INSIDE: Central Lee looking for nominations for Hall of Fame • See page 3

PEN CITY CURRENT It's Black & White and Read all over

Thursday, May 8, 2025 | 8 pages | Volume 9 • Issue 89

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ture of the former KL Megla

building that houses LCEDG.

That question was met

assembled response from

with a prepared and quickly

LCEDG President and CEO

Emily Benjamin in conjunc-

tion with SIREPA Adminis-

www.pencitycurrent.com

CAC moving to Keokuk

LCEDG: LCEDG, SIREPA pivot with facility to focus on transitional child care

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG PCC EDITOR

MONTROSE – In an unexpected twist, the Lee County Career Advantage Center in Montrose is being moved to Southeastern Community College's Keokuk campus.

The move was discussed as part of the Southeast Iowa Regional and Economic Port Authority's regular meeting Wednesday morning at the Lee County Economic Development Group's offices in Montrose.

The word pivot was used frequently as SIREPA board members discussed the decision to move the CAC operations, leaving an obvious question with what is now the fu-



BENJAMIN NORRIS

trator Mike Norris.

And the answer lies in striking at the lack of child care slots and preschool space in the county.

See LCEDG, page 6



Photo courtesy of FM Chamber of Commerce

The Fort Madison Chamber of Commerce Ambassadors helped cut a ribbon for My Sister's Closet, a new consignment shop in Fort Madison at 712 Avenue G. Closet space is for rent in the new business for \$10 per week.

City to double down on James Block building

\$270K: Council votes to up spend on historic structure to hopefully attract interest

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG PCC EDITOR

FORT MADISON – The James Block building is going to get some more city funding to try to preserve the historic building for future development.

At Tuesday's regular Fort Madison City Council meeting, the council voted 6-0 to invest another \$270,000 in the building to get it a new roof and shore up a deteriorating wall.

The funds will come from a \$100,000 state emergency catalyst grant, a \$100,000 low interest loan for a local match for the grant from the Southeast Iowa Housing Trust, a \$25,000 DNR grant, and \$45,000 from the city.

Fort Madison Mayor Matt Mohrfeld directed city staff to come up with an option for the best place for the city to come up with the \$45,000. That could come from the building department nuisance remediation fund, the general fund, or possibly Hwy. 61 funds, which Mohrfeld estimated had about \$2 million in it.

City Manager Laura Liegois said those funds have a lot of pressure on them with work still to be done.

City Building Director Doug Krogmeier and Liegois recommended spending the money on the property to give it additional life and try to get it in the hands of a developer.

City Councilman Matt Emmett said the council had to move forward with the building, in that scenario with the premise in mind that now the taxpayers of the city are investors in that building and deserve a return on that investment.

CITY NEWS

Mayor's first veto yields results for those filling pools

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG PCC EDITOR

FORT MADISON – A relatively minor move that would have increased the charge of a sewer meter rental, resulted in the first veto of Mayor Matt Mohrfeld's tenure as Fort Madison mayor two weeks ago. However, the issue was put back on the agenda Tuesday night against Mohrfeld's direction, but at the recommendation of city attorney Pat O'Connell, a move Mohrfeld opposed. At issue was an increase in the monthly rental charge of sewer meters that are used by property owners with pools or that spend a lot of water on their gardens and lawns.

The meters record the amount of

See VETO, page 2

"We have to be ready... to say this is not a knick-knack shop. This has to be something that pays the taxpayer back," Emmett said.

Mohrfeld went a step further saying fu-

See **BLOCK**, page 3

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WEATHER

THU 08 May Mostly sunny, 70° F/ 42° F	_
FRI 09 May	
SAT 10 May	
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PICK 3 EVENING 05/06	
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For the Record/From the Front



Photo courtesy of Fort Madison Chamber of Commerce

The Lee County Conservation District cut a ribbon on a new shelter at Heron Bend Fishing Center as part of a youth fishing day Saturday.

For the Record

Fort Madison **Police Report**

05/06/25 - no time listed -Fort Madison police cited Lora

Ann Amberger, 52, of Fort Madison, in the 4800 block of Avenue O, on a charge of disorderly conduct. 05/06/25 - 1:25 p.m. - Fort

Madison police responded to a report of a gas odor in the 900 block of 23rd Street.

05/06/25 - 1:25 p.m. - Fort Madison police responded to a report of a larceny/theft in the 2500 block of Avenue D.

05/06/25 - 1:33 p.m. - Fort Madison police arrested Brett Lee Traman, 36, of Fort Madison, in the 2200 block of Avenue L, on a warrant for voluntary absence from custody and a charge of interference with official acts. He was held in Lee County Jail.

Madison police arrested Erica Rae Kimble, 43, of Fort Madison, in the 1900 block of Avenue L, on a charge of trespassing. She was held in Lee County Jail.

Keokuk Police Report

05/06/25 - 11:51 a.m. - Keokuk police responded to a report of a larceny/theft in the 400 block of S. 2nd Street.

05/06/25 - 1:51 p.m. - Keokuk police responded to a report of a burglary in the 3900 block of Main Street.

05/06/25 - 8:05 p.m. - Keokuk police cited William Charles Ackley-King, 30, of Keokuk, in the 100 block of 31st Street, on a charge of driving under suspension.

05/06/25 - 8:13 p.m. - Keokuk police arrested Alexis Marie Bray, 21, of Keokuk, in the 05/06/25 - 5:12 p.m. - Fort 300 block of N. Park Drive, on

warrants for failure to appear. She was held in Lee County Jail.

05/06/25 - 8:49 p.m. - Keokuk police arrested Brianna Raeann Bell, 18, of Keokuk, in the 1400 block of Bank Street, on a warrant for violation of probation and charges of possession of drug paraphernalia, interference with official acts, and possession of alcohol under age. She was held in Lee County Jail.

Lee County Sheriff's Report

05/06/25 - 10:51 a.m. - Lee County Sheriff's deputies arrested Stacey Margaret Rasmussen, 57, of Keokuk at the S. Lee County Courthouse, on a judgment hold. She was held in Lee County Jail.

Those listed above should be and are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

City puts formal policy in place for watering meters

VETO - Continued from Page 1

water being used that isn't going back into the city's sewer system that would need treated.

As the city takes a hard look at the costs associated with services it provides, raising the fee from the current \$10 per month was an option put forward by city staff to the council on April 15. However, Morhfeld, a former greenhouse owner and operator, pushed back that residents shouldn't be charged more for watering their lawn and gardens, or filling their swimming pools.

The council however, voted in favor of the increase in April and Mohrfeld, for the first time ever, vetoed the increase.

With that veto, city council could request the issue be put back on the agenda and then a supermajority vote would be required to override the veto. But Mohrfeld said it wasn't brought back on the agenda viably.

"What the city code, as I forwarded to everybody said, and as I outlined in my reason for objection and the process for putting it back on, didn't happen. So here we are," Mohrfeld said.

City Finance Director Peggy Steffensmeier said the Iowa League of Cities' guidance was to put the vetoed motion back on the agenda, and O'Connell concurred.

"I can only tell you what the League told me," she said.

O'Connell said he spoke with staff and they didn't know the detail on how the council wanted to proceed, so two different motions were included on the agenda, one was to override the mayor's veto, and the other was to approve something less substantial.

"And I'm going to object to that. As per Iowa code, I described why I vetoed it and I laid out the process for bringing it back up for consideration."

Steffensmeier said the League advised her that the motion actually passed on the 14th and was vetoed so the council has a right to override the veto and needed an opportunity to do that.

Mohrfeld said he outlined that process for putting it back on the agenda. Steffensmeier said the council had the right to put it back on the agenda. However, Mohrfeld contended that no council member petitioned to have it put back on the agenda.

O'Connell said any member of the council can request it be reconsidered. But he said, generally, staff can't put anything on the agenda.

"They often do that as appropriate, and I think they just did that because, as a matter of law, they should be able to do that because that's what's supposed to happen," O'Connell said.

The council ended up voting to leave the rental fee the same, but put it formally into city policy.

"Here's what I want to happen. I would like to create a policy and then us address the price on it and so that we have a price that I think it was lateral with last year so we aren't penalizing people for having beautiful yards," Mohrfeld said. "But if the council sees different, by golly, that's their right."



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Education News/From the Front

State bigfoots home rule on fireworks legislation

BLOCK - Continued from Page 1

ture development of the building should be something "that moves the needle for revitalization."

Councilman Rusty Andrews agreed with Emmett that the development has to be a substantial investment now that the city's in for almost \$500,000.

"Yeah, you can't turn around and let it go for pennies so someone can put it back on the tax rolls for \$500 a year."

City Manager Laura Liegois said Southeast Iowa Regional Planning Commission is helping the city with a request for proposals for the project and what it could look like for the downtown.

Barb Asay, a member of the city planning and zoning committee and redeveloper in Fort Madison said the city really hasn't done a solid job in trying to sell the building to anyone. No one disputed Asay's comments, but the city is now up against a May 17 deadline to cut a check for some work or risk losing the \$100,000 catalyst grant from the Iowa Economic Development Authority.

According to a report from Liegois and Krogmeier, the city has spent \$192,813 on the building as of May 1. Leigois said the city had applied for a \$350,000 grant from the EPA for environmental remediations and upgrades to the building, but due to the federal government's efficiency efforts, that grant program has been rescinded and all applications have been forfeited. She said Fort Madison's grant proposal was in review with the agency at the time of the announcement.

Krogmeier said Schickedanz Construction has agreed to do the work for that price. He said the bid is very favorable to the city, and owner Mark Schickedanz is just trying to help the city out at the price.

In other action, the council:

• approved a partial payment for the Fort Madison airport pavement rehabilitation project.

• approved a 3-year lease agreement with Fort Madison Rodeo Corporation for the Summer Roundup Concert Series and heard a brief update on the program from Tri-State Rodeo Chairman Bobby Holtkamp.

• set a public hearing on amending the city ordinance on fireworks on July 3, 4 and Dec. 31 per new Iowa code. The hearing was set for Tuesday, May 20, at 5:30 p.m.

• held a discussion without action on how to move forward with city finances going forward. Mayor Mohrfeld said the real savings is, unfortunately, going to have to come from a reduction in services. New property tax overhauls are still working their way through the Iowa Legislature this year.

Central Lee looking for Hall of Fame nominations

DONNELLSON — The Central Lee Community School District is now accepting nominations for the 2025 inductees into its three Halls of Fame.

As part of its ongoing alumni recognition program, Central Lee honors individuals who have demonstrated exceptional achievement in academics, athletics, and the fine arts. This year, the district will induct nine distinguished alumni and former staff members who have left a lasting impact in their respective fields.

"We are excited to once again open nominations for our Halls of Fame and celebrate the outstanding individuals who have shaped Central Lee's legacy," said Dr. Andy Crozier, Superintendent. "This program is a wonderful way to recognize their talent, dedication, and success."

The Academic Hall of Fame honors students and staff who have made significant contributions in education and scholarship. Three new inductees will be selected based on their academic excellence before or after their time at Central Lee.

The Athletics Hall of Fame celebrates outstanding athletes, teams, and coaches from the past. This year, three individuals or teams who have demonstrated exceptional athletic success will be inducted.

The Fine Arts Hall of Fame recognizes students, directors, and other contributors who have excelled in band, choir, art, and other fine arts disciplines. Three individuals who have showcased excellence in the arts will be honored.

Committees have been established to oversee the selection process. To qualify for nomination, candidates must be graduates or former staff members of Central Lee and must have been separated from the district for at least five years. The committee will continue to review nominations from previous years alongside new submissions. Nominations are open until Monday, June 30. To submit a nomination, visit https://bit.ly/CLHOFNomination.

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Iowa News/Classifieds

Reynolds gets waiver for Healthy Kids summer meal program

DES MOINES— Today, Governor Kim Reynolds announced the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service has approved a demonstration project submitted by Iowa Health and Human Services for the state's own summer food pilot program. Healthy Kids Iowa is an alternative to the summer EBT program that serves Iowa children healthier foods at a lower cost by leveraging Iowa's already-existing, successful network of summer feeding programs and community providers.

"Our goal has always been to ensure all Iowa children have access to nutritious, balanced and wholesome food, while promoting healthy eating habits," Gov. Reynolds said. "I'm grateful to the USDA and Secretary Rollins for partnering with the State of Iowa and placing their trust in our statewide network of meal providers. Together we're building on the strong foundation already in place to better meet the unique needs of Iowa's children and families."

In 2023-24, Iowa received over \$12 million in USDA meal reimbursements for summer nutrition programs administered by the Department of Education. Building on that success, Governor Reynolds invested an additional \$900,000 last year. As a result, 61 new meal sites were added in 2024, bringing the total to more than 500 access

points statewide.

"I want to thank Governor Kim Reynolds of Iowa for her incredible leadership. With USDA's full support, Iowa is launching a new program to provide healthy foods to low-income, school-aged children during this summer break," USDA Secretary Brooke Rollins said. "State-led innovation across all of USDA's nutrition programs is simply the right thing to do and we are encouraging governors across the entire country to explore creative ways to provide food for those in need while also doing right by the American taxpayer."

With the state's summer feeding demonstration project, each family will be able to select \$40 worth of fresh and nutritious food for each eligible child per month. Families will be able to choose their monthly items, respecting their preferences and cultural and dietary needs. Distribution sites across the state will offer a selection of foods that are healthy and kid- friendly. Sites will be selected in partnership with the Feeding America Foods Banks and will be established based on demonstrated need.

"Healthier children are more likely to lead more successful lives," said Iowa HHS Director Kelly Garcia. "We must forge a new path and lead the way on promoting

healthier lifestyles in our children, so they choose fruits and vegetables over unhealthy options. We are excited to partner with the regional food banks across our state to meet the unique needs of their communities."

"In partnership with our dedicated network of community-based providers, the Healthy Kids Iowa initiative builds upon our well-established summer feeding programs," said McKenzie Snow, Director of the Iowa Department of Education. "Together, we can grow the reach and impact of our vital child nutrition programs, providing young Iowans with no-cost, healthy meals and food options that best meet the needs of our families."

Households must meet the federal poverty level of 185% or below AND have children ages 4-18 in their care.

Households will be allowed to choose from a selection of nutritionally balanced foods each month at their local participating pantry.

Foods will include fruits, vegetables, dairy items, whole grains and proteins.

The Healthy Kids Iowa pilot program will run during the months of June, July and August 2025. More information can be found here.

EN CITY CURRENT CLAS

PUBLIC NOTICES

PUBLIC NOTICE **Meeting Notice City of Fort Madison BOARD OF** ADJUSTMENT WILL MEET ON Wednesday May 14, 2025 6:00pm AT THE **Council Chambers** City Hall

811 Avenue E Fort Madison, IA 52627

TO DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING:

AGENDA

1. Roll Call 2. Approval of Minutes – April 9, 2025 3. Case File #25-09:

Special Use Permit -Planned Development to construct a "Tiny Home" at 21 Storms Court by 2x4's For Hope. 4. Adjournment

PUBLIC NOTICE **MEETING NOTICE**

The Green Bay Levee & Drainage District will

hold a special meeting at 7:00 p.m., Monday, May 12, 2025, at Heartland Co-op, east of Wever.

PUBLIC NOTICE MEETING MINUTES MOUNT PLEASANT CITY COUNCIL **REGULAR MEETING** MINUTES Mount Pleasant, Iowa,

April 23, 2025

The Mount Pleasant City Council met in regular session on Wednesday, April 23, 2025, at 5:30 p.m. at City Hall, 307 East Monroe Street, second-floor meeting room. The meeting was called to order by the Mayor Pro Tem and the roll being

called there were present Stephen Engberg in the Chair and the following named Councilmembers. Present: Engberg, Crull, McWilliams, White, Griffith, Glaha

Absent:

It was moved by **Councilmember Crull** and seconded by Councilmember McWilliams





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Classifieds/Public Notices

PUBLIC NOTICES

that the Council approve the following consent agenda items with one roll call motion vote:

the minutes of the April 9, 2025, City Council meeting;

the payment of bill totaling \$242,514.17.

the Outdoor Amplified Sound Permit for PFLAG Mount Pleasant in Central Park July 12, 2025, 1:00 p.m.- 4:00 p.m.;

the renewal of a Class F Retail Alcohol License for Veterans Club of Henry County, Iowa at 300 West Monroe Street.

Roll call vote 6-0. Motion carried.

Councilmember Griffith moved and Councilmember Crull seconded that the Council approve the agenda as printed.

Roll call vote 6-0. Motion carried.

5:31 p.m. Public Hearing was held on the proposed 2025/2026 Budget. 5:34 p.m. Councilmember Crull motioned to close the public hearing and Councilmember McWilliams seconded the motion. No verbal or written arguments were heard. Roll call vote 6-0.

Councilmember McWilliams moved and Councilmember Crull seconded that the Council adopt the following entitled Resolution No. 2025-25:

RESOLUTION AU-THORIZING ADOPTION OF THE 2025 - 2026 BUDGET FOR THE CITY OF MOUNT PLEASANT AND AUTHORIZING ITS FILING

Roll call vote 6-0. Resolution adopted, signed by the Mayor and hereby made a portion of these minutes.

It was moved by Councilmember Crull and seconded by Councilmember White that the Council approve the purchase of a new lawn mower for the Public Works Department. The mower will be purchased from Donnellson, Iowa for a cost of \$9,500.00. Motion approved, 6-0.

Councilmember Griffith moved and Councilmember Glaha seconded that the Council adopt the following entitled Resolution No. 2025-26:

RESOLUTION AUTHO-RIZING THE RENEWAL OF AN AGREEMENT BE-TWEEN MOUNT PLEAS-ANT BENEFITTED FIRE DISTRICT AND THE CITY OF MOUNT PLEASANT, IOWA

Roll call vote 6-0. Resolution adopted, signed by the Mayor and hereby made a portion of these minutes.

It was moved by Councilmember Crull and seconded by Councilmember Griffith that the Council read for the first time the following ordinance:

AN ORDINANCE AMENDING CHAPTER 69 (PARKING REGULA-TIONS) OF THE CITY CODE OF ORDINANCES Roll call vote 6-0. Mo-

tion carried. It was moved by Councilmember Crull and seconded by Councilmember Griffith that the Council read for the first time the following ordinance: AN ORDINANCE AMENDING THE CITY CODE OF MOUNT

PLEASANT, IOWA, CHAPTER 25, ENTITLED "MUNICIPAL FEES AND CHARGES." Roll call vote 6-0. Mo-

tion carried. It was moved by

Councilmember White and seconded by Councilmember McWilliams that the Council approve the renewal contract for employee health, dental and life insurances. There will be an increase of 4.42% in health and dental insurance and no change for life insurance. Motion carried. 6-0.

Councilmember McWilliams moved and Councilmember Crull approve the purchase of a new Police Department Vehicle. The vehicle is a 2025 Explorer purchased from Jim Baier Ford, Fort Madison, Iowa for a cost of \$46,573.00.

Motion approved, 6-0. Councilmember White moved and Councilmember Crull seconded that the Council adopt the following entitled Resolution No. 2025-27:

RESOLUTION AUTHO-RIZING THE FILING OF AN APPLICATION FOR THE IOWA TRANSPOR-TATION ALTERNATIVES SET-ASIDE PROGRAM (TAP) FOR CONSTRUC-TION OF THE WASH-INGTON-GRAND CON-NECTOR TRAIL

Roll call vote 6-0. Resolution adopted, signed by the Mayor and hereby made a portion of these minutes.

Councilmember Crull moved and Councilmember McWilliams seconded that the Council adopt the following entitled Resolution No. 2025-28:

A RESOLUTION SETTING A PUBLIC HEARING ON THE PRO-POSED SALE OF REAL PROPERTY LOCATED AT LOT 15, AND THE NORTH 5 FEET OF LOT 16, IN WEIR'S SUBDI-VISION, ALSO KNOWN AS WIER'S ADDITION TO THE CITY OF MT PLEASANT IOWA, 502 NORTH HAMLIN STREET, MT PLEASANT, IOWA

Roll call vote 6-0. Resolution adopted, signed by the Mayor and hereby made a portion of these minutes.

Councilmember Crull moved and Councilmember McWilliams seconded that the Council adopt the following entitled Resolution No. 2025-29:

A RESOLUTION SETTING A PUBLIC HEARING ON THE PRO-POSED SALE OF REAL PROPERTY LOCATED NORTH 5 FEET THERE-OF, WEIR'S SUBDIVI-SION OF BENTLY'S AD-DITION TO THE CITY OF MT PLEASANT IOWA, 500 NORTH HAMLIN STREET, MT PLEASANT, IOWA

Roll call vote 6-0. Resolution adopted, signed by the Mayor and hereby made a portion of these minutes.

Councilmember McWilliams moved and Councilmember Crull seconded that the Council adopt the following entitled Resolution No. 2025-30:

A RESOLUTION SETTING A PUBLIC HEARING ON THE PRO-POSED SALE OF REAL PROPERTY LOCATED AT LOT 16, AND 10 FEET LYING EAST OF LOT 16, ALL IN COLE'S ADDI-TION TO MT PLEASANT, HENRY COUNTY, IOWA, 207 SOUTH MARION STREET, MT PLEASANT IOWA

Roll call vote 6-0. Resolution adopted, signed by the Mayor and hereby made a portion of these minutes.

Councilmember Griffith moved and Councilmember McWilliams seconded that the Council adopt the following entitled Resolution No. 2025-31:

A RESOLUTION SETTING A PUBLIC HEARING ON THE PRO-POSED SALE OF REAL PROPERTY LOCATED AT 135 FEET NORTH OF THE SOUTHWEST COR-NER OF LOT 7, BLOCK 5, BENTLY'S ADDITION TO THE CITY OF MT PLEASANT IOWA, 306 NORTH LEE STREET, MT PLEASANT IOWA

Roll call vote 6-0. Resolution adopted, signed by the Mayor and hereby made a portion of these minutes.

Councilmember White moved and Councilmember Glaha seconded that the Council adopt the following entitled ResoluA RESOLUTION SETTING A PUBLIC HEARING ON THE PRO-POSED SALE OF REAL PROPERTY LOCATED AT LOT 12 OF VER-NON'S SUBDIVISION OF BLOCK ONE OF BENTLY'S ADDITION TO MT PLEASANT, 312 E VERNON STREET, MT PLEASANT IOWA

Roll call vote 6-0. Resolution adopted, signed by the Mayor and hereby made a portion of these minutes.

Councilmember Crull moved and Councilmember White seconded that the Council adopt the following entitled Resolution No. 2025-33:

RESOLUTION AP-PROVING RELEASE OF REAL ESTATE MORT-GAGE AND AUTHORIZ-ING MAYOR TO EXE-CUTE ON BEHALF OF CITY COUNCIL

Roll call vote 6-0. Resolution adopted, signed by the Mayor and hereby made a portion of these minutes.

Councilmember McWilliams moved and Councilmember Crull seconded that the Council adopt the following entitled Resolution No. 2025- 34:

A RESOLUTION APPROVING CLOSED SESSION CHECKLIST

Roll call vote 6-0. Resolution adopted, signed by the Mayor and hereby made a portion of these minutes.

Councilmember Crull moved and Councilmember McWilliams seconded that the Council adopt the following entitled Resolution No. 2025- 35:

RESOLUTION AU-THORIZING THE AP-POINTMENT OF SIMON PHANTHOUVONG TO THE FIRE DEPARTMENT RESERVES

Roll call vote 6-0. Resolution adopted, signed by the Mayor and hereby made a portion of these minutes.

Councilmember Griffith moved and Councilmember McWilliams seconded that the Council adopt the following entitled Resolution No. 2025- 36:

RESOLUTION AU-THORIZING THE AP-POINTMENT OF ETHAN FAETH TO THE FIRE DEPARTMENT RE-SERVES

Roll call vote 6-0. Resolution adopted, signed by the Mayor and hereby made a portion of these minutes.

Councilmember Crull moved and Councilmember White seconded that the Council adjourn. Motion carried. Meeting adjourned at 5:43 p.m. to meet in adjourned session Tuesday, April 29, 2025, at 9:00 a.m.

Stephen Engberg, Mayor Pro Tem ATTEST: Lori Davis,

City Clerk

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Armstong Tractor LLC,

seconded that the Council AT LOT 16, EXCEPT THE tion No. 2025-32:



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Iowa News/From the Front

SIREPA to apply for \$2.38 million to kickstart program

LCEDG - Continued from Page 1

Benjamin and Norris have been working for the past week to cobble together a plan that would create a transitional system linking child care services with day care for three year olds.

"In a pivot from a previously proposed career and technical education center, local leaders have unveiled plans to transform the Montrose facility into the Lee County Early Childhood Education Center," said Benjamin.

"The center would launch with a countywide, collaborative 3-year-old preschool operated by all three public school districts—Fort Madison, Keokuk, and Central Lee—with future expansion to include infant and toddler care."

Benjamin said initially they would target 55 slots for three year olds.

The move has prompted LCEDG and SIREPA to submit for a congressional appropriation in 2026 through a revised Community Project Fund application through Congresswoman Mariannette Miller-Meeks' office.

Norris said conversations with that office have already taken place and staff there is excited about the new proposal.

SIREPA was initially awarded \$2 million in CPF funding in 2024 for the CAC, but the funding was derailed when federal budget negotiations removed all CPF allocations. Since then, education and economic development leaders have reassessed community needs-and what emerged was a consensus that childcare access is now the most pressing barrier to workforce participation in Lee County.

"Every employer I talk to says the same thing - they're struggling to recruit and retain employees," Benjamin said. "But when you dig deeper, you find many willing parents who simply can't re-enter the workforce because they don't have reliable care for their kids. This center is how we fix that."

Lee County currently ranks #1 in Iowa for child abuse and neglect cases, a harrowing indicator that has shaken local leaders. Combined with the county's official designation as a childcare desert—with a documented shortage of over 1,600 childcare spaces—the data paints a grim picture.

"We refuse to accept this as our legacy," she said. "This project sends a message loud and clear: Lee County is not content with being ranked number one in child abuse. We're taking bold, tangible action to change that trajectory by investing in our youngest citizens."

Though rooted in care and education, the proposal is deeply economic in nature. A recent U.S. Treasury report titled The Economics of Childcare Supply confirms that inadequate childcare limits economic growth, deters workforce re-entry, and causes parents—especially women—to reduce or forgo employment.

Norris said child care is absolutely an economic issue as well as a family one.

"We often think of childcare as a family issue, but it's also an economic one," said Mike Norris, Executive Director of SEIRPC. "When parents can't find care, businesses can't find workers. This proposal takes a proactive step toward addressing both."

Norris said the CPF application would open the door to the project, but isn't guaranteed.

"If approved, it would provide the critical resources needed to move from vision to reality and give Lee County the tools to build the kind of change our families, workforce, and communities need."

SIREPA is not new to impactful efforts in Lee County. That group spearheaded



the effort to improve broadband service in the county, a move that has now generated close to \$35 million in direct fiber investment in the county in just under four years.

Benjamin said a central feature of the plan is its inter-district collaboration. All three public school districts would participate in governance, staffing, and programming, ensuring the center serves the entire county, not just a community. She said the plan also safeguards against open enrollment tensions by making the center neutral in identity and clearly separate from any one district's brand.

Funding for the shift in priority is still being researched, but Benjamin said multiple entities need to look at the priority of a center like this for Lee County.

"If we want to build a resilient workforce, employers must also examine whether their policies support or hinder working parents," said Benjamin. "It's not just about having a facility—it's about building a system that works for families."

While major metros have long debated universal pre-K and workforce childcare supports, Benjamin said Lee County's proposal stands out for its rural practicality.

"This isn't a theory. It's a shovel-ready solution," she said. "We have a building. We have district support. We have a clear and compelling use case. Now, we just need the resources to make it happen."

Norris said moving the Career Advantage Center to Keokuk makes sense with recent decisions by SCC.

"They have the very same equipment that we were going to buy here existing in Keokuk, they have the space, they have the instructors. Really the Career Center is going to open there with little overhead or cost to the center," he said.

"That's a huge advantage and they have room for expansion out there." Central Lee Superintendent Dr. Andy Crozier said it's been that district's position for a while that Keokuk's SCC campus made more sense for the CAC.

"Absolutely, that's been our stance for a long time. That facility exists down there and they have the space to expand for some conccurrent programming. Where it ends up in the future - we'll see what the demand is for the students. But it makes logical sense," he said.

And with the Montrose facility within the Central Lee district, Crozier said they will likely take a lead in the preschool programming.

"In the early conversations, Central Lee has spoken up to take a lead, but we really want it to be a collaborative effort between all three schools," Crozier said.

"It makes it a favorable option for parents and people working in that corridor." If funded, the Lee County Early Childhood Education Center could open its doors in 12-18 months after the appropriation is received, targeting a Fall 2028 open date.

Environmental Leader nominations sought

DES MOINES, Iowa (May 5, 2025) – Iowans seeking to nominate individuals or families who are conservation leaders in their community for the 2025 Iowa Farm Environmental Leader Award now have two additional weeks to complete and submit the application.

The nomination deadline for the prestigious annual award has been extended through May 19, 2025.

The Iowa Farm Environmental Leader Award recognizes farmers and farm families who go above and beyond to take voluntary actions to improve and protect our state's natural resources, including our soil and water, while serving as leaders within their communities. Since the creation of the award in 2012, 821 farm families have been recognized.

The award recipients will be honored during a ceremony on Wednesday, Aug. 13, 2025, at the Iowa State Fair. Gov. Reynolds, Lt. Gov. Cournoyer, Secretary Naig and Director Lyon will present each awardee with an Iowa Farm Environmental Leader Award sign and certificate.

The nomination form can be found on the Iowa Department of Agriculture and

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