

YOUR WEEKEND THURSDAY

ART IN the afternoon will take place at 4:30 p.m. at the Keokuk Public Library. Pop art word 3D art will be the artwork done. It is for those eight and older.

KEOKUK ASSOCIATION for Rights and Equality (KARE) will hold a presentation called Inequities in Medicine at 6 p.m. at the Keokuk Public Library in the round room.

KEOKUK GARDEN Club will meet at 6:30 p.m. at the Keokuk Public Library (lower level) 210 N. Fifth St. Deb Grogan will give a program on squirrels followed by the meeting and refreshments.

SPORTS TRIVIA will take place at the Montrose Sandbar starting at 7 p.m.

FRIDAY

THE SPIRIT of Keokuk Awards will take place starting at 5 p.m. at Meyers' Courtyard in Keokuk. Get an update from economic development groups and see who takes home the spirit of Keokuk awards. Visit www.keokukchamber.com/events for tickets.

MUSIC TRIVIA at DJs Bar and Grill in Warsaw, Illinois will start at 6:30 p.m. Proceeds go to Aubrey and Millie's Epic Adventure.

MONTROSE BINGO Night is 5-9 p.m. at Ivor Fowler Community Building, 710 Main St., Montrose.

GREAT RIVER Players, 17 S. Sixth St., Keokuk, presents "Around the World in 80 Days" at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are sold at the door. Cost is \$15, student admission to matinees is \$5.

COMEDIAN DONNIE Baker of The Bob and Tom Show will appear on stage at 8 p.m. at Capitol Theater, 211 N. Third St. in Burlington. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. All sections are first-come, first-served. For ticket information, visit burlingtoncapitoltheater.com

DR. GETWELL'S in Keokuk will have karaoke starting at 9 p.m.

THE CELLAR in Keokuk will have karaoke starting at 8 p.m.

SATURDAY

CRAFTING AT the Keokuk Public Library will take place at 11 a.m. The day's craft is jar candles. It is open to teens and adults. Call the library at 319-524-1483 to register.

BROOMSTICK POOL and chili cook off will take place at 5 p.m. at Rascal's Pub and Grub in Keokuk. There is an entry fee of \$5 for both events with 100% payback. Call 319-524-2839 for more information.

MUSIC TRIVIA will be held at the Southside Boat Club starting at 7 p.m. to raise money for scholarships. Cost is \$80 per team with a maximum of eight per team.

GREAT RIVER PLAYERS, 17 S. Sixth St., Keokuk, presents "Around the World in 80 Days" at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are sold at the door. Cost is \$15, student admission to matinees is \$5.

THE CARTHAGE Fire Department's Firemen's Ball will take place at 8 p.m. at the Lake Hill Winery, 1822 East County Road 1540 near Carthage. Tickets are \$15. There will be music, raffles, drawings and more.

SEE WEEKEND, PAGE 3

LCHD's new home about \$1.5 million over estimate

ROBIN DELANEY
editor@dailydem.com

Inflation is proving tougher than cost-cutting efforts, or "value engineering" as professionals call it.

In the end, the price tag on the new Lee County Health Department headquarters and ambulance bay is still well above the original \$5.5 million goal.

Architects and engineers were able to carve about \$500,000 from what was a \$7.5 million estimate, but that still leaves a large gap in funding.

Lee County Grant

Writer Chuck Vandenberg presented cost cutting options to supervisors at their meeting Tuesday that included reducing the size of exterior windows, changing the overhead from glass to standard, lowering the ceilings some and changing the parking lot from concrete to asphalt.

"So when you take all the value engineering out, you're right at about \$7 million," he told the board.



Vandenberg

Vandenberg said engineers are looking for direction from the board and mentioned they could opt to go from a steel building to other materials, which has never been an option considered in the past.

Supervisors passed a resolution last year stating they were committed to the \$5.5 million project. They have also earmarked the



Seyb

SEE SUPERVISORS, PAGE 3



CHRIS MILLS/MISSISSIPPI VALLEY PUBLISHING

A merry Mardi Gras

Tuesday was Mardi Gras and Dr. Getwells celebrated its 10th annual Mardi Gras party with music from Jerad Harness and Nathan Gosnell, along with New Orleans-inspired food like jambalaya and gumbo. They even brought in king cake from New Orleans to celebrate. Pictured, from left, are Julie Man, Jerad Harness, Lexie Shipley and Nathan Gosnell, posing in front of some of the decor for the night.

Looking at reasons for derailment

Not the first time and won't be the last: part two

ERIKA BARRETT
dgcnews@dailygate.com

This is the second article of a three-part series in light of the recent train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, and the implications and risks railroad policies and procedures have on Lee County, an area that sees over 100 trains every day.

Several people interviewed currently work for railroad companies such as BNSF or Pacific Union and requested anonymity. Names and possibly genders have been changed to protect identities.

RISKS AND PROBLEMS WITH RAILROAD POLICY

After the East Palestine disaster, many people blamed the braking system for the crash.

According to a Politico article, a rule was passed under President Obama that required trains carrying hazardous, flammable



ERIKA BARRETT/DGCNEWS@DAILYGATE.COM

A BNSF train passes by on a track in Keokuk. Visible is the coupler, the components connecting the train cars together. Under tension caused by excessive train length, change in momentum and direction, couplers can break causing car separation and potentially derailments.

materials to have electric brakes. In 2017, the Trump administration rescinded this requirement after heavy lobbying by rail lobbyists — notably including Norfolk Southern.

"Secretary Buttigieg has dropped the ball on this," retired BNSF rail worker and union leader Jeff Kurtz said. "I was a (Democrat)

state representative here for two years, but I can honestly say the Biden Administration has been horrible on this. But they've got a lot of company with the Republicans. There's a lot of blame to go around — you're all culpable. Stop this and

SEE TRAINS, PAGE 3



ARRESTS

Three were arrested by the Narcotics Task Force on Tuesday.

P2



SCOUTING

Local scouts get tour of Montrose fire dept.

INSIDE TODAY

NOTABLE



In Montrose, residents at the Montrose Health Center enjoyed a visit from Chef Kevin Hebert. Read more on page 9.

DEATHS

Curtis H. Foulkes, 73, Keokuk: Page 5

INSIDE

CLASSIFIEDS	10
COMICS	8
CROSSWORD	2
FYI	5
MONTROSE/DONNELSON	9
OBITUARIES	5
OPINION	4
SPORTS	6-7

No. 38, 176th Year

FIND US!

www.dailygate.com



Keep it
KEOKUK

River Hills Village
RETIREMENT COMMUNITY

www.riverhillsvillage.com 319.524.5772 NOT-FOR-PROFIT PROVIDER

TRAINS: reasons for derailment

FROM PAGE 1

fix it.”

Kurtz believes the problem goes deeper than braking systems. “The brakes are about the fourth or fifth thing that I’d look at,” he said.

According to Kurtz, priority changes railroad companies need to make for the safety of their workers and the public include shortening the trains, adding a caboose, better use of technologies, staffing, and changing the attendance policy.

TRAIN LENGTH

In a 2019 study, the Government Accountability Office reported 150 cars (the current average length of trains) is more than twice the average length of freight trains operated by major railroads from 2008-2017. They found that the average length has increased by 25% since 2008. Trains that were once one mile long now, in some cases, stretch three miles.

When trains are long, contrasting tensions compound between the train cars. Train handling is a delicate business. “You want to run your train, either completely stretched or with slack in the couplers,” Kurtz said. “You don’t want to get caught in between. The problem with the long trains is that there is no way you can’t get caught in between.”

A coupler is what connects train cars together. Couplers are about 14 inches long, 10-12 inches high, and roughly 70 pounds of solid iron. “When we would run mile-long trains, if you didn’t watch yourself, (the tension) could tear one of those things to shreds,” Kurtz said.

Breaking a coupler causes the trains to separate, which can be violent at high speeds. Separations don’t guarantee derailment, but they exponentially increase the risk for one.

Retired BNSF railroad employee Fred Kroll recounted talking with some “rail guys” after a labor chapter meeting one night about handling long trains. “They’re telling me about Trip Optimizer, a cruise control system that runs the trains and manipulates the throttle,” Kroll said.

Union Pacific uses a similar program called Leader Program. The programs don’t recognize the slack in the trains, but from experience, engineers can and do and can adjust the train speeds to prevent separations. However, engineers can’t override the system outside of emergencies without being disciplined.

Kroll asked the workers, “How do you keep those trains together?”

“We don’t,” he remembered them replying. “We break one or two (couplers) almost every day.”

Kroll was shocked. “We used to break them maybe, three or four times a year,” he said. “What they’re talking about is 100 times what we used to do. We used to get

severely disciplined for it. Now, they say they do it every day. Even if they do it once a week, that’s ten times more than we used to do.”

According to BNSF engineer Geri McEntee, trains as long as 16,000 feet are being pushed by a distributed power unit (a remote-operated locomotive car) in the middle of the train but controlled electronically from the head of the train. “There is a delay in response on these engines when they receive a command from the head end,” she said. “It takes the skill of an engineer to get this train over the road in one piece, but this is something that is being taken out of our hands by technology.”

CABOOSE

A caboose is the last car on the train that has rail workers for the purpose of checking on the visible health of the train cars during travel. “From what I understand about that Ohio wreck, people from 20 miles could see fire flying out from the undercarriage of the car,” Kurtz said.

Mechanical failure of train parts is part of train health and maintenance. Kurtz believes the derailment was caused by a failed journal, which is a part of the wheel assembly that surrounds an axle and keeps the wheels turning. “A journal going bad happens — back in the day when we had cabooses, we had two men back there and two or three men on the head end. You would constantly be inspecting your train,” Kurtz said.

Once the trouble is spotted, engineers and conductors stop the trains and travel at very slow speeds until they can get to a place where they can remove the defective car. “I can guarantee (what happened in East Palestine) would not have happened 50 years ago with a caboose,” Kurtz said.

USE OF TECHNOLOGIES

McEntee believes preventative technologies are helpful in avoiding derailments and separations. “Defect detectors alert us of warm bearings, hot wheels, dragging equipment, and excessive dimensions (shifted load),” she said. “Others detect defects before they become evident to us. Acoustic detectors can detect journal bearings going bad before they get hot, impact detectors will detect flat spots on the wheels (thumping sounds), and wild wheel detectors will detect impact forces caused by damaged wheels.”

However, in order to optimize profit margins, railroad companies have implemented some technologies that eliminate employee positions and maximize efficiency. Trip Optimizer, cold wheel detectors, and automated geometry cars are a few examples.

Trip Optimizer calculates the best way to run the train mainly for fuel efficiency. “It is a reactive program,” McEntee said, “There is no proactive capability for changing trip conditions. It makes an engineer complacent because all we are doing is blowing the horn.”

Combined with Positive Train Control, McEntee said these programs are pushing the trains in the direction of one person or no people on the train.

Cold wheel detectors are used when an engineer applies the brakes. The detector checks the temperatures of the wheels to ensure the brakes are functional. McEntee said the technology is being used to replace the position of a carman, who visually inspects the train for defects.

However, cold wheel detectors only find issues with brakes, which are not the only parts of a train that can have issues.

“I’ve had carmen find defects on equipment not pertaining to the brake system,” McEntee said. “With this type of detector, other issues will be overlooked just so the company can eliminate more jobs.”

Automated geometry cars check the subsurface and the ride of the track. “These cars have already replaced maintenance jobs,” McEntee said. “This used to be done by a manned car and track inspectors, but once again, this has allowed the company to reduce jobs.”

In addition to fewer staff aboard the trains, the time employees have to inspect trains has declined. “We’ve heard reports from inspectors that the time they are allotted to inspect both sides of a rail car has decreased by 75% — from two minutes to as little as 30 seconds — thanks to the rail industry’s profit-over-people business model,” said Greg Regan, president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations’ Transportation Department.

STAFFING

Along with the “more with less” ideology McEntee has alluded to, many railroad companies are pushing for one engineer per train, doing away with conductors.

“It would be a horrible idea,” McEntee said. “It takes two sets of eyes to get a train safely over the road. There are blind spots on a locomotive, just like the everyday vehicle people drive. We work together to combat fatigue, which happens from everyday life and from working more than usual because of traffic patterns. If a train has an issue, the conductor is there to work the ground. We work through some pretty remote areas, and if something happens, you’re more than likely going to lose your life so the company can

maximize profits for their shareholders. Everybody should want two people on the trains.”

Eugene Debs works in signal construction with Union Pacific railroad, “Only one person manning a train leads to more human error,” he said. “That leaves one person alone to walk a train, make repairs, or get robbed.”

ATTENDANCE POLICIES

Historically, railroaders didn’t have a fixed schedule. “We used to work until we’d get tired and then take off,” Kurtz said. “It wasn’t paid or anything, but you could get away.”

Shifts are long and draining. While generally 12 hours, Kurtz said they can be even longer. “The longest I’ve spent on a freight train was 38 hours,” he said. “How do you sleep in an 8x8 box with five other people during an ice storm?”

The railroad industry has adopted what’s known as the Hi-Viz Policy or Precision Scheduled Railroad-ing. It’s one of the strictest attendance policies in the nation. Railroad workers are now required to be on call and follow an inflexible schedule.

The Hi-Viz policy works on a points system. Each employee starts with 30 points and receives deductions for missing calls, not going to work for sickness, personal time, fatigue, or family emergencies.

“When rail workers were on the verge of striking last Fall, they expressed major concerns that the railroads’ new system of running the lines, Precision Scheduled

Railroading, was all about profit-maximization — at the expense of worker and public safety,” said an article in More Perfect Union.

Kurtz has many stories of railroad workers having emergencies or accidents and changing how they would respond due to the Hi-Viz Policy. “A guy got into a car wreck coming to work and totaled his car,” Kurtz said. “The supervisor came out and said, ‘You’re not going to go to work — you could be hurt.’ Hi-Viz doesn’t account for that.”

For the no-show, the employee was deducted 15 points. “After the points deduction, the supervisor went to bat for this guy,” Kurtz said. “But the corporate officers reached down and took a lot of power away from local supervisors. That’s why you get things like this guy getting disciplined for a car wreck.”

In an interview in February 2022, Kurtz said people would die from the attendance policy. “Before, these guys always knew when they were ready to work when they were rested and available. When they weren’t working, it was because they were trusting their own bodies — they were avoiding burnout. And now they cut back on the training. They know you’re out there fatigued with no sleep. They put you in these impossible conditions. It’s absolute madness.”

Between May and October 2022, four railroad employees in the region died. Listed are real names of real people.

On May 17, Lee Michael Fenton, 43, of Quincy, died in

his home by suicide. He worked as a BNSF engineer.

On May 30, Jerry D. Ferguson, 65, of Carthage, passed away at Southeast Iowa Regional Medical Center in West Burlington after suffering a stroke while working as an engineer on a BNSF train.

On June 16, Aaron Hiles, 51, of Lee’s Summit, Missouri, had a heart attack and died in the engine room on a BNSF train somewhere between Kansas City and Fort Madison. According to a Washington Post article, Hiles told his wife he “felt different” and made an appointment to see the doctor. BNSF unexpectedly called him into work and, worried about the penalties that would accrue from missing a shift, he delayed the visit and went to work. A few weeks later, he was dead.

On Oct. 8, Marvin Lee, 49, of Topeka, Kansas, died in his sleep. He worked as a BNSF engineer for 24 years and was the Division 75 Chairman.

Kurtz blames the attendance policy. “This is exactly what the science says will happen,” he said. “Fatigue and stress will cause things like diabetes, heart problems, and cancer; it causes mental illness because of emotional problems.”

According to Kurtz, BNSF called the deaths “unfortunate incidents.”

“An unfortunate incident would be a dog peeing in my yard and killing my grass,” Kurtz said. “This is a little bit more than ‘unfortunate.’”

SUPERVISORS: Building cost increases

FROM PAGE 1

county’s \$3.8 million in American Rescue Program Act funds (ARPA), but have said they may have to dip into the fund to make payroll and pay bills until property tax revenue comes in.

In addition to the ARPA fund, the county was recently awarded close to \$1 million from a USDA grant program.

A \$600,000 Community Development Block Grant is pending. If awarded, that would mean the county has \$5.4 million to cover the original cost of the project — at least before inflation and material shortages changed the price tag.

Supervisor Chairman Garry Seyb said that leaves the county about \$1.5 million short of the new \$7 million estimate, but the North Lee

County Community Foundation and the Keokuk Charitable Foundation are still raising funds for the project.

When Roger Ricketts, executive director of North Lee County and Keokuk Foundations, told supervisors of the Foundations’ fundraising plans in August, he said \$100,000 was already in the project’s account.

“That is an unknown number out there, but the way I look at it, we could look at a stick-built building but the longevity of those buildings is not that of a metal building,” Seyb said.

Seyb said when he served on the building committee he told them not to consider the stick-built option, but added that the board could still consider it.

Seyb said despite the county’s current

financial straits in funding the newly-added ambulance service and IT departments, no taxpayer money has been added to the project.

“So, what we could do is look at bonding for the building,” he said, adding that county’s current debt service is low.

He said a process is underway to have the property at 5001 Ave. O on Fort Madison’s west end designated as a county Urban Renewal Area.

“At that point we could use a reverse referendum and we could, theoretically, bond for any portion or all of it.”

Seyb said this could be done by the board without putting the referendum on a ballot, however residents would have the option of petitioning for an election if they opposed the move.

WEEKEND: Events

FROM PAGE 1

SUNDAY

HUCK AND HOPE presents: Wildcat Springs Sunday Matinee in Hamilton. It is a disc

golf event. It will start at 8 a.m. with headquarters at the shelter field. Registration starts at 8 a.m.

AUDITION FOR the Great River Players next

production The Spitfire Grill is at 2 p.m. at 17 S. Sixth St. in Keokuk. Auditions also will be held Monday and Tuesday at 6 p.m. at the same location.