

County sports 91 percent voter turnout in election

Baustian, Nath, Kracht elected in Luverne; Susie is new Hills mayor

By Lori Sorenson

With the general election in the rearview mirror, Rock County election official Ashley Kurtz shared insights on the 2024 process.

"I thought Election Day went great," she said last week. "All polling places were busy, and I thought the election judges did great at handling everything."

She said a few voter questions came up through the day, but they were easily addressed.

"Polling places were busy right up until 8 p.m. on Election Night," Kurtz said.

"We got results uploaded as soon as we could, with the mail ballot precincts reporting first and the other precincts reporting as machines showed up to the courthouse."

Of Rock County's 5,911 registered voters, 91 percent participated in the 2024 election. Kurtz said that's slightly lower than Rock County's typical participation during a presidential election.

There are 3,651 registered voters in Rock County's polling place precincts. Of those, 832 (or 23 percent) voted early by absentee.

There are 2,260 registered voters in mail ballot precincts, and 91.77 percent returned their ballots (similar to in-person participation at polling places.)

Kurtz said public perception of election integrity seemed particularly better this year, in light of the harassment her staff experienced during the last election season.

"We were pleasantly surprised with how well everything went through the weeks leading up to the election," Kurtz said. "It was a night and day difference compared to what we experienced in 2022."

Rock County residents will welcome new and returning leaders when elected officials are sworn in to office in January.

Election results/see page 5

Native bias complaint addressed in Luverne district

By Lori Sorenson

Luverne history teacher Tom Rops has agreed to complete anti-bias counseling and additional training on American Indian History after referring to a unit of a class as "cowboys and Indians."

That's according to an order filed Sept. 20 with the Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board.

The action stems from a complaint filed with the board's Ethics Committee accusing Rops of showing "implicit bias" through comments he made about Native culture.

The complaint states that on

Sept. 29, 2023, Rops was teaching 10th-grade history and introduced a unit, "Native Americans," which he referred to in one class as learning about "cowboys and Indians."

Following an investigation, Rops later read an apology statement to each of his classes.

According to regulations, the state Educator Licensing and Standards Board has the authority to suspend or revoke a teacher's license for violating codes of ethics.

The board's ethics committee is prepared to initiate contested

Native bias complaint/see p. 3



Big horses, big help

Residents from Parkview Manor in Ellsworth were among the first groups in the Senior Saddles program to meet the Percheron horses at Rock Ranch. Former owner Kathryn Johnson talks about her horse Guinness and how she purchased him 14 years ago when she and her husband, Dave, lived in Alaska.

Draft horses gifted to Rock Ranch

By Mavis Fodness

Horses play a central role in the three programs offered at Rock Ranch near Hills.

In July, Rock Ranch owners Marie and Dan LaRock received an unexpected donation of two Percheron draft horses, allowing the non-profit organization to expand in an unexpected way.

"So, initially I was thinking for therapy sessions," Marie said.

The LaRocks spoke on the phone to donors Dave and Kathryn Johnson of Sundance, Wyoming. The couple was shocked that the Johnsons would gift the two horses named JoJo and Guinness to the Ranch.

"We think that they can get used — should be used — for something more than a pasture pet,"

Draft horses gifted to Rock Ranch/page 3

Judge dismisses DeBoer's mayor campaign law complaint

By Lori Sorenson

The Minnesota Office of Administrative Hearings has dismissed a complaint filed by Isaac DeBoer alleging Patrick Baustian violated Fair Campaign Practices law with his mayoral campaign.

After a probable cause hearing by phone Nov. 4, the administrative judge deemed there wasn't enough evidence for the case to proceed.

DeBoer, a candidate for mayor, filed a complaint Oct. 28

alleging that the Keep Luverne Moving Forward Facebook page lacked a disclaimer as required by Minnesota Statute 211B.04.

Specifically, DeBoer said the page violates Subdivision 1 (a) of the statute that says a person who

"participates in the preparation or dissemination of campaign material" must ensure that it prominently includes "the name and address of the person or committee

Campaign law/see page 2

Quality Printing celebrates 25 years; expands business with label machine



Mark and Annie Opitz began Quality Printing 25 years ago.

By Mavis Fodness

For 25 years Quality Printing owners Mark and Annie Opitz have strived to fill customer needs.

The latest need is expanding business into the printing of adhesive labels.

Mark said over the years he's received inquiries into printing labels in small quantities since the existing business only accepts orders for a million or more.

In order to meet the need for labels, special machines would need to be purchased that would print and later apply the top

Quality Printing/see page 2



C&B sold to Point Field Partners

By Lori Sorenson

John Deere farm implement customers who do business with C & B companies received letters on Nov. 4 that C & B had been sold.

The letters, signed by the Burwell family, stated that C & B's Agricultural Division, John Deere dealerships, was purchased by Point Field Partners, another family firm, on Nov. 4.

The letter provided background on C & B, which was started in 1988 by Rod Burwell and his childhood friend Dan Cronin "for the purpose of supporting the farmers, ranchers, and local communities in the areas we served."

Over the past 36 years the business grew from a one-store operation to one of the largest John Deere Ag dealerships in the country.

"We are so proud of our team and thankful to all the customers, suppliers and other stakeholders who have been a huge part of our success," the letter stated.

"C & B has become, and will continue to be, a leader in the agriculture industry."

Eric Sandbulte has been with C & B in Luverne for 15 years and has been manager for five years.

He said he's so far been pleased with the new arrangement.

"Everything sounds like it will be positive for us," Sandbulte said.

"A bigger company can do more, and this will give us more opportunity for growth. With tight profit margins and higher interest rates, we'll be able to better cash flow."

He also said he pleased that the company is committed to the long-term investment.

The letters to C & B customers offered information about the new owners.

"We chose Point Field Partners because they share our vision and prin-

"Everything sounds like it will be positive for us. A bigger company can do more, and this will give us more opportunity for growth."

— Eric Sandbulte, C&B manager

ciples, and they have the resources to help our AG division reach new heights," the letter stated.

Point Field was founded by Steve Bisciotti, the owner of the Baltimore Ravens.

"He is a successful entrepreneur who co-founded Allegis Group, the largest privately held staffing firm in the United States," the letters stated.

"They have a proven track record of successfully partnering with equipment dealerships and companies the size of C & B's AG division to help them grow and thrive."

The company has indicated it will continue to support C & B Agriculture Division through additional investments in innovation.

"Please know that there should be no operational changes to our AG stores," letters stated. "Our Ag Division teams will remain the same and will operate as normal."

The letters indicated that C & B Material Handling and C & B Powersports businesses will continue to be owned and operated by the Burwell family.

"We appreciate your support and thank you for being part of the C & B family," stated the letter, signed by the Burwell Family.

"Point Field Partners will continue to serve you with principles that you have come to expect from us and are excited to add value to your operations. Thank you for your business and trust."



Shared Image

Guinness, the newest horse addition to Rock Ranch, receives a pat during a Senior Saddles program in August. Holding Guinness is his former owner, Kathryn Johnson, of Sundance, Wyoming. She and her husband, Dave, donated Guinness and another draft horse, JoJo, to Rock Ranch in July.

Rock Ranch draft horses expand offerings/from page 1

the Johnsons explained to Marie as the reason for giving the horses away.

At first Marie was hesitant in taking the horses.

As drafts, JoJo and Guinness are tall and large and are very different from the current Rock Ranch horses.

At 17 and 19 hands respectively, they tower over most of the other horses by 8 to 16 inches.

And they were harness horses — meaning they pull wagons — and are ridden like the other horses.

However, in five months, the large black horses have become popular among Rock Ranch visitors.

They also bring history alive again at the farm. Marie's grandfather regularly worked with draft horses.

"To bring that back has been pretty cool to me — just to keep that heritage going here at this place," she said.

But a purpose needed to be found for the horses in order to keep them at Rock Ranch.

Finding purpose for giant horses

At ages 24 and 16, JoJo and Guinness have been harness horses — trained to pull wagons — for most,



A new three-sided shed is located next to the existing indoor arena at Rock Ranch. Local donations allowed the structure to be built that will give the 15 horses housed at Rock Ranch a place to stand out of the elements.

if not all, of their lives.

The Johnsons regularly worked with JoJo and Guinness up until a few years ago, using them to give wagon rides to guests at their bed and breakfast establishments.

Dave would also regularly demonstrate how horse-drawn machinery worked to those who wanted the experience.

However, the Johnsons moved from north Idaho to Wyoming five years ago to a remote area where visitors were not so frequent.

Working the horses regularly wasn't an activity the retired couple could continue.

"We found getting up in the morning to work the horses — and not sharing the experience with anyone — was more of a chore," Dave said.

A year ago the horses were brought to Dave's childhood home near Gibbon, Minnesota, where his great-niece would occasionally ride JoJo.

None of the other family members wanted to work with the horses although they took good care of them.

"And we didn't want to sell them because they are our babies," Dave said. "When you sell them, they are gone. You never know if they are being mistreated or whatever."

A friend of the Johnsons understood their strong feelings and set out to find a new home and purpose for the draft horses.

An internet search brought up the Rock Ranch website.

The Johnsons knew immediately that Rock Ranch was the place.

"The fact they are faith-based is a big, big deal for us," Dave said. "How they treat their horses and the way they do therapy is a special place — not like other therapy places."

With the donation of JoJo and Guinness, Rock Ranch now has 15 horses.

Dave can already tell a difference in the horses' demeanor in being with a herd.

"The horses are much more compliant to work in general. They are relaxed," Dave said. "They feel totally loved and cared for, and they are being used. That's what we are especially happy about."

"As far as we are concerned, they are home."

More than horses given to the ranch

In addition to the horses, the Johnsons donated the harnesses and two wagons to Rock Ranch.

And the Johnsons have become Rock Ranch volunteers, staying in Luverne as they show Marie and barn manager Jessica Richters how to work harnesses and drive each of them in a single horse hitch.

The draft horses immediately connected with those participat-

Rock Ranch/see page 5



Rock Ranch owner Marie LaRock stands next to the tallest horse at Rock Ranch, Guinness. The Percheron, 19 hands tall, was given to Rock Ranch this summer.

Teacher complaint/from page 1

case proceedings to determine whether sufficient grounds exist to suspend or revoke the teaching license.

Rops has the right to those proceedings and was facing a possible one-year suspension of his teaching license.

As a remedy, however, Rops and the Ethics Committee agreed to a "stipulation and consent order" resulting in a "stay" of that license suspension.

In the agreement, Rops waived his right to the hearing and agreed he will not engage in prohibited conduct of the same or similar nature described in the complaint.

Also, within a year he must successfully complete six hours of anti-bias counseling along with training on American Indian history and culture.

He'll be responsible for any expenses associated with these requirements and must receive the board's approval of their chosen therapist or counselor prior to engaging in

those sessions.

According to the stipulation agreement, if Rops fails to meet the terms of the agreement, the Ethics Committee could schedule a hearing, and he could face suspension or termination of his teaching license.

The stipulation agreement was signed Sept. 18 by Rops and Amy Aho of the Ethics Committee.

The Licensing and Standards Board reviewed the stipulation agreement and filed the consent order Sept. 20.

The consent order essentially reiterated that Rops' teaching license was suspended for a year, but that the suspension was stayed, so long as he complies with the stipulation agreement.

Rops has been a licensed teacher since 1998 and is a Luverne High School 9-12 social studies teacher. His current teaching license is good through June 30, 2027.

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THANK YOU

Thank you for the opportunity to serve the City of Luverne as Council Member for the North Ward. I appreciate the support and will continue to address any concerns brought to the council, so please contact me if you have questions. I am looking forward to working with everyone to keep Luverne the growing and vibrant community that we all share.

Dan Nath
Paid for by Dan Nath.

Thank You

I would like to thank the citizens of Luverne for their continued support. I am truly honored to continue serving as Mayor of Luverne!

Patrick Baustian
Paid for by Patrick Baustian.

ON THE RECORD

Dispatch report

Nov. 2
 •Complainant on S. Kniss Avenue reported theft/larceny.
 •Complainant on N. Freeman Avenue reported suspicious activity.
 •Assistance from another department was provided on 1st Avenue West near Edgerton.
 •Complainant at mile marker 13 on Highway 75 reported suspicious activity.
 •Complainant on N. Freeman Avenue reported a civil issue.
 •Complainant on Warren and Donaldson streets reported an accident with property damage.
 •Complainant at 24-hour parking lot reported disturbing the peace.
Nov. 3
 •Complainant reported harassing communications.
 •Complainant on County Road 7 and 180th near Hardwick reported debris.
Nov. 4
 •Vehicle was towed from impound lot.
 •Complainant on County Road 4 near Beaver Creek requested roadside assistance.
 •Complainant on E. Luverne Street reported harassing communications.
Nov. 5
 •Complainant on N. Kniss Avenue requested an unlock.
 •Complainant east-bound on Interstate 90, mile marker 18, reported an accident with property damage.
 •Complainant east-bound on Interstate 90, mile marker 6, Beaver Creek, reported a road and drive law issue.
Nov. 6
 •Complainant on W. Main Street reported suspicious activity.
 •Complainant on N. Kniss Avenue reported a road and drive law issue.
 •Complainant on

County Road 6 and County Road 5 near Beaver Creek requested roadside assistance.
 •Complainant reported an outage.
 •Complainant reported harassing communications.
 •Complainant on E. Main Street reported suspicious activity.
 •Complainant east-bound on Interstate 90, mile marker 4, Beaver Creek, reported a road and drive law issue.
 •Complainant reported harassing communications.
Nov. 7
 •Complainant on S. Cottage Grove Avenue reported fraud/forgery/counterfeit.
 •Complainant reported a road and drive law issue.
 •Assistance from another department was provided on S. Freeman Avenue.
 •Complainant on County Road 4, west of 90th Avenue, Luverne, reported debris.
 •Assistance from another department was provided on 191st Street and 10th Avenue near Beaver Creek.
Nov. 8
 •Complainant on Oak Drive reported disturbing the peace.
 •Complainant on W. Main Street, Hardwick, reported an assault.
 •Complainant on W. Warren Street and S. Kniss Avenue reported a road and drive law issue.

In addition, officers responded to 2 deer accidents, 1 transport, 2 escorts, 12 ambulance runs, 4 paper services, 3 animal complaints, 7 burn permits, 2 stalled vehicles, 1 driver's license check, 2 alarms, 6 purchase and carry permits, 2 stalled vehicles, 35 traffic stops, 4 abandoned 911 calls, 3 tests, 2 welfare checks, 1 OFP and 1 public assist.

Hills substation to meet demand/continued from page 1

age from distribution lines and changes it to lower voltage that branches out on smaller lines to homes, barns and other structures.

The existing substation in Hills is owned by Alliant Energy Corporation, an electric and natural gas retailer in Iowa and Wisconsin. Sioux Valley Energy (SVE) leases the substation from Alliant.

Sioux Valley's plan is to remove all the equipment from that site once the conversion to the new L&O substation near Hills is complete.

"At that time, the lease will revert back to Alliant Energy as the property owners," said Sioux Valley spokesperson Carrie Vugteven.

Alliant spokesperson Chris Caporale said the company has no specific



Mavis Fodness photo/1114 New Hills Substation

Equipment at the existing electrical substation along Highway 270 near the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad will be removed after the new substation comes online in late 2025. Alliant Energy, which owns the current facility, does not have specific plans for the site at this time.

plans for the current substation site located along Highway 270 near the Burlington Northern Santa Fe rail line.

"Once the current equipment is removed, we will then determine business needs and evaluate

all options available to us," Caporale indicated.

About L&O

L&O Power Cooperative was formed in 1952 to bring wholesale electric power to rural electric cooperatives in Lyon and

Osceola counties in Iowa and Rock and Pipestone counties in Minnesota.

In addition to Sioux Valley Energy, other L&O members include Osceola Electric, Lyon Rural Electric and Federal Rural Electric.

Election results for Rock County/continued from page 1

Luverne voters re-elected Pat Baustian as their mayor 1,366-1,226 over challenger Isaac DeBoer.

North Ward voters re-elected Dan Nath to City Council 790-670 over challenger Josh Gangestad.

Voters chose Marlin Kracht over Lori Hallstrom 610-437 for the South Ward City Council seat that will be vacated by Scott Viessman who is not seeking re-election.

In the **Luverne School District**, four candidates ran for three open seats on the board. Heather Johnson (2,676 votes) will be the newcomer on the board with incumbents Ryan DeBates (2,785) and Tim Jarchow (2,478). Incumbent David Wriggs lost his bid for re-election with 1,450 votes. There were 110 write-in votes.

The mayor's race in **Hills** yielded one of the biggest surprises in local election results with Jim Susie (206 votes) upending Keith Elbers (170) who's been in the seat for 12 years and served several years on the council.

On the **Hills City**

across Rock County.

The **Hills-Beaver Creek School Board** candidates elected for new terms are Tim Bosch, Chris Harnack and Tami Rauk.

In **Beaver Creek**, Josh Teune was re-elected as mayor and Cody Dietrich and Alan Harnack were re-elected to the council.

In **Hardwick**, Thomas Haas is mayor and Rich Hubbling and Lowell Schelhaas were elected to the city council.

Kenneth mayor Keith Hoven will continue his duties for another term, and Duane Nieuwboer and Paul Tweet were elected to the city council.

In **Steen** Lynette Woelber is mayor and Marlin Elbers and Mark Kruger were elected to city council.

Rock County Soil and Water Supervisors Eugene Cragoe, Roger Hoff and Dave Esselink were elected to represent the first, third and fourth districts, respectively, on the board. Cragoe, 89, died on Oct. 31 prior to the Nov. 5 election. The board will appoint a supervisor to fill his District 1 seat until the

next election.

On the **Rock County Board**, all three county commissioners were re-elected facing no challengers. Gary Overgaard, Magnolia, will fill a third term representing the county's District 1. Greg Burger, Luverne, will fill a third term representing the county's District 3, and Jody Reisch, Luverne, will start his fourth term representing the county's District 5.

Joe Schomacker (R-Luverne) was re-elected to the District 21A seat in the **Minnesota House of Representatives**.

Congressman Brad Finstad (R-Minnesota) was re-elected as U.S. Representative in Minnesota's District 1.

U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minnesota) was re-elected to her seat in the U.S. Senate, and Republican candidate Donald Trump won election as U.S. president.

This is a summary of ballot choices local voters decided. For complete election results, see electionresults.sos.mn.gov.



Lori Sorenson photos/1114 PMP pork for veterans

PMP shares pork with veterans

Premium Minnesota Pork, Luverne, distributed 225 pork loins averaging 8 to 10 pounds each to local veterans Monday in the Luverne Elementary School bus parking lot. There were 15 left over, and those were taken to veterans who would be attending Monday night's Veterans Day banquet in Hardwick. According to PMP Human Resources Director Stephanie Bickerstaff, this is the fifth year PMP has shared pork loins for Veterans Day. "Gary Lynch (PMP owner) supports veterans and military members and it's something we enjoy doing for the community," she said. Other PMP staff helping Monday were plant manager Scott Johnson and Jerry Warbein. They were joined by Luverne Mayor Pat Baustian and Rock County Veterans Services Officer Eric Oye.

Above, Rock County Veterans Services Officer Eric Oye hands a pork loin through the car window to Willie Nath Monday in the Luverne Elementary School bus parking lot. Nath was among hundreds of local veterans who received pork loins from PMP Monday.



Pictured at right, PMP Human Resources Director Stephanie Bickerstaff hands a pork loin through a car window at the Luverne Elementary School.

Rock Ranch draft horses/continued from page 3

ing in the Rock Ranch Senior Saddles program.

The program hosts field trips to the Ranch for retirement communities, assisted living centers and nursing homes.

The senior citizens, upon seeing the horses, are immediately taken back to their childhoods when their dads or uncles farmed with draft horses.

They also don't hesitate about getting in the wagon for a ride.

"They have the same reaction as everyone else – the horses are impressive and huge," Dave said.

And the horses become conversation topics among the program participants days after the visit to Rock Ranch.

Expanding therapy with counseling cabins

The draft horses will eventually be used in Rock Ranch's equine-assisted therapy program, where horses in this program are not ridden by clients.

Instead, the horses roam freely in the indoor arena while clients watch from the observation deck how the horses interact.

A therapist guides the therapy session and conversations around the horses and their behaviors.

Prior to the draft horses arriving at Rock Ranch, a 16-hand Friesian-cross named Kairos generated the most reaction from therapy clients.

"He is big and he's black. He looks different, acts different," Marie said. "But he can't do therapy sessions one after the other because they (the horses) just take too much (of the clients' emotions) on."

The drafts will eventually assist Kairos with back-to-back therapy sessions, especially as Rock Ranch moves forward with the construction of a counseling cabin.

The design for the 16-by-16-foot cabin with windows on all four sides is currently in the planning stages.

The cabin (and possibly cabins) would be placed in the horse pastures. The counselor and client would meet in the cabin to meet and discuss the grazing horses instead of using the indoor arena, which is used frequently for beginning horseback riding lessons.

"(Clients) can choose to go out and walk through the pasture and interact with the horses that way, too," Marie said.

"With this counseling cabin, it'll allow us to be more in nature and allow us to have concurrent programming."

Another donation assists in comfort

As the draft horses settled into life at Rock Ranch this summer, construction of a stand-alone shelter was finished.

The project was com-

pleted thanks to donations from Jeff and Michelle Thue, Alliance Communications (\$2,000) and Sioux Valley Energy (\$5,000).

Since the organization's founding in 2016, Rock Ranch horses have been housed outdoors. The five stalls within the riding arena are used only for programming or when a horse is injured and needs special care.

However, recent extreme weather events have prompted a need for the older horses to have access to shelter 24/7.

The winter of 2022 really brought the need to the forefront.

"At first we had (portable metal) windbreaks, and they just didn't cut it in a blizzard," Marie LaRock said. "So, during blizzards, we ended up bringing them inside (the indoor arena) for three days."

Cleaning up the arena after 13 horses proved to be labor-intensive.

The new three-sided roofed shelter just outside the indoor arena erases the need to use the indoor arena for housing.

The shed is large enough for all the horses to be protected, not only from wind and snow, but also rain and hot, summer days.

"With our elderly herd, it will keep them healthier," Marie said.

Manure management in the outdoor shed is also easier to complete.