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Janesville farm redefines corn mazes with escape room

Another maze turns corn field into a 9-acre real-life video game

Corn mazes are known for using technology in unique ways to create giant artistic masterpieces, but Skelly's Farm Market in Janesville has used tech to create unique experiences unlike any other corn maze people are used to visiting in the fall.

The farm features both a 6-acre and a 9-acre corn maze with unique adventures in each. In the 6-acre maze, guests follow along with a playful story about Squashees, a fictional group of cute characters created specifically for this year's maze. The Squashees are trying to determine who stole their apple cider donuts, where they are hiding them, and what farm vehicle they used to escape.

Using their smartphone as the clue sheet, guests eliminate suspects as they navigate the maze until only one remains. As players are about to finish, they must then solve a puzzle using the info they collected to unlock an actual door in the maze and reveal the donut thief. Visitors looking for a full escape room experience can select to play the advanced version where they solve five additional puzzles as they navigate the maze.

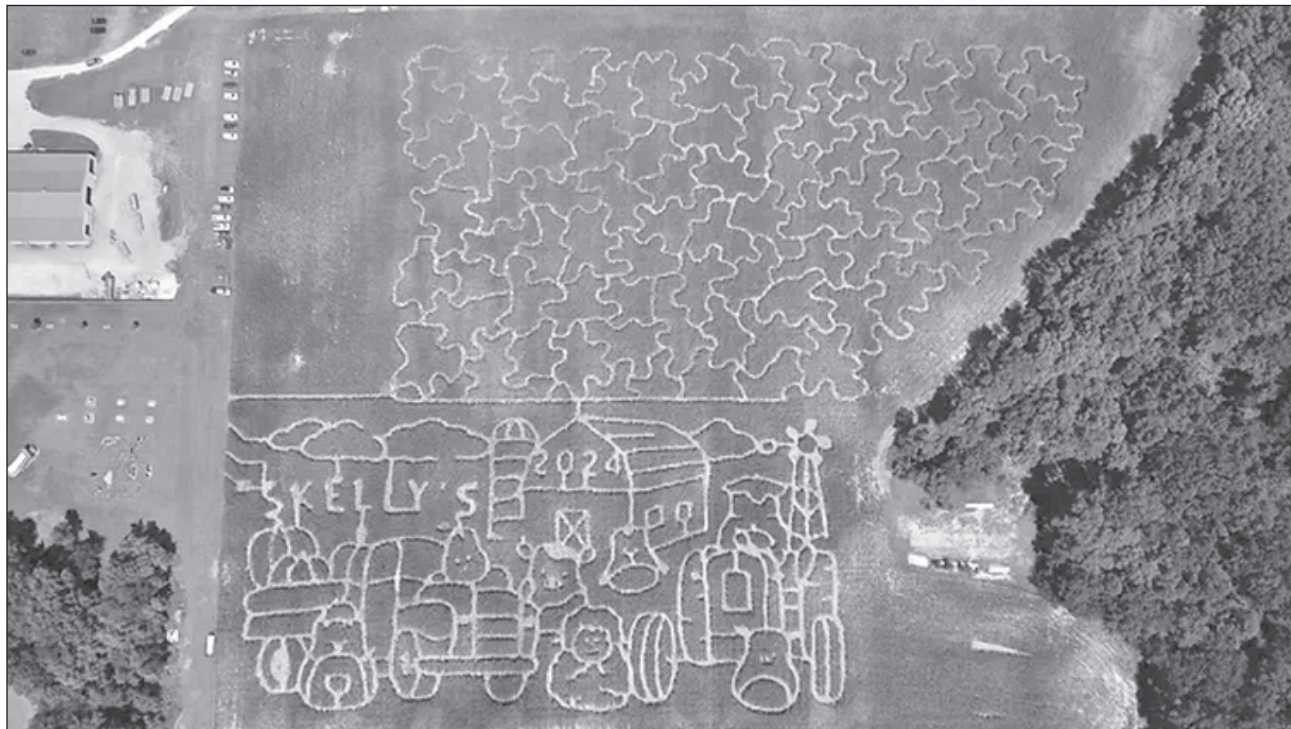
"I love escape rooms, but they tend to be expensive because only one group can

normally play at a time, and after they leave, a staff person needs to completely reset the room," says Scott Skelly, designer of the farm's corn mazes and games. "By using the guests' smartphone as part of the toolset, we've invented a system where people can be playing throughout the corn field simultaneously, while keeping the price down for guests."

Skelly notes that guests who struggle with puzzles can always get hints on their phone to make it to the next challenge.

The 9-acre Impossible Maze also has its own digital game combining digital fun with real life experiences in a game called Animal Pals: County Fair. Visitors choose from one of six farm animals to raise, and then they navigate the maze finding hidden fruits and vegetables and 'feed' their animals to help them grow to be big enough to win at the county fair. The game reacts to data from all the other guests in the maze, with less visited food points worth more, bonus points for feed bags, and stats comparing your standings to other players.

"This game is so fun because it plays like a classic map-based video game," says



SKELLY FARM MARKET WEBSITE PHOTO Rock Valley Publishing

An aerial view of the 2024 corn maze at Skelly Farm Market in Janesville. The farm features both a 6-acre and a 9-acre corn maze with unique adventures in each.

Skelly. "A lot of kids are really good at navigating levels of a video game on a screen, so with this game we put the challenge of navigating into the real world while still giving the digital gamification."

Skelly says it took him well over a month last winter to custom write the software for these games, and that makes the games something exclusive to his family's farm. He

adds that for those guests that prefer not to have the digital components, there are still paper maps available. The games are also scaled to the level of adventure a guest chooses to participate in.

"We want to break the misconception that corn mazes are only something you do if you have kids. Corn mazes

See REDEFINES, Page 6

Vernon given scholarship for criminal justice studies at BTC

D'Angelo Vernon, a 2024 Clinton High School graduate, is this year's recipient of the IDEAL Opportunity Scholarship from the Blackhawk Technical College Foundation.

During a signing ceremony on Friday at Blackhawk, D'Angelo, who is in the Criminal Justice program, officially accepted the scholarship, which includes full-tuition coverage, a faculty mentor, a stipend for living expenses, and two paid internship opportunities – one with the Janesville Police Department and the other with the Beloit Police Department.

At the event, Janesville Chief of Police Chad Pearson and Beloit Chief of Police Andre Sayles both spoke, highlighting the importance of teamwork and the value of a strong support system in law enforcement. They welcomed D'Angelo into the law enforcement community and emphasized how partnerships between Blackhawk and local police departments provide students with the tools to succeed both academically and professionally.

"We want to launch you into a great career. This is a noble profession. It's a thankless job. But we look for great people like you to continue to build upon what we are doing in our police department," said Chief Sayles.

After living in several states over the years, D'Angelo has made Clinton his home for the past six years. Driven by

a strong commitment to serve and protect his community, he aspires to become a police officer or sheriff's deputy upon his graduation in 2026.

"I've always been fascinated by the law and its role in maintaining order and justice. The opportunity to positively impact people's lives is something I find truly rewarding," he said in an interview.

Beyond academics, D'Angelo is passionate about being active in the local community, coaching youth football and serving as a youth leader and worship member at his church. These commitments, while time-consuming, are able to be balanced with his studies, thanks to the scholarship, he said.

"This scholarship has given me the chance to work hard and aim high, knowing that people believe in me. Overall,

this scholarship has helped me grow and be a better student and leader," he said.

He credits Blackhawk Technical College not only

for the financial assistance but also for the vital skills he has gained.

See VERNON, Page 6



PHOTO COURTESY AMANDA URISH, BLACKHAWK TECHNICAL COLLEGE
 Rock Valley Publishing

Chief Chad Pearson, D'Angelo Vernon, and Chief Andre Sayles pose for a picture.

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FNBT to open new branch in Janesville

First National Bank and Trust (FNBT) is excited to announce the expansion of its footprint with the opening of a new full-service branch located at 2111 Holiday Drive in Janesville. This milestone is aligned with the bank's strategic objectives and highlights its commitment to offering convenient banking solutions to their customers.

The new Janesville-Holiday Drive branch opened its doors in September 2024. This new location has been selected for its accessibility to current customers and its potential to foster new relationships with businesses and consumers in the area.

"We are excited to celebrate this milestone and reaffirm our dedication to serving the community," said Don O'Day, President and CEO of FNBT. "Our new branch will not only provide enhanced services to our existing customers but also offer new opportunities for growth and engagement



PHOTO SUBMITTED Rock Valley Publishing

A new full-service branch of First National Bank and Trust will be located at 2111 Holiday Drive in Janesville.

within the Janesville community."

Branch Service Offerings

The new full-service Janesville-Holiday Drive branch will primarily focus on serving the needs of businesses, offering a comprehensive range of business banking services, including:

- Business Checking: Business checking, money market, and savings accounts, commercial loans, merchant services, and cash management

solutions.

- Commercial Lending: Financing options for small to large companies, including lines of credit, equipment financing and real estate loans.

- Cash Management: Customized cash management solutions to help businesses manage their cash flow, optimize liquidity, and streamline payment processes.

- Fraud Management Solutions: Comprehensive fraud management solutions to protect businesses.

- Business Advisory Services: Financial planning and consultation services to support business growth and development.

Additionally, the branch will offer personal banking services to meet the needs of business owners and their employees, including:

- Personal Banking: Checking and savings accounts, personal loans, credit cards, and online/mobile banking services.

- Mortgage Services: Home loans, refinancing options, and home equity loans and lines of credit.

- Wealth Management Services: Trust and estate planning, financial planning, investment management, and retirement planning.

FNBT has operated a Loan Production Office (LPO) in downtown Janesville in anticipation of this new full-service branch opening. The LPO location will close, and the entire team will move to

the new Janesville-Holiday Drive office upon its opening.

FNBT is excited to expand its presence in Janesville with the opening of the new branch on Holiday Drive. This new location underscores the bank's dedication to bringing enhanced banking services to the Janesville community. Please visit www.bankatfirstnational.com for updates as the opening of the new location draws near.

First National Bank and Trust, headquartered in Beloit, has been a pillar of the

community since 1882. With a history of customer-focused solutions, FNBT has evolved into a leading financial services institution, offering a range of products and services for consumers and businesses, including trust, retirement services, investment management, and brokerage. The bank serves nearly 30,000 households across 13 communities and 17 locations in Southern Wisconsin and Northern Illinois, with assets of approximately \$1.5 billion.

Rock County hosted first all-veterans reunion

Rock County proudly honored its veterans with a landmark event on Saturday, Sept. 21, as it hosted the 1st Annual Rock County All-Veterans Reunion at the Beloit VFW Post 2306, 2711 Afton Road in Beloit, from noon to 10 p.m. This special event was expected to be one of the largest veterans' gatherings in Southern Wisconsin, and it will be further highlighted by the visit of the crew from the USS Beloit, who joined the day's festivities.

The event was open to all veterans – active, reserve, guard, retired, and former active-duty service members from every military branch and service period. Vets Roll, a renowned motorcycle and bus tour organization that honors veterans, also made a special appearance.

The event aimed to unite the more than 10,000 veterans residing in Rock County. There was live music throughout the day, with performances by Stone Cold Country, No Static, Rainbow Bridge, and Planet Roxx, ensuring plenty of entertainment.

In addition to celebrating the contributions of veterans, the event offered an opportunity for veterans to connect with over 20 veteran support organizations that provide valuable resources and services. Some of the attending organizations include, but were not limited to VFW, Legion, VFW and Legion Riders, VFW and Legion Auxiliary, Marine Corps League, Disabled Veterans, Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association, Vets Roll, Reserve, Guard, Veterans Affairs, Veteran Service Office, Patriotic Society, Housing for our Vets, and Center for Veterans Issues.

Veterans and one guest received free admission to the event, including complimentary food and drinks from local vendors. Additional family members and the general public were welcome to attend with a donation requested at the entrance, and food and drinks were available for purchase throughout the day.

This event celebrated the legacy of Rock County's veterans, while also offering a chance for veterans and their families to connect with community resources and enjoy a fun-filled day of entertainment.

Soil testing, soil health workshop held this fall

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) invites Wisconsin farmers to attend any of a series of Soil Testing and Soil Health Workshops happening this fall across the state.

During the workshops, staff from DATCP, University of Madison-Extension, and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will present on the following topics:

- How soil biology and cover crops can increase soil fertility and boost yields
- How to take soil samples, submit a soil test and understand a soil report
- How to determine what soil amendments to add to a field based on a soil report
- How to apply for USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding to receive cost share to buy cover crop seed

Open to all producers, these workshops are designed for growers who manage small to mid-sized diversified farm operations with a particular focus on supporting beginning and/or underserved farmers. These field days will connect growers with the information and resources to improve soil health and increase access to USDA programs, such as the NRCS Environmental Quality

Incentives Program (EQIP) funding for cover crop seed.

Workshops will be offered at multiple locations; farmers are encouraged to pick the date and location that works best for them.

- Sept. 30 – Verona (Madison), Farley Center, 4 to 6:30 p.m.
- Oct. 1 – La Crosse, Hmong Cultural and Community Center, 4 to 6:30 p.m.
- Oct. 14 – Mequon (Milwaukee), Fondy Farm, 9 to 11:30 a.m.
- Oct. 21 – Wausau, Green-Gold Gardens, 4 to 6:30 p.m.

There will be a mix of Hmong, Spanish, and English presenters depending on the location. Language interpretation will be provided. Beginning, historically underserved and veteran farmers and ranchers, as defined by the USDA, will receive a free soil test and a \$50 stipend to cover their time and travel costs for attending.

To learn more about the individual workshops including how to register, visit <https://datcp.wi.gov/Pages/AgDevelopment/SpecialtyCrops.aspx>. For those that have any questions about these events, please contact Andrew Bernhardt, DATCP Agriculture Program Specialist, at 608-572-0512 or andrew.bernhardt@wisconsin.gov.

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Waterfowl association receives recognitions for their conservation

The Wisconsin Waterfowl Association has received significant national recognition for their work to help restore critical wetlands and their efforts to advocate for waterfowl and waterfowl hunters in Wisconsin.

Two major organizations supporting conservation – the North American Waterfowl Management Plan Committee (NAWMP) and Delta Waterfowl Foundation – have named the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association (WWA) as a recipient of the 2024 National Bluewing Teal Award and a 2024 Partner in Conservation, respectively. This is the first time a Wisconsin organization or individual has received either recognition.

“As WWA celebrates our 40th Anniversary in 2024, we are proud of our work to benefit waterfowl and waterfowl hunters in Wisconsin,” said WWA Executive Director Bruce Ross. “It’s a tremendous honor to receive recognition from these internationally prestigious organizations.”

The NAWMP’s National Blue-winged Teal Award recognizes individuals or partners whose activities have resulted in substantial benefits to waterfowl and wetlands conservation at the national level. Previous recipients of the award include

The Nature Conservancy and former United States Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont).

WWA with habitat restoration and conservation education are vital to these efforts and have

future of waterfowling. The award is presented to an organization whose work in the

ment to the cost of the Wisconsin waterfowl stamp and advocating for a sustainable and ethical sandhill crane hunt in Wisconsin.

“State-based groups like the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association are critical partners in our efforts to help conservation and advocate for waterfowl hunters, and the WWA stands out as one of the best in the country,” said Delta Waterfowl Senior Director of Governor Affairs Cyrus Baird.

The Wisconsin Waterfowl Association is a state-based non-profit conservation organization dedicated to the conservation of Wisconsin’s waterfowl and wetland resources. Since 1984, WWA has worked to restore critical habitat in Wisconsin, encourage waterfowler progression from hunter to passionate conservationist, and advocate for policies that protect Wisconsin’s resources and the rights of citizens to hunt.



PHOTO COURTESY CHASE BAKER OF GRIT Rock Valley Publishing

WWA Executive Director Bruce Ross and WWA President Bruce Urben accept the North American Waterfowl Management Plan Committee 2024 Bluewing Teal Award from Dr. Sarah Orlofske.

“The Wisconsin Waterfowl Association is a premier example of what waterfowl management in North America strives for. This includes healthy waterfowl populations, maintained by abundant waterfowl habitat, through the support of conservation-minded people. In particular, the work of

had a national impact,” said Tony Roberts, North American Waterfowl Management Plan Coordinator.

Delta Waterfowl Foundation’s Partner in Conservation Award recognizes members of the conservation and waterfowl community for their clear commitment to protecting the

conservation arena has been collaborative with Delta Waterfowl to strive towards benefiting waterfowl, waterfowl habitat, and waterfowl hunters.

Over the past several years, WWA has been working with Delta Waterfowl on important efforts like getting a long-overdue and much needed adjust-



PHOTO COURTESY DELTA WATERFOWL FOUNDATION Rock Valley Publishing

WWA Executive Director Bruce Ross accepts the 2024 Partner in Conservation Award from Delta Waterfowl Foundation’s Senior Director of Government Affairs Cyrus Baird.

News briefs

Sex offender relocation to Janesville



Eric J. Woller

According to the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, Eric J. Woller relocated to Rock Valley Community Programs, 203 W. Sunny Lane, Janesville, on Sept. 18.

Woller was convicted on April 11, 2017, in Lincoln County, on 2 counts of 3rd Degree Sexual Assault, Case Number 16CF330.

While residing at 203 W. Sunny Lane, Janesville, conditions of Woller’s supervision include, but are not limited to: no unsupervised contact with minors; no contact with victim; not to consume drugs; comply with standard sex offender rules; cooperate with electronic monitoring; comply with all requirements and be a lifetime registrant of the Wisconsin Sex Offender Registration Program.

The Rock County Sheriff’s Office is not responsible for the placement of this sex offender in any manner; however, by law, they are required to provide public notice. For further information regarding the placement of this offender, please contact the Department of Community Corrections at 608-758-6075 or refer to the Wisconsin Department of Corrections Sex Offender Registry website at www.WISTAYS SAFE.gov.

Nominations for state corn promotion board open through Oct. 31

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) is accepting nominations through Oct. 31 for three seats on the Wisconsin Corn Promotion Board. Producers who grow and sell corn in Districts 4, 8, and 9 are eligible to nominate producers or to be nominated to the board.

• District 4: Adams, Columbia, Juneau, Marquette, Mon-

roe, and Waushara counties

• District 8: Jefferson, Kenosha, Racine, and Walworth counties

• District 9: Green and Rock counties

DATCP’s Market Orders staff will mail nomination forms to any producer who requests one prior to Oct. 31. Contact the Market Orders staff via phone at 608-224-5046 or via email at DATCPMarketOrders@wisconsin.gov. A completed nomination form must include the signatures of five eligible corn growers other than the nominee. Mail completed forms to DATCP, DAD, PO Box 8911, Madison, WI, 53708-8911.

DATCP will conduct the Wisconsin Corn Promotion Board election from Dec. 5 through Jan. 10, 2025. Elected growers will serve three-year terms beginning February 1, 2025.

DATCP administers elections for Wisconsin commodity marketing boards. To learn more about the marketing boards, visit https://datcp.wi.gov/Pages/About_Us/MarketingBoards.aspx. Learn more about the Wisconsin Corn Promotion Board online at <https://wicorn.org/about/wcpb>.

Kandu to hold grand opening in Milton

Kandu invites the public to their grand opening party held on Saturday, Sept. 28, from 3 to 6 p.m. The address is 15 Plumb St., in Milton.

Admission is free. There will be drinks, food trucks, and tours, plus live music from Nauti-Nauti, a yacht rock band. See Kandu’s new facility and the work happening inside.

Mind Over Matter workshop soon

Did you know that more than half of women over age 50 experience issues with bladder or bowel control? These problems can be slightly bothersome or totally debilitating. For some women, the chance of embarrassment keeps them from enjoying many activities and can take control of their life.

A popular workshop in Rock County can help! Mind Over Matter: Healthy Bowels, Healthy Bladder is a workshop designed to give women, age 60 and older, the tools they need to take control of their bladder and bowel symptoms. The workshop provides information, group activities, and simple exercises and dietary changes to practice at home. The workshop consists of three, 2-hour sessions over the course of a month. Dedication to the series of three classes is required. This is a workshop for females, taught by a female.

The Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) of Rock County invites women to join them for a “Mind Over Matter” series at the Edgerton Public Library located at 101 Albion Street, Edgerton.

The series will occur on three Tuesday mornings from 10 a.m. to noon on: Oct. 15 and Nov. 12. Suggested donation is \$10 to cover cost of materials. Space is limited, so register early to reserve a spot. Registration deadline is Oct. 4.

To learn more, or to register for the series, contact Health Promotion Coordinator, Lisa Messer, of the ADRC of Rock County at: 608-757-5309 or email: Lisa.messer@co.rock.wi.us.

BTC hosting open house at new safety center

Blackhawk Technical College is hosting an open house at its new Public Safety Center on Thursday, Sept. 26 from 4 to 7 p.m. at the Beloit-Janesville Campus. A ribbon cutting ceremony will take place at 5:30 p.m. in the lobby of the new building.

The Public Safety Center is the final project within the Public Safety + Transportation Complex, which was supported by a \$32 million referendum passed by voters in November 2020.

The open house is being held in conjunction with the college’s annual Fall Festival, which is open to the public and includes games, bounce-houses, food trucks and a petting zoo.

IRS appoints secretary designee to committee

The Internal Revenue Service has appointed Wisconsin Department of Revenue Secretary Designee David Casey to the Electronic Tax Administration Advisory Committee (ETAAC). Casey joins nine other appointees to serve three-year terms on the committee beginning in September 2024.

Founded in 1998, the ETAAC focuses on electronic tax administration issues such as paperless tax filing, identity theft and refund fraud. Members of the committee include state tax officials, cybersecurity and information security experts, tax professionals, tax software developers, representatives from the payroll and financial sectors and various consumer groups. The ETAAC works closely with the Security Summit, a public/private partnership of IRS, state tax agencies and the tax community, to address these and similar issues.

“I have devoted much of my

career to ensuring customer information is safe and protected,” Casey said. “Having a role with the ETAAC allows me to be proactive in taking steps to preserve the integrity of not only Wisconsin’s, but also the nation’s, tax system.”

Prior to his appointment as Secretary Designee, Casey served as Deputy Secretary of the department from 2019 to 2022. He has a bachelor’s degree in economics from Grinnell College. Additionally, he holds a Master of Public Administration in public policy and management from Carnegie Mellon University.

ADRC to hold a caregivers retreat

The ADRCs of Jefferson, Rock and Dane Counties are pleased to host a day of pampering and information for family caregivers.

On Wednesday, Nov. 6, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., The Aging and Disability Resource Centers of Jefferson, Rock and Dane Coun-

ties will host a day to honor family caregivers at The Fort Atkinson Club – 211 S. Water Street E, Fort Atkinson.

The day starts with a variety of spa and relaxation services. Lunch is included and will be followed by an afternoon of informative conversation about a variety of topics related to caring for someone with dementia including safety, security, technology, research and perspectives from a family caregiver and person with a dementia diagnosis.

Full and half day sessions are available to meet scheduling needs. Respite care for a family member is available based on need and with a prior registration for services. This is a complimentary event. Preregistration is required. Please contact Karen Tennyson at 608-741-3615 for more information and to complete a registration.

For more information on the dementia care specialist program and services available, please contact the local Aging and Disability Resource Center.

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Natural Land Institute acquires 327-acre natural area

Natural Land Institute (NLI) is excited to announce that it closed Sept. 16 on the purchase of a 327-acre natural area featuring wetlands, ponds, a lake, Raccoon Creek and grassland bird habitat. This pristine property, purchased for \$816,925 plus closing costs, is home to threatened and endangered species. It is located just north of NLI's Lost Flora Fen on Raccoon Creek, in Rockton, and includes 196.52 acres in

Illinois (northern Winnebago County) and 130.25 acres in Wisconsin (southern Rock County).

This newly-acquired property will be called the "Jerry and Kathy Busse Prairie Preserve on Raccoon Creek" after the Busses, who purchased the naming rights for this preserve with a \$500,000 gift to NLI for their passion for protecting nature. Jerry Busse is the retired CEO and Founder of Rockford Toolcraft Inc.

NLI purchased the Busse Prairie Preserve for its incredible variety of plants and animals and to protect the water, fish and other aquatic species, and other wildlife. "We are thrilled to be able to protect this property. It is such an incredible complex of wetlands and wet grasslands and hosts an amazing variety of birds, wildflowers, and pollinators," said Alan Branham, Executive Director, Natural Land Institute. "The big views of the skyline from here are impressive," he added.

NLI is very grateful to the Busses and other donors who gave generously to help safeguard this land and water habitat. Other naming opportunities were available for naming the lake, the bur oak grove, and the walking trails. A gift of \$50,000 was received from an anonymous donor to name the lake "Lake AJ" after their two daughters' first names, Andrea and Jessica. A gift of \$50,000 was received from the Vanderpoel family and the Vanderpoel Conservation Foundation to name the bur oak grove "The Vanderpoel Family Bur Oak Grove." A gift of \$50,000 was received from Dorothy Baits to name the walking trails, which will be called the "Stephen and Dorothy Baits Trail." An additional \$50,000 was received from Nancy Maze to provide an enhanced meadow view. Several \$10,000 donations were received for the opportunity to be listed on signage at the preserve that will recognize these donors as "Protectors" of threatened, endangered and species of conservation concern. Additional donations were received in



Located just north of NLI's Lost Flora Fen on Raccoon Creek, in Rockton, this new preserve includes 196.52 acres in Illinois (northern Winnebago County) and 130.25 acres in Wisconsin (southern Rock County). This property already is enrollment in the Wetland Reserve Program, but NLI will protect it further by managing invasive species and any trickle down impact from nearby holdings.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS Rock Valley Publishing

Jerry and Kathy Busse made a huge gift to NLI for a 327-acre natural area featuring wetlands, ponds, a lake, Raccoon Creek and grassland bird habitat to be named the "Jerry and Kathy Busse Prairie Preserve on Raccoon Creek" in their honor.

various amounts to make up the total amount needed to purchase the Jerry and Kathy Busse Prairie Preserve.

NLI staff and volunteer wildlife monitors have been to the preserve several times in the months leading up to the acquisition of the Busse Prairie Preserve. Many threatened and endangered species have been found there, including the Hine's Emerald Dragonfly, Blanding's Turtle, Rusty Patched Bumble Bee, and a plethora of other plants and animals of conservation concern. Eastern Meadowlarks, Bobolinks, Dickcissels, and Henslow's Sparrows are key grassland birds that will have nesting habitat protected

at the preserve.

While this property already has one level of protection with enrollment in the Wetland Reserve Program, it doesn't guarantee management of the land. NLI will further protect it by managing it for invasive species and any trickle down impact to NLI's other holdings on Raccoon Creek such as Lost Flora Fen on Raccoon Creek and Nygren Wetland Preserve. NLI will also protect it from tree and shrub encroachment, which would eventually destroy the grassland habitat.

Busse Prairie Preserve will open to the public at a date to be announced at a later time. For more information about

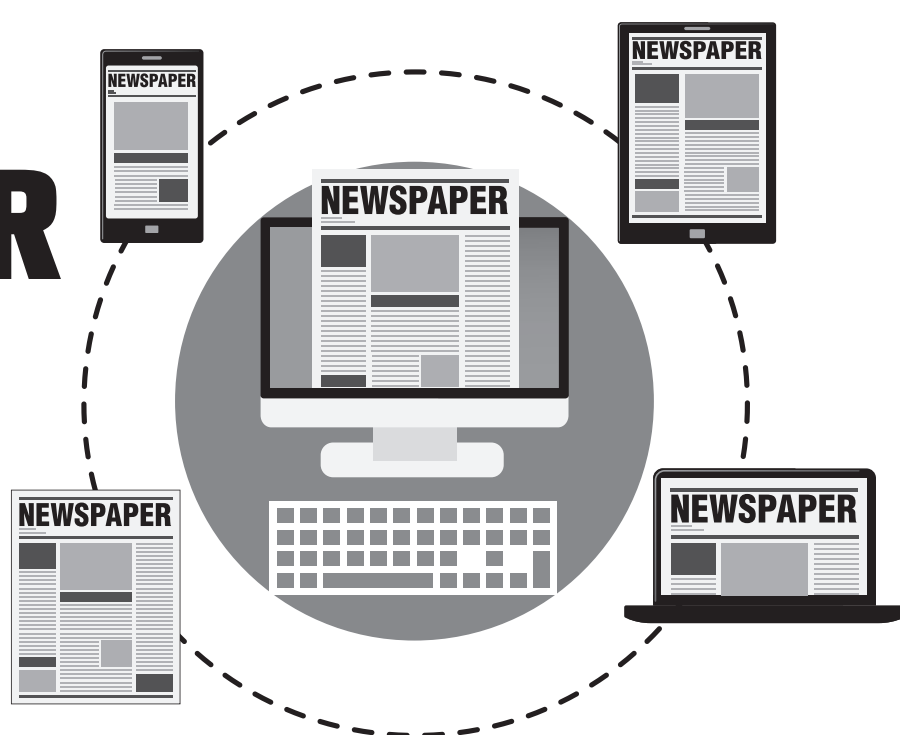
Natural Land Institute, visit www.NaturalLand.org, call 815-964-6666 or email info@naturalland.org.

About the Natural Land Institute

The Natural Land Institute, an accredited conservation land trust, is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in Rockford, which has protected 18,000 acres of natural land in Illinois since 1958. The current service area covers 12 counties in northern Illinois. NLI's mission is to create an enduring legacy of natural land in northern Illinois for people, plants and animals. For more information and to donate, visit NaturalLand.org

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Sen. Spreitzer tours BTC, learns about updates

On Wednesday, Sept. 18, Sen. Mark Spreitzer, D-Beloit, visited Blackhawk Technical College to tour the college's Surgical Technology program classroom and learn more about efforts by the Wisconsin Chapter of the Association of Surgical Technology (WIAST) to encourage new legislation that would enhance the credentialing process for surgical technologists across the state.

Surgical technologists play a vital role in the operating room, possessing expertise in the theory and application of sterile and aseptic techniques along with the managing of surgical instrumentation, supplies and medications. WIAST and the national Association of Surgical Technologists (AST) are pushing for legislation that would require healthcare facilities to verify the credentials of surgical technologists upon hire. This would include confirming that

surgical technologists have graduated from an accredited surgical technology program and are certified by the National Board of Surgical Technology and Surgical Assisting (NBSTSA).

"Ensuring that surgical technologists have certification is essential to maintaining patient safety," said Jessica Jacobson, a member of the WIAST Board of Directors, who joined Sen. Spreitzer during the tour. AST repre-

sentatives as well as Dr. Tracy Pierner, President of Blackhawk, and Moira Lafayette, Dean of Health Sciences and Public Safety at Blackhawk, were also in attendance.

Currently, Wisconsin lacks laws mandating certification for surgical technologists, though many healthcare facilities prefer credentialed professionals. Several other states have enacted similar regulations, but Wisconsin has yet to advance such legislation.

Heather Gray, Director of Blackhawk's Surgical Technology program, expressed support for the efforts by WIAST and AST.

"Requiring proper credentialing ensures that all surgical technologists meet the highest standards of professionalism. Our graduates are thoroughly prepared, and we back these efforts to establish uniform standards across the state," she said.

Blackhawk's Surgical Technology program is a two-year

associate degree that qualifies graduates to sit for the CST exam. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment for surgical technologists is expected to grow by 6 percent over the next decade, which is faster than the average for all occupations. In Wisconsin, the median hourly wage for a surgical technologist is \$31.55.

For more information on our Surgical Technology program, visit blackhawk.edu/surgicaltechnology.

Fire department highlights benefits of fire dues program

Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services (DPS) Secretary Dan Hereth and Wisconsin Commissioner of Insurance Nathan Houdek presented a ceremonial check for more than \$50,000 to City of Merrill Fire Department Chief Josh Klug earlier this month, the department's share of funding from the Wisconsin 2% Fire Dues Program.

"Safety is a vital part of our department's mission, and our state fire departments are the backbone of safety in Wisconsin communities," said DPS Secretary Dan Hereth. "Ensuring that safety means funding our fire departments, and the Fire Dues Program is a major source of funding."

The 2% Fire Dues Program requires insurers to pay 2% of premiums collected for insurance against loss from fires. The Office of the Commissioner of Insurance (OCI) collects the dues, and DPS distributes the dues to hundreds of cities, villages, and towns across Wisconsin according to a prescribed formula. This

summer, Wisconsin professional, volunteer, and hybrid fire departments received a total of \$32.2 million, a nearly \$4 million increase over 2023.

"This program is all about prevention. Fire departments across our state can take their share of the Fire Dues funding and put it towards the programs that best serve their communities. We're proud to play a part in this collaboration," said Commissioner Houdek.

Wisconsin fire departments can use the Fire Dues funding in a variety of ways to keep communities safe, including buying and replacing equipment, producing fire prevention programming, training crews, and more. Merrill has used some of its annual funding to keep a dedicated Fire Inspector on staff.

"Previously, we had employees filling in that role on a rotating basis," explained Merrill Fire Chief Josh Klug. "Having someone dedicated to that job allows our other fire staff to concentrate on

their work, and for our local businesses it provides consistency. There is no question about whom to contact with questions about fire inspections."

Chief Klug and Fire Inspector Joe Bozinski joined Merrill Mayor Steve Hass and City Administrator Rod Akey to accept the ceremonial check for \$50,872.26.

DPS issues more than 240 unique licenses, administers dozens of boards and councils that regulate professions, enforces state building codes, and maintains the Wisconsin Enhanced Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, which is a key tool in the multi-faceted public health campaign to stem excessive opioid prescribing. A fee-based agency, DPS is self-sustaining and receives no general fund tax dollars for its day-to-day operations. With two offices and roughly 250 employees, DPS collaborates with constituents and stakeholders across a wide range of industries to promote safety and advance the economy.

Janesville unveils new public art installation

On Wednesday, Sept. 25, the city of Janesville will celebrate the unveiling of an extraordinary new public art installation, "Self-Worth," at a special ceremony starting at 5:30 p.m. This twelve-foot-tall sculpture, created by acclaimed local artist Richard Lazcano, will be revealed at the southeast corner of River and Court Streets, marking a vibrant addition to downtown Janesville's artistic landscape.

"Self-Worth" captures a whimsical and thoughtful moment: a bicyclist taking a selfie with his bicycle, highlighting a playful and engaging intersection of art and daily life. An oversized bicycle tire pump acts as a selfie-stand, inviting the public to interact with the sculpture and take their own photos. Crafted entirely from recycled bicycle parts donated by The Bike Elves (Brian and Ann Reece of Beloit) and Michael's Cycles of Janesville, this piece is a testament to community collaboration and sustainable art.

The piece was commissioned by Lynn and John Westphal, long-time supporters of local cycling initiatives and public art. Their passion for both bicycling and community engagement shines through in this unique artwork. "We are lifelong bicyclists who have supported all types of local bicycling initiatives for many years," said Lynn Westphal. John Westphal is known

for founding the Janesville Morning Rotary Pie Ride and co-founding the Janesville Town Square Gran Prix bicycle race, while Lynn has led various committees in support of cycling events. Their vision for "Self-Worth" is to create a landmark that links the downtown area, the river, the Town Square, and the scenic Ice Age Trail that runs through our downtown, encouraging residents and visitors to explore and connect.

Local art ambassador Sue Burkart, who helped coordinate the creation of the piece, praised Lazcano's work, stating, "Richard Lazcano's talent and dedication are evident in 'Self-Worth.' We believe this sculpture will become an iconic symbol of Janesville, much like the Black Hawk mural or Bessie the Cow statue. It represents not just artistic excellence but also our community's spirit and commitment to public art."

Lazcano, who is also known for his previous work, Gloria the Eagle, reflected

on the personal significance of "Self-Worth." He shared, "The title represents a journey of self-discovery and confidence. Initially, I doubted my ability to complete such a monumental project, but through perseverance and creativity, I realized my potential. This sculpture stands as a reminder that we all have the strength and capability within us."

The unveiling ceremony will feature remarks from the Westphals, Lazcano, and local officials, with the sculpture officially dedicated to the city. The project was made possible through the collaborative efforts of Mike Payne, Public Works Director; Emily Mocerero, Engineering Department; Angus Young Associates; and J.P. Cullen, who completed the sitework and installation.

Residents and visitors are encouraged to attend the unveiling and experience the new public art piece that celebrates community, creativity, and the joy of cycling.



PHOTO COURTESY BLACKHAWK TECHNICAL COLLEGE *Rock Valley Publishing*

Blackhawk Technical College Surgical Technology students are joined by (left to right) Dr. Tracy Pierner, President of Blackhawk; Jessica Jacobson, WIAST Board of Directors member; Sen. Mark Spreitzer, D-Beloit; Heather Gray, Director of Blackhawk's Surgical Technology program; and Jaime Ginner, Surgical Technology instructor.

Apprentices receive scholarships from ABC

Fifteen apprentices in the skilled trades have been awarded \$1,000 scholarships for the 2024-25 school year. The Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) of Wisconsin's Apprenticeship and Training Trust announced the awards in September.

"This is the first year we've offered scholarships to apprentices," said Cheyenne Foster, Apprenticeship Manager and scholarship coordinator. "We know that apprenticeship is an investment of time and resources, and we are pleased to provide scholarships to support those training in our program."

Nearly 2,500 apprentices are currently training as part of the ABC of Wisconsin program. Each one is employed by an ABC member, and is paid while training. The scholarships will assist them with costs associated with tools, instruction at technical schools and related needs. Almost 150 apprentices applied for the scholarship award. Applicants were asked to provide references from both an employer and an instructor, and to complete two short essays detailing their interest

in the trades and the importance of the scholarship. The fifteen apprentices selected all demonstrated character, work ethic and a commitment to the trades.

"We are so impressed with the high quality of the applicant pool," said Gerry Krebsbach, chair of the ABC of Wisconsin Board of Trustees. "We knew that our apprentices exhibit incredible work ethic and tenacity, and the applications showed us we have an incredible future being developed in Wisconsin's construction industry."

Funding for the scholarships was provided by a large number of longtime ABC member companies.

"Our members care deeply about their employees, apprentices and the future of Wisconsin's skilled trades workforce," said Kelly Tourdot, Incoming President of ABC. "Their generous donations help to ensure that a new generation of apprentices have what they need to complete their program and become skilled craftsmen and women."

For more information on the ABC Apprenticeship

Scholarship, visit <https://www.abcwi.org/apprenticeshipscholarship/>.

Established in 1950, Associated Builders and Contractors is a national construction industry trade association that represents more than 23,000 members. Founded on the merit shop philosophy, ABC and its 68 chapters help members develop people, win work and deliver that work safely, ethically and profitably for the betterment of the communities in which ABC and its members work. The ABC Apprenticeship program in Wisconsin has nearly 2,500 active apprentices in 12 different skilled trades utilizing 13 different technical colleges. Founded on the Merit Shop philosophy, ABC and its 68 chapters help members develop people, win work and deliver that work safely, ethically and profitably for the betterment of the communities in which ABC and its members work. The Wisconsin Chapter, based out of Madison, is among the largest in the country with more than 1,000 member companies. Learn more at abcwi.org.

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