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Sat., February 28, 2026

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## Baxter orthopedic center construction on time and budget



Construction of a new orthopedic center in Baxter is proceeding well for a November 2026 opening. The new clinic will feature orthopedic, urgent care, and drive-through pharmacy.

Ann Schwartz photo

By ANN SCHWARTZ  
Construction is proceeding on time and on budget for the Essential Health Orthopedic Center in Baxter. It is located at the site of the former Camping World along Hwy. 371.

The 60,000-square-foot facility will offer orthopedic surgery consultations, podiatry, rheumatology, endocrinology, pain care and sports medicine. There will be onsite X-ray, MRI and fluoroscopy services.

There will be 72 exam and six procedure rooms, along with indoor and outdoor gyms. It also includes Baxter's first drive-through pharmacy and expanded spine treatment.

"The construction is going really, really well—on budget and on track to open in November 2026," said Sandy Zutz-Wiczek, Essentia Health's vice president of

operations and the administrator of St. Joseph's Hospital in Brainerd. "We lost a few days placing beams—when it was -30 steelworkers couldn't work. Understandably so. Other than that it is going really, really well."

The planned timeline is to get into the building in September and spend October stocking the interior—starting to see patients in November. Hy-Tech Construction of Brainerd is the general contractor.

They will be recruiting staff for the new building, she said, with nationwide searches ongoing for specialists. "Luckily, people are attracted to the recreational opportunities of the Brainerd Lakes Area. It is just a beautiful place to live."

"We will have laboratory and imaging -- diagnostics -- to support our care," continued

Zutz-Wiczek. "We will have the first drive-through pharmacy in city of Baxter. That's one of our biggest draws. If you are sick, or just visited urgent care, or had a procedure at hospital or surgery center, and don't want to get out of the car you can just drive up. Same thing if your loved one in the car just had surgery—you won't have to leave them alone and walk in. It is also great to use when the weather is bad."

They also will have a wide turning radius for folks with campers or boats to navigate the drive-up window.

She said the facility will have a surgical suite with pre-and-post operation rooms. Some procedures can be done there under local anesthetic.

"It's a clinic," she explained. "It's not a surgery center and it's not a hospital."

"This clinic allows patients

to come in and get urgent care at one location. We can see patients for orthopedic care but also treat colds, flu, Urinary Tract Infections, apply stitches and treat sprains and strains to ankles, elbows and shoulders."

She stressed the convenience for Brainerd Lakes

Area residents to be able to get urgent care, pharmacy and orthopedic exams and procedures all in one place.

"We are really, really excited to bring the ortho center to this community. This really brings our service level and our ability to care for this community to a whole new level."

## Garrison woman dies in two-vehicle crash

A 50-year-old Garrison woman was killed Tuesday morning after her vehicle lost control on an icy stretch of Highway 169 in Mille Lacs County, according to the Minnesota State Patrol.

The crash was reported at 8:51 a.m. Feb. 24 at the intersection of Highway 169 and 460th Street in Kathio Township, northwest of Garrison.

Authorities said a Kia Sorento traveling northbound on Highway 169 and a Subaru Impreza traveling southbound collided after the Subaru went out of control on the ice-covered roadway.

The Subaru crossed into the oncoming lane, where it was struck broadside by the Kia. Both vehicles came to rest on the downward slope of the

east ditch. The driver of the Subaru, Nicole Elizabeth Freeman, was pronounced dead at the scene.

The driver of the Kia, Leslie James Gahbow, 42, of Isle, sustained non-life-threatening injuries and was transported to Essentia Health-St. Joseph's Medical Center in Brainerd for treatment.

Road conditions were reported to be icy at the time of the crash, which remains under investigation.

Assisting at the scene were the Mille Lacs County Sheriff's Office, Mille Lacs Tribal Police Department, Garrison Fire Department, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Mille Lacs Health System.

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# Minnesota DNR adds year-round catch-and-release bass season



Minnesota anglers won't have to wait for the traditional May fishing opener to cast for bass anymore.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has announced that beginning this year, largemouth and smallmouth bass will be open to catch-and-release fishing all year on inland waters. The change is part of the 2026 fishing regulations and allows anglers to start targeting bass as soon as the current harvest season closes — with no gap in between.

"We're improving bass fishing opportunities after

hearing strong support from anglers for earlier bass fishing," said Eric Altena, Little Falls area fisheries supervisor. "Bass populations are thriving and have increased abundance and sizes, and compared with past decades, have broader geographic distribution in our state."

Under the new rules, bass harvest season dates remain the same. However, anglers can begin catch-and-release fishing for bass as of Feb. 23. The regulation was formally adopted in January. While most new fishing regulations typically take effect March 1,

the continuous bass season will begin immediately after the previous season closes, alternating between harvest

and catch-and-release periods without a full closure. Biologists note that bass spawning typically peaks in

late May, later than some other game fish species. According to the DNR, there is no biological evidence that

catch-and-release fishing before that time poses a conservation risk.

Continued on Page 4

## LEGAL NOTICES

(Published in NewsHopper Saturday, Feb. 21, 28, & Mar. 7, 2026)

### TOWNSHIP OF LITTLE PINE NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING

The annual meeting for the Township of Little Pine will be held on Tuesday, March 10, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

In the case of inclement weather the meeting will instead be held on Tuesday, March 17, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

The meeting will be held at Emily City Hall 39811 State Highway 6, Emily, MN 56447

The meeting is also accessible via Zoom

Meeting ID: 780 450 6554 Password: 56447

Dated: February 10, 2026 ABRA HAWLEY Little Pine Township Clerk 3.6

(Published in NewsHopper Saturday, Feb. 28 & Mar. 7, 2026)

### WEALTHWOOD TOWNSHIP CHANGE OF MEETING NOTICE

Wealthwood Township Board regular meeting will be changed to Wednesday, March 11, 2026, at 7:00 p.m. due to the Annual Meeting and Election at 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday, March 10, 2026.

Dated: February 6, 2026 LINDA WENDLANDT, Clerk Wealthwood Township 2.4

(Published in NewsHopper Saturday, Feb. 21 & 28, 2026)

### NORRLAND TOWNSHIP NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING

Notice The Annual Meeting for Nordland Township will be held Tuesday, March 10, 2026, at the Bethlehem Lutheran Church fellowship hall at 7:30 p.m. In case of inclement weather, the meeting will be postponed until March 17, 2026, at 7:30 p.m. The purpose of this meeting will be to conduct all necessary town business as required by law. Please note that there will be a discussion of the costs of rebuilding the east half of 330th Place and whether the township should do so.

Dated: February 11, 2026 MATHEW NIX, Clerk Nordland Township 3.7

(Published in NewsHopper Saturday, Feb. 21 & 28, 2026)

### KIMBERLY TOWNSHIP NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING

The meeting will start at 7:00 p.m. on March 10, 2026 to conduct all necessary business as prescribed by law and held at Glen/Kimberly Town Hall. In case of inclement weather, the meeting will be postponed until March 17, 2026.

Please contact the clerk at 612-619-6742 or kimberly-clerk06@gmail.com for copies of reports or any questions. Dated: February 16, 2026 MIA RAPOPORT, Kimberly Township Clerk 3.00

Spread Your Message with an ad in the NEWSHOPPER hopper@crosbyironton.net

(Published in NewsHopper Saturday, Feb. 28 & Mar. 7, 2026)

### WEALTHWOOD TOWNSHIP NOTICE OF ELECTION AND ANNUAL MEETING

Notice is hereby given to the voters of Wealthwood Township.

The annual election of Wealthwood Township will be held at the Wealthwood Town Hall on Tuesday, March 10, 2026, to elect one Supervisor for a three (3) year term, and a special election for one Supervisor for a one (1) year term. The polls will be open from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.

The annual meeting will convene at 8:15 p.m. to conduct all necessary business as prescribed by law.

In case of inclement weather, the election and meeting will be postponed until Tuesday, March 17, 2026.

Dated: February 6, 2026 LINDA WENDLANDT, Clerk Wealthwood Township 4.5

(Published in NewsHopper Sat., Feb. 28 & Mar. 7, 2026)

### LIBBY TOWNSHIP ANNUAL MEETING

Notice is hereby given to the qualified voters of Libby Township, County of Aitkin, State of Minnesota, that the Annual Town Meeting will be held on Tuesday, March 10th, 2026 at the Palsade Community Center. The Annual Meeting will commence at 1:00 p.m. to conduct all necessary business prescribed by law. In case of inclement weather, the meeting may be postponed until the third Tuesday in March.

Dated this 17th day of February 2026 JANE GRIMSBO JEWETT, Clerk Libby Township 3.3

(Published in NewsHopper Sat., Feb. 28 & Mar. 7, 2026)

### LIBBY TOWNSHIP BOARD OF AUDIT

The Libby Township Board of Audit will be held at the Palsade Community Center on Tuesday, March 10, 2026 at 2:00 p.m.

Dated this 17th day of February 2026 JANE GRIMSBO JEWETT, Clerk Libby Township 2.0

(Published in NewsHopper Sat., Feb. 28 & Mar. 7, 2026)

### HAZELTON TOWNSHIP NOTICE OF 2026 ANNUAL MEETING AND ELECTION OF OFFICERS

Notice is hereby given to the qualified voters of Hazelton Township, County of Aitkin, State of Minnesota that the Hazelton Township Annual Election of Officers and Annual Town Meeting will be held on Tuesday, March 10, 2026, at the Hazelton Townhall.

The Election Poll hours will be from 1:00pm to 8:00pm at which time voters will elect:

1 Supervisor - 3 year term

1 Clerk - 2 year term

Vote on question: Whether to move the town election to November?

The Annual Meeting will commence at approximately 8:15pm, following the close of polls, to conduct all necessary business prescribed by law.

In case of inclement weather, the meeting and election may be postponed until the third Tuesday in March; March 17, 2026, at the same time and location.

The Board of Canvass will meet following the Annual Meeting to certify the official election results.

Dated this 16th day of February 2026

KAY OLSON, Clerk Hazelton Township 6.2

(Published in NewsHopper Sat., February 21 & 28, 2026)

### MINNESOTA SECRETARY OF STATE CERTIFICATE OF ASSUMED NAME

Pursuant to Chapter 333, Minnesota Statutes; the undersigned, who is or will be conducting or transacting a commercial business in the State of Minnesota under an assumed name, hereby certifies:

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Anna M Bankey 517 NW 4th St., Suite 113B, Brainerd, MN 56401 USA

4. I certify that I am authorized to sign this certificate and I further certify that I understand that by signing this certificate, I am subject to the penalties of perjury as set forth in section 609.48 as if I had signed this certificate under oath.

DATE: 02/01/2026

SIGNED BY: Anna Bankey Bankstera101@gmail.com

Work Item 1625782800026 Original File Number 1625782800026

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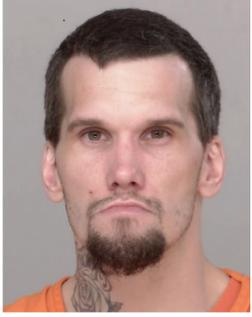
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# Man sentenced to 13 years for 2025 stabbing of a woman in Aitkin



Matthew Dean Liimatainen

An Aitkin man will serve more than 13 years in prison for the stabbing of a woman last year in the city of Aitkin.

Matthew Dean Liimatainen, 34, was sentenced Dec. 8, 2025, in Aitkin County District Court to 158 months in prison after pleading guilty to one count of felony first-degree assault causing great

bodily harm. He also pleaded guilty to a gross misdemeanor charge of domestic assault. Additional charges were dismissed as part of a plea agreement entered Sept. 29, 2025.

For the felony assault conviction, Liimatainen was ordered to serve his sentence at the Minnesota Correctional Facility – St. Cloud. He was also ordered to pay \$153,510 in restitution and fines. No sentence was imposed on the gross misdemeanor domestic assault charge because it is a lesser offense.

Under Minnesota law, an offender must serve two-thirds of a prison sentence in custody, with the remaining one-third served on supervised release. Liimatainen was credited with 300 days already served in custody.

## Violent attack inside Aitkin home

According to the criminal complaint, at 10:56 a.m. Feb. 12, 2025, law enforcement and emergency medical personnel were dispatched to a residence on First Street Northwest in Aitkin on a report of a stabbing.

Officers arrived to find a woman seated in a living room covered in blood. She told authorities that Liimatainen had stabbed her. Court documents state she suffered multiple knife wounds to her right cheek and right arm, and officers observed significant blood on furniture, flooring and clothing throughout the room. The woman was described as minimally responsive due to blood loss.

A second woman at the

residence told officers she witnessed the attack and attempted to intervene. She said she did not initially realize Liimatainen had grabbed a knife from a nearby shelf before charging at the seated woman. At first, she believed he was punching the victim until she saw the blood.

The witness told officers Liimatainen repeatedly stabbed the woman in the head area. She was able to stop the assault, after which Liimatainen left the residence.

As the witness attempted to call 911 outside, she reported that Liimatainen grabbed her phone and put it in his pocket, then ripped her purse from her shoulder, causing her to fall. He then got into her truck. She jumped onto the

running boards in an effort to turn off the vehicle, but he pushed her into the roadway before fleeing the scene.

The witness ran to a neighbor's home for help, and 911 was contacted. She was later transported to a hospital for injuries sustained during the incident.

## Statewide search and arrest

The stabbing victim was initially taken by North Memorial Health Ambulance to Riverwood Healthcare Center and later airlifted to Hennepin County Medical Center due to the severity of her injuries.

Officers from multiple agencies searched for Liimatainen, and a statewide alert was issued for the vehicle. The Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension assisted in the investigation.

At approximately 3:27 p.m. the same day, Liimatainen was taken into custody in White Bear Township in Ramsey County.

During questioning, he told officers he felt he should go to detox and admitted using methamphetamine and ecstasy four to five hours prior to the assault. Authorities reported that while officers attempted to collect evidence, Liimatainen struck them and had to be restrained before being transported to the Aitkin County Jail. His clothing was seized as evidence.

Court records show Liimatainen was previously convicted in September 2020 in Ramsey County of gross misdemeanor violation of an order for protection.

## Year-round catch-and-release bass seasons | Continued from Page 1

### Strong angler, Tribal support

The change comes after years of interest from the fishing community. In 2023, the DNR surveyed anglers about extending the bass season. Of the 3,041 respondents, 91% said they supported or strongly supported the proposal.

The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe also expressed support. The Leech Lake Band indicated its backing was contingent on continued monitoring of bass populations to ensure the added opportunity does not negatively impact the resource.

Separate regulations still apply to Minnesota's border waters, and anglers are encouraged to review those rules carefully.

### Other changes for 2026

The updated 2026 regulations include several additional changes affecting inland and border waters:

- New or modified regulations for nine lakes and rivers in Beltrami, Crow Wing, Itasca, Jackson, Martin, Morrison and Todd counties.
- The stream trout harvest opener is now the second Saturday in April each year.
- The previous one-fish limit for Atlantic salmon on Lake Superior has been removed; anglers may now keep five salmon in combination.
- The season closure for brook trout and splake on Lake Superior and its tributaries below posted boundaries is now Sept. 30.
- A new rule allows up to

three hooks within 18 inches on a single tackle configuration.

Updated language clarifies that only one bait is allowed per line and that stinger hooks are limited to artificial baits.

- Ice anglers may now use nonmotorized hook-setting devices.
  - Updated guidance on harvesting crayfish in infested waters and labeling traps.
  - No closed season for taking dead freshwater mussel shells.
  - Inland portions of Mississippi River Pool 3 now align with adjacent Wisconsin-Minnesota border waters regulations for Pools 3–8, including Lake Pepin.
- The regulations book also includes fish consumption guidance from the Minne-

sota Department of Health, offering advice based on contaminants found in certain waterbodies.

"Fish are an important part of a nutritious, well-balanced diet and part of many traditions and cultures in Minnesota," said Angela Preimesberger, who leads the

Fish Consumption Guidance program at MDH. "Our fish consumption guidance can help you decide how much fish you can eat, depending on where you caught it, how old you are, whether you are or may become pregnant, and other factors."

The 2026 Minnesota fish-

ing regulations are available now on the DNR website. Printed copies will be available by March 1 anywhere Minnesota fishing licenses are sold.

For bass anglers eager to shake off winter early, the message is clear: the wait just got shorter.

# Explore divided Berlin and its people

History buffs and lifelong learners will have a chance to step behind the Iron Curtain next month — without ever leaving the Lakes Area.

The Unlimited Learning program will be held Monday, Mar. 9, at 1:30 p.m. at Heartwood Senior Living Community, 500 Heartwood Drive in Crosby.

Admission is free for Un-

limited Learning members and \$10 for nonmembers. Unlimited Learning is welcoming historian and author Briana Smith for a deep dive into the social, cultural and political landscape of divided Berlin, with a focus not just on world leaders and diplomatic showdowns, but on the everyday lives of the people who called the city

home.

For those curious about how global politics shape personal lives and how resilience flourishes in divided times, the afternoon offers a chance to see Berlin's history through a more intimate lens.

More information is available at the organization's website, [www.lakesareaunlimitedlearning.org](http://www.lakesareaunlimitedlearning.org).

# MnDOT's snowplow stars prove Minnesota's sense of humor is snow joke

Move over, winter blues. Minnesota drivers will soon be greeted by a fresh flurry of funny as eight Minnesota Department of Transportation snowplows roll out with brand-new names — and plenty of plow-mance.

The winners of the 2026 "Name a Snowplow" contest have officially been crowned, following a months-long process that drew tens of thou-

sands of creative entries from pun-loving Minnesotans.

MnDOT invited the public to submit name ideas in December and was promptly buried — in the best way — under more than 67,500 submissions. Staff members narrowed the list to 30 finalists, and nearly 19,000 voters cast ballots in February to determine which names would make the final cut.

Here are the eight snowplows that will soon be clearing highways — and cracking smiles — across the state, listed in order of votes received:

1. "Oh, For Sleet's Sake" — District 3 (Central Minnesota)
2. "Flurrious George" — District 6 (Southeast Minnesota)
3. "Sled Zeppelin" — District 2 (Northwest Minnesota)
4. "K Pop Blizzard Hunter" — District 8 (Southwest Minnesota)
5. "Minne-Snow-ta" — District 1 (Northeast Minnesota)
6. "Every Day I'm Shovel-in'" — District 7 (South Central Minnesota)
7. "O Brother, Where Art Plow?" — District 4 (West Central Minnesota)
8. "The Life of a Snowgirl" — Metro District (Twin Cities)

While only eight could take home top honors, the runners-up proved Minnesotans have no shortage of icy wit. Among the finalists that just missed the podium were

- "Just Scraping By," "Say It Ain't Snow," "Ka-Plow!," "Here We Snow Again," "867-530 Brine," "I Got Friends In Snow Places," "Feelin' Salty," "Mission: Impassable," "Below Zero Hero," "Lake Snowbe-gone," "Mr. Plow," "Walter Whiteout," "LL Cool Blade,"

"Salt Shaker," "Plowin' In The Wind," "Bob Chillin'," "Six-Sleddin'," "Six-Sleddin'," "Jon Bon Snowi," "Whiteout Warrior," "The North Plow," and "Al: Arctic Intelligence."

The contest has become an annual reminder that even in subzero temperatures, Minnesota's sense of humor remains well above freezing.

With the new additions, MnDOT now boasts 52 named snowplows statewide. That fleet includes fan favorites such as "Plowy McPlow-Face," "Betty Whiteout" and "Taylor Drift," each of which has developed something of a cult following among winter-weary commuters.

In addition to the 48 plows named through the public contest over the years, MnDOT staff have also named four additional snowplows in recognition of highways the state maintains adjacent to tribal lands.

The agency's lighthearted tradition serves a serious purpose: highlighting the work of snowplow operators who log long hours keeping Minnesota's roads safe during the state's famously fierce winters.

Because in Minnesota, when the snow flies, the plows and the puns aren't far behind.

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