



Senate District 47



House District 94



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NSP

THE NORTH SCOTT PRESS WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 26, 2022 Volume 55, No. 43 | \$1.50 newsstand | 85¢ delivered



Lancer comedy begins Friday; what could possibly go wrong? PAGE 2A

Country Connection



Baetkes have the meats SECTION B

Raising the steaks



School leaders have no specific plans for the church property at 208 S. Fifth Street.

ELDRIDGE Clerk suspended following funds probe

State audit ordered after \$30K discrepancy

By Mark Ridolfi and Scott Campbell

NSP Eldridge city clerk Denise Benson is on paid, administrative leave after being ordered out of her city hall office in the presence of an Eldridge police officer on Wednesday, Oct. 12.

She has yet to return to work. Two sources say a special state audit ordered by council members at their Monday, Oct. 17 meeting, is intended to document discrepancies the sources say already totals \$30,000.

At a special closed session meeting Monday, Oct. 24, council members met for an hour to discuss a personnel matter. The council took no action on personnel matters, and set a 7 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 25 meeting, where Mayor Frank King indicated more information might be available.



Benson

After Monday's meeting, King said Eldridge police were only on hand to witness Benson's departure. He said no law enforcement agency has been involved.

County attorney Mike Walton said no one in his office had been contacted by Eldridge authorities, and that he knows nothing of Eldridge's special audit or the employee's suspension.

Police chief Joe Sisler asked that any questions be sent to him in writing. Later, Sisler declined to respond to eight NSP questions hand delivered to the police station. "I have been directed by my boss, Tony Rupe, that all questions and answers go through Art, the city attorney. Your questions have been forwarded to City Administrator Rupe," Sisler wrote.

The council contracts with attorney Art Eggers for personnel issues. Eggers had not replied to questions emailed

School bids \$500K for Eldridge church



George and Patty McCord pause while packing up their parsonage home at Living Church of Jesus Christ, 208 S. Fifth St., Eldridge. NSP photo by Mark Ridolfi

Living Church of Jesus Christ ends half century of services Saturday

By Mark Ridolfi NSP Assistant Editor

George and Patty McCord are packing up 28 years of their Eldridge ministry to make room for a North Scott school district expansion, and they're exhausted, but thrilled.

The move ends the Living Church of Jesus Christ, 208 S. Fifth St. That's what drew the West Virginians to Iowa in the first place back in 1992. But both say they're privileged to make room for a growing public school system that is among the many reasons they stayed and grew to love the town.

"I'm happy the school got it. I like their vision," said George.

George led North Scott superintendent Joe Stutting and some staff through the church and home last week. He anticipated an offer, and is thrilled the board acted quickly.

School board members on Monday approved a \$500,000 bid for two lots covering three acres that include the

1971 church building and a split-level parsonage.

Stutting first toured the church Oct. 20, then returned with some board members for another look Monday. The board unanimously voted for the offer that night.

Stutting said the church approached the school district in September. Board members jumped at a chance to acquire the property just west of Ed White Elementary School.

Stutting said the district has no specific plan, but mentioned "any one of a number of things that land could be very valuable for."

Long-term district needs are for pre-school space in Eldridge, and student-built home lots, the superintendent said. But there are no development plans at this time.

"This fell into our lap. We're lucky that people who go to the congregation thought of the school district," Stutting said.

School board chairman Joni Dittmer agreed. "It's a great opportunity to enhance and expand our existing services for our families and our students.

SCHOOLS, continued on page 4A

ELDRIDGE, continued on page 10A

ELDRIDGE: City alerted state auditor, but not law enforcement

Continued from page 1A

Monday night.

Rupe declined to read or answer the questions Monday evening.

Council members Brian Dockery, Dan Collins, Adrian Blackwell, Bruce Cheek and Bernie Peeters participated in the closed session. Dockery said the public may be alerted "in future meetings."



State auditor Rob Sand

Benson was absent from the regular, Monday, Oct. 17 council meeting at the Eldridge Community Center. That's where the council voted to ask state auditor Rob Sand to conduct a special audit.

On Monday, Oct. 24, Sand confirmed Eldridge's audit request.

"The next step is to take a look at what they are sending us," said Sand, "and then decide whether we need to do something, or if there are better ways to address the issue. It depends on facts, and what records show."

He said the matter will remain secret, "until we get a report."

On Friday, Oct. 21, Mayor King scheduled Monday's closed session. The agenda indicated possible public action afterward. The council convened at 5:36 p.m., then adjourned to closed session until 6:37 p.m. *The NSP*, and reporters from *WQAD TV8*, and the *Quad-City Times* waited in council chambers while the council convened behind closed doors in Rupe's office.

Rupe emerged at 6:24 p.m. to say the council would not take public action, and that a related, closed session was scheduled for 7 p.m. Tuesday. He said public action may occur after that.

When the council emerged from behind closed doors, King reiterated there would be no public action.

The mayor declined questions from the *WQAD* reporter by saying, "This is a confidential, personnel matter."

King declined to confirm Benson's employment status, or the time period of the special audit.

Benson is in her 30th year as a city employee, including 20 as clerk. She joined the city after working for Davenport bank. She responded to an *NSP* ad placed by former city administrator John Dowd in 1992.

Benson earned certifications from the International Institute of Municipal Clerks in 2002. At her 25th anniversary observation in 2017, Dowd, and former



Eldridge council members met Monday at city hall for a closed session that drew reporters from *WQAD* and the *Quad City Times*.

NSP photo by Mark Ridolfi

mayor Marty O'Boyle commended Benson's service to residents. At the time, Benson said she loved the job.

"I thought back and figured out I've been through six mayors," Benson told

The NSP in 2017. "It's something different all of the time. But in general, it's helping people and making sure everything is taken care of," Benson said.

That included work that some might regard as tedious.

"I even like doing bank statements, finding problems and making everything work. I look at it as more of a challenge," she said in 2017.

As a Bettendorf Alderman, Scott Webster Raised Taxes and Fees

Raised:

- Property Taxes
- Stormwater Fees
- Sewer Fees
- Garbage Fees



Now Bettendorf taxpayers pay more in taxes for city debt than taxpayers in any other city in Iowa.

Cut Taxes. Vote Figaro!



Sources: City of Bettendorf City Council Meeting Minutes: 3/3/2020, 3/17/2020, and 3/15/2022

"Taxes, Fees and Staffing," *Quad-City Times*, February 20, 2022

Paid for by Kathleen Figaro for Senate.

ON SALE AT THESE LOCATIONS:

- Blue Grass:** Jeff's Market, JLee Oil
- Davenport:** Fareway W. 53rd St.
- Durant:** Jeff's Market
- Eldridge:** Casey's, Big 10 Mart, Eldridge BP, Quality Inn & Suites, North Scott Foods, North Scott Pharmacy, Eldridge Mart
- LeClaire:** Casey's
- Mt. Joy:** Mt. Joy Amoco
- Park View:** Kwik Shop, Casey's
- Princeton:** Casey's



✓ VOTE **JAZMIN** NEWTON

For Supervisor

A voice for ALL of Scott County

Paid for by "Friends of Jazmin Newton"



THE NORTH SCOTT PRESS

Walcott Historical Society book celebrates Scott County's 1-room schools

PAGE 1B



CAMPBELL'S SCOUP



High school's heartbeat

moves on PAGE 13A

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2022

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Credit card records show years of personal purchases

Tools, clothing, horse supplies delivered to Benson's home

By Mark Ridolfi
NSP Assistant Editor

Eldridge credit card records show former clerk Denise Benson used city cards to order thousands of dollars in clothing, tools, horse supplies and gifts delivered to her Long Grove home.

Freedom of Information Act requests specifically for Eldridge Amazon or-

ders disclosed \$17,772.94 worth of Amazon orders placed on city credit cards 2019-2022 by Benson.

Since 2013, the records show Benson increased her Amazon orders on city credit cards each year, and was on the way to topping all annual totals when she was escorted by a police officer from city hall Oct. 4. Council member Brian Dockery said

Amazon orders

Year	Total
2022.....	\$3,268.46
2021.....	\$5,836.20
2020.....	\$4,005.48
2019.....	\$4,662.80



Benson

the purchases did not show up on bills Benson presented to the council for approval.

He said council members did see transaction amounts on spreadsheet. But details were missing.

"What we saw in Excel spreadsheets all seemed reasonable," he said.

He noted that some employees have

clothing allowances that might have explained work apparel purchases.

But aldermen missed any listings of children's gifts, farm supplies and a comforter labeled, "It's a Benson Thing."

Dockery said since Benson was fired, he's asked to see actual bills.

"Since we identified the problem, going forward we made internal changes. We're looking at reducing use of credit cards and using direct bill accounts. We're having individual statement

CREDIT CARD, continued on page 6A

It's beginning to look a lot like...



Nutcracker returns to auditorium PAGE 7A

Donahue & McCausland celebrate! PAGE 8A

Elected leaders vow pipeline fight

By Mark Ridolfi
NSP Assistant Editor

Scott County elected officials hope Wolf Carbon Solutions representatives learned something about the people and towns along the path of their proposed carbon waste pipeline across the county.

They say those are the people who will live with all the risks, and none of the benefits of the project pushed by ADM and other Iowa ethanol makers.

Scott County board chairman Ken Beck, Eldridge council member Brian Dockery, Long Grove mayor Mike Limberg and Donahue mayor Ken Schoenthaler attended the Dec. 7 Iowa Utility Board hearing that launched Wolf's easement negotiations for the pipeline. They all spoke against Wolf's plan.

All said the company representatives listened. None were sure they were heard.

"I'm not sure the guys from Wolf really understand where they were going. Donahue wasn't really on their map," Schoenthaler said. "They may have thought Donahue, Long Grove, maybe even Eldridge were small, podunk communities that didn't really matter."

The cities of Eldridge, Long Grove,



"I told them I'm speaking for about 7,000 Eldridge residents who have no voice in this decision."

Eldridge council member Brian Dockery

PIPELINE, continued on page 5A

CREDIT CARDS: Records do not distinguish between personal and workplace bills

Continued from page 1A

checked by supervisors, then by our clerk, then Tony.”

Mayor Frank King has declined to return phone calls or texts from *The NSP*.

City administrator Tony Rupe alerted elected leaders the day the transactions were discovered, Dockery said.

Benson was walked from her office by an Eldridge police officer and given a letter dated Oct. 4 from Eldridge mayor Frank King, “pending a fact finding investigation.” The letter barred her from city hall.

“I view the sheriff’s investigation as supplementary to the state audit.”

Scott County Attorney Mike Walton

Council members voted unanimously at a special meeting Oct. 25 to fire her. At that time, King said it was for “improper use of credit cards.”

Rupe contacted state auditor Rob Sand, who launched a special audit. County attorney Mike Walton ordered the sheriff’s department to investigate.

A Freedom of Information request by attorney Mike Meloy compelled Eldridge to produce nearly 1,000 pages of Amazon transactions made by Benson.

Meloy represented former Eldridge city administrator Lisa Kotter in her lawsuit against the city. Meloy said the Eldridge FOI requests are for a different client.

The city and Meloy provided copies of those FOI responses to *The NSP*.

No evidence of reimbursements

The records document Amazon orders on at least four different credit cards. Most of the orders originated from city hall. Many show Benson’s home address for delivery.

Dockery said he’s neither heard nor seen any evidence of reimbursements.

“We are trying to work through it and have better checks and balances. We need the auditor’s office to perform their task. The city is not involved at this point. It’s the county attorney and state auditor’s office,” he said.

The county attorney also is awaiting the audit.

“The investigation is pending,” Walton said. “I view the sheriff’s investigation as supplementary to the state audit. Therefore, further actions will depend on the findings of the state auditor report.”

Many orders seem clearly personal, including gift items labeled “Benson.”

The records show children’s gifts, particularly each December. The records show orders of personal clothing, footwear, hemp pain relievers, deodorant and other personal supplies.

In 2013 show Benson placed four Amazon orders, totaling \$194.34, all delivered to city hall. It includes an \$11.41 St. Joseph’s statue, and \$118.62 portable oven along with \$37.38 in baking pans.

In 2014, Benson used city credit cards for two orders totaling \$373.46, all delivered to city hall. That includes a super-large dog door and pet wall kit April 6; and a \$103.85 digital recorder and memory card, July 29.

In 2015, Benson authorized 11 Amazon orders totaling \$425.32. June 10 of that year is the first order with Benson’s Long Grove home address for delivery. That was for six Seville Classics stainless steel top work stools for \$310.48.

Other orders delivered that year to the Long Grove home include \$123.97 for men’s and women’s custom hooded sweatshirts labeled, “It’s a BENSON Thing You Wouldn’t Understand!” and \$55.86 for ATV wiring harness and light bar.

In 2016, records show 37 orders totaling \$2,050.23, including 12 in December, mostly for gift items.

The NSP has not totaled transaction records for 2017 and 2018.

After that, annual orders increased, with most delivered to Benson’s Long Grove home.

2019: 54 orders totaling \$4,662.80
2020: 61 orders totaling \$4,005.48
2021: 72 orders totaling \$5,836.20
2022: 31 orders totaling \$3,268.46 through Aug. 1.

March audit showed no concerns

As clerk, Benson oversaw preparation of all bills for council approval. Benson had been trained in public finance law, and assisted state auditors in past routine audits.

The city’s most recent financial report released in March found “no expenditures were noted that we believe may not meet the requirements of public purpose.” The annual report required by state law covered the fiscal year ending June 30, 2021.

The report by the firm Bohnsack and Frommelt also noted, “no business transactions between the city and city officials or employees were noted,” which suggests no reimbursement transactions between Benson and the city that year.

The report did recommend better segregation of duties for utility billing, payroll and cash disbursements. It did not address credit card transactions.

At each council meeting, elected members are supposed to review bills before approving them in a resolution prepared with Benson’s help. Those reports show credit card totals, but do not itemize expenditures, or vendors.



Chooka Women's Waterproof boot



WNEEDU women's waffle knit tunic



Myth field dress knife



Skeleton pink cowboy hat

Shopping list glimpse: Clothing, tools, toys

December 2021

This month had \$1,424.72 in items billed to the city hall address, and delivered to Denise Benson’s Long Grove home.

- Dec. 9: Dog squeaky toys, 6-pack, \$27.98; Pack Rainbow Pop fidget toys, \$13.89; 12-pack crew socks for men, three at \$25.99; Robot Roomba vacuum, \$179; faux felt child cowboy hat, \$14.99. Skeleton Pink Cowboy Hat, three at \$24.99 each. **Total: \$313.83**
- Dec. 10: Biucly women's fashion crewneck tie dye sweatshirt, \$27.98; Sunzel workout leggings for women, \$27.99; WNEEDU women's long sleeve waffle knit tunic blouse, army green, \$25.99; WNEEDU women's long sleeve waffle knit tunic blouse, purple and gray, \$25.99. **Total: \$107.95**
- Dec. 10: Adokoo women's canvas shoes casual cute sneakers, Total: \$19.99
- Dec. 12: TPS universal hoverboard seat attachment, two at \$63.17 each. **Total: \$126.34**
- Dec. 14: Fujifilm Instax mini instant film, three at \$38 each; **Total: \$114**
- Dec. 14: Vanity Fair Beauty back full figure wirefree bra \$14.99; full figure wirefree bra, \$15; Full Figure Wirefree Bra, \$24.99; Full Coverage underwire bra, \$16.99; Hanes women's 10-pair value pack crew socks, \$10.99; full figure wirefree bra, \$22; **Total: \$104.96**
- Dec. 14: Clarks women's Emily Calle fashion boot, \$85.46; Carhartt men's traditional welt 6" steel toe work boot Construction, \$119.99. **Total: \$205.45**
- Dec. 14: Myth field dress knife, two at

\$64.06 each. **Total: \$128.12**

- Dec. 15: Cowboy cowgirl hat, three at \$36.99 each; **Total: \$110.97**
- Dec. 17: . Prosier wood moisture meter, two at \$16.99 each. **Total: \$36.36**
- Dec. 22: Dewalt DW6654 reversible carbide blade set, two at \$16.17 each. **Total: \$32.34**
- Dec. 24: Dewalt planer blades, two at \$24.72 each. **Total: \$49.44**

2022

Eldridge’s 2022 Amazon bills included these items delivered to Benson’s Long Grove home, and billed to city hall.

- Women's Henley V Neck T Shirts Short Sleeve Casual Loose Summer Tops Tees Blouses Tunics, **\$18.99**
- Women's T Shirts Short Sleeve Tunic Tops Loose Crewneck Color Block Casual Tee Shirts Blouses, **\$19.99**
- Chooka Women's Waterproof Plush Chelsea Boot, Black, 9 medium, **\$39.99**
- 2 Right Guard Sport Deodorant, Aerosol, Original 8.5 oz (Pack of 3) **\$46.18**
- 2 Levi's Men's 550 Short, Medium Stonewash, 34, **\$67.70**
- Timberland PRO men's 40mm Workwear Leather Belt, 36, **\$27.20**
- 3 Lee Men's Carpenter Jean Shorts, Retro Stone, 34, **\$74.97**
- 4 Galaxy S10e Rugged Clear Case, Poetic Full-Body Hybrid Bumper Cover, **\$67.80**
- Cooler Hinge and Latch Set, High Strength Cooler Latch replacement parts, **\$13.99**

Davenport attorney sought public information from Davenport, LeClaire and Riverdale

Eldridge credit card records became public because of a Freedom of Information request from Davenport attorney Mike Meloy.

Meloy has won public record lawsuits against Davenport, LeClaire and Riverdale.

In April, the city of LeClaire settled his FOI lawsuit by paying \$57,923.18 in attorney’s fees and all costs. The court-ordered

settlement followed Meloy’s suit on behalf of Alan Diercks regarding LeClaire officials’ loss of \$220,000 through an online scam.

The suit alleged LeClaire improperly concealed 3,523 pages of public records before the court-ordered settlement.

In 2009, Meloy won a public information lawsuit against Riverdale, forcing it to

disclose city records to Diercks.

In 2017, the city of Davenport agreed to pay Meloy \$129,055.59 for open record violations regarding the city’s 2013 discussion of purchasing a casino. Meloy represented Allen Diercks and Patricia Lane in that case.

Meloy said he sought Eldridge records on behalf of different clients.

County prepares for new supervisors and department heads

Finley, Walton and Thee end county careers

Newly elected supervisors Ross Paustian and Jean Dickson joined the Dec. 9 meeting. Both have attended briefings by county administrator Mahesh Sharma and budget director David Farmer. Republicans Paustian and Dickson succeed Democratic supervisor Brinson Kinzer, who resigned, and Ken Croken, who did not seek reelection.

Supervisor Tony Knobbe will resign at year’s end. The Republican won election unopposed as county treasurer. Sharma bid adieu to three county executives who participated in their last leadership meeting. Treasurer Mike Finley did not seek reelection. Tony Knobbe won unopposed and takes over Jan. 1. County human resources director Mary Thee retires at year-end. Her successor has not been hired. County attorney Mike Walton did not seek reelection. Republican Kelly Haan won the election to succeed him Jan. 1.

“I don’t think I’ve ever lost three department heads at once,” Sharma told supervisors.



Jean Dickson and Ross Paustian join the Dec. 9 Scott County supervisors meeting. Both were elected and begin their terms Jan. 1. NSP photo by Mark Ridolfi

DEWITT
OPERAHOUSE THEATRE

SHOWTIMES: Evenings, 7 PM
Saturday and Sunday matinees, 2 PM
TICKETS: \$5 for evenings, \$4 for matinees

SHOWING DEC. 16 TH -19 TH Elf Rated PG	COMING DEC. 21 ST Puss in Boots: The Last Wish Rated PG
CLOSED DEC. 20 TH FOR PRIVATE EVENT	
VISIT DEWITTOPERAHOUSE.COM OR OUR FACEBOOK PAGE 716 6TH AVENUE, DEWITT, (563) 659-8213	



NSP



Arsenal general speaks at Memorial Day service PAGE 14A



Day of Caring spruces up Eldridge YMCA and Park View

PAGES 2A & 9A



\$600,000 North Scott school's regional innovation center



\$72,500 Long Grove fire gear



\$13,000 Eldridge police dog, Marty



\$67,956 Humble Dwellings, Eldridge

North Scott area casino grants top \$775K

Gaming funds enrich schools, Long Grove fire, Park View parks, Eldridge police and more

By Mark Ridolfi
NSP Managing Editor

Gambling revenue will pump \$600,000 into North Scott's \$19.5 million regional innovation center, part of \$778,456 in casino grants to North Scott, Eldridge, Long Grove, Blue Grass and Walcott communities.

The Regional Development Authority provided \$100,000 for the innovation center this year. The Scott County Regional Development Authority provided \$100,000 this spring, and a commitment for \$400,000

GRANTS, continued on page 6A

INSIDE: Grant details

Regional Development Authority - Rhythm City

- **City of Eldridge Police Department**, K-9 police vehicle, \$13,000
- **Humble Dwellings**, continue to provide new beds to clients for a place to sleep better, \$35,150
- **North Scott Community School District**, Regional Innovation Center: Collaborative Education for Workforce Growth, \$100,000
- **Park View Park Board**, Ma'am, What's the Score?, \$11,150
- **City of Blue Grass**, family restroom and storm shelter facilities for Black Bear Park, \$15,000

Scott County Regional Authority, Isle of Capri

- **City of Eldridge** - Hickory Creek Park soccer irrigation project, \$25,000
- **Humble Dwellings** - A Good Night's Rest - New Beds for a New Beginning, \$32,806
- **Long Grove Volunteer Fire Department** - SCBA replacement and LUNAR purchase, \$72,500
- **North Scott Community School District** - Regional Innovation Center: Collaborative Education for Workforce Growth (\$500,000 total commitment over five cycles), \$100,000
- **City of Walcott** - rescue vehicle replacement, \$74,583

GRADUATION CELEBRATION



North Scott High School graduate Nik Davis does a back flip on his old Grissom Elementary playground, while J.J. Herbst captures the moment. We did, too, on page 8A

NSP photo by Erin Gentz

Eldridge audit documents more than Amazon thefts

162-page report condemns lack of council oversight

By Mark Ridolfi
NSP Managing Editor

Eldridge clerk Denise Benson's abuse of city funds went far beyond 549 unauthorized charges on the city's Amazon card.

The Scott County sheriff's department is now launching an investigation based on the state auditor's report showing PayPal, and other credit card transactions, as well as unauthorized payroll hours, and tens of thousands in other purchases the auditors said lack enough documentation to determine the purpose of the transactions.

The May 25 emergency audit lays blame on

AUDIT, continued on page 4A

Audit findings

\$76,171.90 of improper disbursements includes:

- \$42,384.74 of personal purchases made with the City's credit card
 - \$16,515.15 of payments to a Capital One Credit card
 - \$16,133.12 of payments to other vendors.
 - \$1,138.89 of unauthorized payroll issued to Benson
- The audit also found:
- \$6,325.76 of city credit-card purchases that could not be verified as personal, or for city use.
 - \$2,392.42 from the city's checking account that could not be verified for personal, or city use.

AUDIT: Thousands in undocumented credit card, gas card and payroll spending

Continued from page 1A

Eldridge elected officials for ignoring oversight recommendations in a 2022 routine audit.

"Based on our observations and the procedures we performed, we determined city officials failed to exercise proper fiduciary oversight. The lack of appropriate oversight and the failure to ensure implementation of adequate internal controls permitted an employee to exercise too much control over the operations of the city," the state audit concluded.

It also says this investigation was limited by Eldridge's record-keeping.

"We were unable to determine if additional funds were improperly disbursed during the period reviewed because adequate records were not available," Sand wrote. The city could not provide Amazon credit card statements prior to 2017.

Council members put Benson on leave Oct. 4 and fired her Oct. 22.

City officials have said nothing about the audit, or shared it publicly on the city's website, or through social media.

Mayor Frank King did not return NSP phone and text messages.

On Tuesday, council member Brian Dockery told *The NSP* that he has been reviewing city employee credit card purchases.

"We thought we had checks and balances in place. But obviously, you've got to verify no matter who it is and how much you trust them," he said.

"Because of size of our city, it has been a challenge to separate duties. We're going to have to figure out ways to restructure a little bit. Hopefully, at some point in time, every council member will review everything."

The 15-page audit comes with 147 pages of exhibits that document the purchases. That includes some of the same disclosures the city discovered and released after Freedom of Information requests.

The Amazon credit card receipts show

obvious personal product descriptions that had never been seen by council members.

"Flybay Kids Makeup Kit for Girl, Toddler Makeup Kit, Play Makeup for Little Girls," read a Nov. 19, 2021 invoice.

The audit also found Benson submitted 29 unauthorized work hours over the seven-year period. All of it occurred in 2022.

"...hours were charged to the 'Committee of the Whole' meeting which according to meeting minutes discussed the proposed budget and Sesquicentennial festival. According to City officials, there should have been only one hour recorded. Instead, Ms. Benson recorded 30 hours charged to the Committee of the Whole payroll line."

Of the receipts provided by the city, or Amazon, the audit found:

- Just six of the 549 Amazon purchases deemed reasonable for city operations
- \$11,609.98 of 33 improper purchases from other vendors, including Kohls, Duluth Trading Co., and restaurants.
- \$4,540.56 in 25 purchases from other vendors that lack documentation.
- 226 transactions that included streaming services, apps, and entertainment. Amazon did not disclose the titles. "However, the City was able to provide us the Amazon receipts that contain the information for the majority of those transactions. Based on this information and the number of titles, apps, movies, and TV shows purchased, these purchases are not related to city operations and were classified as improper.
- 10 unauthorized credit card charges for fuel, beverages and other items totaling \$678.99.
- \$562.25 in improper purchases from Menards.

Credit card purchases

The auditor included \$678.99 in credit purchases from Eldridge and DeWitt fuel

AUDIT, continued on page 5A

How Benson got caught

The audit discloses how the fraud came to light.

"According to city officials, the monthly bank statements and related images of redeemed checks were periodically reviewed by the mayor or members of the City Council while Ms. Benson was the city clerk. In addition, city officials stated bank reconciliations were either not provided or provided when asked during Ms. Benson's tenure as city clerk.

During review of the credit card statements, a city official noticed the credit cards had a lot of use which was uncommon, and those charges were not reported to city council. In addition, the city official stated the city clerk's credit card was used to purchase personal items. The city official we spoke with also stated when Ms. Benson was questioned about the credit card charges Ms. Benson stated that she "used the wrong card and was going to pay the city back."

On October 3, 2022, a city official asked Ms. Benson about the use of the City's credit card again.

"According to the city official we spoke with, Ms. Benson stated she did not have a personal credit card and was using the city's credit card but was reimbursing the city for all personal purchases. City officials stated they asked Ms. Benson to provide documentation to support the reimbursements; however, documentation was not provided. In addition, the city official we spoke with stated they were unable to find any reimbursements issued to the city.

On October 4, 2022, Ms. Benson was placed on administrative leave and was terminated from her employment with the city on October 26, 2022 by the city council.

Council member says Benson withheld requested records

Denise Benson withheld credit card invoices sought by council member Brian Dockery in the months before she was fired.

Dockery said he requested credit card bills after being alarmed at the number of city credit cards.

"It used to be we had three or four cards, and an employee would check it out if needed. Now, every full-time employee had one," he told *The NSP* Tuesday.

He said he sought credit card bills last year after noting purchases that never showed up on council agendas.

"I was trying to find out how we paid for the TV in the old city administrator's office," he said.

That's when he discovered the extent of credit card purchases.

Dockery said Benson provided an Excel

spreadsheet summarizing purchases, but not the actual bills. He alerted Mayor Frank King, who also began receiving copies of city credit card bills, Dockery said.

Dockery said the records provided by Benson found just one credit card purchase, a \$14 item that he assumed was for city use.

Now he knows he did not see all the bills. A state audit documented tens of thousands of dollars in personal purchases delivered to Benson's Long Grove home.

Dockery said the city should limit the number of credit cards. He said the council reviews only those used by city staff, which account for less than a fourth of credit card use. The community center and utilities employees report to their own boards, which are responsible for credit card oversight.



Long Grove Strawberry Festival

Sunday, June 11, 2023

Watch for complete schedule in next week's NSP!

Pie Auction!

We need your pies!



Any type of pie accepted.
Sorry no refrigeration.
Drop off by 11:00 am
in Community Center
Dining Room
for judging.
Auction starts at noon!

Help support the
Long Grove Civic League

Prize Money for 1st, 2nd and 3rd Place - \$30, \$20, \$10
Sponsored by First Central State Bank

Donate a cake for serving with ice cream!
Call Joni at 563-285-5829


Strawberries • Ice Cream • And Fun!

A variety of foods offered by local civic organizations and merchants!

Terry Behren's Annual Strawberry Cooking Contest!

June 11th


Entries must be in before 10 am
Judging goes from 10-11 am



STRAWBERRY COOK-OFF RULES

2 Categories: Adult (16+) and Children (6 to 15)
Must contain strawberry ingredient

Any item accepted
\$5 entry fee for adults,
no entry fee for children



DEWITT

OPERAHOUSE THEATRE

SHOWTIMES: Evenings, 7 PM
Saturday and Sunday matinees, 2 PM
TICKETS: \$5 for evenings, \$4 for matinees

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THE NORTH SCOTT PRESS

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 21, 2023

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Aliyah Saunders
**Lancer Productions
summer camp!** PAGE 1B

**Kye Smith goes 5 for 5 in
win over Bettendorf** PAGE 6B



Eldridge hires new clerk away from Silvis

Closed meeting minutes and emails describe 3-month hiring process

By Mark Ridolfi
NSP Managing Editor

Eldridge council members hired Martha Nieto as city clerk for \$71,585 a year, subject to her passing drug and alcohol screenings. She is scheduled to start work July 10.

Council members Adrian Blackwell, Dan Collins and Bruce Cheek approved the hire with no public discussion, or sharing any information regarding her experience, education or town of residence. Council members Brian Dock-

More Eldridge news

- First & LeClaire open in a week.
- Benson faces felony charges. **PAGE 6A**

ery and Bernie Peeters were absent. Council members declined to release the names or number of any applicants. They have not disclosed the interview or hiring process.

The city of Silvis website said Nieto is a city accountant, who earned \$66,206.40 in 2022.

New city administrator Nevada Lemke was Silvis city administrator

ELDRIDGE, continued on page 4A

Cheek takes aim at Scott County Library

At least one councilman is eyeing the Scott County Library building in Eldridge as new city hall and police station, and Mayor Frank King said a public discussion is planned.

Council member Bruce Cheek raised the issue at Monday's council meeting as county library board chairman Krystal Schaefer offered an update on the library.

Cheek challenged Schaefer's lending statistics, then complained that the library hasn't increased its monthly rental payments for the building it has leased from the city.

The library has contacted the city council about renewing the lease, but has received no

formal response.

At Monday's meeting Cheek indicated council members have discussed the lease privately. He questioned Schaefer's data, then said he would vote "no," on extending the lease.

The exchange began as Schaefer wrapped up a 10-minute update on library use. She and other board members have visited councils with usage data, and to explain the Iowa law that requires cities to provide library services, and sets a per capita rate based on population.

CHEEK, continued on page 6A



Eldridge police officer Garrett Jahns shakes up lemonade at Saturday's Quad City Veterans Car Show benefit at the Eldridge community center. Carla and Brent Whitlock, of Durant, brought granddaughter Isabel Lueth. NSP photos by Mark Ridolfi



Russo's open plea ends fraud investigation

She appears alone for deal that could include probation and fine

By Mark Ridolfi
NSP Managing Editor

The Maddy Russo investigation is finished following her guilty plea June 16 to an open deal on a Class C felony that could bring up to 10 years in prison for faking cancer to solicit donations.

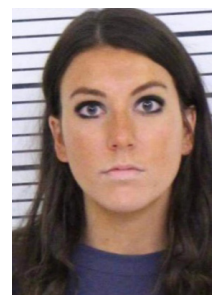
Arresting officer Garrett Jahns said the plea wraps up an investigation launched in October 2022, after area medical professionals questioned Russo's story about a pancreatic cancer diagnosis.

Russo, 20, appeared alone at the plea hearing, with only reporters and Jahns

in the third-floor courtroom last Friday.

On Saturday, Jahns told *The NSP* the investigation is over. He acknowledged concerns about terms of the plea deal. Judge Jeffrey Bert said the class C felony conviction comes with a term of up to 10 years, which may be suspended. Sentencing will be scheduled yet this summer.

"To some, it might feel like justice was not served. But at the end of the day, she pleaded guilty," Jahns said.



Russo

RUSSO, continued on page 7A

MEET ELDRIDGE'S NEW POLICE K-9 TEAM. PAGE 2A

Princeton makes Chief Heyvaert city manager

Change comes after Iowa Police Academy council denies certification

By Mark Ridolfi
NSP Managing Editor

Princeton council members promoted police chief Wyatt Heyvaert to city manager June 15 after the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy Council declined to certify him as an Iowa police officer.

The academy council on April 4 declined Heyvaert's request to waive moral turpitude provisions of Iowa police



• Heyvaert entertains in Eldridge. **PAGE 14A**

"I'm thankful of a supportive council. I love this community." Wyatt Heyvaert

officer certification code, Princeton officials disclosed last week.

Heyvaert has remained on the payroll, but cannot arrest, question or detain anyone.

Mayor Kevin Kernan said the pro-

motion to city manager reflects most of the council and residents' faith and appreciation in Heyvaert's year of service as police chief. It also reflects Kernan's frustration with the law enforcement academy council for declining Heyvaert's certification after accepting about \$9,000 in fees for academy classes the officer took in Des Moines and online.

"I don't have a vote on the council,

but I recommended to the council that we keep him on. The way this board treated us, I don't think was a fair shake after we already had him on board almost a year. I think he deserves a fair shake," Kernan said. "It felt more like a parole board hearing."

Before he was hired, Heyvaert disclosed to the Princeton mayor and council members about his arrest

More Princeton news

Petition stalls trail plan; Council awards staff raises **PAGE 7A**

PRINCETON, continued on page 10A

COMMUNITY NEWS



Sandra Bjurstrom

Remembering Sandra blood drive set for July 15

Remembering Sandra, a blood drive in memory of Sandra Bjurstrom, will be held from 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. on Saturday, July 15, in the First Amendment Room of the Scott County Library in Eldridge.

The drive will be held in conjunction with ImpactLife, the provider of blood components for local hospitals.

Potential donors must be at least 17 years of age, or 16 with parental permission (forms available at bloodcenter.org), and weigh more than 110 pounds. A photo I.D. is required to donate. Donors who last gave blood on or before May 20, 2023, are eligible to give at this time. For questions about eligibility, please call ImpactLife at 800-747-5401.

To donate, please contact Susan Schreck at 563-370-6915 or Debbie Jenkins at 563-370-1443. You may also visit bloodcenter.org and use code 5742 to locate the drive.

Garden walk in Princeton and McCausland

The Sheridan Sluggers 4-H Club, Friends of the Princeton Library, and the McCausland Gardeners Group will host the 2023 Garden Walk on Saturday, July 1, from 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Enjoy beautiful, manicured yards and gardens at homes in the Princeton and McCausland areas. There will also be a

location to purchase fresh cut arrangements to take home and enjoy.

In addition to the Garden Walk, there will also be a Garden Tractor Show at Virgil Grissom Elementary School from 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. There will be kids' activities as well as a tractor parade. Lunch will be available for purchase from 11 a.m. – 1 p.m.

Location maps can be picked up at *The North Scott Press*, the Princeton Library, and the Corner Market in McCausland, as well as all garden walk stops. Donations are appreciated, with all proceeds going to support the Sheridan Sluggers 4-H Club.

For more information, contact Erin Engelbrecht with the Sheridan Sluggers at 563-349-0163 or e.engelbrecht2001@gmail.com; Dawn McMeen in Princeton at 563-340-9811 or dawnmmcmean@gmail.com; or Wendy McCarrell in McCausland at 563-285-4794, Ext. 1 or wcaves6567@gmail.com.

Princeton native, Kyle O'Neill earns scholarship and veterinarian degree

The Iowa Veterinary Medical Association is pleased to announce that

Dr. Kyle O'Neill originally of Princeton, was awarded one of six 2023

Iowa Veterinary Medicine Association Green and Gold Tag Preconditioning Program Scholarships for \$2,500.

The recipient of this scholarship must show intentions of practicing primarily bovine medicine in Iowa.

O'Neill earned his undergraduate degree in animal science from Iowa State University. He recently graduated from Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine with his doctor of veterinary medicine. Dr. O'Neill will begin his veterinary career working as a large animal practitioner at Veterinary Medical Center in Williamsburg.

He is the son of Terry and Colene O'Neill. He is engaged to Jaycie Pargler.



O'Neill

Fired clerk faces felony charges

Denise Benson stole \$76,717.90 through city of Eldridge checking and credit card accounts, including payments to her own credit card, and her personal tax filing fees, according to felony charges filed June 15 in Iowa District Court.

The sheriff's department said she was arrested June 15, then released without bond.

The former Eldridge city clerk is scheduled to be arraigned July 17 in Scott County District court on felony charges filed June 14 alleging felony, first-degree theft, forgery, identity theft and a misdemeanor or count of misconduct in office.

"Between the dates of December, 2016 and November, 2022 BENSON was employed as the City Clerk of Eldridge. Benson did use the city owned credit



Benson

card ... to make unauthorized, personal purchases from Amazon, PayPal, Menards, AmeriGas, and other various vendors to acquire property. Benson did use the city's checking account... to make unauthorized payments to her personal credit cards and file taxes. Total value of funds stolen is \$76,717.90."

Scott County Sheriff's Lt. Dan Furlong said the search warrant served June 2 at 17338 305th St., Long Grove, found evidence detailed in the State of Iowa Auditor's Office report as being purchased by Benson with the City of Eldridge's credit card.

First degree theft, unauthorized use of a credit card and identity theft are class C felonies punishable by up to 10 years in prison and fines of \$1,370 to \$13,660.

Forgery is a class D felony, which carries up to a five-year prison term, and fines of \$1,025 to \$10,045.

The misconduct charge is a serious misdemeanor punishable up to a year in prison and fines of \$430 to \$2,560.

CHEEK: Vows 'no' vote on renewing library's lease in Eldridge

Continued from page 1A

Schaefer said the value of items borrowed in a year from the Eldridge branch is \$1.02 million to members who use them.

Cheek disputed the figure, saying much of the borrowing is done by members in Long Grove and Donahue, not Eldridge. He said her figure represented the entire county.

"No, it is not all of the county, sir. Why do you think I've given you misinformation?" Schaefer asked.

Cheek said, "I've got a lot of facts. I'm really thinking when the contract renewal comes up, we say, uh-uh," Cheek said.

Schaefer asked: "Is that for a city hall and police station?"

"Yes," Cheek replied. "You've had this building for 25 years. You've paid Eldridge \$400 per month. We're not getting anything from that building. I know what the city paid. I'm not going to argue."

"But you are," Schaefer replied.

The library has one more year in its current 15-year lease with the city. The library funds all building operation and maintenance through the state-ordered property tax, and grants. Schaefer reminded council members

that county supervisors and others pitched in on those improvements.

Mayor Frank King tried to quell Monday's argument, and acknowledged council members have raised the issue. "We're coming up with a plan to have a discussion at a different meeting," he said.

Schaefer asked Cheek to get facts, "before you go and be publicly negative."

"I'm not," Cheek interrupted.

"Excuse me, especially if you haven't been in the library and used it," Schaefer said.

"We're coming up with a new contract for an extension of the 15-year lease. To say something negative without even negotiating a lease is bad politics," said Schaefer, a former mayor of Walcott.

Council member Adrian Blackwell said he supports the library.

"I do not echo those same views," he said. He also noted the Eldridge voters voted down a plan to build a new city hall. "We had a referendum that failed, not the concept, but the way it was funded," he said.

He defended the value of libraries. "At a time some are taking books away, the library brings books to children," he said.

Breaking News:

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- Legal affidavits/ proof of publications
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