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WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2024



Meeker County Sheriff's Office detective Ryan Schutz displays various pieces of the department's new drone program. Included are three drones of various sizes — each used for specific circumstances and conditions — as well as controllers and computer equipment used to track the drone and for surveillance.

STAFF PHOTO BY BRENT SCHACHERER

Sky-high expectations

New drone program, already a lifesaver, holds much potential for Meeker County Sheriff's Office

BY BRENT SCHACHERER
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It didn't take long to validate the Meeker County Sheriff Office's latest investment in law enforcement technology.

Just a few months after spending $30,000 to purchase equipment, the agency's new drone program played a key role in a search and rescue operation that not only helped find a suspect and likely saved the man's life — reaffirming Sheriff Brian Cruze's belief in his agency's newest tool.

"We knew we would use it," Cruze said. "I don't think we were expecting right out of the gate we'd use it.

"That's the pitch when we start this is, 'Hey, this is technology to save somebody's life, and right out of the gate you do," Cruze continued. "I mean, it just puts an exclamation point on that. And obviously, it's gonna save somebody else's life in the future. We've demonstrated how you can use this and the capabilities of it."

Detective Ryan Schutz helped launch the program. Schutz started working with the department in 2013 as a corrections officer and as a reserve officer and became a full-time deputy in 2014. He worked with the CEE-VI drug task force for a few years before becoming a detective in 2021.

A drone hobbyist for about a decade, Schutz began seeing how law enforcement agencies were using the flying technology and thought Meeker County could benefit from it, as well.

"There are a lot of valuable things that drones can do," Schutz said, "between searching out in a field or searching inside a house where it doesn't put officers or other people's lives in danger while they're searching."

Meeker County benefited from drone assistance in the past, most notably two years ago when a rural Dassel man was holed up in a house after taking hostages and shooting at law enforcement.

"We called other agencies in to send drones in, because we didn't know where he was at. We didn't know what he was doing in there," Cruze said. "That's when we really started talking about it more and more, just the safety aspect of it for people involved in those situations."

With Schutz an enthusiastic supporter of a drone program inside the department, they agreed to pursue it last year. Unfortunately, by the time they made the decision, they had missed the county's budget cycle.

Neither Cruze nor Schutz wanted to wait another year to put together funding.

"We knew it'd be another year out" before county funds could be allocated to purchase drones, Cruze said. "So Ryan was tasked with reaching out to businesses and individuals, and it didn't take long. It was well-received in the community, and obviously, we're extremely thankful."

"I sent a letter to some of the local businesses, and some other people around the community heard about it … some that were sought out and some that were just kind of

Drone to 2 ➤

Board jousts over moratorium, process

Verbal back-and-forth includes hints of conflicts of interest

BY BRENT SCHACHERER
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The recently approved moratorium on solar and wind energy project continues to spark controversy among Meeker County Board members.

Approved on a 4-1 vote during the board's Feb. 6 meeting, the moratorium puts a one-year hold on all solar and wind generation projects in Meeker County. For those who supported its passage, the moratorium is intended to give county staff and the Planning and Zoning Committee time to study and make changes to the county's current ordinances.



Commissioner Julie Bredeson

Commissioner Julie Bredeson, however, has been an outspoken critic, questioning whether landowners should be prohibited from using their land for solar gardens or any other project. She was the lone opponent of the moratorium when the board approved it.

And she continued to draw attention to what she said was a flawed process — or at least attempted to before she was shut down by her fellow commissioners — during the board's meeting last week.

Bredeson attempted to bring up the topic during the portion of the meeting when Land Use Director Greg Schultz discussed Planning and

Moratorium to 2 ➤

Behind the wheel shortage

School bus companies challenged by lack of drivers

BY KENDALL LARSON
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School bus drivers play a vital role in the educational ecosystem, ensuring that students have access to safe and reliable transportation to and from school. But they have been in low supply in Hutchinson and Litchfield.

"It's a nationwide shortage," said Roxanne Godejahn, bus manager at Hicks Bus Line in Litchfield. "We've had to combine a few of our extracurricular routes. There's four or five of us that are licensed in the office. Sometimes we end up pulling them out of the office to go drive around. There's been times where our dispatch has been empty with nobody answering phones or two-way radios."

Hutchinson Bus Line, sister company to Hicks Bus Line, faces similar challenges.

"It's mostly Tuesdays and Thursdays that are a problem," Paul Meyer, general manager at Hutchinson Bus Line, said. "We need a lot of buses for the sports events."

Hicks and Hutchinson bus lines are not alone in facing the challenge, of course. The Economic Policy Institute reported that school bus driver employment continues to be far below pre-pandemic levels. There were approximately 192,400 bus drivers working in K–12 schools nationally this past September, down 15.1% from September 2019.

Drivers do what they can to help each other out, and Godejahn said she drives if she must while coordinating efforts to get other routes covered. She often calls on substitute drivers and Hutchinson Bus Line when there is no other option.

"I have 28 full route drivers," she said. "I have nine substitute drivers that I can call, but only three that help out regularly when called."

"The scheduling is somewhat challenging," Meyer said. "But our drivers are very reliable. We have quite a few retirees who have worked 20 to 30 years and they're used to going to work every day. And so you know, and they show up every day."

Bus to 2 ➤



FILE PHOTO

Bus drivers play a vital role in the education system, transporting students to school and home again, but local bus companies have been struggling to fill driving positions.

Grant opens new transportation options

CCT uses $80,000 to purchase van for use in volunteer driver program

BY BRENT SCHACHERER
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Public transportation took a big step up in Meeker County with the addition of a new vehicle to Central Community Transit's already-crowded bus garage in Litchfield.

Using an $80,000 grant from PrimeWest Health, CCT purchased a handicap-accessible van that will be used as part of its volunteer driver program to transport patrons to out-of-town medical appointments.

Prior to the 2024 Chrysler Pacifica going into service, out-of-county service was a mixed bag, according to Donna Anderson, director of transportation for Meeker Public Transit. At least once a day, Anderson said, a patron request for service was denied, simply because there was not a vehicle available.

CCT uses 12 buses based in the Litchfield garage to run 10 regular routes throughout Meeker County. But CCT buses don't circulate beyond the agency's three-county service area of Meeker, Kandiyohi and Renville.

"So (getting to) the Cities, Rochester, St. Cloud," Anderson said. "I've had (dispatchers) start tracking it, and in Litchfield, it's about one a day (who are turned down)."

While dispatchers did what they could to refer patrons to other transportation options,

CCT to 2 ➤

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INSIDE
TRIBUTES/3 OPINION/4 FAITH/5
PUBLIC SAFETY/6 CLASSIFIEDS/7 BACK THEN/9

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