

LITCHFIELD Independent Review

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WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2021



The Bonfire Bar & Grille on State Highway 22 near Litchfield closed in late January.

PHOTO BY BRENT SCHACHERER

ACGC tweaks return-to-school plan

All students will be back in-person Feb. 9

BY AMY WILDE
For the Independent Review

The Atwater-Cosmos-Grove City School Board made a few changes to its Return-to-School plan during a meeting Monday.

The amended plan has all students in preschool and grades K-9 back in the buildings in-person by Jan. 28, with the older students, grades 10-12, back to in-person school on Feb. 9. (The older students are currently attending in a hybrid model of two days per week in-person, two days distance learning.)

School administrators (after hearing from their own advisory council) originally recommended holding off on having seventh- through ninth-graders full-time in-person until Feb. 8, but input from the state department of education's regional council persuaded school officials to allow junior high students to return earlier. (Elementary students are already back in classrooms full-time.)

According to charts Superintendent Nels Onstad showed the board, the primary reason ACGC students can return to school buildings is a drastic reduction in the number of people in Meeker and Kandiyohi counties who are experiencing active cases of COVID-19. The number of active cases among residents of the ACGC ZIP codes has also dropped dramatically from the peak in November and early December.

Prior to the board ordering students home for distance learning, more than 100 ACGC students and 10 staff members were quarantined due to exposure to the virus. It had become challenging and hazardous to continue to conduct in-person school under such circumstances, Onstad indicated.

Since then, school officials have communicated regularly with the District Advisory Council, consisting of representatives from ACGC parents, teachers, support staff, local businesses and the administrative team. Onstad said that almost everyone desires students back in classrooms, but it has been challenging to make the accommodations necessary to do so. The rapidly changing science of how to deal with the virus, Onstad said, has forced the DAC and staff to experience much fluctuation in how to best slow the disease's spread.

"Any announcement from the state creates an upset apple cart," he said. "We joke about the changes, but it's growing weary."

Although the highly contagious virus had slowed its spread in the ACGC community by mid-January, it has not disappeared. Failure to comply with health protocols could allow the virus to roar back.

"How we do this remains complicated," Onstad said. "It is nobody's fault: It is the pandemic's fault."

He told the board about mental health services available to school staff who struggle with the situation. He closed by stating that, whether a person believes in wearing a mask or not, "wearing masks is needed to get us back together."

The staggered re-opening of the schools means that the daily schedule will need to be adjusted until the transition is complete. Currently, teachers need time to connect with their distance learners. A modified schedule is going into effect this week, with both buildings back to their pre-COVID schedules by Feb. 9.

"The kids really want to be back," concluded board member Sarah Blom.

The board heard more details about how the district is coping with the situation in reports from PreK-4 Principal Kodi Goracke and Middle/High School Principal Robin

ACGC to 2 >

Burgarts say bon voyage to the Bonfire

After almost 16 years, the Bonfire Bar & Grille is closed

BY KAY JOHNSON
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If you're looking to generate comments on social media, all you have to do is announce the closing of a favorite tavern and that will do it.

After almost 16 years of ownership, the Dick Burgart family posted on Facebook this past week that they were closing the Bonfire Bar & Grille in rural Litchfield. The response was rapid and heartfelt. Fans bemoaned its passing, reminiscing about good times and favorite meals such as prime rib night and the best chicken strips and steaks.

Although many may attribute the business' demise to Gov. Walz's mandate that closed restaurants during the holiday season, Burgart said that wasn't true. It was a more mundane reason — their kitchen manager gave notice and that was it.

"We were forced to close May 16 to June 10 and Nov. 20 to Jan. 10," Burgart lamented. "Although the closures had a huge impact on

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STAFF PHOTO BY SARV MITHAQIYAN

Dick Burgart and granddaughter Cecilia Vaillancourt, owners of Bonfire Bar & Grille, delivered about 745 pounds of food to the Meeker Area Food Shelf last March when restaurants around the state were closed due to COVID-19. Although Bonfire took a hit from the pandemic, Burgart stressed that restrictions were not the reason the restaurant is closing.

Virtual school tour draws board praise

School Board likes the look, process of \$13.2 renovation project

BY BRENT SCHACHERER
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Proposed upgrades at Litchfield High School and Middle School took sharper focus

Virtual to 2 >



John Kretchmer, an associate with Wold Architects and Engineers, explains work planned as part renovations at Litchfield Middle School and High School during the School Board meeting Jan. 25.

STAFF PHOTO BY BRENT SCHACHERER

