

TORNADOES: Recovery underway in Mississippi. **3A**

SOFTBALL: Missouri Southern sweeps Rogers State. **1B**

Carthage council to consider park proposal

Construction of playground would cost \$364,752

BY JOHN HACKER
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CARTHAGE, Mo. — Kellogg Lake Park in Carthage will get its first playground thanks to a parks improvement program initiated by the city and funded by the McCune-Brooks Hospital Trust, if the Carthage City Council gives its final approval to a contract at its meetings March 28 and April 11.

The Carthage City Council's Public Services Committee agreed Tuesday to recommend that the full council approve a \$364,752 playground to be built near the pavilion on the banks of Kellogg Lake.

The playground is to be built in a field near a parking area across the road from the pavilion and protected from some potential flooding by a berm to the south and west of that location, according to parks Director Abi Almandinger.

The contractor is Park & Play Structure, from Park Hills.

"I did meet with the Kellogg Lake board multiple times and had some really nice chats with them and great feedback," Almandinger told the Public Services Committee. "There were about six iterations of this playground prior to me arriving, so we amended it a little bit."

The new playground will include a new picnic shelter.

Restrooms will be built near the playground as well. Those are part of a \$477,305 contract, approved by the Carthage City Council at its March 14 meeting with the contractor CTX to install new restrooms in Municipal, Kellogg Lake, Carter and Griggs parks.

The construction of the berm and site preparation for the playground will also cost extra, with contracts to come before the committee at a future meeting.

This will be the first permanent playground and permanent restroom built at the park, which has been a part of Carthage since the 1950s.

David Lawhon, president of the Kellogg Lake Advisory Board, said the board is excited about the addition to the park.

"There's never been a playground out there to my knowledge," Lawhon said. "It's another feature to the park that can keep families out there for a long period of time, give the kids something to do if maybe dad wants to go out and try out this new rod and reel. The kids can go play on the playground while dad goes fishing for a little bit. It's just something else for families to do to go out and experience Kellogg Lake."

The park is subject to frequent flooding when heavy rains force the Spring River from its banks, so the playground will be partially protected by a earthen berm on the side facing the slough just south of the playground.

Almandinger said Park & Play officials have assured the city that the playground, which will include a soft, rubberized surface to prevent injuries from falls from playground equipment

SEE **PLAYGROUND**, 6A

'Major problem'

Missourians with developmental disabilities languish in hospitals, jails, shelters



Community Opportunities clients David (left) and Megan enjoy a moment with community skills teacher Kristin Nobus (right) at the agency's day program in Troy.

MISSOURI INDEPENDENT | RUDI KELLER

BY RUDI KELLER
Missouri Independent

In a Friday afternoon in late December, Geri Curtis received a disturbing phone call informing her she had only five days to find a new home for a developmentally disabled person.

As part of her job as public administrator for Livingston County, she had become legal guardian of a person with severe developmental disabilities two months earlier. The person, autistic and unable to speak, was living in a residential support facility in Jackson County.

Soon after she became the legal guardian, Curtis received notice from the facility that the person had to move within 30 days because of aggression.

Despite the efforts of the case manager at a regional office of the Missouri Department of Mental Health, nothing was available. Just before Christmas, Curtis got the call informing her that she had just five days left to find a new residential placement.

When the five days passed, the provider took the person to a hospital emergency room.

That is where the person has lived since. "Our hospitals are not dumping grounds for these individuals, but the hospitals are full of our clients," Curtis said.

At the beginning of March, there were 650 adults with developmental disabilities in what the Department of Mental Health calls "inappropriate placements." There are 39 residing in hospitals, plus a handful in jails and homeless shelters, representing the most critical cases affected by widespread staffing shortages among local not-for-profit organizations.

"This is a major problem," Curtis said,

SEE **PLACEMENTS**, 6A



Jessica Bax, director of the Division of Developmental Disabilities, speaks during a March 8 House Budget Committee hearing with Department of Mental Health Director Valerie Huhn (center) and Molly Boeckman, director of administrative services.

MISSOURI INDEPENDENT | RUDI KELLER

Push to spend \$900M rejected on party-line vote

Money intended to aid Missourians with developmental disabilities

BY RUDI KELLER
Missouri Independent

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — Republican lawmakers rejected an effort Thursday evening to spend \$900 million to assist hundreds of Missourians with developmental disabilities who lack proper residential support, including dozens languishing in hospitals, jails and homeless shelters.

State Rep. Deb Lavender, D-Manchester, asked the House Budget Committee for \$910 million, all from federal tax dollars, to push base pay for direct service employees at community support agencies to \$21 per

hour. The effort failed on a party-line vote.

The agencies blame low pay — the current base is \$15 an hour — for staffing shortages that leave hundreds waiting for help. A rate study completed late last year concluded higher wages would help attract the hundreds of employees needed by those agencies and cut down on mandatory overtime for many workers in understaffed agencies.

Lavender's proposal combined \$308 million from federal COVID-19 aid the state received last year with federal matching funds for the first year of the rate increases. In an emotional plea to the committee, Lavender argued the money should not be an obstacle since earlier in the day the House passed a \$1 billion tax cut.

SEE **VOTE**, 6A



In this weekly feature, we put five questions before someone in the community. Today, we chat with Crista Cunningham, of the Pittsburg Arts Council.

1 Why did the Pittsburg ArtWalk Association recently choose to rebrand and change its name to the Pittsburg Arts Council?

We wanted to make this change because we have a group of motivated people who have great ideas and want to do so much for Pittsburg. Our main focus as the ArtWalk Association was to plan and coordinate the ArtWalk throughout a three-block section of downtown Pittsburg. As an organization, we're limited to what we should be doing.

We have expanded our reach because there's been a need to



Children gather around a kiddie pool filled with soap to blow bubbles during the 2022 Pittsburg ArtWalk.

COURTESY | CRISTA CUNNINGHAM

SEE **5 Q'S**, 6A