

# St. Peter Herald



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2A



**GUSTAVUS TO EXPAND CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE**  
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## Growing number of ODs show opioids' grip on southern Minnesota tightening

By ANNIE GRANLUND  
annie.granlund@apgsomn.com

### EDITOR'S NOTE

This story is the first in an occasional series on the growing problem of opioids in southern Minnesota, and how they're impacting those who come in contact with the drugs and the addicts.

As the stresses over social distancing, mask wearing and vaccine supplies continue, a silent killer lurks in the shadows.

The opioid epidemic reaches far beyond local accessibility of both prescription drugs and street heroin. A quick look at local statistics from the Overdose Detection Mapping Application Program shows that from August 2019 to the end of 2020, law enforcement in southern Minnesota's Steele and Rice counties know of 43 overdoses linked to opioid abuse — nine were fatal.

The bulk of the known overdoses have been concentrated in the area's larger cities. Faribault has seen 14 of the 30 total overdoses in Rice County — two of which were fatal. Eleven of the 13 overdoses to take place in Steele County occurred in Owatonna, including all three of the fatalities. Despite the concentration in the larger cities, the epidemic is everywhere. Rural Rice County

had a reported four overdoses, including one fatality, between September 2019 and August 2020, and in Steele County town of Medford, population roughly 1,266, was home to one opioid-related overdose in the last year.

"It's here, it's real and it's affecting a lot of families and community members," said Sgt. Paul LaRoche, commander of the Cannon River Drug and Violent Offender Task Force, which covers Rice and Le Sueur counties. "The presence has gone up — opioids in our area have been on the rise specifically with a lot more fentanyl-laced heroin. A lot of what our overdoses have been is that elevated pres-



Quietly lurking the dark, the opioid epidemic continues to grow in numbers and dangers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as local law enforcement continues to respond to overdoses in southern Minnesota. (Photo by Michael Longmire on Unsplash)

ence of fentanyl!"

The Minnesota River Valley Drug Task Force is the lead agency in tracking and working opioid cases in St. Peter and the Mankato area. Jeff Wersal, MRVDTF commander, said

the agency tries to track non-fatal overdoses, but that is difficult to hospital privacy laws. However, he did confirm a rise in fatal opioid overdoses in recent years.

In Nicollet County, there were zero fatal

### GET NALOXONE

Naloxone, a drug that reverses opioid overdose, is available without a prescription at many area pharmacies and medical centers. Law enforcement often carries the anti-opioid, and residents can do so as well, using it in the case of a suspected overdose.

opioid overdoses in 2015-17, but in 2018-20, there have been two. In Blue Earth County, there were zero from 2015-18, but in 2019-20, there were five. Wersal noted that there were several more meth overdoses, but opioids are beginning to be more impactful in the area.

"I can't give an accurate number, but I can tell you that drug overdose calls are almost a daily occurrence, especially in the Mankato area," Wersal said about opioids.

See OPIOIDS on 3A



Years ago, the wetland on the corner of Leo Koppelman's Cleveland Township farm site was a meadow. Here, he stands at the site of a 2.5-acre wetland restoration before work began. The Le Sueur County SWCD project, which finished in summer 2020 and draws from a BWSR Clean Water Fund grant, directs water from neighbors' upland fields through the wetland. The water is now treated before it enters Middle Jefferson Lake. (Photo by Ann Wessel, BWSR)

## St. Peter School District joins city and county in passing moderate levy increase

By PHILIP WEYHE  
philip.veyhe@apgsomn.com

All three governmental bodies that St. Peter property owners pay taxes to called for increased in 2021, but all three attempted to keep those increases relatively minimal.

After the city of St. Peter passed a 3.16% city-wide tax levy increase and Nicollet County a 2.99% countywide tax levy increase, the St. Peter School Board approved a 2.37% (or about \$157,000) increase at its Dec. 21 meeting. The board unanimously approved the increase, with School Finance Director Tim Regner explaining where the increased expenses came from.

"We have been adding a lot of classes in the technical department, and that took some levy dollars," he said. "And we made an increase to reemployment."

Beyond those costs, the school district is always impacted by enrollment; when that goes up, as it has for many years in St. Peter, the local tax share goes up with it. Also, teacher and staff salaries generally rise on an experience-based scale.

Regner pointed out that the school district levy has seen steady increases in recent years. In 2020, the increase was only about \$13,000; it was \$402,000 in 2019; \$177,000 in 2018; and \$437,000 in 2017. Those increases add up on a property owner's tax bill over several years, but the goal of the district most years is to keep the increase manageable.

The last major increase, comparatively, was in 2016 when the first bond payment for the voter-approved new high school kicked in. The annual levy increased \$2.23 million that year, and the district's taxes will continue to be impacted by those bonds until they're paid off.

See LEVY on 3A

## POLLUTION PREVENTION

### Le Sueur Co. SWCD, landowner work together on German-Jefferson water quality project

By ANN WESSEL  
MN Board of Water and Soil Resources

A local government agency and agricultural landowner teamed up to improve water quality in the German-Jefferson lakes chain.

The most conspicuous of Le Sueur County Soil and Water Conservation District's water quality improvement projects restored a 2.5-acre wetland at the edge of a hog farm directly across a county road from Middle Jefferson Lake. The project will help to prevent potentially harmful pollutants from reaching the nearby lakes.

"The water doesn't come off of our farm, but we get blamed for it, because it runs across our property," said Leo Koppelman, who runs the feeder pig operation with his brother and son. "All I've heard is, 'Koppelman's hog

farm is polluting the lake."

Middle Jefferson — one of five lakes in the chain that includes German, East Jefferson, West Jefferson and Swede's Bay — is impaired for aquatic recreation due to nutrient loading. The SWCD's \$484,000 phosphorus reduction project aims to improve water quality in the chain with strategically placed best management practices that help to reduce nutrient loading. The chain lies within the Cannon River watershed, which



Redding



Jones



Le Sueur County SWCD's \$484,000 phosphorus reduction project, made possible with a Clean Water Fund grant from BWSR, aims to improve water quality in the German-Jefferson chain of lakes with strategically placed best management practices that help to reduce nutrient loading. The chain lies within the Cannon River watershed, which drains into the Mississippi River. (Photo by Ann Wessel, BWSR)

drains into the Mississippi River. "Whenever you have a landowner who wants to do something along a major recreational lake, you want to be able to do that," said Ryan Jones, the

Mankato-based South Central Technical Service Area engineer who worked on the wetland design.

See POLLUTION on 3A



County Road 5 and the roundabout at the St. Peter High School entrance opened in 2017. Payments on the new school started affecting district-wide property taxes in 2016. (File photo/southernminn.com)

### CONTACT US

editor@apgsomn.com  
classifieds@apgsomn.com  
circulation@apgsomn.com

News: 507-931-8569  
Sports: 507-931-8566

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