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Year in Review: Elections, U46 board rule year's news

BY MIKE DANAHEY

Local elections, comments made by school board members, summer floods and a heinous murder made headlines in the [Elgin](#) area in 2017. Here's a look at some of the biggest news of the year:

Elgin City Council election

Incumbents Rich Dunne, Terry Gavin and Carol Rauschenberger were re-elected to the Elgin City Council along with newcomer Corey Dixon during an April election. Incumbent John Prigge lost in his attempt to seek his third term.

The main issue before the newly seated council was the city's budget, and a series of special meetings were held leading up to the November unveiling of the proposed document and spending plan.

In December, council members ultimately approved a \$259 million budget for 2018 that increases taxes on gasoline and hotel stays, raises ambulance fees and cuts the number of firefighters manning each shift. Council members noted the plan calls for no layoffs.

The plan doubles the hotel/motel tax from 4 percent to 8 percent and adds a 4 cents per gallon fuel tax at Elgin gas stations. It also increases water and sewer rates by 7 percent and 8 percent respectively. The city sales tax will increase from 1.25 percent to 1.5 percent. A small property tax increase will fund police and fire pensions and bond payments.

Elgin-area U46 school board

The Elgin-area U46 school board race had five candidates vying for three seats. Ideological lines separated them into two groups, with incumbents Donna Smith, Veronica Noland and first-time candidate Melissa Owens in one camp and incumbent Cody Holt and newcomer Enoch Essendrop on another side. The three women won the seats, changing the balance of the board.

Two board members often found themselves at the center of controversies because of comments they shared at meetings or in social media.

School Board member Jeanette Ward invited Steve Goreham, author of "Mad, Mad, Mad World of Climatedism," to speak at Elgin's Gail Borden Public Library in February about alternative theories on climate change. In March, Ward voted against a new social studies curriculum saying it "smacks of racism against white males." In April, Ward voted against a new science curriculum for the district because of how climate change is presented in 8th grade materials. Ward was in the news again in December for her Facebook comments about a homework assignment that asserted Jews, Muslims and Christians all believed in the same God.



U46 school board member Traci O'Neal Ellis, pictured during an Oct. 2 meeting, was in the news for comments she made about the American flag. (Brian O'Mahoney / The Courier-News)

In the fall, on her personal Facebook page, U46 board member Traci O'Neal Ellis stated her support for NFL players who took a knee during the national anthem and wrote that the United States flag was "nothing more than toilet paper to me." Ellis reported she received death threats for what she said.

Downtown Elgin

In June, Smooth Fox, a downtown Elgin restaurant and nightclub, closed after about a year in business. Owner Justin Hodge was evicted for owing \$9,000 in rent. During Smooth Fox's run, Elgin officials and police held several discussions with Hodge about the number and type of calls for service to the establishment.

The Courier-News learned Russian national Victor Lipukhin, who is a fugitive and has been wanted by federal authorities for three years on tax evasion charges, owns the building. Despite that, Elgin entrepreneur Kevin Echevarria is working to turn the space into a food hall for budding businesses.

Flooding

After record rains and ensuing flooding, the Fox River in Illinois was closed for boating of any sort from the middle of July to early August, from the Wisconsin border to Montgomery.

Locally, hardest hit by the flooding were Algonquin, East and West Dundee and South Elgin. In Elgin, heavy July rains washed out the T-intersection of Linden and Preston [Avenues](#), not far from Lords Park, and the city is footing the bill to make necessary repairs.

Todd Middendorf



Carpentersville fire battlion chief Todd Middendorf, 46, died in July while on vacation in Tennessee as a result of an allergic reaction to insect stings. (Carpentersville Fire Department)

In July, while on vacation at a home he and his family own in Tennessee, Carpentersville Fire Battalion Chief Todd Middendorf died after being stung multiple times by bees or wasps. A medical examiner's report revealed the stings brought on anaphylactic shock, leading to Middendorf's death.

Middendorf was well-respected by his fellow firefighters in Carpentersville and surrounding communities. His wake and funeral services July 27 drew a large number of people to St. Mary Catholic Church in Huntley.

Youth baseball

This past summer three Elgin area Little League teams fared well. In July, the Elgin Classic Little League team, for boys ages 12 and 13, became the first Little League state champion from Elgin, in any division, since 1996, but fell short in its efforts to move past the regional tournament in Kalamazoo, Mich.

The season also saw the Tri-Cities All Star teams for 10U and 11U levels each taking home state championships. Tri-Cities players must live within boundaries that include Carpentersville, East and West Dundee and Sleepy Hollow or attend schools within the boundaries of those towns. Some also are from Gilberts.

West Dundee

After several years of working to renovate a building more than 100 years old along Main Street, in October Kevin Krak finally opened Rochaus in the spot that was formerly the Clearwater Theater in West Dundee. The opening night act was Living Colour, which had its biggest selling album, "Vivid," released in 1988.

Also opening along Main Street in West Dundee during 2017 were restaurants Bleuroot, in the spot where MT Barrels had been, and Bamboozles, where Dylan's had been.

Elgin charter school

In early October, commissioners for the Illinois State Charter School Commission voted 5-3 in favor of the Elgin Math and Science Academy. It was the second time the Elgin Charter School Initiative had gone to the state commission to overturn School District U46's rejection of their proposal in three years. The plan calls for opening in fall 2018, using the Neil Building on the campus of what was the Fox River Country Day School, which the city of Elgin now owns. Charter school backers are renting it from Elgin for a nominal fee.

Arts in Elgin

At the Art Harvest in late October, Elgin unveiled three commissioned pieces of public art: Joanna White's the mural "Which Way" at the Hemmens Cultural Center, Nathan Pierce's stainless steel sculpture titled "Continuum" along the Riverside Drive Promenade and Davis McCarty's acrylic glass sculpture "1835 Expedition", which also is along the promenade.



Artist Joanna White speaks with a young girl about her mural, "Which Way," which was installed at the Hemmens Cultural Center in Elgin. White was one of three artists whose works were chosen in a public art contest and unveiled at the city's Art Harvest in October. (Gloria Casas / The Courier-News)

Elgin's Cultural Arts Commission began working on a public art plan more than a year and a half ago, but its efforts gained more attention when a controversy erupted over a mural titled "American Nocturne." The mural was the work of Elgin artist David Powers and was painted by some Judson College students. It had been on a downtown wall for about 10 years until mid-2016, when two men pointed out that it depicted a crowd captured in a photograph of a lynching of two black men in 1930 in Marion, Ind.

Murder charges

Brian Peck, 55, of Elgin is accused of killing his mother, dismembering her body and disposing of the remains over two days in bags and newly purchased luggage in a lagoon in Chicago's Lincoln Park, Cook County prosecutors said. Authorities said the murder happened in October after Peck's mother, Gail Peck, 76, with whom Peck lived in Elgin, had told him to turn down the Jimi Hendrix music he was playing.

Pat Schultz

Pat Schultz, 61, who was first elected to the the Carpentersville Village Board in 2009, died unexpectedly in October from apparent natural causes. Former Fire Chief John Skillman, who won the village president seat in spring, appointed John O'Sullivan to finish Schultz's term. In late November, Skillman appointed Jeff Frost - son of former

village Trustee James Frost - to complete the term of Jeff Sabbe, who moved to the St. Louis area. Sabbe was elected to the board in April 2015.

Charlestowne Mall

Interior spaces at Charlestowne Mall were shuttered in late November to make way for planned redevelopment for the St. Charles shopping center site. Chuck May, project manager for the mall owner, said a concept plan presented to the St. Charles City Council in May is still in play, making a portion of the mall into townhouses and apartments. More details are expected in early 2018.

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Suburban school districts able to apply for after-school program grants

BY MADHU KRISHNAMURTHY

Suburban schools can apply for roughly \$12 million in federal funds available for after-school programs.

The Illinois State Board of Education put out a request for proposals for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) grants for fiscal year 2018-19. The grants facilitate academically focused after-school programs serving schools with a high concentration of low-income students to improve student achievement through enrichment and family engagement.

Existing grant-funded programs provide students with art, music, character building, physical education, and supplementary mathematics, English and science activities. They also connect students' families with literacy and computer training and other educational services.

"These enrichment activities help students engage in their learning in new and different ways," State Superintendent of Education Tony Smith said. "Students having a safe place to explore and learn outside of school hours also provides a tremendous benefit to families and communities."

Teachers have reported improved behavior, motivation to learn, and academic performance among students who participate in 21st CCLC programs, data shows.

In fiscal year 2015, grants funded programs serving several suburban school districts, including Aurora East Unit District 131, Aurora West Unit District 129, Algonquin-based Community Unit District 300, **Elgin Area School District U-46**, Round Lake Unit District 116, and West Chicago Elementary District 33.

Among participating elementary school students, 63 percent improved in behavior and motivation to learn, 30.7 percent improved in reading, and 26.2 percent improved in math, according to teachers surveyed for the 21st CCLC Annual Performance Report for the 2013 cohort of grants -- the last year for which a report is available.

Among middle and high school students, 55 percent improved in behavior, 53 percent improved in motivation to learn, 29.7 percent improved in reading, and 27.1 improved in math.

Applications for funding proposals comprising the following components receive higher priority: Programs that serve the lowest-performing schools, eligible middle or high schools, and students who attend 40 percent or higher low-income rural schools, in partnership with community organizations.

For more information, visit isbe.net. Proposals must be submitted by 4 p.m. Feb. 15.