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Dec. 26, 2010

Start of disputed jail project voted region’s top story

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Leader-Telegram staff

After struggling to even get the building off the ground, the new Eau Claire County Jail will begin to take shape in February.

"It's been a long road getting to this point, and now that we're here, I'm very gratified," Eau Claire County Board Chairman Gregg Moore said.

The construction of a new jail was voted by the Leader-Telegram's news staff as the Chippewa Valley’s top local news story for 2010.

At the start of the year, the location of the proposed structure was in question. On June 23, 2009, the Eau Claire City Council voted 6-5 against rezoning property next to the Eau Claire County Courthouse needed for the project to proceed. Nine affirmative votes were required for passage after a protest petition against the project was filed by neighboring landowners.

In February, Eau Claire County Supervisor Howard Ludwigson proposed asking voters whether they favored a downtown jail or a remote justice center at one of two sites — one in Altoona and the other in the town of Washington — in an advisory referendum. On April 6, the overwhelming majority of county residents casting their ballots supported building a new jail downtown.
Two weeks after the public weighed in, the County Board voted 23-5, with one supervisor absent, in favor of a resolution reaffirming an earlier decision adopting the downtown jail option and directing staff to prepare and resubmit a rezoning petition and site plan to the city. On June 22, the City Council voted 9-2 to approve the petition and a revised site plan rotating the proposed jail 90 degrees and shifting the building slightly to the north.

Construction on the first portion of the county’s $59.1 million building project — a law enforcement garage — began a little more than a month later and was completed this fall. The project includes building the new jail and remodeling the courthouse. The latter will include the construction of a new law enforcement center, which will house the Eau Claire City-County Communications Center, Eau Claire County Sheriff’s Department and Eau Claire Police Department.

In November, Hayward Baker, a contractor from Roselle, Ill., began installing aggregate piers to reinforce the ground conditions under the footprint of the new jail. More than 400 piers have been put in place, according to an update provided by Frank Draxler, county project manager. A second contractor, Vonasek & Schieffer of Rice Lake, has begun to install footings on top of the piers.

"Right now, the project is on schedule and under budget, and that's what everyone wants," said Draxler, who believes the April referendum was the project's turning point this year.

The bids for most of the remainder of the overall building project are due Feb. 3, said Draxler, noting that the bid package has been divided into 40 categories to encourage local contractors to bid on the work. Crews will begin erecting the precast frame of the new jail in February.

"We definitely need a new jail," said Draxler, noting the existing structure has a number of deficiencies. "I think it will be great when the new one gets done."

The jail tentatively is scheduled for occupancy in May 2012. However, staffing issues for the new facility have yet to be settled. In June 2012, the courthouse remodeling project is expected to begin.

Supervisor John Prince, who supported building a remote justice center, has accepted that the project is moving forward at the downtown location. "It's a done deal," he said, noting he prefers the revised design over the old one. "You're not going to be able to stop it. However, I think I'm going to be proven right in the end."

Following are the second through 10th top news stories of 2000, as voted on by Leader-Telegram editorial staff members.
2. GOP’s big election

The Chippewa Valley followed the national trend in November as the GOP won majorities in both houses of the state Legislature.

In the Assembly, incumbent Eau Claire Democrats Kristen Dexter and Jeff Smith lost by a combined total of 166 votes. Republicans Kathy Bernier and Warren Petryk, respectively, prevailed in the 68th and 93rd district races.

"People were ready for a change," Petryk said after the Nov. 2 elections.

The state Senate race saw Republican Terry Moulton oust Pat Kreitlow in District 23. Republicans Tom Larson of Colfax and John Murtha of Baldwin prevailed in Assembly contests.

Although Eau Claire County vote totals leaned toward Democrats in the gubernatorial and U.S. Senate races, Scott Walker prevailed in the former and fellow Republican Ron Johnson of Oshkosh ousted longtime U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold in the latter.


3. Murders

Chippewa County had three murders in about three months.

The first murder was discovered Feb. 24, when 17-year-old Jason Grau's body was found along the Chippewa River. Two days later, Shane Hawkins, 30, of Chippewa Falls was arrested and accused of the Eau Claire teen's death.

Over the next three months, Chippewa County law enforcement would handle two more unrelated murder cases. William Vollbrecht and William A. Ball are both accused of shooting and killing men in the county.

As 2011 begins, Chippewa County District Attorney Jon Theisen is preparing for three separate trials. Hawkins reportedly stabbed Grau multiple times in the chest and neck at Hawkins' apartment.

Ball, 21, is accused of killing 24-year-old Kyle Ryba on April 3 in Boyd.
Vollbrecht, 32, is accused of killing 41-year-old Christopher J. Farmer on May 13 in the town of Lafayette as Farmer slept.

All three are in the Chippewa County Jail.

4. Student killed

A disagreement over a shirt in a bar ended in the death of a UW-Stout student and criminal charges filed against two other students.

Jared C. Britton, 23, and Jedidiah R. McGlasson, 21, are charged with being party to the crime of felony murder and felony battery in the death of Bradley L. Simon, 22. Both have pleaded not guilty and are scheduled to return to court Feb. 18.

Britton and McGlasson were at The Log Jam tavern in downtown Menomonie with a group of UW-Stout hockey players. Britton played for the team, and McGlasson was a new recruit.

A disagreement arose, and Simon left the bar at closing time, taking a bicycle and riding up Main Street. A bouncer reported one of the men pushed Simon, causing him to be catapulted off the bike head first into a cement wall.

5. Record snowfall

West-central Wisconsin dug itself out of deep snow after being slammed by a major storm in early December. The 22 inches of snow that fell in Eau Claire was a single-day record for the city. The powder started coming down close to midnight Dec. 10 and kept falling Dec. 11, sometimes coming down at a rate of about 2 inches an hour.

Snowfall totals were nearly as high in other parts of the region. Black River Falls received about 21.6 inches, Osseo 18.8, Menomonie 18.5 and Mondovi 18 inches. Plows struggled to keep even the busiest roads clear during the height of the storm because fast-falling snow piled up quickly behind plows and wind kicked snow drifts over roads.

The storm also marked a step in a new, high-tech direction for the city of Eau Claire; for the first time, the city's Public Works Department relied heavily on social networking websites Facebook and Twitter to deliver storm news to local residents, offering updates about plowing progress and urging people to stay home.
6. Klaus suit dropped

After dominating headlines for more than two years, sparking lots of controversy and prompting scorn at the Eau Claire school district, the saga of former district Superintendent Bill Klaus and his attempt to obtain his $267,209 retirement stipend before he retired came to an end this year.

Now district officials hope to move beyond the negative public perception associated with the matter and forge ahead on education-related issues, including a referendum in April seeking residents' approval of money to upgrade district school buildings.

In July a federal judge dismissed Klaus' $1.19 million lawsuit against the district. Klaus had filed the lawsuit to contest the school board's suspending him for 10 months without pay, reducing his contract by two years, violating his due process rights and defaming his character.

Klaus was suspended after police and district investigations into the stipend issue. His district employment ended June 30.

Klaus' retirement stipend attracted attention after it was learned that in July 2007, former school board President Carol Olson, at Klaus' request, signed and backdated a document allowing Klaus to begin receiving his retirement stipend even though he continued to work for the district. That document wasn't discussed or approved by the school board, and Olson was no longer a board member when she signed and dated the agreement.

Board members subsequently disagreed about whether their Feb. 5, 2007 vote approving Klaus' contract intended for him to receive his retirement stipend early. The board voted in October 2007 against Klaus receiving that money.

7. Inmate suicides

Three inmates committed suicide in the Eau Claire County Jail, including a man set to face trial on a charge of first-degree intentional homicide.

On June 6, Gregory A. Gubernot, 44, of Altoona hanged himself in his cell and died the next day at Luther Hospital.

Gubernot's weeklong murder trial was set to begin the day he died. He was charged in the December 2009 murder of his live-in girlfriend, Theresa Lynn Still.
William P. Kuhn, 47, of Eau Claire attempted suicide by hanging himself May 15 in the jail; he died Aug. 11 at a nursing home. He was jailed May 15 after a domestic dispute.

Jason R. Denning, 31, of Eau Claire committed suicide at midday Aug. 3, just a couple of hours after his initial court appearance.

Denning was facing felony charges of false imprisonment and strangulation and suffocation following his arrest after an Aug. 2 domestic dispute.

Independent investigations showed no policy violations by jail staff in all three suicides.

No policy changes resulted from the suicides but jail staff is trying to be more diligent in determining the mental health status of inmates "when they walk through the door," Eau Claire County Sheriff Ron Cramer said.

"The three suicides are definitely an anomaly," he said.

A new jail, scheduled to open in the spring of 2012, will have better sight lines for jail staff to monitor inmates, Cramer said.

8. Smoking ban

Two years after Eau Claire enacted its own workplace smoking ban, the rest of the Chippewa Valley and entire state of Wisconsin followed suit on July 5.

Many restaurants and business already had opted to go smoke-free on their own, but many bar owners were concerned about losing their smoking clientele and the associated revenue.

Several taverns in Altoona, Chippewa Falls and other areas opted to create semi-enclosed additions to their buildings that would allow smoking while still obeying the ban's restrictions.

Statewide, there were 205 complaints of non-compliance made in the first month after the law went into effect. But the amount of complaints tapered off to 78 filed in October, according to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services.

Five complaints have been lodged in Eau Claire County, two in Chippewa County and none in Dunn County during the four months after the law began, according to department spokesman Seth Boffeli.
Gov. Jim Doyle signed the ban into law on May 18, 2009, but delayed its enactment until this year.

9. Chieftain logo

Osseo-Fairchild school district administrators are developing a plan to present to the school board next month regarding a new nickname and mascot.

A judge last month dismissed an appeal by the district to allow the district to retain its Chieftains logo, setting the stage for a new mascot for the district. The district has until July 27 to remove the Chieftains name and come up with a new mascot, logo and nickname.

A petition to the state Department of Public Instruction claimed the Chieftains mascot and nickname are discriminatory. DPI officials agreed in June and ordered changes. The logo/nickname issue has been controversial in the district for many years.

"If the board approves the plan, we will go ahead and start implementing it," said O-F Superintendent Ed Dombrowski, adding that the plan includes timelines and partnerships between communities, parents, staff and students.

Dombrowski said officials were examine the methods other districts and colleges have taken when making name changes.

"We will be looking at recommendations and procedures, and working with many entities to get this into a manageable product to present," Dombrowski said.

10. Luther addition

Two years after ground was broken, Luther Midelfort's new five-story building was completed.

The $118 million, 358,000-square-foot addition — built to the west of the existing hospital — is believed to be the single most expensive construction project in Eau Claire's history.

Called the Luther Building, the new structure includes a comprehensive cancer center, family birthing center, an outpatient surgery center, an auditorium and increased space for inpatient care beds.

Since its completion, the building has been opening in stages.
Hospital patients and visitors began entering through the new building's main entrance Nov. 8. The medical surgical unit on the third floor opened Nov. 14; the medical surgical unit on the fourth floor, Dec. 5; and the Family Birthing Center on the second floor, Dec. 20.

The surgery center on the first floor is scheduled to open to patients on Jan. 17, and the Albert J. and Judith A. Dunlap Cancer Center, also on the first floor, is set to open on Feb. 7.

Staff reporters Christena O'Brien, Chris Vetter, Pamela Powers, McLean Bennett, Julian Emerson, Dan Holtz, Andrew Dowd and Chuck Rupnow contributed to this report.