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Crete sets goal of five-star welcoming designation with inclusion focus

BY AMY HAUSMAN
amy@friendsentinel.com

Crete is making forward progress on receiving a Certified Welcoming designation from Welcoming America, a nonprofit organization that is leading a movement of inclusive communities becoming more prosperous by ensuring everyone belongs, including immigrants.

The designation requires a commitment from the City of Crete to make decisions considering residents of all backgrounds, identities and perspectives. Together with Welcoming America, Crete is able to work to develop tailored programs that build local welcoming infrastructure that will be based on seven welcoming pillars:

1. Civic Engagement: all residents, including newcomers, are able to fully participate in civic life.

2. Connected, Safe and Healthy Communities: community institutions, including local

government, businesses, faith-based organizations and nonprofits, create opportunities and spaces for newcomers and long-time residents to have constructive interactions and develop relationships.

3. Economic Development and Entrepreneurship: newcomers and long-time residents are able to participate fully in the economy. Programs that support entrepreneurship, business development and workforce development and that are accessible to all.

4. Education: system that ensures all students, including newcomers, have the support needed to thrive in school and the knowledge needed to succeed in the workforce.

5. Equitable Access: local services are accessible to all residents, including newcomers.

6. Government and Community Leadership: infrastructure in place to support



The City of Crete is working through the process of obtaining a five-star Welcoming City designation from Welcoming America, a nonprofit organization focused on inclusion of all, including immigrants.

AMY HAUSMAN

newcomer participation, inclusion, and equity. Understand the challenges and priorities of

newcomers.

7. Safe Communities: community prioritizes safety for

all residents, including newcomers. Strong, trusting relationships are built between newcomers

and local safety services. Community partnerships

See WELCOMING, page 8

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Coming soon: a theatre near you

BY AMY HAUSMAN
amy@friendsentinel.com

It is getting so close you can almost smell freshly popped popcorn.

Resurrecting the goddess, the iconic logo of the ISIS theatre, is a project at the heart of Saline County spearheaded by Blue River Arts Council (BRAC).

BRAC, formed in 2018, operates in a nonprofit format of volunteers. BRAC's goal is to bring movies back to the county and offer a gathering place for live entertainment, performances and concerts. But resurrection is no easy task.

On March 29 an 800-pound aluminum goddess rolled into Crete as the newest marquee in Crete. The designer focused on bringing new technology to an icon of the past with LED's that communicates through the 4G Verizon network, so anywhere there is an internet connection images can be loaded and accessible. This new beacon of light has many anxious for the historical landmark to reopen.

The Isis Theatre in Crete was originally designed for "talkies" in 1926 – four years before movies with sound were released in Nebraska. A local resident, Otto Feeken, had just been working in Hollywood and he brought this advanced technology back home. The Isis is believed to be the first theatre in the Midwest built with both an orchestra pit (for live music with silent movies) and a speaker system.

Thanks to a grant from the Nebraska Arts Council, the theatre will now be rebuilt with sound for all. The NAC awarded an accessibility grant to BRAC so that a hearing loop can be installed in the Isis Theatre.

A hearing loop uses a system of copper wires installed in a venue's floor and a T-coil in a patron's hearing aid or

cochlear implant to create a magnetic field. This magnetic field transmits the venue's sound system directly into the user's hearing device. With a hearing loop installed in the Isis, persons with a hearing loss will actually be able to hear the sound effects in movies, and attendees at corporate events will be able to understand the speakers because their own personal listening device can accommodate for their own personal hearing issue.

The original exterior wall was uncovered during the renovation, exposing white glazed bricks, which are now becoming the backsplash of the concession stand. Art deco lighting accents are included on the interior and exterior.

Although there have been challenges and delays, things are looking up. Way up to an original 1920's-era gold tin ceiling with a modern, circular chandelier. Together they pay tribute to how the goddess Isis was represented in ancient Egypt by hieroglyphics with a headdress of golden cow's horns with a circle in the center representing the sun.

The theatre is set to open in the summer 2024, as finishes, progress and decisions are being made daily.

As a non-profit organization, the ISIS theatre depends entirely on grant funding and donations. BRAC has been creative in its funding sources but continues to need approximately \$250,000 to meet their goal.

Outside of finances, the ISIS Theatre is in need of volunteers to start registering to work when the ribbon is cut and the projector illuminates the big screen. Ticket sales and the concession stand will be solely operated by volunteers. Volunteers only need to commit to a few shows a year and can do so online.

To make a donation or volunteer, go to www.creteisistheatre.com.



AMY HAUSMAN

The marquee for the ISIS Theatre in Crete arrived and was installed on March 29. The theatre is scheduled to reopen this summer.

COVER PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE SMITH, GENERIC SMITH PHOTO

Considerations for the design of the marquee, structure of the building and historical integrity were at the top of mind for the new downtown marquee. The main challenge was supporting the weight of the goddess, which came in around 800 pounds.

New house for Doane University presidents expected to have large impact on Crete

BY DOUG CARROLL
doug@sewardindependent.com

Doane University president Dr. Roger Hughes says he is enjoying the recently completed president's house which was built on the southern edge of campus, just across the street from College Heights Country Club, but it still has some drawbacks.

There are minor things here and there that still need to be fixed or corrected, but the biggest problem he and his wife Laura are just now getting past is figuring out which boxes items from their previous home were packed in and where they ended up in the new house.

Still, the Doane alum turned university president said he is happy to be living on campus again and is looking forward to seeing what effect the

house can have on the university and on Crete as a whole.

The approximately 7,000 square-foot house has an open floor plan on the first story of the home that will easily accommodate guests during indoor events, and a catering prep room that can service both the outside and inside entertaining spaces.

It also has a more secluded living space for the Hugheses and their dog Luna when they're not entertaining guests in the house.

Much of the house is decorated with artwork from the university's archives, Hughes said, and has enough indoor and outdoor space to host large groups.

"Laura did a tremendous job of thinking things through with this house, and in decorating it," he said. "I can't thank



DOUG CARROLL

Doane University president Dr. Roger Hughes and his wife Laura, pose in the living room of their new university home April 10.

her enough."

Hughes said he envisions the president's house as being a great place to host various

events in the future.

"We had 60 people in this house for a chamber event," he said, "and it wasn't crowded at all. It's

going to be a great place to have collaborative events.

"I give a lot of credit to Doane's trustees. They

were champions of this project, and it makes a great statement not only for Doane, but for the entire city of Crete as well."

Connecting Crete: ALLO construction complete

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN
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ALLO Fiber broke ground on its construction in Crete last spring, and this January its first customers had their internet up and running.

ALLO finished its final section of town on April 1. Fiber connections provide for faster internet that can handle more information at a time than cable.

“Crete was one of the best communities as far as working with their city on the ease of construction,” said Dave Miller, the general manager for ALLO in eastern Nebraska.

The build had been a long time coming. ALLO and Crete first showed interest in coming together about 10 years ago. Miller said the company built a great partnership with Doane University that helped equip it to come to town.

ALLO did a ubiquitous build, meaning its services became available to everyone within the city limits, including residents, schools, businesses and government entities. It divided the community into grids called Passive Optical Networks and built in each of the grids.

It opened a physical storefront on Main Ave-



COURTESY PHOTO

Dave Miller, general manager for ALLO in eastern Nebraska, and Edward Jarret, ALLO's senior manager of plant operations, were proud to celebrate the grand opening of the company's Crete's store on April 3.

nue in Crete so residents can speak with someone face-to-face if they have questions.

“It's extremely important for us to have a local presence in every community,” Miller said.

The company held its grand opening/end-of-construction cel-

bration on April 3. People were welcome to visit the storefront throughout the day and enter their names in a raffle for prizes, and ALLO held a gathering at The 1206 in the afternoon.

City Administrator Tom Ourada said ALLO is the third high-speed

internet provider to join the city.

“We're happy to have ALLO,” he said. “Crete is lucky we have the luxury of all three, and many communities don't have one high-speed broadband provider. We feel fortunate.”

Miller said the city of

Crete and ALLO worked well together to ensure businesses and residents were aware of what was happening and the timeline for it.

“It was fairly seamless,” Ourada said. “Whenever we had complaints, and I was only aware of just a small handful, they addressed them immediately. And, they had a construction season that was really short.”

Miller said Crete residents have responded positively to it ALLO joining the community, and several businesses and multiple dwelling units have already signed up for its services.

“Crete has a very diverse community, which is great. We want to make sure we're able to effectively engage with all of the different ethnic groups there so that they can experience what ALLO is,” he said. “It may take a little bit of time for us to build that foundation of trust where they get to know us, but I think once we do that, and they start telling their friends and other family members, Crete will really start to take off.”

ALLO is planning to begin offering a public WiFi program called SmartTown in Crete near the end of this year or the

beginning of 2025.

“We're providing a separate channel for people to be able to connect to the ALLO fiber network. So, for example, if you're walking through downtown, if your cell phone can spot an ALLO route it'll stay connected to that ALLO Wi-Fi network all throughout town,” Miller said.

Going forward, Miller said the company will work with developments outside of city limits and gauge people's interests to determine if it is feasible to serve their area. Anyone struggling with their internet speeds can go to the Nebraska Broadband Website and do a speed test to see if they can qualify for federal funding through the Broadband Equity Access Deployment program.

“Our goal from day one when ALLO started was to make Nebraska the most connected state in the country,” he said. “We're certainly on our way to doing that, as we've got communities from Scottsbluff, Sidney and Imperial all the way up to the Omaha region. We're going to continue to expand in Saline County. As it grows, we want to grow right along with it.”

Sokol Hall sign refurbishment to bridge past and present

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN
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The Sokol Hall sign was taken down Feb. 16 and is set to return after it has gotten a facelift.

The sign was installed in 1947 when Wilber refurbished the front of Sokol Hall. Although its neon still works, the sign's structure is rusting and the paint is fading after years of use. Sokol Hall Vice President Dave Packer said he is looking forward to seeing it looking bright again.

“I just wanted to bring it back to its glory,” he said.

The updated sign will be a replica of the original. The members of Sokol Hall voted in favor of this to help preserve the history of the building, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

“We wanted to keep that look and feel of that

age so it doesn't make the building look older than the sign,” Packer said.

Packer said Sokol Hall got a few different competitive bids from companies wanting to redo the sign. The Sokol Hall members ultimately decided to go with the Nebraska Sign Company in Lincoln, which fixed the neon sign after a hail storm in the early 2010s.

Packer said it will likely take a while for Nebraska Sign to finish the revitalization and estimated it will be done sometime this summer, possibly in June.

“I told (the Nebraska Sign Company) that we need it back up before Czech Days,” Packer said.

The project is being paid for by a combination of community donations to Sokol Hall, a \$1,500 grant from Saline County Tourism and a \$5,000 donation from

Sokol Hall members Russ and Jodi Karpisek.

Russ Karpisek said the money he and his wife put toward the sign is leftover campaign funds from when he ran for legislature. Campaign funds must be put toward campaigning or nonprofits.

“The Sokols have done so much work on the inside, and it looks really good and they keep improving it,” Karpisek said. “I just think that if we get the sign on the outside fixed up it will draw people in and make the outside look as nice as the inside.”

Karpisek said he is grateful for all the people in town who work so hard to keep Sokol Hall in shape.

“I appreciate everybody that helps out around town and at Sokol and everything. We all need to do it together,” he said.



COURTESY PHOTO

The fading and rusting Sokol Hall sign in Wilber was taken down recently for revitalization.

Friend: A hub for women-owned businesses

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN
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The vast majority of Friend's business owners are women, which is not only uncommon in general but especially for a town of its size.

"I'm proud of our community that we have strong leadership and strong women and strong men that aren't bothered by that," Friend Mayor Jewels Knoke said.

Knoke said there are also many women on clubs and boards, such as the Friend Community Club, and the captain of the rescue squad is a woman. She said all of the business owners and entrepreneurs in the community are part of helping Friend thrive.

"I think it's really, really important to view a community from all aspects, you know, from the aspect of a man and a woman and the children," she said. "I think that helps us in order to tackle and to look at it from everyone's perspective, because maybe there's something that, because it's not in my perspective, I wouldn't notice it."

Blue Blossom Floral

Gretta Stutzman opened her flower arrangement business, Blue Blossom Floral, 25 years ago. She said she grew up in a family that loved growing plants, and she has always enjoyed designing and creating. Starting a floral shop was the perfect combination of her interests.

"I kind of always wanted to be my own boss and have my own business," she said. "When that opportunity arose, I was about 39 and soon to be 40. So, I decided I should probably go ahead

and do that so I didn't have any regrets that I didn't get to do a business-type adventure."

Stutzman said she loves the camaraderie amongst Friend's women business owners.

"It's very good because I think that we try to be supportive of each other and encouraging of each other and try to help the public know that, you know, next door is The Freckled Door with Christy or Robbin's antique store is across the street," she said.

Friend Antiques

Friend Antiques owner Robbin Schemm has been in the antiques business for more than 30 years. She said she has always loved the heritage behind the pieces she sells.

"About everything in my store has a story," she said.

This is Friend Antique's third year in town, and Schemm said she has enjoyed all the opportunities it has provided for her to meet people.

"I love the idea of a town that wants to make their main street up and coming and inviting to young families," she said. "We think the antique business is one way we can contribute to that."

Hospital Auxiliary Thrift Shop (HATS)

Cindy Talley and Deb Segner co-lead the Hospital Auxiliary Thrift Shop, which sells used clothes at a reduced price and donates its profits to keeping the hospital open and offering new services. Talley said the organization recently donated \$13,000.

"We feel like by having this store and the community helping, it just kind of brings it full circle," Segner said.

Forty-five women make up the women's auxiliary, Talley and Segner said they enjoy working toward a common goal alongside them.

"It's a way to get to know people that maybe you don't socialize with on a regular basis and connect with other women that have the same purpose in the community," Segner said.

Home and Country, LLC

Anita Meyer has been running a real estate and appraisal business, Home and Country, LLC, for nearly 20 years.

"When it's typically a male-dominated business, with the agricultural side of it, they're used to dealing with a male. So, sometimes they struggle to believe a woman could do the job as well as a man," she said. "But, that was 20 years ago, and things have gotten better now. You occasionally will run into that, but, for the most part, that aspect of it has gotten much better."

Despite the initial challenges, Meyer said she enjoys being a business owner. She said she and the other female business owners in town support each other and stick together.

"I just feel blessed to work in a community that there's so many women-owned businesses, and so many people are willing to support all of us," she said.

Johnson's Pharmacy

Sheri Kasl and her mom, Cheryl, own and operate Johnson's Pharmacy.

Kasl said she enjoys that she and her fellow business owners in Friend try to help one another and sometimes host community events that everyone can get involved in. She believes these events are important because they

encourage new people to visit Friend, which has a lot to offer.

"A lot of people just can't believe we have all this stuff in a small town," she said.

Kasl said her favorite thing about her job is getting to know local people and being able to stay up to date with one another's lives.

"They are like friends or family. They are not just customers," she said.

Sharon's Clip and Curl

Friend native Sharon Svec will soon celebrate 40 years of running Sharon's Clip and Curl. She said she has loved styling hair since she was a child and always enjoys hearing her customers' stories.

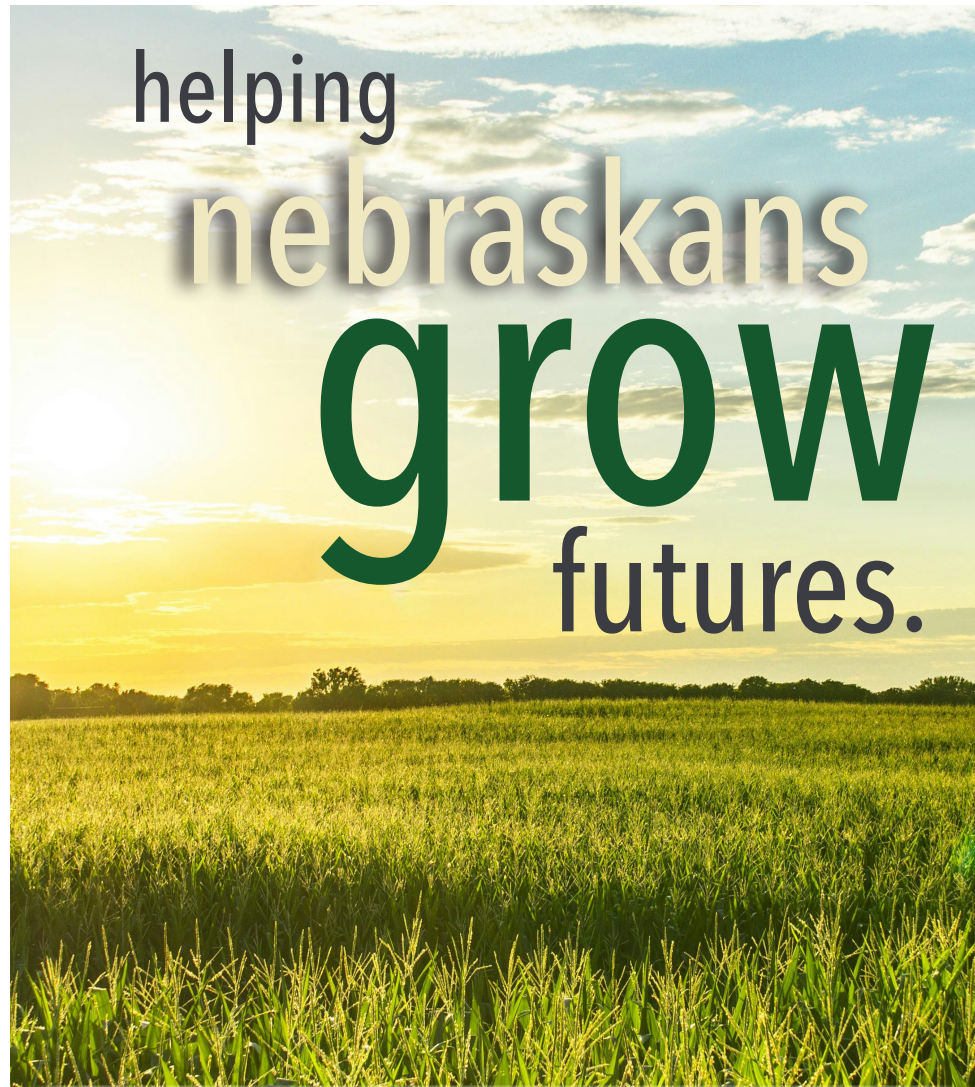
"I'm just lucky to be part of [Friend's community of business owners]," she said.

The Body Shop Wellness Center

Manager and co-owner of The Body Shop Wellness Center Shelly Bresson said she started her 24-hour fitness center after her husband encouraged her to share her passion for fitness and the benefits it can bring to the mind and body. She said it is fulfilling to see what her business does for others.

"I enjoy seeing the social connection and new friendships that the gym brings to the community and members," she said.

Other women-owned businesses in Friend include The Freckled Door, Chantel Collier and Complete Rural Medicine. They did not respond for comment.



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Crete man one of 15 national Afterschool Ambassadors

BY AMY HAUSMAN
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The Afterschool Alliance announced March 6 that it has selected Joel Bramhall, the Director of Federal Programs and Cardinal Community Learning Centers for Crete Public Schools, to serve as a 2024 Afterschool Ambassador.

He is one of only 15 leaders in the country chosen for the honor this year.

The Afterschool Alliance is a non-profit public awareness and advocacy organization working to ensure that all children and youth have access to quality afterschool programs.

Bramhall and the other Afterschool Ambassadors will continue working with local afterschool programs while serving a one-year Afterschool Ambassador term, working with community leaders and policy makers, organizing events and in other ways growing support for the afterschool and summer learning programs families rely on.

Bramhall was recommended for the national position by Beyond School Bells, a division of the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. They nominated Bramhall for one of the 15 positions in the 26th class of the Afterschool Alliance.

Bramhall feels honored to be selected.

"I am delighted to have the opportunity to work with the Afterschool Alliance to increase awareness and bolster support for afterschool and summer learning programs," Bramhall said. "I have witnessed firsthand the impact these programs have on students and families, especially as they work to overcome challenges.

"That is especially important now,

as many students have ground to make up and afterschool programs can help them do that. I am so proud to be part of the afterschool movement and to be a 2024 Afterschool Ambassador."

Cardinal Community Learning Centers is the free afterschool and summer program for Crete Public Schools. Open to K-12 students residing within the boundaries of the school district, the program serves all public, parochial and homeschool students free of charge.

Annually, Cardinal Community Learning Centers supports more than 1,400 students across four campuses, employs 105 part-time and five full-time staff members, saves local working families more than \$2 million in K-5 childcare costs, and provides nearly 57,000 snacks and serves over 22,000 dinners.

Additionally, the program holds 18 family engagement events throughout the school year and summer that bring the growing community of Crete together under the banner of afterschool.

"What we know is that, for every child in an aftercare program, there are four that are looking to get in, so the demand is high and yet the resources and people needed to conduct after school programming is not always there," Bramhall said. "So what we have in Crete is very special."

Funded by federal, state and private grants, Cardinal Community Learning Centers is further powered by a robust network of partners that include local businesses, nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and individuals.

These multiple sources collectively supplement the foundational investments made by Crete Public Schools.

"There are two challenges that are



AMY HAUSMAN/CN

Joel Bramhall, the Director of Federal Programs and Cardinal Community Learning Centers for Crete Public Schools, is selected as one of 15 to serve as a 2024 Afterschool Ambassador nationally.

continually inherent with after school which are funding and people," Bramhall said. "Funding is a challenge and that is why Afterschool Ambassadors exist as an advocacy in Washington, D.C. As part of my role, I will be meeting with the congressional delegation from Nebraska, and it is very powerful to be able to tell that story with data that drives home the point of how important funding is but what we can get back educationally, socially and economically as a workforce leader."

"We are thrilled that Joel Bramhall is serving as a 2024 Afterschool Ambassador for the Afterschool Alliance," said Jodi Grant, Afterschool Alliance executive director. "This is a challenging time for the country's students and families, and afterschool and summer

learning programs are uniquely positioned to help. But there aren't nearly enough programs to meet the need, and programs are facing significant challenges including funding shortfalls as the pandemic relief tapers off, staff shortages, and more.

"Now more than ever, we need leaders to spread the word that afterschool programs keep kids safe, inspire them to learn, and give parents peace of mind that their children are safe and supervised after the school day ends. Bramhall is exactly the kind of champion we need."

Some 24.7 million U.S. children not in an afterschool program would be enrolled, if a program were avail-

See AMBASSADOR, page 8

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DOUG CARROLL/FS

The Friend Community Healthcare System has received designation to convert to a rural emergency hospital. The approval means the hospital will receive \$3.2 million, broken into monthly installments to keep emergency services personnel.

REH designation props FCHS open as critical care unit

BY AMY HAUSMAN
amy@friendsentinel.com

Friend Community Healthcare System successfully completed a hail Mary pass to keep its doors open by becoming the first hospital in Nebraska to convert to a rural emergency hospital (REH).

The designation comes after the hospital admittedly lived paycheck to paycheck and was unable to fulfill vendor requests.

REH is a designation given to eligible rural hospitals as a government program by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. REH's were established as a part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 passed by Congress, with the goal of ensuring access to health care and emergency services in rural areas.

The approval results in the hospital receiving \$3.2 million, broken into monthly installments to keep emergency services personnel.

The REH designation became critical to the hospital's financial stability. In July 2023, the hospital was hours away from closing its doors, unable to pay its employees and expenses.

"Our cash flow got to a point where we were days away from closing, if not hours," said Jared Chaffin, chief financial officer and interim co-chief executive officer of Friend Community Healthcare System. "But the city did help us, and we started looking into the rural emergency hospital program."

The City of Friend gave the hospital a total



DOUG CARROLL

From left, Jared Chaffin, Amy Thimm and Ron TeBrink, the three CEOs of Friend Community Healthcare System, pose in one of the hospital's emergency rooms Feb. 28.

of \$250,000 to help administrators make payroll and fund operations, but clearly communicated to the hospital this was a temporary solution. Even with the assistance of the city, it was an everyday battle to stay out of collections from vendors, Chaffin said.

In November 2023, the hospital applied for the REH designation with a trade-off that Friend Community Healthcare System can no longer provide inpatient care, including swing beds that turned into long-term care. Within three days of the approval, the hospital was required to transfer out all inpatients.

Patient services must now average no more than 24 hours between stays and outpatient services.

From a staffing point, the REH designation means physicians and nurses will provide acute care. The hospital worked to prepare current staff that their job responsibilities would be changing from bedside nursing to emergency and critical care.

"We have some local people that work in the hospital, that live just blocks away from the hospital," said Ron TeBrink, chief information officer and interim co-CEO.

He said it's extremely important for them and the community to keep their jobs.

Despite some trade-offs, opting to convert was a "no-brainer," Chaffin said. The \$3.2 million cash infusion would account for roughly 70% of Friend Community Hospital's annual revenue,

and only a fraction of its 3.2 average daily patients as of Sept. 30 were acute patients, he said.

The hospital plans to add outpatient services, which is projected to financially save the hospital, Chaffin said.

"If our hospital closes, this town will lose its emergency room, which is the main priority for the vast majority of people in this community. We strongly believe if our ER goes away, there will be a death in this community," Chaffin said.

Five other Nebraska critical access hospitals are also considering converting, said Jed Hansen, executive director of the Nebraska Rural Health Association.

"We are in the spotlight for multiple hospitals to see how this goes," Chaffin said.

Welcoming

Continued from page 3

are built to identify and address needs and gaps in services.

Much of the progress starts with the Community in Motion Networking Group, led by community assistance director Marilyn Schacht, which is open to the public and meets monthly. Previously the meetings were geared for stakeholders only.

At the March meeting Schacht shared that Welcoming American changed its requirements for certification while the City of Crete has been working through the process to receive a five-star designation and there is more work to be done.

Currently, Crete is sitting at a three-star rating.

"The Welcoming

certification process has changed because Welcoming America is trying to improve the process but if you, like me, think that Crete should have a five star designation, know that what I have learned is that there has been no one that has gotten the five star designation," Christa Yoakum, senior welcoming coordinator with Nebraska Appleseed, said. "I think a three star is really, really good. In fact there was one community that only got a one star certification. I think being thorough and accurate in Crete is the most important step toward five-star accreditation."

Community in Motion meets monthly, with its next meeting on April 17.

Ambassador

Continued from page 7

able to them, according to a survey of nearly 1,500 parents commissioned by the Afterschool Alliance and conducted by Edge Research in May and June of 2022. That is the highest number ever recorded.

Unmet demand for afterschool programs is significantly higher among Latino and Black children (at 60% and 54% respectively) than among children overall (49%). Cost is the top barrier to enroll, cited by 57% of parents as a reason for not enrolling their child.

In Nebraska, unmet demand for afterschool programs has reached an all-time high, with more than 141,000 children who would be enrolled in a program if one were available to them, according to a national survey commissioned by the Afterschool Alliance and conducted by Edge Research in May and June 2022, which included 395 households and 401 children throughout Nebraska.

Demand for afterschool in Nebraska surges as parents see key benefits from afterschool, including keeping kids safe, helping them learn and grow and providing peace of mind for working families. As families face barriers to participation, such as cost and accessibility, there is strong support behind public funding for afterschool programs in the state.

In Nebraska, 92% of parents overwhelmingly support public funding for afterschool, 93% of parents are satisfied with afterschool programs, while for every child in an afterschool program in Nebraska, four more children are waiting to get in.

A large and powerful body of evidence demonstrates improvements in grades, school attendance, behavior and more among children who participate in afterschool programs. Researchers have also found that students in afterschool programs are more engaged in school and excited about learning and develop critical work and life skills such as problem solving, teamwork and communications.

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Blue River Raceway set to begin racing

BY DOUG CARROLL

doug@sewardindependent.com

Thanks to a group of ardent supporters, a local Crete racetrack will soon begin another season of go-cart racing.

Located on the southeast side of Tuxedo Park, Blue River Raceway is scheduled to start its season on Sunday, April 28, with "hot laps" beginning at 1 p.m., and actual racing starting at 1:45 p.m.

"When the previous owner left, a group of us took it over and have been trying to bring back the sport of cart racing in this area again," according to track board member Brandon Johnson of DeWitt. "We've all been doing it for a long time, and now we have kids that are getting into it."

"It's a really fun event for the whole family, and everyone can take part in it."

It's also a sport that racers of all ages can enjoy - participants will range in age from 14-year-olds all the way up to racers in their mid-70s, Johnson said.

Board member and fellow racer Kyle Kalkwarf of Crete agreed. His



DOUG CARROLL

Blue River Raceway in Crete is looking forward to another season of go-kart racing starting April 28.

seven-year-old son Kasen also races go-karts.

"The younger kids are

restricted on how fast they can go," Kalkwarf said, "but it's still

eye-opening to see kids race like this.

"My son has friends

who have come out to see him race, and they had no idea that we do this out

here."

Blue River Raceway draws most of its racers from Lincoln, Omaha and the area surrounding Crete, said Kalkwarf, but some drivers come from McCook, Iowa and Kansas as well.

Races this summer at the track will be held about every other Sunday afternoon until mid-September, at which point races will be held on Saturday nights until the season ends in mid-October.

The races are free for spectators who just want to come watch the action, Johnson said, and usually draw a crowd of 50-75 people for most events and up to twice as many for special events.

Johnson encourages people to come watch the races or to get involved in the sport themselves.

"It's a great sport - my kid and I work in the shop together almost every night," he said. "This is the only sport where you do everything together as a family - you smile together after the win, and you all shrug together after a loss."

Young's Welding and Repair changes hands

BY DOUG CARROLL

doug@sewardindependent.com

When owners Dale and Jan Young decided to retire and sell Young's Welding & Repair Inc. in Friend, they didn't have to go look hard, or far, to find people to take over the business.

They were already in the shop.

Doug Drake, 46, and Justin Slawnyk, 23, were already working for the company when Dale Young decided to retire.

"It was an opportunity that just kind of fell into our laps, and we said 'Sure, we'll give it a go,' so we did," Drake said.

Both of the new co-owners said they weren't really excited about maybe working for new owners, and are happy they decided to take the plunge and purchase the business themselves.

A lot of the work they have been doing are the same types of things they did before they took over the business,

"It was a pretty smooth

transition" Drake said.

"We pretty much pick up where Dale had left off."

"A lot of our customers didn't even realize there had been a change for quite a while," added Slawnyk.

Both men estimate that 90% of their work is ag-related, but they also have been doing other work, such as fabricating and welding metal stairs for an apartment complex in Crete.

"We fix a lot of farming equipment," Slawnyk said, "but a lot of stuff we pretty much build from scratch."

The two have also brought back some of the items the company used to make but had stopped doing so, such as "stalk punishers," which help protect tractor tires from being punctured by corn stalks during harvest, and sheds that cover and protect irrigation pumps in the field.

"We've seen a lot of interest in those," Slawnyk said.

Right now the pair just



DOUG CARROLL

Doug Drake, left, and Justin Slawnyk, the new owners of Young's Welding and Repair in Friend, pose in front of the wood-fueled stock tank heaters that they manufacture at their shop.

plans to keep growing the business and adding new products as time

and equipment upgrades allows.

"There's not much we

can't do now," Slawnyk said, "but there are a few things.

"But we'll get that taken care of eventually."

Vlasin takes over Crete Chiropractic

BY AMY HAUSMAN
amy@friendsentinel.com

Bruce Wahl, former owner and practitioner of Crete Chiropractic, made 170 personal phone calls to his patients notifying them that his solo practice would be changing hands on July 1 when he retires at the end of June.

Wahl began his chiropractic career in 1982. His interest in chiropractic care stemmed from a football injury as an undergrad.

In 1985, Wahl started a solo practice and two years later married his wife Carrie, the friendly face at the reception desk. The couple has three children who all have careers in the healthcare industry.

Wahl believes that one of the most misunderstood

things about chiropractic care is that once you start you have to keep going.

“Continuing care is a personal choice,” Wahl said. “We take care of the short term and then turn our patients loose. Some offices overtreat and hesitate to refer when they should.”

The most rewarding part of Wahl’s career has been getting people well.

Wahl has decided to retire after more than 40 years because of the difficulty in adjusting to the constantly changing insurance regulations.

“It just seems like a good time to go travel with our adult children,” Wahl said. “I am looking forward to getting outside to walk our doberman, Apollo, and working in the yard. It is quiet and peaceful.”

Wahl will be staying in Crete and loves his commu-

nity and neighbors.

Wahl selected Dr. Grant Vlasin of Seward to take over his practice due to his similar practice style.

The Wahls have a tremendous amount of gratitude to Crete, Doane University and their student athletes, and the large industrious hispanic population that is eager to heal and get back to work.

“We have generational families that have traveled from Geneva, Hickman, south of Fairbury, Exeter and a number of other communities to have care with us,” Wahl said. “We also took over care for Dr. Rich Felsing’s patients after his passing. With this transition we have wanted to personally insure that we found someone we believe will provide the best care going forward. We found that in Dr. Vlasin and wish him the best success.”

EMF Concessions introduces gift cards and cashless payments

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN
screporter@sewardindependent.com

Exeter-Milligan/Friend Concessions is now offering gift cards and cashless payment options for events it serves.

This options prevent people from having to fumble for cash or find an ATM and make it easier for students to manage money at games.

Exeter-Milligan social studies teacher Jordan Marr, who manages concessions for EMF, said the concessions team was

approached by Friend Public Schools Superintendent Derek Anderson last semester with the idea to introduce a credit card option for concessions at EMF events.

Last summer, Marr worked on purchasing and programming a Square terminal, which is a portable device for taking card payments or Apple Pay and printing receipts. The terminals also help Marr keep track of buying trends.

He puts in what items each customer buys during transactions and the Square keeps a

record of them for each game. He said this helps him better plan for future games.

While working on the terminals, Marr had the idea to implement gift cards as well.

“I thought, ‘Well, if we’re already going to do Squares, why not try to do gift cards as well? I think that’d be a great opportunity for us to generate some early sales to help pay for some stuff here and there to keep things flowing,’” he said.

The gift cards are reloadable, meaning people can put more money on the cards once

they run out instead of getting new ones each time. Users can check their cash balance on the cards at any time by scanning the QR code on the back.

Marr said parents can put money on the cards for their kids and use it as a way to help them practice managing money and sticking to a budget.

“The kids could keep going back and forth with their card buying stuff, and then the parents could say, ‘Well, you’re all out of money on the card so you have to wait for next time to get it refilled,’” he said.

A mother of three Exeter-Milligan students said she has enjoyed the new convenience of payment options and thinks the gift cards will be a good option for stocking stuffers.

“It’s just the ease of you’re not shelling out cash for your kids and they’re not always coming up to you and asking for cash for games,” she said.

EMF Concessions has sold almost \$600 in gift cards thus far. Anyone interested in purchasing one can contact Marr to make arrangements.

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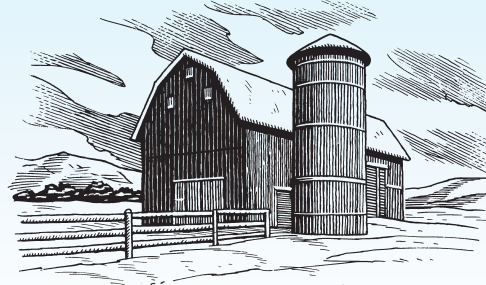


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CPS shows double digit growth over past four years

With the release of the most recent state assessment data from the Nebraska Department of Education, Crete Public Schools officials are pleased with the growth shown in the past four years.

These results, which NDE released on Nov. 22, also include CPS having one school classified by the state as “excellent,” two as “great” and one as “good.” The district overall is rated as “great.”

“When we look at where we were as a district before COVID hit, CPS has increased the percentage of students proficient in all three areas, including double-digit jumps in both math and English Language Arts,” said Dr. Josh McDowell, CPS superintendent.

The three areas assessed are English language arts, math and science.

McDowell points to the systems put in place by CPS staff as a credit to these gains.

“If you look at what happened in public education for those four years, and everything we’ve faced, I am very proud to say we not only didn’t accept excuses, we made major gains,” McDowell said.

This year, NDE made changes to some of the formulas they use to determine proficiency, matching those used before the pandemic.

“In 2019, the state used a baseline of approximately the 40th percentile as proficient but bumped that up to around the 60th percentile for the past two years,” said Brittany Hajek, CPS Chief Academic Officer. “For this year, they have returned to the 2019 baseline.”

Hajek pointed out that overall CPS

proficiency scores dipped and hovered in the two years of the higher threshold, as did most of Nebraska.

“Now that we’re back on the same baseline as before, it’s exciting to see how much improvement we’ve made as a district over four years,” Hajek said.

The percent of CPS students proficient in 2018-2019 in ELA, math and science were, respectively, 47%, 51% and 77%. In 2022-2023, they were 58%, 67% and 80%.

CPS equaled or outpaced the state average in all three categories this year—the state numbers: ELA, 58%; math, 61%; and science, 70%.

Both Hajek and McDowell pointed to some specific reasons for these gains during such a challenging time for public education in general.

“Our teachers have doubled down on planning high-quality, standards-based instruction,” Hajek said. “They also work so well together to look at the data on each individual student and develop cross-curricular plans to move kids along.”

McDowell also highlighted the renewed effort of district teachers.

“The CPS staff has bought into the work needed to impact each student,” he said. “When we as a district put all of our collective energy into individual students, these types of results follow.”

High school results

However, the superintendent has often repeated a mantra of forward movement.

“This district hears me say this often: It’s OK to be where you are, but you can’t stay there,” McDowell said.

“These results show the impact so far. But we are not satisfied with these numbers.”

NDE uses the ACT as the statewide assessment. Crete High School scores are lower than the state averages, something the district has taken into account when developing the new Cardinal Academies.

“We know if we can connect kids to their interests and passions while at school, they will carry that connectedness into all areas of their education,” Hajek said. “This has shown to have an impact in core areas and is reflected on ACT scores.”

The transition to the Cardinal Academies has been underway for a few years, with all freshman students enrolled in the Freshman Exploration Academy this school year.

Grades 3 – 8 results

Looking at individual grade levels and class cohorts in grades 3 through 8, CPS is doing well compared to the state averages.

In ELA, CPS had growth year-over-year with an individual grade in higher than the state’s growth in four grades, was equal in one and less in just one grade level.

A highlight included sixth and eighth-grade levels, which saw growth of 22 and 31 percentage points, respectively, compared to growth by the state in the same grades – 11 and 17.

The eighth grade ELA is worth taking another look: At 76% proficient, CPS topped the state rate by 13 percentage points. As a cohort (same students over time), this group gained

33 percentage points in two years. The same group statewide grew 18 percentage points, meaning CPS had nearly double the growth in ELA for this cohort of students.

In all, three of the four CPS cohorts with three years’ comparable ELA data showed higher growth than the state averages.

In math, CPS outscored the state average in five of six grade levels and grew at higher levels than the state in four of the six, with another just slightly below the growth - eighth grade. That same eighth-grade group outperformed the state by six percentage points.

In science, there is less data, due to the state only testing three grades, 5, 8 and 11. However, in grades 5 and 8, CPS outperformed the state and showed greater growth than the state in all three grades.

Hajek pointed out that all of these comparisons should be taken for what they are: A snapshot in time.

“There continues to be changes in the tests, the proficiency benchmarks, the standards, and – most of all – the students,” she said. “These aren’t necessarily going to be apples-to-apples comparisons.”

McDowell agreed, adding the complexity of the data isn’t necessarily easy to comprehend for everyone.

“These detailed numbers across the board can make a parent or community member’s eyes glaze over, but our team uses it to look for trends,” McDowell said. “We use data to find out where we are now compared to where we’ve been. This data shows we are on the right track, but we aren’t done yet.”



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CHS upgrades gym speakers

BY KEATON BURGESS
reporter@sewardindependent.com

At the Jan. 23 Crete Board of Education meeting, the board approved a new speaker system for the Crete High School gym that will cost \$48,408.

Dr. Josh McDowell, Crete Public Schools superintendent, said the

current sound system is significantly under-engineered for the Crete gym.

“The gym gets used so frequently for classes, graduation and sporting events,” McDowell said. “It’s not functioning well, doesn’t sound well and it’s hard to understand talking and music. The board felt it was necessary.”

Although the project is

going to cost \$48,408, a lot of the project is going to be paid for by revenue made from the video boards.

“They will cover more than half of the expenses,” McDowell said. “The other roughly 40% will come out of the building fund.”

McDowell said some of the speakers in the gym are still usable, so

those will go to the softball fields.

“We’re really trying to create a great student and fan experience, and we’re excited that the board wanted to move in that direction,” he said.

The school will be going through Yandas Music and Pro Audio and was hoping the project would be done in February.

“We’re on their list and we hope we can get it done ASAP,” McDowell said.

McDowell said they really wanted to do the project because they wanted to give people the best experience after all the time and investments the community has put into CHS.

“When the community has invested in as much

as they have into the facilities at Crete, we want the whole experience to be outstanding,” he said. “We teach a lot in that gym and have phenomenal community support for our sporting events and graduation. It’s a great investment and will provide the best experience possible.”

A year to remember

A look back at last year when Wilber turned 150

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN
scireporter@sewardindependent.com

Last year marked Wilber’s 150th anniversary, and the town celebrated the milestone with a year full of events.

Wilber sold commemorative merchandise throughout the year, including themed hats, t-shirts, tumblers, challenge coins, ornaments, cookbooks and copies of Doris Koll’s book, *Early Days of Wilber Businesses*. Koll said her book is a celebration of the history behind the town she loves.

“I really liked trying to bring together stuff that can commemorate the 150th but also stuff about Wilber,” Chamber President Jennifer Reedy said.

The town kicked off its festivities with a cake and ice cream social at the Cultural Center on March 10, the same day that Wilber was platted in 1873.

On June 17, the legion hosted a community barbeque followed by *Dueling Pianos* for a concert.

James Bates’ Wilber-Clatonia high school students buried a time capsule in City Park on June 25 with items including a phone, pop bottles and newspapers. It is set to be opened in 50 years.

Susan McClain of Beatrice, also known as “Yesterday’s Lady,” showcased clothing from 150 years ago and presented information about the time at Sokol Hall in September.

In December, the Cultural Center hosted a Christmas display that show-

cased old Christmas traditions. For example, the Czech would eat a carp with Christmas dinner and single ladies were to take off their shoes and throw them at the door. If the shoes landed facing the door as if leaving, it meant the woman would get married that next year.

Wilber also revived an old tradition through its Christmas Craft Market event on Dec. 23 at Hotel Wilber. The hotel hosted last-minute, local holiday shopping with vendors that did not have to pay vendor fees.

The hotel then had a raffle for a one-of-a-kind commemorative quilt that was made for the anniversary. The quilt, which was displayed at various local businesses throughout the month, was 80 inches by 91.5 inches and featured 30 squares with embroidery inspired by Wilber. Reedy said the piece will be something people can look back on in future anniversary celebrations.

Proceeds from the raffle went toward funding and advertising for the anniversary celebrations. Community sponsors also supported the festivities.

Reedy said she enjoyed spotlighting Wilber’s rich history all year.

“It was to let everybody know how old the town is and to recognize what they did 150 years ago and see if there is anything comparable to what we do now,” she said.

She said many of the traditions are no longer practiced, but it was wonderful for people to learn about and experience a taste of them.



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KEATON BURGESS

Breckan Schluter of EMF fails to hang on to the ball as he stiff arms a Stanton defender, but the ball rolls out of bounds to stay with EMF on Nov. 20.

Crete practice fields nearing completion

BY KEATON BURGESS
reporter@sewardindependent.com

After starting on new practice fields in early 2023, the project is coming closer to completion.

Matt Martin, director of activities at Crete High School, said he hopes the fields will be completed by the time teams start fall practice.

The Crete practice fields are located on Iris Street just north of the high school. The purpose of the practice fields is to open up more space for teams to practice and eventually have their own athletic facility.

The practice fields will be five acres and will have two and a half sodded practice fields. The practice fields will be used for soccer, football, tennis training and any other activity that benefits the student-athletes and organizations.

The practice fields were funded by building funds.

Although the Cardinals are able to use Doane's facilities, they are looking to find another solution with the practice fields because of the growing numbers of students.

Better together

A recap on EMF's first season

BY KEATON BURGESS
reporter@sewardindependent.com

Other than football and softball, the Exeter-Milligan/Friend Bobcats started its first season as a cooped sports team.

The Bobcats saw success, seeing improvements in records.

The Bobcats' seasons went as follows:

Football: The Bobcats went 11-2 and found themselves in the state championship game, finishing as the runner-up. Breckan Schluter ended the season with over 7,100 career yards, putting himself in the top five in the all-time Nebraska rushing list.

EMF went 4-1 in the playoffs, defeating Pender 40-14, Shelby-Rising City 26-0, North Platte St. Patrick's 44-28 and Crofton 46-32 and lost to Stanton 42-36 in the finals. It was the first time EMF won a state game since 2018.

Volleyball: EMF went 17-12 on the season and ended its season in subdistricts. The

Bobcats started the season 7-0 and finished the season 10-12. Kiley Oldehoeft had 56 blocks on the season and Kaydence Haase had 60 aces.

Cross country: The first season of cross country for both Friend and Exeter-Milligan saw four boys and one girl join the team. Although none of the Bobcats qualified for the state meet, the five all improved over the season and saw season-best times in their final meet of the season, districts.

Softball: The Filmore Central/Exeter-Milligan/Friend softball team had a successful season, going 20-15 and making a district final. In the district final, FCEMF fell one game short of state, losing to Ashland Greenwood 14-1, 5-6, 12-2.

Girls' golf: The first season of girls' golf ended with one state qualifier. Abbie Milton was the first state qualifier in Bobcat history and finished 30th overall out of 91 girls, shooting a 95 on day one and 96 on day two.

Boys' basketball: The Bobcats finished its first combined boys' basketball season at 14-10 under head coach Brian Arp. The Bobcats swept season series against Pawnee City, Thayer Central and Diller-Odell.

Girls' basketball: The girls' basketball team ended the 2023-24 season with a 10-13 record and a loss in subdistricts, which was a big improvement for both teams over previous seasons. In 2022-23, EM went 5-19 and Friend 2-20. With a young team, the Bobcats bring back a lot from this season and will look to improve.

Wrestling: The boys' wrestling team sent one to state while the girls ended their inaugural season at subdistricts. Tyler Sladek was the lone girl to compete at the subdistrict meet. Sladek went 1-2 on the day. For the boys, Dayton Kremer qualified for the state meet at 157 but went 0-2 to end his season.

Spanish-language childcare training program helps break language barriers

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN
scioreporter@sewardindependent.com

Public Health Solutions and the Center for Rural Affairs recently teamed up to provide quality childcare training to Crete residents.

The training was in Spanish and was intended to equip prospective childcare professionals with information on how to care for children, start their own business and keep children safe.

Johanna Pesante-Daniel, the health equity, diversity and inclusion coordinator at Public

Health Solutions, said offering the classes was especially important right now because Nebraska is going through a childcare crisis.

"Many families in our area are experiencing a crisis finding affordable, quality childcare," she said. "This is hurting families. This thing is hurting the economy and the future of our children's education."

COVID-19 made this crisis worse because many childcare centers had to shut down due to lack of employees, Pesante-Daniel said.

iel said.

"Recently, the childcare next to us closed their doors, leaving parents scrambling to find a place to take their children when they're at work," she said. "Sometimes, those circumstances obligate parents to quit their jobs or reduce their hours or pass job opportunities to grow professionally. So, having childcare is a necessity right now."

Pesante-Daniel said she hopes the training inspired people to start their own childcare businesses in the community. She said working in childcare

can be rewarding because it is about helping children grow and being there for families.

"Sometimes, especially for females, if they're childcare providers and they do it from home, they don't see themselves as a business person or a business woman."

"This is a business, and if they learn some basic information, they might be very successful," she said. "We get to be here to try to provide any support that we can to somebody that wants to try and do it to be successful."



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