

Lee County's financial worries continue

New proposed subsection addresses dual county seats

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Lee County Supervisors continue to battle against a proposed bill that would cap the basic tax levy at \$3.50 for Iowa counties and Lee County Auditor Denise Fraise says that if that occurs it will be devastating to the county supervisors.

"If we have to stay at that, I'm going to be totally up front here, there is no way we can survive that," Fraise told supervisors at their meeting Tuesday.

Supervisors have been lobbying against a bill that

caps the general basic levy at \$3.50 – a level that 30 plus Iowa counties are already above. Lee County is not now, but officials say it must go above this levy amount to make ends meet in the next fiscal year.

Because of the additional costs associated with the county-run ambulance and the closing of Keokuk's hospital, along with changes in state property tax configurations and other variables, supervisors are looking at a cash flow crunch in the general fund this fiscal year. They have even discussed using the county's



Seyb

America Rescue Plan Act funds to cover payroll and other bills until spring property taxes come due.

The county now has \$3.85 million in ARPA funds, but they have obligated all of that amount to its commitment to pay \$5.4 million for the new Lee County Health Department facility and ambulance bay to be built on the west end of Fort Madison.

Supervisor Matt Pflug asked where State Senator Jeff Reichman (R-Montrose) and State Rep. Martin Graber (R-Fort Madison) stood on the proposals and Supervisor Chairman Garry



Pflug

Seyb said they have been listening to concerns but are undecided.

"They should be front and center on this," Pflug said.

Seyb said capping the basic tax levy prevents counties from being able to govern locally and provide specific services that are needed and/or wanted by county residents. He said the county has had a basic levy of \$3.50 or less for most of the last 40 years.

"Now they want to cap it at \$3.50 at a time period when we're seeing major inflation



Fraise

SEE MONEY, PAGE 4

Does safety suffer from seeking profit?

Not the first time and won't be the last: Train troubles part three

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This is the third 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 Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) or Union Pacific (UP) and requested anonymity. As a result, names and possibly genders have been changed to protect identities.

As discussed in a previous article, railroad companies



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Trains stopped outside the Keokuk Union Depot.

could change the length of trains, add a caboose, change their use of technologies, increase staff aboard trains, and change the Hi-Viz attendance policy.

Data, death certificates, and personal experiences of railroad employees have testified to the need for change, so what keeps railroad companies from changing their policies? Is it a lack of resources? In a word—no.

Norfolk Southern (NS), worth \$55 billion, released its Q4 and 2022 financial reports on January 25. According to the report, railway operating revenues were a record \$12.7 billion in 2022, up 14%, or \$1.6 billion, compared with 2021, driven by an 18% increase in revenue per unit.

In a statement by NS President and CEO Alan H. Shaw, the company delivered "double-digit percentage

growth in revenue as well as earnings per share and achieved record revenue and operative income for the year."

BNSF, North America's largest freight rail transportation network, has main rail lines through Lee County. Occasionally used by UP, most of the trains that run through the area belong

SEE TRAINS, PAGE 4

Conference, calendars, and projects

School projects update, roof upgrades needed

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The open meeting of the Keokuk School Board was called to order at 6:01 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 21 at the Central Office Collaboration Center at 500 N. 20th St.

Two constituents took the opportunity to address the board. One brought up the subject of a recent conference on the Marzano system (a system for "standards-based learning") and who attended it. The speaker noted that at least a couple of the attendees were leaving the district soon and that their fees out of the \$13,000 total cost might have been better invested in people who were here for the longer term.

The second person brought up several topics, one of which dealt with the yearly school calendar. The speaker suggested that there were several questionable decisions indicated in the calendar and that it might be better to revert to having a calendar committee (teachers, parents, staff) put it together and submit it for approval. In with that, the speaker questioned what seemed to be excessive professional development days in the schedule, and that the Christmas break has been shortened, thus putting a strain on parents who want to travel during that holiday season.

The board approved several items: (1) Educational Services Agreement with SCC for joint enrollment courses with KHS; (2) Memorandum of Understanding between William Penn University and the Keokuk School District



regarding the Teacher/Paraprofessional Registered Apprenticeship program (TRPA); (3) Hawthorne HVAC Maintenance Agreement with Daikin Industries, LTD; (4) Soccer clinic fundraiser for 1st-6th graders to be held March 4 and 11.

Monthly reports on ongoing major projects (from Carl A. Nelson and CO.)

Hawthorne HVAC upgrade At this time, there are four open action items that could result in additional cost to the project.

1. Repair to the UV-11 and UV-14 with the froze chilled water coils. This

change request is valued at \$5,739.62 and is being disputed. The contractor will submit their claim to the Initial Decision Maker per the contract requirements.

2. Adding glycol to the chilled water system for optional extra protection (\$3,000 — \$5,000).

3. Testing, adjusting and balancing of unit ventilators' outdoor air (\$0 — \$2,500).

4. Calibration of AHU-B's existing fan and motor to get more airflow to VAVs (solution is still being reviewed by the engineer).

KHS music addition and secure entry renovation

There are some items that are not complete due to material lead time and exterior temperatures. Carl A. Nelson are tracking these items to make sure the project continues to progress and have

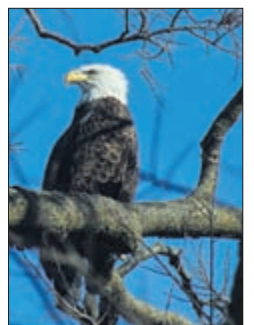
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THE DEFENSE

Hancock County has a new public defender.

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HANGING OUT

Bald eagles still in the area.

INSIDE TODAY

NOTABLE



In Warsaw, the historical society learned about Warsaw Caviar at its January meeting. Read more on page 12.

DEATHS

Doris J. Pope, 95, Burnside, Ill.: Page 5
Frances E. Boylan, 95, Fort Madison: Page 5

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What's Happening at the Y?

Register now for these programs

Mommy-Son Challenge Battles

Sunday, March 5
1:00 pm - 3:00 pm

Register in person or online

Soccer

Pre K - 6th Grade

Registration Ends March 8

First game April 8 & last game May 13

Register in person or online

Family Fun Day

Games, Easter Bunny, Activities, Bounce House & Much More!

Sunday, April 2

1:00 pm - 4:00 pm

Register in person or online



Hoerner YMCA

319-524-6724
2126 Plank Road
Keokuk, IA 52632
hoernerymca.org

Two arrested in armed robbery in rural Burlington

One suspect still at large, considered dangerous

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Two suspects have been arrested, and one suspect is still on the loose, after an armed robbery incident in rural Burlington early Tuesday morning.

Ryan Payne, 27, and Jason Hollenbeck, 34, both of Burlington, were both located, interviewed and arrested, according to a press release from the Des Moines County Sheriff's Office.

Payne has been charged with first-degree robbery (class B felony).

Hollenbeck has been charged with first-degree robbery and being a felon in possession of a firearm (class D felony).

Aaron Bessine, 33, of Burlington, the third suspect in the incident, has not been located and currently has active warrants for first-degree robbery and being a felon in possession of a firearm.

Authorities say Bessine should be considered armed and dangerous.

At about 12:21 a.m., the Des Moines County Sheriff's Office was called to the Sundown Apartments, located on the 10000 block of 115th Avenue, for a report of a robbery with a shot being fired, according to the Des Moines County Sheriff's Office.

When deputies arrived, they spoke with a victim who said he had been held at gunpoint by three males who took money from him and fled on foot, according to the release.

Detectives were able to identify Hollenbeck,

Payne and Bessine as the suspects in the incident.

The victim told investigators that he and Bessine had gotten into a physical altercation over stolen property at the victim's residence on Monday evening, according to a criminal complaint.

Before calling 911 after being robbed, the victim told police he heard a knock at his door, opened the door, saw Bessine, tried to close the door, saw Bessine holding what looked like a sawed-off shotgun, backed away from the door, and that Bessine, Hollenbeck, and Payne entered his apartment, the complaint states.

The victim also told police that one of the three pointed a hand-



Hollenbeck

gun at him, that Bessine grabbed his money and cell-phone, that Bessine then began to assault him with the shotgun, that one of the other two fired the handgun inside the apartment, and that the three then ran out of the apartment, according to the complaint.

Detectives were able to locate a spent silver 9mm Luger shell casing inside the apartment, observed a hole in the wall consistent with a bullet hole, and recovered security camera footage from a Ring doorbell camera from the victim, the complaint states.

In the footage, the three men can be seen entering the apartment, the victim can be heard screaming,



Payne

one of the men can be heard saying "Give me my things back," and a muffled gunshot can be heard in the background, according to the complaint.

During his interview with the Des Moines County Sheriff's Office, Payne told investigators he went with Hollenbeck and Bessine to the apartment to help retrieve a phone, that he did not see anyone with guns, but that he heard what he thought was a gunshot, the complaint states.

Police advise anyone who has seen or knows where Bessine is hiding to not approach and call 911 immediately.

Anyone with information on



Bessine

Bessine's whereabouts can also contact the Burlington Iowa Area Crime Stoppers at 319-753-6835. If your tip leads to an arrest, you will receive a cash reward.

"It should be known that harboring a known wanted person is a crime," the Des Moines County Sheriff's Office said in a statement. "The Des Moines County Sheriff's Office will investigate and charge any person who is currently harboring Bessine."

Payne and Hollenbeck are both being held at the Des Moines County Jail. Payne is being held on \$100,000 cash-only bond, and Hollenbeck is being held on \$125,000 cash-only bond.

Their preliminary hearings have been scheduled for 2 p.m. March 3.

MONEY: Bill allows county seats consolidation

FROM PAGE 1

and we're making major adjustments to what we provide for services that I have to believe citizens want, like an ambulance," Seyb said. "If you're allowed 2 to 3 percent growth, how do you do that in a world with 25 and 30 percent increase in the cost of your bills?"

Supervisor Tom Schulz said some of the Iowa counties

above the \$3.50 level need to be.

Because, like Lee County, they are providing additional services to citizens, but others have maintained amount above that level simply to generate more revenue and increase spending.

NO RAISE FOR SUPERVISORS

In light of the county's current budget restraints,

supervisors voted to forgo accepting the raise as recommended by the Lee County Compensation Board.

"We all know we've got a horrible problem with the budget this year and I think it would be wise for the board to lead by example," Supervisor Ron Fedler said.

Supervisors did take the 10% raise along with other county officials last year, but Seyb said even with

that increase supervisors' salaries rank 94th among Iowa's 99 counties.

"But I don't think that the rankings against other counties is a fair way to establish salaries for Lee County employees," Supervisor Chuck Holmes said. "I think we have to be sympathetic to the problem."

BILL ADDRESSES DUAL COUNTY SEATS

Seyb distributed a

proposed amendment to a Senate Study Bill that pertains only to Lee County since it is the only county that has two county seats. He said talks with state officials concerning the property reform bills brought questions, including the expense of having two county seats.

Seyb said the question then could be whether the two judicial districts would be combined.

The amended to Section 331.391 of the Code adds a subsection that reads "Pursuant to the general grant of home rule power conferred by the Constitution of the State of Iowa and if not inconsistent with the laws of the general assembly, a county that has designated more than one city to be a county seat may consolidate or reduce the number of county seats by ordinance."

TRAINS: what's keeping railroads from changing?

FROM PAGE 1

to BNSF.

In 2019, BNSF had a net worth of \$88.574 billion. Though financial reports of operating income indicate a 2022 third-quarter loss of \$154 million (7%) compared to the third-quarter earnings in 2021, the first nine months of 2022, compared to 2021, experienced a \$159 million (2%) increase.

Currently, UP has a net worth of \$123.35 billion. The company reported a net income of \$7 billion for 2022, a 7% increase from 2021. Benefiting from higher fuel surcharge revenue, core pricing gains, and volume growth, the company's operating revenue grew 14% to \$24.9 billion.

Profit margins are also increasing thanks to cutting down on staff per train with technology and running the trains based on efficiency over safety.

"The trains are getting too long, and it's the whole 'do more with less' mentality that management has in these corporations," BNSF railroad engineer Geri McEntee said. "There is no reason for a train to be over 8,000 feet in length other than corporate greed."

Technologies like Trip Optimizer and Positive Train Control help train companies

save on fuel but test the durability of important train parts like the journals, the wheels, and the couplers.

"The things (railroad companies) are doing to save fuel are things like manipulating the throttle, which — oh my God — it sounds to me like they're trying to break these trains," Retired BNSF engineer and union leader Jeff Kurtz said. "They have people running these railroads that don't know how trains work. A railroader from 50 years ago would be horrified."

For McEntee, it's not that the companies can't improve derailment risk but that they prioritize money over it. "The Railroad has the capability and fully attempts to prevent derailment, but it also tries to take the easy route and blame the train crews or track crews for incidents when it is totally out of our control," McEntee said. "Between Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR) and the technology push made by shareholders, the federal government, and society, it is starting to corrode the efforts of safety for the transportation of goods and to protect the public."

BNSF is an indirect, wholly-owned subsidiary of Berkshire Hathaway, which investor Warren

Buffett controls. "Warren Buffett is a big donor to Democratic politicians," Kurtz said. "But then he turns around and gives a lot of dark money to people in the Republican Party."

According to opensecrets.gov, railroad companies spent \$24,634,162 lobbying last year.

When railroad unions were on the verge of a strike in 2022, President Biden created an emergency board under the Railway Labor Act. Worried the looming strike would ruin the holidays and cost an estimated \$2 billion a day, President Biden short-circuited the collective bargaining and signed a bill to avert the strike and force an agreement. The legislation received bipartisan support and passed in the House and the Senate.

Kurtz said the emergency board, supposed to investigate, mediate, and report on the dispute between workers and the companies, was less than helpful. "They weren't even listening to these guys. The presidential emergency board basically gave the rail carriers everything they wanted. It was the most god-awful thing I've ever seen."

The emergency board called for 24 percent raises (from the last contract in

2020) and \$5,000 in bonuses. However, it didn't resolve workers' concerns about the Hi-Viz schedules that make taking a day off and other working conditions hard. The railroad companies wanted the congressional legislation to closely follow the board's recommendations.

In the end, Congress authorized the pay raises and allowed employees to miss work for routine medical appointments three times per year without risking disciplinary action. It also granted them one additional day of paid personal leave. The paid sick leave, which many workers argued was a bare minimum considering their grueling work schedules, was averted.

According to railroad company policies, workers should attend to illnesses or medical appointments using paid vacation days.

"Because of what happened, these guys don't feel like they have in place that they can go," Kurtz said. "The government allows the railroads to treat them like hell."

For Lee County residents and others considering work with railroad companies, Kurtz has somber advice. "You can make a lot of money. But you might die early. So you have to balance that out. Do you want to sacrifice your time

with your friends, family, and loved ones to work to make Warren Buffett rich?"

For the rest of the community, Kurtz admonishes people to keep their eyes open. "Do your research on this and keep an open mind. When politicians start pointing fingers at each other — ignore that. Keep asking questions."

Back in East Palestine, NS is now legally bound to identify and clean up contaminated soil and water resources, funding the work performed by the EPA and reimbursing the agency for additional cleaning services offered to residents and businesses. If NS fails to comply, EPA Administrator Michaela Regan said the EPA would perform the work and threatened to seek triple damages from the company.

"In no way, shape, or form will Norfolk Southern get off the hook for the mess they created," Regan said. "I know this order cannot undo the nightmare that families in this town have been living with, but it will begin to deliver much-needed justice for the pain that Norfolk Southern has caused."

Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro praised the EPA's handling of the situation. The crash took place just one mile from the Ohio-Pennsylvania border.

"It is my view that Norfolk Southern wasn't going to do this out of the goodness of their own heart," Shapiro said. "There's not a lot of goodness in there. They needed to be compelled to act."

Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw doubled down on the company's action. He reiterated promises to restore the site, invest in the community, and work with regulators and officials to improve railroad safety. To date, the business has committed over \$6 million in East Palestine.

In an interview with CNBC, Shaw rebuffed criticism from Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown, saying that NS invests over \$1 billion a year in "science-based" safety solutions, which he said included track maintenance, equipment, and technology.

"It's pretty clear that our safety culture and our investments in safety didn't prevent this accident," Shaw said. "We need to take a look at this and see what we can do differently and what we can do better."

Best of luck to Shaw as he and other railroad tycoons struggle to solve this mystery — or perhaps feign in order to continue pocketing billions at the expense of employee and public safety.