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TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2024 BLUFFTON, INDIANA • Wells County's Hometown Connection \$1.00

Meyer Building receives Business of the Year

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Meyer Building was named the Business Of The Year by the Wells County Chamber of Commerce on Monday.

Jason and Matthew Gerber were both surprised with balloons, a cookie cake and smiles from friends and family as part of the announcement. Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Erin Prible addressed the staff and family on hand, celebrating the achievement and their commitment to the community.

"The impact you have made in our community, the lives you touch in meaningful ways, and the way you go above and beyond for your customers — you leave a lasting impact wherever you go," Prible said.

Meyer Building's nomination letter, sent in by John Reinhard, states that Meyer's work is incredibly varied within their scope of post frame buildings. The work involves general contracting for residential homes, schools, churches and office buildings, in addition to storage structures. Meyer has their handiwork in Wells County and throughout Indiana, Michigan and Ohio.

"We've just grown significantly in the amount and size of projects we've been doing," Jason said. "We're doing a couple of projects on State Road 201, a couple local projects that have been pretty neat to work on, that are nice sized and just grow our expertise in what

we're doing." Meyer's dedication to their employees is another point of pride for the company. Meyer started a program where employee-raised funds for organizations employees care about will be matched by the company. Meyer also has donated to Loving Shepherd Ministries, Forgotten Children, 4-H and Helping Hands.

"Meyer Building has a name, and can that be helpful to an organization?" Matthew said about their donation philosophy. "Not because we're something so special, but can we come alongside an organization and partner with them?"

Meyer has also shown their excitement for growth in Wells County. While the amount of Meyer-built projects in Wells County has grown through the last five years, the Gerbers see it as an opportunity to invest in a community they both grew up in while also adding to their business ventures.

"We have seen growth in Wells County, and that's exciting because we want to be invested here," Matthew said. "We want to provide a great place to work here. If we could provide an awesome job here and opportunities (here), that's cool."

"We both grew up in Bluffton, we've lived in Bluffton," Jason said. "We've worked outside Bluffton and had good relation-

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Above are building staff, along with family, friends and other Chamber of Commerce Staff. At left, Matthew Gerber addresses and congratulates the hard work of their employees. (Photos by Jonathan Snyder)

Kunkel hired as BHS assistant principal

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Brent Kunkel will be the next Bluffton High School assistant principal.

His promotion was approved Monday by the Bluffton Harrison Metropolitan School District board of trustees. Kunkel was recommended by incoming principal Stacy Morrison and currently teaches weights, physical education and economics while coaching for the football and track teams. He has taught at the high school since 2011 and hopes to build relationships with students, faculty and the community.

He will follow Morrison, who will serve as principal following Steve Baker's retirement at the end of the school year.

"The best part of my job is building relationships with students, faculty members, and members of the community, and I look

forward to building upon these relationships, and creating new ones in this position," Kunkel said in a press release. "Bluffton High School is known for our culture of excellence, and I look forward to working with all members of the BHS family to continue to build upon that foundation."

Kunkel and his wife, Danielle, have four children who also attend BHMSD — Cora, Wesley, Eliza and Harrison.

Also during the meeting, Superintendent Brad Yates reported that new panels for BHS's construction will arrive in early January. Yates has previously discussed issues with mismatching panel colors to the school board during their Nov. 18 meeting. This led to a recall after meetings between the school and construction team.

Installation should resume in the first four to six weeks of 2025.

Additionally, over \$63,000 in grant stipends for teacher appreciation were paid out to teachers at BHMSD, approximately \$415 to \$545 per teacher depending on circumstances.

Yates also announced that the district's attorney Colin Andrews has expanded his duties as a prosecutor and will step away from private services for the district. In response, Yates began reaching out to other firms in the state and will provide a recommendation at the board's January meeting.

The board also recognized Andrew Cook, who was awarded the BHMSD Educator of the Year in November. Baker shared his excitement about Cook's growth throughout Cook's 10 years of ser-

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Brent Kunkel

Completion of highway garage drags on

By HOLLY GASKILL
Final construction items at the new Wells County Highway Garage have now stretched six months past the project's initial "substantial completion."

Highway Department Supervisor Shawn Bonar presented a list of 17 unfinished items to the County Commissioners during their meeting Monday evening. Bonar has discussed many of these items for months, such as heat and air conditioning issues in the technical room.

The building has been in use for roughly 10 months and commissioners approved "substantial completion" in June. Also on the list were two roof leaks, waterline concerns, and the installation of multiple overhead door thresholds.

Bonar said he walked through the building with Project Manager Conor Jackson last week and identified issues, but did not have a deadline for the work.

Bonar and Sheriff Scott Holliday have shared ongoing issues with their respective building projects. On Monday, Holliday shared that all final items should be completed by mid-January.

Meanwhile, Bonar also reported that paving between county roads 200 S and 300 S will not take place before spring. The road soil failed tests for its sulfate content and the contractor, Gradex, was ordered to remove the 14 inches of soil and replace it with stone. Bonar stated that Gradex initially wanted to pave immediately, but would not warranty the road.

Commissioner Blake Gerber then recognized Bonar's work in responding to a water line issue at the courthouse in November. Gerber stated that Bonar stayed on-site from approximately 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. working despite being unable to eat before a doctor's visit

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Seniors, disabled Hoosiers, children on waiting list for services

By WHITNEY DOWNARD
Indiana Capital Chronicle

Two separate waitlists overseen by the Family and Social Services Agency have been likened to crises by critics, delaying much-needed health and child care services to Hoosiers in need.

And now FSSA has added a third waiting list for applicants seeking child care services under the Child Care Development Fund and On My Way Pre-K.

The vouchers support low-income families earning less than 150% of the federal poverty level, or roughly \$45,000 for a family of four. Many low-income families

couldn't afford child care without such subsidies and would instead drop out of the workforce, halting their professional development and no longer contributing to a community's economy.

The agency has provided several updates to its waitlist for Medicaid waiver services, programs that are critical for Hoosiers seeking assistance as they age and for Hoosiers with disabilities. After starting the list earlier this year — and increasing the number of Hoosiers invited off each month — more than 12,000 Hoosiers are still waiting, including 4,617 Hoosiers on the Health and Wellness Waiver

and 7,611 seniors on Pathways.

Enrolled families will continue to receive child care vouchers "as long as funding permits," according to the release, and a reassessment will start in the next federal fiscal year in October.

Several Democratic lawmakers from both chambers decried the move, which is the first time FSSA had employed a waitlist since 2018.

House Minority Leader Phil GiaQuinta, D-Fort Wayne, pointed to the lack of affordable options for parents and lamented the shortage of providers.

"This waitlist is a result of all

federal childcare funds being used to their capacities here in the state. If you recall, Republican leadership told us recently that Hoosiers shouldn't look to the state to solve this monumental problem," GiaQuinta said in a statement, linking to a story from WRBI.

GiaQuinta vowed that his caucus would focus on child care — something he previously criticized Gov.-elect Mike Braun for omitting from his legislative agenda.

Sen. Shelli Yoder likened the new waiting list to "a moral failure and fiscal disaster," pointing to the Republican majority's decision to expand private school vouchers

to nearly all Hoosiers in the last budget session rather than putting funds toward early childhood education.

"We're telling a family of four earning up to \$230,000 that they qualify for a need-based private school voucher, while a family earning \$38,000 doesn't qualify for a Pre-K voucher. That's not just unfair—it's absurd," Yoder, D-Bloomington, said in a release.

In its release, FSSA pointed to the number of recent changes implemented by the General Assembly earlier this year, including the decision to expand sub-

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Outside

Sunny and windy today, rain in the evening

Today	Wed.	Thursday
High 43	High 40	High 37
Low 31	Low 20	Low 27

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Vol. 96 No. 38

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Meyer Building

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ships out there, but it's neat to be able to come back to our hometown and interact with the people we grew up with."

The top vision statement for the company on Meyer Building's website is to achieve "strategic and sustainable growth that increases our impact for the Kingdom of God." The Gerbers want every interaction to be impactful for both business and for their relationships, to help others and themselves grow as people.

"Ultimately we want to better people by their connection and interactions with Meyer Building," Jason said.

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Above, Jason Gerber and Erin Prible, executive director of the Chamber of Commerce celebrate the award. (Photo by Jonathan Snyder)

Assistant principal

(Continued from Page 1)

vice.

"It was so neat to watch him grow from that first year teacher to where he is today," Baker said. "He's grown into one of the strongest teachers in the building. Students want to be a part of his class. He's a team leader ... and he has just become an extremely valuable part of our team."

The board also approved a resolution to transfer all funds from the Curricular Materials Fund to the Education Fund. The Indiana General Assembly recently enacted an act that requires schools to transition those funds and deactivate the Curricular Materials Fund. Furthermore, a monthly transfer from the Education Fund to the Operations Fund was

also approved by the board. Additional transfers to balance different line items were also approved by the board.

Yates announced that board reorganization and a Board of Finance meeting will occur in their Jan. 13 meeting. Additionally, the board:

- Approved BHS guidance secretary Gwen Craighead's resignation at the end of the 2024-2025 school year.
- Terminated ISS teacher Patricia Gay Schoeff, effective Nov. 15.
- Approved employment recommendations for Mitchel Bertsch as special purpose bus driver; Caleb Geimer as middle school boys' swimming coach; Ryan Thomas as volunteer high school wrestling assistant Coach; Ben Ramseyer as volunteer high school boys track assistant coach; Grace

Moser as high school volleyball assistant coach; Adam King as high school weight room supervisor; and Cindy Smith-Gagle, Alisha Lee and Wendy Kaehr as substitute teachers. The board also announced their intent to employ a middle school special education instructional assistant.

- Accepted donations of \$180 from Keven Shutt for high school intense intervention and life skills class; \$660 from Adams Wells Manufacturing Alliance for the elementary school robotics club; \$200 from PMB Mechanical to the wrestling program; \$200 from Tyeger's Pizza for the eSports program; and hot chocolate packets from Peyton's Northern for elementary school classroom holiday parties.

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Highway garage

(Continued from Page 1)

the following day. "This guy saved us thousands of dollars," Gerber emphasized.

Also during the commissioner meeting, the board approved multiple board appointments for 2025.

New appointments were Lisa McCormick to the Community Corrections Advisory Board, replacing Commissioner Jeff Stringer, and David Ferguson to the Huntington Public Library Board, replacing Jessica Mankey. Additionally, Tim Rohr and Tyson Brooks were

re-appointed to the Area Plan Commission among five applicants. Bruce Stinson and Andy Stoller were also re-appointed to the Regional Sewer District among four applicants.

The following appointments were renewed: Bonar as highway supervisor, Bobbie Studebaker as courthouse custodian and ADA coordinator, Ted Storer as county attorney, Nate Whitacre as county engineer, Roger Richardson as IT director, Dewey Randall as veterans officer, Mike Miller as 911

director, Bill Dowty to the cemetery board, Dr. Mary Donley to a one-year term on the health board, Steve Bales to a four-year term on the health board, Ben Beer to a three-year term on the Property Tax Board of Appeals, Nathan Shrock to a one-year term on the PTABOA, Robert Mautz and Mike Shumm to the Rockcreek Conservancy District, Laura Dalrymple, Shari Duncan and Diana Collins to the sick bank committee, and Michelle Blount and Jon Winne to the Wells County Convention and Vis-

itors Commission.

Due to Commissioner Mike Vanover's absence, the board postponed appointments for the Emergency Management Director, Alcoholic Beverage Commission, and a second appointment to the Cemetery Board. They also did not vote on appointments the commissioners currently occupy on the 911 Advisory Board, Economic Development Commission, EMA Board and EMS Board.

The commissioners will meet next at 5 p.m. on Jan. 6.

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Waiting list for services

(Continued from Page 1)

sity funding to child care employees explicitly and raise the eligibility level — moves that came without extra funding.

More than 70,000 children have benefited from CCDF while nearly 8,000 children enrolled in pre-K programming, according to the agency.

Waitlists can serve two important functions, said Sam Snideman, the vice president of government relations for United Way of Central Indiana. Firstly, they can manage scarce resources but waitlists also signal to decision makers "how much demand there is for a particular good or service."

Child care is one of the three priorities for the organization ahead of the 2025 legislative session, alongside action on housing and medical debt. Roughly six out of every ten children who need child care have access, with a shortage of services that costs the state an estimated \$4.2 billion annually in missed tax revenue and employee shortages.

"... child care and pre-K services are really critical to the ability of the adults in a child's life to work and to be economically productive, which means it's also critical to the proper functioning of the broader macro economy," Snideman said. "When we don't have access ... we're really holding back — not only these kids and the sort of educational development that happens in those settings — but also the economic opportunity and prosperity for their families."

The legislature took limited, non-budgetary action earlier this year but Snideman said early childhood education advocates always knew 2025 would be a big year.

"So much of the American Rescue Plan and other COVID-era supports from the federal government were

going away," Snideman said. "We've been using those funds in ways that sort of supported expansion and enrollment ... to support and stabilize the sector from the provider perspective and from the family perspective."

Budget writers have warned that funds will be tighter during the 2025 session, in which the General Assembly will craft Indiana's next two-year budget. But Snideman said legislators will have to provide adequate resources for child care funding, "and that is not going to be cheap."

Building upon a pilot model from earlier this year, the group also proposes pursuing a "tri-share" model in which the government, employers and individuals split the costs of child care. Michigan and a pilot in northeast Indiana have been early pilots of this model and shown some preliminary success, Snideman noted, but Indiana's model could be tailored for specific economic groups or sectors.

Dozens of Hoosiers have publicly shared their waiting list experiences, including elderly Hoosiers who spent down their financial resources in order to qualify for Medicaid. Needing help and anticipating Medicaid assistance, they moved into assisted living — only for the bill to come due as they sat on the waitlist.

In addition to providing for assisted living expenses, the Medicaid waiver also covers other home- and community-based services, such as attendant care, adult day care, home-delivered meals or structured family care.

A coalition pointed to the recent reorganization of Medicaid services, including the introduction of managed care, and the program's \$1 billion shortfall. In return, FSSA made a series of unpopular decisions to curtail certain services and

introduced the Medicaid waiver waitlist.

"... the State made abrupt and drastic changes to the Indiana Home and Community-Based Waivers — now called the Pathways Waiver and the Health and Wellness Waiver — neglecting to consult key stakeholders and failing to consider the short-term and long-term effects on Hoosiers and the Indiana State budget," the coalition of organizations said in a

release last week.

Members include AARP Indiana, The Arc of Indiana, the Indiana Assisted Living Association, LeadingAge Indiana, elder law attorneys and more.

Some Hoosiers have turned to the courts for relief, accusing the state of "failing its mandatory duty under federal law to ensure" that such services are available in a class action lawsuit filed in October.

Weather

Tuesday, December 17, 2024

(24-hour observations at 11:20 p.m. Monday)

High: 57; Low: 40; Precipitation: 0.28 inches of rain

Wabash River Level (at the Main Street bridge): 1.17 feet at 9:45 p.m. Monday

Wells County forecast

Today: Mostly sunny, with a high near 43. West wind 10 to 15 mph, with gusts as high as 20 mph.

Tonight: A 30% chance of rain after 4 a.m. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 31. Calm wind becoming east around 5 mph after midnight.

Wednesday: A 40% chance of rain before 1 p.m. Mostly cloudy, with a high near 40. Light and variable wind becoming northwest 5 to 10 mph in the afternoon. Winds could gust as high as 20 mph.

Wednesday Night: Mostly cloudy, with a low around 26. Northwest wind 5 to 10 mph, with gusts as high as 20 mph.

Thursday: Mostly cloudy, with a high near 37. **Thursday Night:** A slight chance of rain and snow before 1 a.m., then a chance of snow. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 27. Chance of precipitation is 40%.

Friday: A 40% chance of snow, mainly before 1 p.m. Mostly cloudy, with a high near 34.

Friday Night: Mostly cloudy, with a low around 20.

Saturday: A 20% chance of snow. Partly sunny, with a high near 29.

Saturday Night: Partly cloudy, with a low around 14.

Sunday: Mostly sunny, with a high near 27.

Sunday Night: Partly cloudy, with a low around 17.



OBITUARIES

Janice M. Uptgraft, 91

Janice M. Uptgraft, 91, of Bluffton, passed away Monday morning, Dec. 16, 2024, at Heritage Pointe in Warren.



Janice was born in Archbold, Ohio, on Sept. 6, 1933, to Logan and Mildred (Rupp) Houchin. She married Jack W. Uptgraft in Bluffton on Oct. 24, 1952. He preceded her in death on July 21, 2015.

Janice was a 1951 graduate of Bluffton High School and was a receptionist for Caylor-Nickel Clinic in Bluffton for 25 years until retiring in 1998. She and Jack loved to travel and spent 12 years wintering in Texas.

Survivors include two daughters, Deb (Bill) Pursley and Jody (Randy) Gentis, both of Bluffton; three grandsons, Ryan (Leah) Pursley, Randy (Gwen) Pursley and Cory (Aimee) Lucabaugh; a step-grandson, Ryan (Lindy) Gentis; five great-granddaughters, Renner Pursley, Faren Pursley, Emery Pursley, Oaklee Pursley and Adleigh Lucabaugh; and two step great-granddaughters, Lily and Ella Gentis.

Private family services will be held at Six Mile Cemetery in Bluffton at a later date.

Goodwin – Cale & Harnish Memorial Chapel in Bluffton has been entrusted with the arrangements.

Online condolences may be shared at www.goodwin-caleharnish.com.



Top notch bus drivers

Norwell bus drivers received a collective “Bus Driver of the Year” recognition this year for their collaboration and cooperation this semester. (Photo submitted)

Police Notebook

INCIDENTS

City:

Friday, 4:35 p.m., Cherry and Oak streets. Verbal altercation over driving behavior, both drivers warned.

Friday, 4:44 p.m., Elm and Bennett streets. Large pot hole in the roadway. Street Department notified and traffic cones placed.

Friday, 8:44 p.m., 700 block of West Wiley Avenue. Caller reported people with flashlights making loud noises in a dark house. Two individuals advised they were renovating for a friend.

Friday, 9:58 p.m., 500 block of South Marion Street. Report of threatening messages.

Friday, 11:19 p.m., Lancaster Park. Advised subject the park closes at 11 p.m.

Saturday, 1:54 a.m., Main Street and Sutton Circle. Car vs. deer, report to follow.

Saturday, 4:23 a.m., Pak A Sak South. Crash, report to follow.

Saturday, 4:24 a.m., Superior Auto Inc. Drugs found in repossessed in vehicle.

Saturday, 10:23 a.m., Dollar General. Vehicle blocking delivery door.

Sunday, 12:28 a.m., Airplane Express. Two juveniles given ride.

Sunday, 2:02 a.m., 200 block of East Townley Street. Bat in home, caught and released outside.

Sunday, 5:31 p.m., 400 block of West South Street. Verbal altercation between neighbors.

Sunday, 6:06 p.m., 300 block of Arrowhead Trail. Welfare check, two arrested on warrant.

Sunday, 7:34 p.m., 500 block of South Marion Street. Caller observed male on bicycle stop by car, may

have done something to car. Sunday, 7:47 p.m., 500 block of South Marion Street. Caller reported man popped car’s tires.

Sunday, 9:20 p.m., 500 block of South Marion Street. Caller reported male slashed remaining car tires, left on bike.

Sunday, 11:26 p.m., YMCA. Report of man walking through area with flashlight and yelling things, possibly hallucinating. Unable to locate.

Monday, 3:16 a.m., 20/20 Custom Molded Plastics. Report of employee under the influence of drugs, on break in vehicle. No marijuana odor observed.

Monday, 10:08 a.m., Wells County Jail. Report of a stolen vehicle.

Monday, 10:47 a.m., 800 block of Westfield Drive. Caller reported an unknown vehicle left his carport. Vehicle towed.

Monday, 11:21 a.m., 200 block of North Oak Street. Report of possible break-in.

Monday, 11:45 a.m., 300 block of North Williams Street. Report of identity theft.

County: Friday, 3:03 p.m., 9000 N 500 W, Markle. Report of a possible fraudulent check.

Friday, 8:25 p.m., Wabash at Johnson streets, Bluffton. Vehicle observed running red light, traffic stop initiated. Marijuana smell observed and driver admitted to having “roach” in center console. Driver exhibited some signs of intoxication in a field sobriety test and then received a chemical test at Bluffton Regional Medical Center. Toby Thomas Morrison Jr., 46, Bluffton, was arrested for possession of marijuana, a Class B mis-

demeanor, operating with a controlled substance in the body, a Class C misdemeanor, and operating while intoxicated endangerment, a Class A misdemeanor. Bond set at \$3,000.

Saturday, 11:38 a.m., Washington and Matthews streets, Bluffton. Citation issued for speeding.

Saturday, 12:05 p.m., U.S. 224 and C.R. 500 W, Markle. Citation issued for speeding.

Saturday, 12:36 p.m., C.R. 300 N and Meridian Road, Bluffton. Citation issued for speeding.

Saturday, 12:40 p.m., River Terrace Drive, Bluffton. Woman reported her father had not responded to her text the prior day and was not answering the door, both unusual behaviors. Maintenance let officer in and the man was found deceased. Man had pre-existing health conditions and nothing appeared suspicious.

Saturday, 3:15 p.m., 6277 E 100 S, Bluffton. Deer permit issued.

Saturday, 6:13 p.m., C.R. 1100 S and S.R. 3, Montpelier. Vehicle returned to a suspended driver, traffic stop initiated. Driver released from the scene, but warrant requested for her arrest.

Saturday, 7:47 p.m., Main and Riley streets, Bluffton. Vehicle observed traveling 52 in a 40 mph zone, traffic stop initiated. Driver Jorge Garcia, 44, Fort Wayne, was arrested for operating a vehicle without ever receiving a license, a Class C misdemeanor. Booked and released. He was also cited for speeding.

Saturday, 9:16 p.m., Main Street and Dustman Road, Bluffton. Vehicle plate

returned to an unlicensed driver, traffic stop initiated. Driver Andrew Larreal, 27, Bluffton, was arrested for operating a vehicle without ever receiving a license, a Class C misdemeanor. Booked and released.

Sunday, 5:18 a.m., 4000 S Hoosier Highway, Bluffton. Officer dispatched in reference to a 911 hang-up. At the scene, a woman with several wounds reported that Travis Dewayne Beeks, 35, Bluffton, had beaten her. Beeks, who reportedly had blood on his hands, denied the claims and said it was another man who had injured her while dangling drugs over her. The woman denied any drug involvement, but several paraphernalia were found in her bag and in the home. Beeks was arrested for domestic battery, a Class A misdemeanor. Bond set at \$25,000. A warrant was requested for the woman’s arrest related to the drug paraphernalia.

Sunday 6:53 p.m., C.R. 450 E and 100 N, Bluffton. Car vs. deer.

Sunday, 8:15 p.m., C.R. 900 S and 600 E, Bluffton. Caller reported her vehicle had slid off the roadway earlier. She didn’t have any vehicle damage to report, but wanted the ditch evaluated. Just ruts in the field, no further action taken.

Ossian: Sunday, 10:11 p.m., 5000 N 450 E, Ossian. Report of threats.

Accidents: Saturday, 7:25 p.m., C.R. 100 N at 300 W, Rockford. Jacqueline Niver, 59, Warren, was driving a 2002 Chevrolet Cavalier eastbound on C.R. 100 N and looked down to grab a cigarette. When she looked up,

a stopped 2021 Chevrolet Tahoe driven by Bruce L. Raber, 73, Bluffton, was in her lane and she was unable to avoid collision. Raber advised he had stopped to check his mailbox. Both vehicles were towed. Damage exceeded \$10,000.

ARRESTS: Gene Marie McClelland II, 49, Bluffton; compulsory school attendance for full-term, a Class B misdemeanor, and neglect of a dependent, a Level 6 felony. Bond set at \$10,000.

Ronald Lee Furry, 67, Bluffton; public intoxication, a Class B misdemeanor, and making a prohibited 911 call, a Class A misdemeanor.

Bond set at \$1,500. Joslyn Ray Rasnick, 21, Garrett; possession of a syringe, a Level 6 felony, and possession of a controlled substance, a Level 6 felony. Bond set at \$10,000.

Philip E. Leonard
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Governor-elect debuts full cabinet, defends decision to add government positions

By WHITNEY DOWNARD

Indiana Capital Chronicle

Indiana’s next governor has added a layer of management with his incoming cabinet, with just two of the eight members serving as agency heads in addition to their secretarial duties. Other positions in the cabinet include the adjutant general of the Indiana National Guard, the superintendent of the Indiana State Police and the lieutenant governor.

All eight will oversee several agencies and report directly to Gov.-elect Mike Braun. In contrast, Gov. Eric Holcomb had two dozen members in his cabinet, including direct reports from agency heads.

“So much of the inefficiency in government is when it sprawls and you don’t have any real good management structure to it,” Braun said at an Indianapolis steakhouse on Friday.

He likened it to adopting a new technology with a steep up-front cost.

“Sometimes you might be spending a little more on the structure of something — and I don’t view it as this being the case — because I can see how savings are going to immediately flow

from it,” Braun said. “... the goal is going to be, as I’ve said many times, to show how you can do more with less. Government always wants to get more done; they want more to do it.”

Incoming members of Gov.-elect Mike Braun’s cabinet listen to Braun on Dec. 13, 2024 in Indianapolis. From left: Sec. of Transportation and Infrastructure

Matthew Ubelhor, Indiana State Police Superintendent Anthony Scott and Secretary of Commerce David Adams. (Whitney Downard/Indiana Capital Chronicle)

“That’s not the real world. It doesn’t work that way and that’s not called productivity,” Braun continued.

Cabinet members would be “entrepreneurial and

accessible,” though Braun didn’t clarify if each would be able to hire their own staff — which could add more government positions.

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A holiday hiccup. Festive fail in '24 but a Christmas comeback in '25

The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

That nugget of wisdom adapted from a line in "To a Mouse" by Robert Burns came to mind this weekend as we were driving home and admiring some of the beautiful Christmas lights in our neighborhood.

We had the Christmas music turned up as we applauded from the car so many of our neighbor's efforts this year to spread some joy — from the festive green and red flood lightbulbs illuminating several houses to the set of three light-up glittering reindeer a few houses down.

We like to decorate outside every year as well and had planned to put up some lights and decorate the small spruce tree in our front yard like we've done every year since we moved here.

This year, however, you might mistake our place for being more like ole' Ebenezer's instead of Clark Griswold's.

We didn't get the lights up.

We didn't get the tree decorated.

The 3.5-foot yuletide LED golden retriever in a gift box holiday yard decoration that I planned to buy and put in the middle of the front yard is still sitting on the store shelf.

And those flood lights we talked about adding this year didn't make it from the Amazon warehouse to our front door, as I never got around to ordering them.

We did manage to put in green and red light bulbs on our outdoor post light and outdoor garage wall lights, so perhaps we're not as bad as Ebenezer.

The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

We were out of town a couple of weekends and missed out on some great weather to do our outdoor decorating. The plan, however, was to decorate two weekends ago.

While we anticipated those out-of-town hiccups with our schedule, we didn't count on the pharynx frenzy that would go on for more than a week — sending both my wife and me to the clinic and foiling our outdoor decorating this year.

While I have never swallowed sandpaper, I think now I know what it would feel like — and it's not something I'd recommend.

A nasty case of strep throat made its way to the Peeper house causing an inferno in my esophagus. I don't think I have had strep throat since I was a boy, and I hope I'll never experience it again.

While venturing out in the colder-than-normal weather that hit northeast Indiana last week to get the lights up didn't happen, we tried to make up for it by doing a bit more decorating inside this year.

On the positive side, we're both healthy again and full of ideas for how to decorate outside next year to spread a bit more Christmas joy than we did this year.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

jdpeeper2@hotmail.com



Justin Peeper



Free speech: why a tech titan backed Trump

Why did Marc Andreessen — inventor of the first internet web browser, and perhaps the prime venture capitalist in Silicon Valley today — switch from his longstanding support of the Democratic Party and back President-elect Donald Trump this year?

Because, in his view, the Democrats who claim to be the great scourge of "disinformation" are threatening to embed disinformation in the bedrock of society. At least that's my interpretation of Andreessen's comments in a wide-ranging interview with The Free Press cofounder Bari Weiss.

"My concern is that the censorship and political control of AI is a thousand times more dangerous than censorship and political control of social media — maybe a million times more dangerous," Andreessen, a prime innovator of artificial intelligence, told Weiss. "The thing with AI is, I think AI is going to be the control layer for everything in the future — how the health care system works, how the education system works, how the government works. So that if AI is woke, biased, censored, politically controlled, you are in a hyper-Orwellian, China-style, social credit system nightmare."

Like fellow tech titan Elon Musk, Andreessen has come to see the Democrats as "the ones who are trying to silence free speech." However, unlike many Trump supporters, he does not fasten upon the obvious partisan example: Secretary of State Antony Blinken's 2020 campaign enlistment of 51 current or former intelligence officials to depict Hunter Biden's laptop as bearing "the hallmarks of Russian disinformation."

That Democratic disinformation operation suppressed facts about Biden family corruption during the campaign year, but not forever, as President Joe Biden's pardon of his son showed.

Andreessen is concerned less about transitory partisan finagling and more about possibly permanent suppressions of truth. An example he cites is the claim that "the COVID lab leak hypothesis was 'misinformation' and broadly censored on social media."

I have written often about the lab leak hypothesis and how denigration of it was concocted by former National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci and former National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins.

Starting in February 2020, they conspired to get colleagues who considered the lab leak likely to write a paper disparaging that theory and endorsing the idea that the virus came from a live animal market. No evidence of such transmission has been found, and presumably, Fauci and Collins' control over millions of dollars in research funding helped persuade the authors to change their minds. After publication, Fauci airily referred the article to the press as if he had nothing to do with it.

Establishment press outfits were happy to play along, characterizing the lab leak theory as "already debunked" (The Washington Post) or a "fringe theory" (The New York Times). The latter outlet's lead COVID-19 reporter offhandedly referred to its "racist roots." Facebook and pre-Musk Twitter, now X, followed the cues and suppressed the lab leak theory even as they suppressed criticism of masking protocols and

school closures.

By March 2023, the Energy Department joined the FBI in concluding that the virus likely resulted from a lab leak. They were bolstered by multiple articles by former Times science writer Nicholas Wade, and by Matt Ridley and Alina Chan's book, "Viral."

Finally, this month, a detailed report by the House Oversight Committee not only endorses the lab leak theory as the most likely explanation of the virus but also, as Ridley wrote in The Telegraph, "lays out in gobsmacking detail just how much senior officials allegedly have schemed to prevent information emerging."

What they were covering up, it becomes plain now, is that Fauci was commissioning the Wuhan laboratory to conduct gain-of-function research, making the virus more contagious to humans, presumably to develop means of defense. The report explains in painstaking detail how Fauci, in testimony before Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), used a misleading definition when he vehemently denied authorizing gain-of-function research.

One can argue the attempted coverup by Fauci and others ultimately failed. One can argue further that, unlike the Hunter Biden laptop coverup, this was not necessarily a partisan operation: It began during the Trump presidency and was uncovered in part by actions of the Biden administration.

However, one must also add that the scientists who led the coverup retained the capacity to shape pandemic policy, pressing successfully for measures that proved to be harmful or unnecessary, such as school closures, masking for children, and vaccine requirements for those with natural immunity from previous infection.

Another thing one must add: The press and social media billionaires who went along with the scientists' speech suppression acted on the assumption that they were frustrating the intentions of Trump and his supporters, whom they continued — and continue — to regard as something like Hitler and Nazis. Any evidence in favor of things the Trump side was for, the media outlets felt an obligation to suppress.

For Andreessen, the key moment came after Jon Stewart went on Stephen Colbert's show for an eight-minute segment in which he pointed out that it "literally cannot be a coincidence that you have the Wuhan institute of bat viruses," as he told Weiss.

After that, he said, "I was in a discussion at one of the big internet companies, where the discussion was like, 'Did you see the Jon Stewart thing? Ha ha. That was really funny. I guess we should stop censoring the lab leak theory now. Ha ha.' And literally, they stop censoring it that day."

So his theory seems to be that if you want free expression and exchange of ideas in an AI world, it's better to install a president such as Trump, whom the great establishments of government, journalism and academe will strive to rebut, rather than a Democrat whose comforting presence will leave them inclined to accept any convenient untruth.

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Michael Barone

Letters to the Editor

Onward Central! Onward Central!

Congratulations to the Adams Central Flying Jets football team for winning the Class 2A State Championship over the Thanksgiving weekend! Quite a feat after losing the last three state finals games to Indianapolis Lutheran in 1A and being moved up to 2A.

Something like this doesn't happen too often for the 6 bi-county teams in any sport. The last I can remember was Belmont winning state football in 2008, and Adams Central in 2000.

I was hoping to see a blurb in the Banner, but nothing. Instead, we get Formula 1 racing and Cleveland Guardian stories. A recent December 7 article of the Southern Wells v AC boy's basketball

game was barely 2 lines long and only listed the score and scorers for Southern Wells, and no box score.

This is not about Adams Central. It is about the kids and common community of Adams and Wells counties. As a high school sports fan, I am always happy to support local teams doing well in the state tournaments. This includes South Adams (AC rival) in the 2020 state football finals, and Norwell (AC rival) in both boys and girls basketball recently.

Let's do better, News-Banner, in supporting the kids and community of both Adams and Wells counties.

MICHAEL NELSON
Bluffton resident
ACHS Graduate

We are a Wells County newspaper and our focus is on the 49 varsity Wells County teams, not to mention the middle school teams and other local sports. While we realize there are a number of AC fans in Wells County, we don't claim that we cover Adams County sports which would be nice, but not realistic.

We too were disappointed that we couldn't get any coverage at all through our membership in The Associated Press. Historically, they have provided coverage of these championship games but for reasons still unclear, they did not this year. Nor could we, at the last hour, find any information on the IHSAA website.

We offer our congratulations to the Adams Central Flying Jets on their historic win.

Doug Brown, President and Publisher

Submit your Letters to the Editor via: • Our website link (Submit your Letter) • E-Mail: email@news-banner.com • Mail: PO Box 436, Bluffton IN 46714 • Drop-off: 125 N. Johnson St., Bluffton. All letters must be signed and must include a phone number or address in case verification is desired. Letters are edited for brevity and clarity. Letters must be no more than 500 words. Please mark your correspondence as a "Letter to the Editor," or if you wish to express an opinion to us but do not want it published, please mark as "Not for Publication."

The News-Banner

(USPS 059-200)

Evening News est. 1892 • Evening Banner est. 1899 • Consolidated 1929

News-Banner Publications, Inc.

George B. Witwer, Chairman of the Board • Doug Brown, President, Publisher • Dianne Witwer, Secretary/Treasurer

Periodicals Postage Paid at Bluffton, IN 46714. Published every day except Sundays and principal holidays at 125 N. Johnson St., Bluffton IN 46714, Post Office Box 436

Holly Gaskill, Editor
Mark Miller, Opinion Page Editor

Opinions expressed on this page do not necessarily represent the views of this newspaper.

Other Opinions

Assad's downfall and the Middle East's future

Bashar al-Assad's downfall came not with a bang but a whimper. The Syrian dictator reportedly fled his home in the wake of a blitzkrieg advance by a coalition of anti-government rebels. By Sunday morning he was gone — leaving armed groups as the country's dominant political players. A spirit of anti-Assad sentiment surged across Syria, manifesting itself through displays of both celebration and defiance. The question now is whether this unleashed energy — brutally suppressed by fear and authoritarian control — will become a unifying force in building a new nation or, rather, a precursor to deeper divisions.

The fall of the House of Assad, which has ruled Syria for more than half a century, should be a warning to dictatorial regimes. Mr Assad's departure underscores a broader truth: societies cannot indefinitely tolerate systemic abuses, such as state-sponsored propaganda, corruption and violence. The fish rots from the head down. Mr Assad's Syrian state collapsed from within, having spent more than a decade pursuing a reign of terror that only fuelled the very unrest it sought to suppress. The regime's collapse raises pressing questions about Syria's future. With weak institutions and a frail civil society, the risk of

disintegration looms large.

Syria's prospects depend on both internal and external forces, and notably on Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former al-Qaida offshoot turned moderate Islamist faction. Credited with Mr Assad's overthrow, Mr Jolani drove the strategic shift from jihadism to national liberation. In 2021, he declared that he had no intention of waging war against the west, and for the past five years he has overseen a semi-technocratic government in Idlib province for 3 million people under Turkish protection. HTS has avoided extreme sharia interpretations, but remains designated a terrorist group. Critics say it is corrupt and intolerant of dissent. However, Mr Jolani's outreach to tribes, minorities and former foes has bolstered his national legitimacy, while even Moscow — once Mr Assad's protector — may engage to secure its military bases.

Mr Jolani relies on allies, including the Turkish-backed militia groups collectively called the Syrian National Army, which has a pluggish reputation. Re-elected on a pledge to return 3 million refugees, Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, seeks stability in Syria, but fears that

US-backed Kurdish regions in Syria may stir autonomy demands at home. Israel sees an Islamist-led Damascus as a threat, but finds comfort in Hezbollah's inability to defend the Assad regime, as it prioritises the defence of its Lebanese bases. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with their financial resources, could aid Syria's reconstruction, but their past support for Mr Assad complicates their role. Encouragingly, Arab leaders said they would seek to avoid reigniting a 13-year-old civil war after talks in Qatar.

Syria will never be the same. Ordinary Syrians have endured unimaginable horrors under the Assad regime. But they have written this chapter of history. Their newfound freedom is shadowed by the daunting task of rebuilding lives and infrastructure. A shared hope to avoid violent vendettas must guide efforts toward a just settlement. The Syrian people were often forsaken. In this moment of fragile hope, the world must not fail them again. A concerted international effort toward political stability, reconciliation and reconstruction is essential to ensure their sacrifices lead to a lasting peace.

THE GUARDIAN

Distributed by the Associated Press

Gloria shares her family Christmas traditions

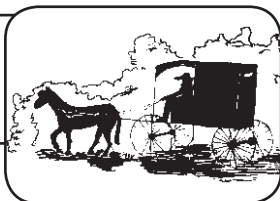
Good morning from a quiet Yoder household. It's only my little early bird that's awake with me. When Jesse was an infant, he had already figured out that morning was his time to be awake.

Last night, the children and I all gathered in a circle to open a large brown envelope from a reader friend, Mrs. Young, in Delaware, Ohio. This time, it was Joshua who opened it up. His eyes sparkled as he giggled and cut until he got it. An array of school papers that reflected Mrs. Young's years of teaching, along with stickers, calendars, and chewing gum, awaited inside. "Mom, may I open this packet of gum and place it on the shelf for Sunday morning?" Elijah wanted to know.

The children have adapted to our Sunday morning policy of each child getting a piece of gum after being dressed and combed, ready to leave for church. They were impressed with a new kind for next Sunday morning. Along with this, they know they won't get gum through the week, that is, unless Aunt Gracie comes along. They know they'll get some every time she comes to our house.

The Amish Cook

by Gloria Yoder



While Joshua was trying to get his package open and his older siblings sat there thinking how fast they could have opened it, he finally got it to where he pulled out a letter from the side. "It's for mom," Austin quipped.

I read it as Joshua kept working on the package. She wanted to know if I could share more on how Christmas is celebrated in our culture.

Of course, I'd love to share. So, my disclaimer will be that I won't be able to speak for all plain people, or even Amish folks for that matter, so I'll just speak for ourselves here in Southern Illinois.

My mother was the one who made Christmas special. Even today it is a special holiday, not because it is extravagant or that we have much ado, but simply because it's a special time to rejoice. There's good food, games for the children, Christmas songs, and the

like. My mother takes her grandchildren Christmas caroling in the neighborhood just before Christmas much like she did with her cousins when she was a little girl.

As a little girl myself, there was nothing quite like Grandma's packages. Moving 400 miles from her and Grandpa was a dramatic change. Our visits were few and far between. Etched in my memory were all of us as a family gathered around a big cardboard box. Lifting the flaps, we'd find carefully wrapped packages with our names written on them. The love that went into those packages could clearly be felt from 400 miles away. Life changes, but that love remains.

Now that our children are grown and most of us have families, I see Mom with a joy and dedication that touches my heart as she prepares for her children to come home for

Christmas. We live in four different states, including Alaska, so those times of all gathering do not happen every year, thus making time together even more precious when it does happen.

Then there's Dad. As children, we all know how Dad is out for the ultimate good in our lives, no matter what. His strength of love has been demonstrated in many aspects over the years. One statement he has made numerous times has held my attention in a special way. He'd say, "I am fine to have my children scattered all over the world, as long as they are all living for the Lord, and being a light to Him." Dad's love and protectiveness for his family won't keep his children from going where God would send them. Even as a widow, I cherish Dad's way of caring about me as his daughter and family, then ultimately trusting God with our lives and future. He has shown me the true depth of love in action and the love that releases.

This Christmas season, I got an urge to send cards and personal letters to our many friends and supporters. I was saddened when I saw that I could not make it happen.

Please know that your cards, letters, and support do make a difference. Also, may you be incredibly blessed for all the prayers offered on our behalf that only God knows about.

Lastly, I'll share a recipe Daniel helped Julia make when she was three years old, and Austin was a newborn. With all of us being avid peanut butter lovers these didn't last long. We now prefer using natural sugar substitutes and a homemade chocolate.

Peanut Butter Balls

- 1 cup butter
- 2 cups peanut butter
- 1 ½ cups powdered sugar
- 1 ½ pound milk chocolate coating

Cream together butter and peanut butter. Add powdered sugar and mix well. Roll into balls, your choice of size; I prefer small ones with the children. Place onto a cookie sheet or flat-bottomed container of any kind, freeze for one hour or until they're set. Next dip in chocolate, one at a time. Place in wax paper-lined container. Chill and enjoy!
Yields about 10 dozen.



Blessing Tree Donation

Southern Wells Community Schools recently helped donate items for the Markle Church of Christ Blessing Tree Program. Several different Southern Wells organizations, along with elementary and high school staff, bought gifts for the Blessing Tree Program to help needy families this Christmas. Pictured are Rhonda O'Reilly with the Markle Church, and sixth graders Olivia Hoffacker, Elise Schneider, Mrs. Hoffacker, Braelyn Boyer, Jessa Batten, and Rowan Quickery loading up all the gifts. (Photo provided)

Wild Zoo Wonderland at Fort Wayne Children's Zoo

Visits to the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo during December include story times, visits with Santa and favorite animals.

Visiting dates include the weekends of: Dec. 6-8, 13-15, 20-23, 26-30, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. each day.

For more information about the family fun events go to kidszoo.org.

Free tickets to Philharmonic's Family Series concerts

Thanks to a generous gift from an anonymous donor admission to the Family Series concerts by the Fort Wayne Philharmonic will be free for the next three seasons.

These sensory-friendly concerts are geared for kids ages 2 to 12 with Troy Webdell conducting.

The 2024-2025 series includes:
We Are One: Jan. 25, 11 a.m., Auer Performance Hall
Across the Stars: Feb. 22 at 11 a.m. at the Auer Performance Hall.

Young Persons Guide to the Orchestra: March 22 at 11 a.m. at the Auer Performance Hall

To secure free tickets go to tickets@fwphil.org or call 260-422-4226.

Santa says ... Support your ho-ho-hometown!

Don't Forget Non-Profits

Some local organizations are focused not on selling products, but on improving the lives of disadvantaged community members. Non-profit groups, food banks and children advocacy organizations are all seeking help this holiday season.

And what they're asking for is simply a hand. They need more manpower to achieve their goals and spread the word on their efforts.



Lending Your Skill Set

Can you spare a few hours every weekend in December? You may be asked to run errands or visit with people. Maybe deliver food or products to clients across town.

Professionals in the creative services field can offer their skills free of charge as a holiday contribution. Developing a website, creating brochures or writing a mission statement for free can help your local group promote its missions.

Locals helping locals will strengthen the community this holiday season.

Food Donations

Why not spend your Christmas spreading some holiday cheer – and delicious food? You can spend some time cooking your favorite dish or baking some special cookies, then take them to your local food bank.

Your gesture will surely be appreciated by the hungry, as well as by the food bank staff. And it is a simple act of kindness that can be turned into a tradition, passed on to children or replicated by your friends and family members.

Charitable Contributions

You may find yourself short on time this holiday season, but maybe you have a few dollars to donate to a local organization. Your contribution could go a long way toward furthering the cause of a group near and dear to your heart.

And for that really hard-to-buy for person, perhaps they would appreciate a donation made in their name.

You can conveniently make online donations or in-person cash contributions. Either way, donating funds is a simple way to show your support while making a difference in the lives of those who need it.

Santa says ... Be sure to shop these businesses:

- ❄️ Above & Beyond Vehicle Reconditioning
- ❄️ Balance Massage Therapy & Body Works
- ❄️ Bluffton Tire
- ❄️ Moser & Son
- ❄️ Daniel's Jewelers
- ❄️ Mr Kool
- ❄️ Gerber Furniture
- ❄️ Northwood Computer
- ❄️ Habegger's ACE
- ❄️ Paddlefish
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Braun's cabinet

(Continued from Page 3)

He said each would have "a lot of latitude."

At the event, Braun assembled nearly every cabinet member — Jennifer-Ruth Green, the incoming public safety secretary, was still on a military assignment — and called the government positions "the most exciting team we've had in state government for a long, long time."

"We've reorganized the executive side to make it streamlined so it's going to emphasize transparency, results (and) accountability," Braun told reporters.

He recapped his one term in Congress, which culminated in a farewell speech last week, continuing his criticism of the federal government.

"Here you're going to see, I think, what government's supposed to be about," he said.

He also repeated his company's insurance "fix" to cap premiums in a high-deductible plan for his employees. Health care, he said, would be one of the hardest challenges to address, acknowledging a tight budget in the upcoming session.

He also vowed to collaborate with the state legislature "in a way that's probably never been done before" and continue to visit all 92 counties regularly.

Braun's incoming cabinet includes: Lisa Hershan, Secretary of Management and Budget and head of the Office of Management and Budget

Matthew Uebelhor, Secretary of Transportation and Infrastructure
Katie Jenner, Secretary of Education and head of the Department of Education

David Adams, Secretary of Commerce

Mike Speedy, Secretary of Business Affairs

Jennifer-Ruth Green, Secretary of Public Safety

Suzanne Jaworowski, Secretary of Energy and Natural Resources

Gloria Sachdev, Secretary of Health and Family Services

Anthony Scott, Superintendent of the Indiana State Police

Braun hasn't yet named an adjutant general.

Drone detectors in New Jersey have found 'little or no evidence' of wrongdoing, governor says

By DAVE COLLINS and MIKE CATALINI
Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — Drone-detecting devices deployed in New Jersey in the past week have found "little to no evidence" of anything nefarious or threatening, Gov. Phil Murphy said Monday as calls grew for action to address the mysterious nighttime sightings of suspected unmanned flights across the northeastern U.S.

Murphy told reporters in Trenton that there were 12 sightings of suspected drones in the state on Saturday and one on Sunday. He declined to go into detail about the detection equipment, but said it was powerful enough to disable the drones, although he added that is not legal on U.S. soil.

Murphy, a Democrat, echoed calls by state officials elsewhere for Congress to allow them to deal with drones. Nearly all the power now rests with the federal government.

"It is extraordinary to me that, that a nation as great as ours and as powerful as ours has the deficiencies that we have now seen in living color as it relates to drone incursions," Murphy said.

Federal officials, including Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, have repeatedly said there are no signs that any drone operators have shown bad intent, nor is there evidence of foreign involvement.

"There's no question that people are seeing drones," Mayorkas told ABC's George Stephanopoulos on Sunday. "But I want to assure the American public that we are on it. We are working in close coordination with state and local authorities."

But that hasn't reassured everyone. Conspiracy theories about foreign actors, the U.S. government and the "deep state," abound online, while elected officials concerned about threats to military bases, airports and other locations have increased their calls for federal officials to act.

The skeptics include

President-elect Donald Trump, who suggested Monday that "the government knows what is happening."

"Our military knows and our president knows and for some reason they want to keep people in suspense," Trump said. He refused to say whether he had been briefed on the drone sightings.

New Jersey Sen. Andy Kim, a Democrat, told The Associated Press that officials could do a better job helping the public to understand what is going on, especially when people wrongly conclude they are seeing unmanned aircraft.

"What the public could use is like walking through

that rather than just, you know, as a statement that says nothing, nothing to be concerned about," he said. "I think it's reached a level of just public attention that some greater level of depth is necessary."

Kim said he's heard no supporting evidence for the president-elect's statement Monday that information is being withheld and that a lack of faith in institutions is playing a key part in the saga.

"Nothing that I'm seeing, nothing that I've engaged in gives me any impression of that nature. But like, I get it, some people won't believe me, right? Because that's the level of distrust that we face."

Ukraine, U.S. say some North Korean troops have been killed fighting alongside Russian forces

By SAMYA KULLAB and TARA COPP
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's military intelligence agency and the Pentagon said Monday that some North Korean troops have been killed during combat against Ukrainian forces in Russia's Kursk border region.

These are the first reported casualties since the U.S. and Ukraine announced that North Korea had sent 10,000 to 12,000 troops to Russia to help it in the almost 3-year war.

Ukraine's military intelligence agency said around 30 North Korean troops were killed or wounded during battle with the Ukrainian army over the weekend.

The casualties occurred around three villages in Kursk, where Russia has for four months been trying to quash a Ukrainian incursion, the agency, known by its acronym GUR, said in a public post on the Telegram messaging app.

At least three North Korean servicemen went missing around another Kursk village, GUR said.

The White House also said it now believes North Korean troops are on the "front lines" of Russia's war and are "actively engaged in combat operations" against Ukraine.

National security spokesman John Kirby confirmed the assessment Monday after Ukraine's government said North Korean troops had moved from support roles into direct fighting on behalf of Russia. Kirby

said North Korean troops are taking casualties in the fighting and promised a strong U.S. and allied sanctions response to North Korea.

Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, told reporters that some North Korean troops have died in combat in Kursk but did not have a specific number of those killed or wounded. Those troops have primarily been used in an infantry role and started fighting in combat operations about a week ago, Ryder said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov referred questions to the Russian Defense Ministry, which didn't immediately comment.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has pledged unwavering support for Russia's full-scale invasion of its neighbor under a mutual defense pact.

The alliance gave a jolt to international relations, and Russian President Vladimir Putin said Monday that the planned deployment of U.S. intermediate-range missiles to Europe and Asia has brought new threats.

"In view of rising geopolitical tensions, we must take additional measures to ensure the security of Russia and our allies," Putin told a meeting with top military brass. "We are doing it accurately and in a balanced way to avoid being drawn into a full-scale arms race."

However, military analysts say the language barrier has bedeviled combat coordination between Russian and North Korean troops.

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Colts blame themselves for costly miscues, need solutions to salvage playoff hopes

By **MICHAEL MAROT**
AP Sports Writer
INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — One by one, the Indianapolis Colts took responsibility for the long list of embarrassments Sunday.



Wide receiver Michael Pittman Jr. regretted showing his frustration on the field. Rookie receiver Adonai Mitchell explained he never saw Broncos linebacker Nik Bonitto when he lobbed a fateful lateral across the field toward quarterback Anthony Richardson. And running back Jonathan Taylor apologized to his teammates for dropping the ball — literally and figuratively.

The explanations continued Monday when coach Shane Steichen told reporters he was ultimately responsible for the miscues that led to the devastating 31-13 loss at Denver.

“It comes down to consistency and it starts with myself,” Steichen said. “We’ve got to be consistent in everything we do. We’ve got to take care of the football moving forward because I thought our defense played a heck of a game.”

But it’s the lingering inconsistency that may wind up costing the Colts (6-8) a playoff spot.

Indy hasn’t had consecutive wins in two months. And while some growing pains are expected from a second-year quarterback such as Richardson, his play has varied wildly, sometimes from drive to drive or play to play.

And on Sunday, it wasn’t just Richardson’s two interceptions or Mitchell’s ill-advised throw that Bonitto turned into a game-changing touch-

down. Steichen blamed himself for trying to give his team a spark with the play call and putting Mitchell in a tough spot.

“It was there pretty much until (No.) 15 (Bonitto) turned into Ed Reed,” Mitchell said, referring to the ball-hawking Hall of Fame

why the offense, defense and special teams have not played well together all season. The loss to Denver was a perfect illustration. On a day the defense gave up only 10 points through three quarters, the offense essentially gave away 14 with the fumble return and Taylor’s drop.

Stock up

S Nick Cross. He’s having a breakout season in his third year. He has 130 tackles, after logging only 56 total in 2022 and 2023, the first sack of his career and against Denver he picked off his third pass of the season.

Stock down

Mitchell. The rookie has been criticized all year over a variety of issues. First, it was dropped passes. Then, it was questions about his route running. Now, he’s being asked about the decision to throw the ball.

Injuries

WR Alec Pierce left with a concussion and Steichen said he’s in the concussion protocol. ... The bigger questions continue to center on the offensive line. Pro Bowl center Ryan Kelly was not activated from injured reserve this week and even though backup Tanor Bortolini could have played, Steichen went with Danny Pinter at center anyway. The Colts also announced Saturday that RT Braden Smith has been placed on the reserve/non-football illness list, ending his season. Smith has been dealing with an undisclosed personal matter.

Next steps

Steichen is encouraging his team to stay hopeful that if it plays hard the next three weeks, it just might get the help it needs to make the playoffs for the first time since 2020. And if that doesn’t happen, he wants everyone to know there’s still plenty on the line this season.



Habegger earns first

Miken Habegger bowled in the Fort Wayne USBC Youth Tournament of Champions on Sunday, Dec. 15 at Pro Bowl West. He bowled an 885 securing him first place in the Division One Handicap Division and first place in the Division One Scratch Division. (Photo submitted)

Burrow keeps Bengals offense going in sloppy win over Titans



Joe Burrow

By **MITCH STACY**
AP Sports Writer

CINCINNATI (AP) — Joe Burrow keeps throwing touchdown passes and the Cincinnati Bengals have won two in a row for just the second time this season.

However, the star quarterback was far from happy with the effort.

“It was too sloppy, we had too many penalties, too many procedural penalties, I had too many turnovers,” Burrow said after Cincinnati beat the Tennessee

Titans 37-27 on Sunday. “It was just a frustrating day on offense.”

It certainly was a messy affair. There were myriad turnovers, including two interceptions thrown by Burrow, and penalties galore. The Bengals (6-8) were flagged 14 times.

The combined 10 turnovers were the most in an NFL game since 2007. And it was the first NFL game since 2000 to feature at least 10 turnovers and at least 25 penalties.

A meaningless touchdown for the Titans at the end of the game made it seem closer than it was. Cincinnati had carried a 17-point into the fourth quarter.

“To be honest with you, we weren’t playing good ball today,” running back Chase Brown said. “I mean, defense backed us up there a couple of times, got us back on the field. So big tribute to them. Outside of that, we could have been a lot better. We put some points on the board, but when we watch the film, there’s got to be a lot to learn from.”

The win kept the Bengals’ slim playoff hopes alive, but just barely. They would likely have to win their three remaining games and get a lot of help from other teams. They are on the bubble with two other 6-8 teams.

Burrow continues to have a terrific season whether the Bengals win or not. Against the Titans, he was 26 for 37 for 271 yards and three touchdowns. He became the fifth NFL quarterback with at least three touchdown passes in six consecutive games. He’s in good company. The others are Tom Brady (10 in 2007), Andrew Luck (8 in 2018), Peyton Manning (8 in 2004) and Dan Marino (7 from 1986-87). Burrow’s 36 touchdown passes this season broke his previous franchise record of 35 from 2022. ... WR Ja’Marr Chase became the first NFL receiver this season with 100 catches.

The 49ers suspend De’Vondre Campbell

By **JOSH DUBOW**
AP Pro Football Writer

SANTA CLARA, Calif. (AP) — The San Francisco 49ers suspended linebacker De’Vondre Campbell for the rest of the regular season after he refused to enter a game after losing his starting job.

General manager John Lynch announced the news on Monday that Campbell was suspended for three games for conduct detrimental to the team.

The news came four days after Campbell’s refusal to go into a game against the Los Angeles Rams was decried by coaches and teammates as a “selfish” act. Coach Kyle Shanahan said Friday that Campbell would no longer be part of the team, with the only question whether that would be by a suspension or an outright release.

The team opted for the suspension. The Collective Bargaining Agreement allows teams to suspend a player for up to four games without pay for conduct detrimental to the team and fine

them one week’s pay.

“I just lost all respect,” cornerback Deommodore Lenoir said Monday. “I’m a person that’s going 110% every play. ... I just feel like he’s a cancer to the team.”

Campbell makes about \$67,000 in base salary each week under the one-year \$5 million contract he signed in March. Campbell also will miss the chance to earn \$60,000 in weekly roster bonuses and the Niners could try to recoup about \$111,000 from Campbell’s signing bonus.

Had the 49ers waived Campbell, he would have had the opportunity to be claimed or sign with another team.

Campbell had started 12 of the first 13 games of the season and played 90% of defensive snaps for the 49ers but was benched Thursday night after Dre Greenlaw came back for his first game since tearing his left Achilles tendon in last season’s Super Bowl.

When the 49ers wanted to put Campbell in the game in the third quarter because

Greenlaw was sidelined with soreness in his Achilles tendon, Campbell refused, something Shanahan said has never happened to him in his time as a head coach or an assistant in the NFL.

Defensive end Nick Bosa said he got a sense of Campbell’s frustration before the game but didn’t say anything at the time.

“In the locker room before the game, I heard some complaining,” Bosa said. “I was going to say something but didn’t because I didn’t want to create more of a distraction. But I kind of felt it. I kind of saw the foreshadowing. I definitely didn’t think it was going to result in that.”

Bosa said he doesn’t regret not trying to make it an issue before the game because “if he was going to do that then he’s not the type of guy to be here.”



De’Vondre Campbell

Campbell walked off the field with a towel draped over his head and went into the locker room before the end of the game with the Rams that almost ended the 49ers’ playoff hopes. Shanahan said he didn’t send Campbell to

the locker room and didn’t know why he left the field.

Campbell’s decision left his teammates angered and bewildered after the game and that hadn’t changed a few days later. But Bosa said he doesn’t see Campbell’s actions as a reflection of a team that has lost its way.

“This locker room is great,” he said. “It’s always been great. But sometimes when you bring somebody who’s older in from a different place, you don’t know. He was a good dude. It’s not like I didn’t like him. But there’s no issues in this locker room.”

Eagles shove aside injuries, in-house dissent to celebrate 10-game win streak

By **DAN GELSTON**
AP Sports Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Jalen Hurts and Saquon Barkley both played through injuries that served more as minor inconveniences than long-term concerns for the Eagles.

Injuries heal. So, it turns out, do bruised egos and hard feelings caused by criticism and gossip spread not by fans, social media trolls or sports talk radio — but from inside Philadelphia’s locker room.

Hurts connected with wide receivers A.J. Brown and DeVonta Smith for touchdowns and the Eagles

put to rest any in-house dissent over their offense in Sunday’s 27-13 win over the Pittsburgh Steelers.

The Eagles (12-2) won their 10th straight game, a franchise record. A victory this weekend at Washington would give them the NFC East title, and they moved into a tie with Detroit for the best record in the conference.

With three games left, the No. 1 seed and a first-round bye are still in play. All they need to do is stay healthy.

Hurts said he played through a broken finger on his non-throwing hand while Barkley, the NFL’s rushing leader, said he

battled “a little something” against the Steelers that forced him to the medical tent.

When the Eagles are on the same page, injuries might be the only thing that can slow them down.

“I just felt extremely locked in and focused through the entire week, through what could have been a time where people could say, ‘What’s going on over in Philadelphia?’” coach Nick Sirianni said.

Smith and Brown both grumbled about the state of the passing game following a lackluster effort a week earlier against Carolina. Defensive end Brandon

Graham then suggested in a radio appearance there were problems between Hurts and Brown.

After they thumped Pittsburgh, the Eagles acted like one big happy family in the locker room.

“Behind closed doors, we talk about that, we called each other out,” Brown said. “That’s very uncomfortable. You don’t want to feel like you’re getting attacked. We’re trying to get on the same page. We’re trying to win.”

The passing game. Brown had eight catches for 110 yards, and Smith had 11 for 109 yards a week after they combined for

only eight catches and 80 yards. Hurts finished with 290 yards passing and two touchdowns.

“I asked the question to everyone. ‘Hey, we’re going to have to go do this together.’ Started with that, and then I said, ‘Let’s not forget

to keep the main thing the main thing,’” Hurts said. “I said, ‘You do know what the main thing is, right?’ And they were spot on. So we can’t forget that. And it takes everyone to win. And it can look a ton of different ways.”

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Three complete Midwest Agricultural Banking School

First Bank of Berne is proud to announce that three of its team members, Tim Frantz, Dustin Arnold and Karley Walker, successfully completed the Midwest Agricultural Banking School held Dec. 2-5, at Purdue University. The Midwest Agricultural Banking School is a premier program designed to provide bankers with practical knowledge in agricultural credit and finance, farm management, marketing, and related subjects.

"Our employees' completion of this rigorous program demonstrates First Bank of Berne's unwavering commitment to supporting the financial needs of our local agricultural community," said Jayde Ketring, First Bank of Berne Agribusiness Banking Manager. "Tim, Dustin, and Karley's dedication to professional growth will further enhance our ability to serve area farmers and agribusinesses with expert guidance tailored to their unique challenges." (Photo submitted)

Indiana's poultry industry continues to seek new export opportunities

By C.J. MILLER
Hoosier Ag Today

When it comes to poultry, Indiana is among the top producers in the nation. That's why ag leaders are continuing to find new markets for poultry around the world to raise its value back here at home.

Indiana is the number one producer of duck in the U.S., number three for egg production, and number four for turkey production. The state's two main duck producers, Maple Leaf Farms and Culver Duck, have seen a great deal of success because of the demand for duck in Asia, Canada, Mexico and other foreign markets.

Becky Joniskan, President of the Indiana State Poultry Association, says the worldwide demand for Indiana poultry products are growing because more people around the world have the money to spend.

"As the middle class continues to really grow in Asia, in the Middle East, and even in Africa, [poultry products are] one of the first areas they look

where they might spend that extra couple of dollars on protein," according to Joniskan. Poultry and eggs are very flexible and culturally adaptive sources of protein, so those markets are very much out there and very much growing."

She says another area for export growth for Indiana poultry is through hotels and restaurants around the world.

"They are a very significant market—they are larger in bulk and easier to sell to move more product that way," she says. "It's a fantastic way to introduce new products into a country."

A sample of Perdue's turkey products, which are raised and produced from farms in Indiana. Photo courtesy of the Indiana State Department of Agriculture.

Joniskan was recently in Washington, D.C. for the Winter Meeting for the USA Poultry and Egg Export Council to discuss how a shift in trade policies under a new administration could impact the poultry and egg

industries in 2025 and beyond.

"We have lots of great support with the National Turkey Federation, United Egg Producers, National Chicken Council, and other agricultural organizations that are out there making sure people are aware how policies affect folks on the ground in Indiana who are producing food for the nation," says Joniskan. "Part of being out there in Washington this week was meeting with representatives from those national organizations who not also participate in these conversations, but they're also representing Indiana's poultry and egg producers when meeting with lawmakers on Capitol Hill."

Indiana is the seventh largest ag exporting state in the U.S., with \$7.4 billion worth of ag products being shipped outside the U.S. in 2022. Indiana's poultry and egg sectors are responsible for as much as \$15.07 billion in total economic activity throughout the state supporting more than 49,000 jobs in 2022.

'Velocity' from AgriNovus Indiana to Accelerate More Ag Businesses in '25

By ERIC PFEIFFER
Hoosier Ag Today

We told you the other day about the Producer-Led Innovation Challenge from AgriNovus Indiana and the \$25,000 check that goes along with that challenge that looks for tech solutions to on-farm problems. When they announced mobile software startup Gripp as this year's winner last week, they also announced some exciting news about next year's challenge.

"We've heard time and time again from our partners that, what if we could

do more? What if we could support at a higher level?"

Geoff Zentz, Senior Director of Innovation for AgriNovus discusses how the Producer-Led Innovation Challenge will transition into an accelerator program called Velocity beginning in early 2025.

"Velocity is that next evolution. It's going to be a six-month program in which we support innovators in three different verticals that we believe are going to be key for the future of the Indiana agbio-science economy. Those

three are on-farm innovation, food is health innovation, and bioinnovation as a whole. Those three are going to be the areas in which we focus to find problems that exist in the space, support innovators as they tackle those problems, and we're fortunate enough to be able to now offer three \$25,000 checks at the end of that rainbow to seed three different companies to drive forward into those ideas."

And what does this ultimately mean for Indiana farmers?

"This means that Indi-

ana farmers are going to have Indiana innovation making their lives better, making their checkbooks thicker, making their yields higher, and ultimately making their operation more sustainable, more revenue generating, and having a better quality of life in the long run."

Companies, individuals and entrepreneurs who want to participate in Velocity can access more information and a registration link at the AgriNovus website. The deadline to register is January 12, 2025.

U.S. sales of tractors, combines drops in Nov. 2024

By AGDAILY

According to new data from the Association of Equipment Manufacturers, U.S. sales of Ag tractors and combines fell in November 2024 compared to the year before.

"November's sales of Ag tractors and combines follow the same pattern of the last few months softness in the market," said AEM Senior Vice President Curt Blades. "This slowdown in sales can be traced back to high interest rates and uncertainty in the overall ag economy."

Canadian sales of Ag tractors dropped 18.8 percent while combines fell 39.4 percent in November 2024 compared to the year before.

Sales of 2WD farm tractors, often used for large-scale farming operations, showed a smaller decline of 1.6 percent, with 4,001 units

drop at 16.4 percent, with sales of 20,774 units in 2024 versus 24,859 in 2023.

The overall category of 2WD farm tractors declined by 13.6 percent, totaling 196,137 units sold in 2024.

Sales of 4WD farm tractors, often used for large-scale farming operations, showed a smaller decline of 1.6 percent, with 4,001 units

sold compared to 4,068 in 2023. However, monthly sales in November alone dropped by 40.8 percent, highlighting recent volatility.

The self-propelled combine category has faced even sharper declines. Year-to-date sales fell by 24.1 percent, with only 5,120 units sold in 2024 compared

to 6,746 in 2023. November sales were down 46.7 percent from the same month last year, indicating a significant contraction in demand.

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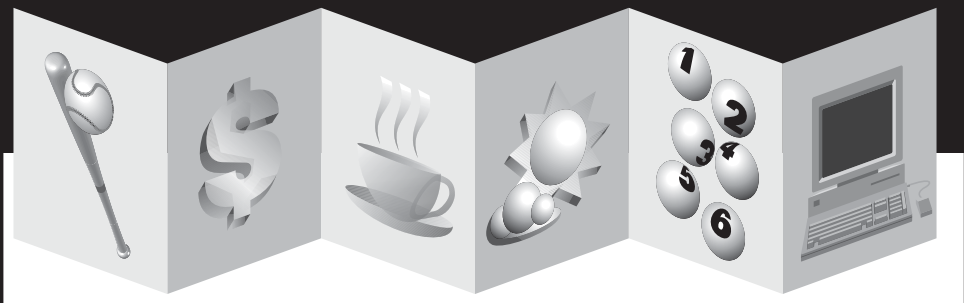
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Quick Draw Midday — 06-16-18-19-27-31-32-34-38-41-45-48-50-51-63-66-67-70-72-77, BE: 45
Daily Three-Midday — 02-03-09, SB: 02
Daily Three-Evening — 03-09-07, SB: 08
Daily Four-Midday — 05-09-03-01, SB: 02
Daily Four-Evening — 08-01-03-08, SB: 08
Quick Draw Evening — 09-10-14-21-24-31-45-46-53-56-59-65-66-67-68-69-74-75-78-79, BE: 75
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Public Sale Calendar

DECEMBER 17 - 9 a.m.-6 p.m. - (Online Only) - Thomas B. & Mary Lou Woodward, seller. One of a kind picturesque real estate offering. Outstanding 4,014 SF on 8.45 acres, 4 bedroom, 3 bath home with a 2 car detached garage. Scenic backyard with multiple utility sheds and gazebo, Wells County. Pat Carter, sale manager, 260-273-8294, *The Steffen Group Inc.*, 260-426-0633, www.steffengrp.com.

BIDDING ENDS DECEMBER 21 - Bidding starts closing at 1 p.m. - Private collection, seller. 20 Marolf Ct., Fremont. Collection of exotic taxidermy mounts (over 150), zebra & bear skins, 100's of antlers, fully restored antique boat motors, bow & arrows, gun cases, hunting & camping equipment, vintage fishing lures, high-end art work, antiques & collectibles, watches & fine jewelry, power & hand tools, storage cabinets, household, vintage nautical items, more. Preview Dec. 18, 4-6 p.m. Sale managers Pat Carter, 260-273-8294, Brandon Steffen, 260-710-5684, *The Steffen Group Inc.*, www.steffengrp.com, 260-824-3006.

DECEMBER 22-DECEMBER 31 - Bidding starts closing at 2 p.m. - Estate of Richard Gerken and others, sellers. "Outstanding year end auction." Very high quality art deco, Lladro collection art, mid century modern and Art Nouveau home furnishings, International Harvester collection, 2011 Platinum Ford F150 in pristine condition, high quality antiques, 3,500 record albums, vintage Schwinn bicycles, lawn mower, tools, advertising memorabilia, Coca Cola collection, antique gas pump, country primitives, military patches & pins, and more. Open house Dec. 26 and Dec. 30 from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., 102 S. Jefferson St., Ossian, IN. Sale manager Rod Fetters, 260-557-8451, *The Steffen Group Inc.*, steffengrp.com, 260-824-3006.

DECEMBER 29-JANUARY 5 - Bidding starts closing at 2 p.m. - Estate of Eldrid Tinkel, seller. Large antique and collectible auction. Country primitives, early metal toys including vintage tractors, farm implements, trucks, boats, more, antique furniture, cast iron collection, antique brass cash register, antique stoves, large and rare collection of vintage graniteware, Fenton, Marion advertising memorabilia, vintage beer signs, crocks, long guns, coins, more. Open house Dec. 29, 2-4 p.m., Jan. 4, 10 a.m.-noon, 1910 N Meridian St., Marion. Sale manager Brandon Steffen, 260-710-5684, *The Steffen Group Inc.*, Steffengrp.com, 260-824-3006.

BIDDING OPEN AND STARTS CLOSING JANUARY 2 at 10 a.m. - (Online Only) - MD Landscaping LLC, owner. Over 170+ Lots. John Deere 5525 W/ Belly Blade, Bobcat Dozer 96" Blade, 2016 International 4300 Box Truck, 2003 Wells Cargo Enclosed/Office Trailer, 84" 3-Point Cultivator, 2008 Ford F-350 W/ Boss Snow Plow, 2007 Jeep Wrangler w/J Truck Bed, Volvo ECR88 Excavator Kawasaki 65TMVB Wheel Loader, Kubota SCL 1000 Mini Skid Steer, Skid Loader Attachments, Hardscape Stone, Walnut Slabs, Assorted Lawn Tools, Power Tools and much more. 3883 US HWY 33 Decatur IN, 46733. *Krueckeberg Auction & Realty LLC*, 260-724-7402, kjauction.com.

BIDDING ENDS JANUARY 7 at 10 a.m. - (Online Only) - Wayne Metals LLC Machining Division, owner. Offering over 200+ Lots. Roskelley 1440 Lathe, 2007 Haas SL-40T CNC Turning Lathe, Hardinge CHNCI Precision CNC Machine, Delta Floor Drill Press, Omni Turn GT-75 CNC Lathe, Targa Surface Grinder, Acer Milling Machine W/ Phase-2 3 Jaw Chuck, Abex Denison Stamp Machine, OOYA RE-1225H Drilling & Tapping Radial Arm Drill, Cincinnati Milacron Hawk 150 A2100 CNC Lathe, Welders, Tooling Cabinets, Large Selection of pallet racking, Power & Hand Tools and much more. 9312 Avionics Drive, Fort Wayne IN 46809. *Krueckeberg Auction & Realty LLC*, kjauction.com, 260-724-7402.

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