:30 a.m. and we already had people lined up. We took information down because we think at some point we're going to have report to somebody how much product we handed out,” said volunteer Vicky Lundebly.

## County sells off 8 acres for slip ramp

**JUNE 13, 2020 - 4,531 views, 926 engagements**

PCC STAFF

LEE COUNTY – A slip ramp the Iowa Department of Transportation is building to allow easier access to Hwy. 61 for Siemens wind blades, will require purchasing some land from the county.

The property is part of the Lee County Conservation District's Trumpeter Marsh habitat across the conservation center at Heron Bend. A public hearing on the matter has been set for July 7, at the next regular Lee County Board of Supervisor's meeting.

LCCD Director Nathan Unsworth said the project has been in the works for a while and he's had numerous conversations with DOT officials.

“One component for this to happen was for the DOT to acquire .79 acres at the Trumpeter Marsh area that we own. It was donated by local conservation groups to the board,” he said.

The Lee County Conservation Board discussed the item last week and has recommended that the sale be considered.

“They see this as a public safety issue for the county, as we have wind blades pulling onto the highway and blocking traffic,” Unsworth said.

## Niggemeyer retires from PD

**JUNE 13, 2020 - 4,426 views, 892 engagements**

PCC STAFF

FORT MADISON – In a weird twist of protocol, a police captain's retirement agreement is going in front of the Fort Madison City Council.

Police Captain, and former police chief, Bruce Niggemeyer through his attorney Tom Skewes of Fort Madison has asked that an agreement outlining his retirement be signed by Mayor Matt Mohrfeld, which requires a majority vote of the city council.

According to Fort Madison City Code, City Manager David Varley has authority over action concerning city employees with the exception of the police and fire chiefs, which require city council approval.

On Friday, Varley said he was perplexed as to why Niggemeyer and Skewes have asked to have the agreement signed by the mayor.

“It's pretty clear that there's a lot of stuff in there and I think that's why the attorneys wanted it to be more of a contractual agreement, rather than the typical resignation letter,” Varley said.

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## 2020 – A Year in Review: May & June

**MAY 7, 2020 - 4,328 views, 417 engagements**

# FM Partners goes ahead with 4th of July Light up the Sky

FORT MADISON – Fort Madison fireworks will go off as planned! “Thanks to the outpouring of community support, we are pleased to be able to provide this tradition”, states Tim Gobble, Executive Director of Fort Madison Partners.

“It was a year of unknowns so I was a little nervous going into last week. Without our corporate sponsors, as well as a number of local citizens coming forward, I was close to cancelling as the funds just weren’t there.” Fort Madison’s production has always been one of the area’s best shows, which is a testament to our community’s continued support and it couldn’t happen without it.

“Many of the surrounding communities have cancelled their displays, but I wasn’t willing to give up so early”, continued Gobble.

This year marks the 12th year that Fort Madison Partners, the combined efforts of the Chamber of Commerce, EDC, and FMSIRRC, will coordinate the display along with J&M Displays and the City of Fort Madison. To say the least, we are excited to keep this event to the caliber you have grown accustomed to from past years. A community event such as this is needed more than ever this year.

The fireworks will once again be shot off on July 4th at dark from Riverview Park, allowing the community to enjoy a wonderful display right on the mighty Mississippi. As in years past, Ave H (Business Hwy 61) will be shut down to traffic to allow our citizens and guests the opportunity to have a better view- as well as provide social distancing. There will not admittance into Riverview Park for viewing for safety reason.

**MAY 26, 2020 - 4,243 views, 580 engagements**

# Merschmans donate street repaving in WP

**BY CHUCK VANDENBERG**  
PCC EDITOR

ing Tuesday at the American Legion Hall.

The Merschman family agreed to repave the section of Avenue D, which is the main east-west road through West Point, as a gift to the city.

The work will take about five weeks to complete and is expected to start this week. The repaving will take place from 4th Street west to the gravel road past Merschman Seeds.

West Point City Administrator Dennis McGregor said the value of the project is slightly more than \$300,000.

The move was originally part of a proposal by the Merschman family to repave the section of the highway in exchange for the city vacating Avenue C, but McGregor said that proposal is not under consideration at the time.

Joe Merschman spoke to city officials at the last regular meeting about the plan, but another contractor present at the meeting caused a snag in the proposal saying there was value to the city in vacating the property and the work should be bid out. Merschman then pulled the offer off the table.

WEST POINT – West Point city officials approved a plan to repave a section of Avenue D through town, but at no cost to tax payers.

The West Point City Council voted 4-0 with Brian Meierotto abstaining to accept a paving gift from the Merschman family, at a special meet-



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**MAY 7, 2020 - 4,328 views, 417 engagements**

# CL seniors preserve graduation on film



Photo by Chuck Vandenberg/PCC

Central Lee senior Alleanah Oilar gets a diploma from Superintendent Dr. Andy Crozier as a video production crew from northern Iowa films the event. The footage will be added to other individual video shoots to create a simulated graduation for the 2020 class.

**BY CHUCK VANDENBERG**  
PCC EDITOR

DONNELSON – Gov. Reynolds is moving about as fast as she can to get life back to normal for Iowans, but seniors at Central Lee High School were relegated to a mock graduation Thursday and Friday.

With officials hoping to get a real graduation ceremony in on June 28, with weather... and governor...permitting, the district moved to have a company come in and put together a simulated graduation.

Seniors, one at a time with full-on social distancing in place, walked down the center of the high school gymnasium

to a set of camera's run by 2008 Central Lee alum Kelsey Hammer-Parks.

The students would then stop, High School Principal Nicole Herdrich would read their name, and then the students would walk up the steps across the stage to a diploma cover presented by Superintendent Dr. Andy Crozier.

The simulation will even include senior addresses, valedictorian speeches and presentations from school officials.

Alleanah Oilar, a graduating senior said she's glad the district is being proactive with the students, but will miss not being a part of the class for the last 10 weeks.

“I think it's a lot better than just having it online or something, compared to how it could've been. It's a lot easier as well even with all the distancing guidelines being met,” Oilar said.

“It was kind of weird not being able to say good bye and everything face to face, but I'm sure we're

all going to get through this pretty well, and I hope to see them all later on down the line in our lives.”

Her father Daniel said he was happy the school district took the issue serious enough to segregate the kids at this point.

“I think it did diminish the whole graduation process,” he said. “But what else do you do?”

Alleanah's mother Barbara said there are regrets about her daughter's final year of high school.

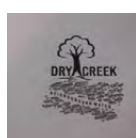
“This is a lot better than nothing. I feel bad that she didn't get to go through everything we did with our graduation,” Barbara said “It's those final goodbyes that help you stop one section of your life and carry on to the others.”

Crozier said he thinks the odds are very likely that there will be an outdoor graduation, but he said he questions the limits on how many people can gather. The district has set Sunday, June 28 at 2 p.m. as a tentative date.

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## 2020 – A Year in Review: May & June



Photo by Chuck Vandenberg/PCC

Fort Madison Park and Rec Board chairman Jim Decker cuts the ribbon with a group of volunteers at the new Canine Corral in Fort Madison's Rodeo Park on Saturday.

**JUNE 29, 2020 - 4,031 views, 485 engagements**

### Volunteers cut ribbon on city's new Canine Corral

FORT MADISON – Fort Madison officials and volunteers held a ribbon cutting at the new Canine Corral located in Rodeo Park on Saturday morning.

Members of the Canine Corral Fundraising Committee and members of the Fort Madison Park and Recreation Board and Fort Madison City Council were on hand to open the new dog park in Fort Madison.

According to committee chairperson Donna Amandus, a generous donor as well as P.A.W. animal shelter donated 18 baby pools for the dogs to frolick and cool off in. The day was complete with several dog related vendors at the event and around 50 area pooches and their owners enjoying the park.

Amandus said the Canine Corral Fundraising Committee is seeking donations from the public and private sector with a \$50,000 goal in order to pour ADA accessible walkways that will circle both the large and the small dog sides of the park.

“We also want to get benches, shade trees and a few other amenities to make this great new addition to our community accessible and fun for everyone,” she said.

**MAY 18, 2020 - 3,839 views, 601 engagements**

### EMS director shoulders blame for financial pinch

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG  
PCC EDITOR

LEE COUNTY – The head of Lee County's current ambulance service said the company is willing to go another 12 months, but said the county needs to come up with another option for 2022.

Bill Young, the director for Lee County EMS Ambulance, Inc, told Pen City Current Monday the current proposal submitted to the county for \$900,000 in subsidies would have to be met, but the county should look at making the service a governmental entity.

He said the service just can't continue to function with reimbursements the way they are, and with private providers being left out of legislation for gap funding.

“We just don't see that working out financially,” Young said Monday.

“We went up to \$900,000 and even that would be a break-even point. With reimbursements, and the way we feel things would change, the best thing is that it will have to be some kind of government entity. That way other things would open for them.”

Young took total blame for the ambulance services financial woes on himself.



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# 2020 – A Year in Review: May & June

**JUNE 18, 2020 - 3,763 views, 387 engagements**

## Amtrak announces reductions in Southwest Chief runs

**BY CHUCK VANDENBERG**  
PCC EDITOR

FORT MADISON – As Iowa Bridge and Culvert literally makes its way to Fort Madison to start construction on the new Amtrak platform at the city depot, Amtrak officials are releasing cuts to its Southwest Chief stops in Fort Madison.

The cuts are being labeled as temporary cuts due to decreased ridership on the heels of the COVID outbreak and Mayor Matt Mohrfeld said Thursday morning he believes they will be temporary.

“I have all confidence that ridership is going to come back up,” Mohrfeld said.

“The depot – BNSF still wants it out of their rail yard and they are fully committed. Does it mean less trains for a while, yeah.”

Amtrak currently runs the Southwest Chief daily

between Chicago and Los Angeles, including stops in Fort Madison to and from. It also runs the California Zephyr from Chicago to San Francisco with stops in Burlington. Both of those routes will be reduced to three stops per week beginning Oct. 1. Nine more other long-distance routes are also being cut to three days per week.

In addition, according to a report in the Washington Post on Tuesday, Amtrak may be looking for an extra infusion of \$1.5 billion in federal funding to stay afloat.

Marc Magliari, a spokesman for Amtrak, said ridership was on trajectory in the fall and winter to beat record numbers seen during the last fiscal year. But the COVID outbreak sent ridership plummeting in March and April to about 10% of normal.

“This is just a temporary change,” Magliari told Pen City Current Thursday. “Certainly a lot of people

have scaled back their travel. We have Congressional funding through Sept. 30, but after that we thought it was prudent to reduce capacity until demand is back up.”

In a statement emailed Thursday morning Magliari wrote that the passenger rail system’s goal is to restore service as soon as demand warrant, hopefully by next summer.

“Due to the long-term impact of Covid-19 on ridership, Amtrak has made the decision to operate with reduced capacity through FY21. As we have already made adjustments to our Northeast Corridor (NEC) and state-supported services, the next adjustment is with our long-distance trains, which we plan to reduce to three days per week, beginning October 1, 2020. Our goal is to restore daily service on these routes as demand warrants, potentially by the summer of 2021,” he wrote.

**JUNE 3, 2020 - 3,666 views, 321 engagements**

## HTC fields first softball team in 8 years

**BY CHUCK VANDENBERG**  
PCC EDITOR

WEST POINT – It’s been close to eight years, but HTC’s blue and silver uniforms will be back on the varsity softball field this summer.

Not only is 1st year head coach Loren Menke dealing with the extra hurdles of the coronavirus, but putting together a varsity squad for the first time since 2012, has had just a few challenges.

Menke led the Crusaders to a 10-5 record last year playing a junior varsity/junior high school schedule. He said going into this year hasn’t been too much different other than working more with the Iowa High School Girls’ Athletic Union and navigating the coronavirus.

“I think we have the same hurdles as everybody else and we’re trying to follow the rules so we don’t mess it up,” Menke said Tuesday.

“I took all the girls temperatures here. I guess you don’t have to and I asked them to do it before they came, but I have a thermometer here so we get double coverage. The last thing we want is for anyone to get sick or spread it around, or even shut it down. So we’re trying to be cautious.”

**MAY 6, 2020 - 3,952 views, 671 engagements**

## Council grows impatient with nuisance properties

**BY CHUCK VANDENBERG**  
PCC EDITOR

FORT MADISON – Several members of the Fort Madison City Council pushed the city’s building director on what’s going on with nuisance properties in the city.

At Tuesday’s City Council meeting, City Building Director Doug Krogmeier Bowker and councilman Mark Lair that the city’s hands are tied on some properties due to no court proceedings happening in the wake of the coronavirus.

Bowker specifically

asked where the city was in regards to the Humphrey Building at the corner of 8th Street and Avenue G.

“I know the courts are delaying things a bit, but as far as the Humphrey building have we heard from his contractor?” Bowker asked Krogmeier.

Krogmeier said he wasn’t getting a lot back from the owner’s contractor or engineer, but did see that a court date was set for September. An original court date was set for March 30, but the coronavirus put those cases on hold.

“We’re gonna try and continue to work with the contractor and engineer to

keep moving forward, but there’s not a lot we can do until we get in front of a judge,” Krogmeier said.

Bowker pressed Krogmeier on why the city’s still working with them, when they haven’t been in communication.

“We need to be a bit more definitive,” Bowker said. “I’m a bit frustrated with this.”

Krogmeier said city staff was frustrated too, but the city has filed papers in North Lee County Court and the issue is in the hands of the court system.

Mayor Matt Mohrfeld said he was happy to even see a court date.

“If they don’t cooperate, it’s until we get in front of a judge, but I’d be open to anyone’s insight there,” he said. “This continues to be frustrating. The street’s open but it’s nonetheless frustrating. And it’s not the only frustrating one, I can tell you that.”

Bowker asked what other avenues the city could take to move the process along.

“It’s a dual statement,” she said. “On one hand you’re saying we’re not hearing from them, and the other is we continue to work with them. If we’re not hearing from them is there anything else we can do? It’s an eyesore.”

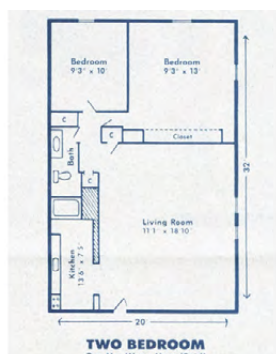
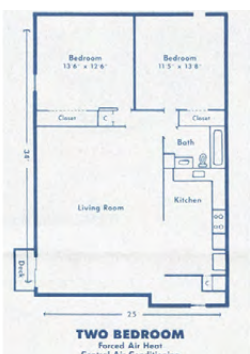
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- Rethink how you connect - host a virtual event - sharing recipes ahead of time so you can all enjoy the same feast.
- If you do gather, limit the size and scope of your gatherings.
- Gather in a space where families can stay 6' apart, outdoors is best. If indoors, open the windows.
- Wear a mask and safely store your mask when eating & drinking.
- Bring your own food or have one person serve the meal.
- Use disposable plates and utensils.
- WASH YOUR HANDS OFTEN!

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## 2020 – A Year in Review: May & June

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