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Andrew Rosten/Ford County Chronicle

7th-grade girls win regional

Members of Gibson City-Melvin-Sibley Middle School's seventh-grade girls' basketball team pose for a photo with the IESA Class 2A regional championship trophy after winning Tuesday's regional title game 25-20 over Bement. The Falcons (21-1) will compete against Paris Crestwood (21-0) in the Champaign St. Matthew Sectional at 6:30 p.m. today. *Please see Andrew Rosten's coverage in Sports.*

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FORD COUNTY BOARD

FOR WHOSE BENEFIT?

The cash-rent leasing of Ford County's farmland may come to an end due to concerns over its legality. Instead, the county's 3 farms may be enrolled into programs of 'direct benefit' to the public.



Will Brumleve photos/Ford County Chronicle

The 157-acre Hatfield/Bowen Farm in Button Township is one of three farms owned by Ford County, the others being the 103-acre Ford County Nursing Home Farm in Patton Township and the 149-acre Bowen/Grider Farm in Button Township. All three farms have been leased to area farmers for years through cash-rent lease agreements, but that practice may eventually come to an end — possibly by this time next year.

By WILL BRUMLEVE
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PAXTON — To comply with Illinois law, the Ford County Board is considering eventually ending its decades-long practice of renting out the three county-owned farms to area farmers under cash-rent lease agreements and instead enrolling the land into the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Illinois Recreational Access Program (IRAP), allowing it to be restored to native prairie and used by the public for outdoor recreational activities like hunting, bird-watching and hiking.

During last week's two-hour county board meeting, several agenda items related to the county-owned farms were discussed, but no action was taken because only eight of the 12 board members were present, short of the nine votes needed for approval of some of the items, according to the board's vice chairman, Cindy Ihrke of rural Roberts.

While the proposed CRP and IRAP enrollment of all three farms — the 103-acre Ford County Nursing Home Farm in Patton Township, the 149-acre Bowen/Grider Farm in Button Township and the 157-acre Hatfield/Bowen Farm in Button Township — was not among the meeting agenda's topics, it likely will be soon, Ihrke said Tuesday.

"That one is the next thing on the list," Ihrke said.



Will Brumleve photos/Ford County Chronicle

The Ford County Board's vice chairman, Cindy Ihrke of rural Roberts, looks on during October's monthly board meeting.

First, though, the board plans to address existing agenda topics, including whether to continue to lease the county's farmland beyond Thursday, Dec. 1 — when the county's current cash-rent lease agreements with area farmers expire — despite prevailing concerns that doing so may not be legal.

Ihrke said that she and board member Tom McQuinn of rural Paxton

visited with State's Attorney Andrew Killian in recent weeks to discuss updates to the farm lease contracts prior to the scheduling of a public auction to accept bids. In doing so, though, the three officials came to agreement that continuing to lease the land to up to a few farmers would not be considered of "direct benefit" to the general public and, as such, could be

against state law, Ihrke said.

"According to state statute, a county, if we have property, it's supposed to be used for public benefit," Ihrke said, "and apparently, according to court (rulings) that are on file from a while back, money (generated by the county from cash-rent leases) is not (considered to be of) public benefit. ... Public benefit would be that the public gets direct benefit from it."

Ihrke said Killian "did a really thorough job of investigating" the legality before advising the board to "change direction in what we're doing and open it up for public access." Questions about the legality of renting out the farmland arose, Ihrke said, after the Edgar County Watchdogs exposed issues with the same practice in Shelby County.

To avoid potential legal issues in Ford County, Ihrke said, the county board's overview committee considered the possibility of selling the county's farmland before ultimately agreeing not to pursue that option and instead pursue CRP and IRAP enrollment. The committee also considered the possibility of "custom farming" — in which "everything has to be bid," Ihrke said — but ultimately agreed that it might be too much of an undertaking for the county, as it would involve the hiring of a farm manager along with strict county board oversight.

SEE COUNTY ON PG. A21

IROQUOIS COUNTY

Equalization results in big spike in homes' assessed values

■ Unless area taxing bodies reduce their tax rates, tax bills likely to rise

By WILL BRUMLEVE
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WATSEKA — Unless local taxing bodies decide to reduce their tax rates this fall, most residential taxpayers in Iroquois County should see a sizable increase in their real estate tax bills next summer, the county's supervisor of assessments said Tuesday.

Admittedly, the new property assessment equalization factor that Supervisor of Assessments Bob Yergler has applied to Iroquois County's residential properties has the 16 1/2-year veteran chief assessor bracing for those inevitable telephone calls to his Watseka office from upset or confused taxpayers. An equalization factor of 17 percent or greater has been applied to most properties in the county, Yergler said, noting that taxpayers should be prepared for a proportional increase on their tax bills.

As required by state law, the Iroquois County assessment office calculated the new equalization factor — often called a "multiplier" — for 2022 based on a sales-ratio study conducted for 2019, 2020 and 2021 that found that many residential properties were greatly under-assessed, Yergler said. Of the 346 residential properties sold in "good sale status" in 2021, for example, 237 were assessed at less than one-third of their sale price, Yergler said.

SEE MULTIPLIER ON PG. A21

GCMS SCHOOL BOARD

At GCMS, tax rate expected to fall despite costly projects

By WILL BRUMLEVE
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GIBSON CITY — Despite the Gibson City-Melvin-Sibley school district undertaking a number of expensive construction projects this fiscal year — including the ongoing construction of a new maintenance shed and the upcoming construction of a new greenhouse — its property tax rate for 2022 is going down, not up.

Among the main reasons, according to

SEE GCMS ON PG. A21

Christmas Decor



Assortment of Indoor & Outdoor Ornaments



Indoor Tree Stand



Stocking Hangers



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