



Workers installed 192 glittering Waterford crystal triangles on Times Square's New Year's Eve ball Sunday in preparation for a pandemic-limited celebration that will lack the usual tightly packed crowds of revelers. The ball is a 12-foot geodesic sphere covered with 2,688 crystal triangles of various sizes.

Published by APG Media of Southern Minnesota
\$1.00 Newsstand

WEDNESDAY
www.owatonna.com

Vol. 106, No. 216 ©2020
December 30, 2020

RICE COUNTY BOARD

'Jake used good common sense, tried to be honest and do the right thing. He was always concerned about the taxpayers and making sure they got their bang for a buck.'

— former Rice County Commissioner Milt Plaisance



Rice County Commissioner Jake Gillen, left, was one of three area officials testifying in March 2018 in support of a bill that would have allotted \$500,000 to study the feasibility of adding an interchange at I-35 and County Road 9. Also pictured are Rice County Engineer Dennis Leubbe, state Sen. John Jasinski, and Faribault City Administrator Tim Murray. (Photo courtesy of Minn. Senate Republican Communications Dept.)

COMMON SENSE COMMISSIONER

Advocate for good roads and fiscal prudence, Gillen wraps Rice County board tenure

By ANDREW DEZIEL
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After four election victories and more than a decade and a half of service, Rice County's longest tenured commissioner is saying goodbye.

Jake Gillen, whose District 1 includes a portion of the city of Northfield, the cities of Nerstrand and Dundas and numerous rural townships in eastern Rice County, attended his final meeting as a member of the board Tuesday. First elected in 2004 and re-elected three more times, the retired dairy farmer was known for his strong work ethic, fiscally cautious approach and commitment to improving the county's infrastructure.

While Gillen represented the rural eastern part of the county, the rural western part has been represented by District 5 Commissioner Jeff Docken since 2008. As the only other farmer on the board, Docken said he always enjoyed working with Gillen.

"He was very dedicated to the job and he was not a person to miss meetings," Docken said. "Some of his (committee) meetings would be half day meetings,

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the first in a three-part series featuring long-serving elected officials whose tenures end early next month. These three, Rice County Commissioner Jake Gillen, Medford Councilor Marie Sexton and Faribault School Board member Jason Engbrecht, have dealt with a wealth of issues — from financial challenges to changing demographics to unhappy constituents. Today through Saturday we shine a light on the people behind the decisions.

and he'd have to go to Rochester or St. Paul, but he took that obligation very seriously."

As one of two heavily rural districts, Gillen's seat included plenty of miles of well-traveled roads. The commissioner is particularly proud of his success in delivering needed road repairs and improvements.

"I got practically every blacktop road in my dis-

trict resurfaced, including the state highways from Faribault to Northfield to Nerstrand," he said.

County Engineer Dennis Luebbe said the Highway Department has managed to achieve an impressive amount over Gillen's 16 years on the board — in large part, due to revenue increases Gillen backed during his tenure.

A fiscal conservative who was loath to increase property taxes, Gillen instead looked elsewhere for the revenue needed to improve roads in his district. Among the initiatives he backed were a wheelage tax, a gravel tax and a half-cent sales tax.

"He's been a great commissioner to work with over the years," Luebbe said. "He has been extremely dedicated to advancing key Rice County initiatives."

In order to deliver funding for roads and other key county services, Gillen deviated slightly from his fiscally conservative approach — but only slightly. While careful with the taxpayer dollar, he wasn't wedded to maintaining Rice County's position as the lowest taxed county in the state.

See COMMISSIONER on 2A

Medford's 2021 budget factors in possible state aid cut

By LISA KACZKE
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The Medford City Council has approved a 2.4% property tax levy increase for 2021.

The council on Monday approved a total tax levy of \$673,978 for 2021. Of that, \$603,100 is for the general fund and the remaining amount is for items such as fire relief and the Economic Development Authority, according to the city. No one from the public spoke during the Truth and Taxation hearing prior to the council's approval.

"The overall levy increase will fund inflation in the cost of supplies and services, provide additional funding for Fire Department repairs and capital expenses, increase reserves, fund increases in health insurance, continue the maintenance of streets and wastewater infrastructure, park improvements and putting funds into the capital project fund," City Administrator Andy Welti said.

The council also approved a \$2.28 million budget for 2021. Slightly more than \$1 million is slated for general fund expenditures. Other expenditures include \$369,700 from the water fund, \$340,000 from the sewer fund, \$441,000 from the liquor fund and \$21,500 in capital projects, according to the city.

Welti cautioned that the state of Minnesota could cut local government aid due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the budget accounts for that reduction with little or no impact on city services.

In other news, the council declined to renew a contract with the Minnesota non-profit Community and Economic Development Associates. The motion to renew the contract failed 3-2 with Mayor Lois Nelson and Councilor Grace Bartlett were the two supporting the motion.

See BUDGET on 2A

MEDFORD'S 2021 BUDGET

General fund, including pool:
\$1.02 million
EDA: \$10,350
Water fund: \$369,694
Sewer fund: \$339,935
Liquo fund: \$441,013
Capital projects: \$21,493
Scenic Heights Bond: \$6,901
Central Bond: \$39,445
2018 Streets Bond: \$37,471

Holiday shoppers provide crucial boost to small local businesses

By ANDREW DEZIEL
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Despite fears that cash-strapped, pandemic-conscious holiday shoppers would turn to online retailers, small local businesses are reporting robust sales over the holiday season.

While December is always a crucial time of year for small businesses, it was seen as even more pivotal this year, given that the effects of the pandemic and associated restrictions have often fallen squarely on their shoulders.

At first, the pandemic sent Todd Lundgren of Owatonna's Country Goods into a panic. After being forced to close the doors, the longtime business owner not only dipped deep into savings, but even

took a job at a grocery store just to make ends meet. When the Country Goods did manage to reopen, Lundgren experienced an increase in sales that has continued through the holiday season. He believes much of that boost has occurred at the expense of industries that have seen business even more sharply curtailed.

"People say 'well, we can't spend money going on a cruise or at restaurants, so we're going to go to Country Goods and buy a couple of really good candles,'" he said. "We can't visit grandma face to face, so let's give her a gift package."

At Fleur de Lis Gallery in Faribault, owner Jess Prill said she's seen a small decrease in sales but that customers haven't really stopped shopping at Fleur de Lis. Instead, they've tended to eschew the store's

pricier items for less expensive ones.

"We've been down a tiny bit, but we're doing OK and we're here to stay," she said. "And we're looking forward to spring!"

To be fair, online sales saw a big increase, surging by 49% compared to 2019 according to a report from Mastercard. Over the two weeks of Thanksgiving and Cyber Monday, shipment tracking firm ShipMatrix reported more than 100 million parcels delivered per day.

That local small businesses managed to post decent sales perhaps underscores Lundgren's point. Nicole Winter of Owatonna's Urban Loft said that many shoppers she talked to were particularly eager to support small businesses like hers.

See BOOST on 2A



Jessica Prill stands in her downtown Faribault shop, Fleur-de-lis Gallery, in August. Prill says that while sales were down slightly, customers were buying bigger ticket items this holiday season. (File photo/southernminn.com)



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