

hp LOCAL & STATE

Spirit of cooperation pays off

Union Pier road, infrastructure improvements hailed at groundbreaking

By LOUISE WREGG
HP Staff Writer

UNION PIER — Elected officials on Thursday praised how well communities have worked together to make the multi-million dollar Red Arrow Highway Union Pier Corridor Improvements Project a reality. “After two years of public engagement, extensive meetings, coordination of nearly every public utility in the county, we’re standing at the crossroads of a project that’s going to improve the safety, the quality of life and the image of one of our beloved hamlets in Chikaming,” said Chikaming Township Supervisor David Bunte at the groundbreaking ceremony for the project.

The project includes new public restrooms, 1.3 miles of road resurfacing, a non-motorized pathway and sidewalk improvements, as well as new stormwater infrastructure, lighting and plantings at the intersection, which straddles the townships of New Buffalo and Chikaming.

The ceremony was held on the road that is the dividing line between the townships. It is called Town Line Avenue on the west side of Red Arrow Highway and Union Pier Road on the east side of Red Arrow Highway.

Bunte called Union Pier a true beach community that is welcoming and neighborly.

“The improvements on Red Arrow will enhance the ability to access current businesses and residences, allow safe passage for recreation purposes and encourage small business development,” he said. “The strategic partnerships created during this process also lay the groundwork for some future opportunities and should be used as a benchmark for how communities can work together for the greater good.”



Photos by Don Campbell / HP Staff

Jason Latham, managing director of the Berrien County Road Department, speaks during a groundbreaking ceremony held Thursday for the Red Arrow Highway Union Pier Corridor Improvement Project. The road and streetscape project, which is to be completed by next summer, will include 1.3 miles of road resurfacing, a non-motorized pathway, sidewalk improvements, plus new stormwater infrastructure, lighting and plantings.

New Buffalo Township Supervisor Michelle Heit said the project couldn’t have been done without all of the governmental agencies working together.

Berrien County Commissioner Ezra Scott, who represents the area, said that while running for office in 2017, people told him something needs to be done at the intersection because it was dangerous. He said hundreds of people signed petitions asking for the intersection to be improved.

Shortly after Jason Latham was named the county’s new managing director of the Berrien County Road Department, Scott said he got him involved.

Latham said that during his 25 years working with roads, this is the first project in which there was so much intergovernmental cooperation.

“This is truly what it’s all about to be a public servant and to do our best,” he said.

The \$3.6 million project



Chikaming Township Supervisor David Bunte addresses a crowd gathered during a groundbreaking ceremony held Thursday for the Red Arrow Highway Union Pier Corridor Improvement Project in Union Pier.

was funded by the townships, along with by the Berrien County Road Department, the USDA Rural

Development and The Pokagon Fund. It is expected to be completed by next June. But that’s only part of

the story. The Galien River Sanitary District Sewer Authority had plans to replace existing sanitary sewer in Town Line Avenue between Greenwood Avenue and Red Arrow Highway, and to install new sanitary sewer along Red Arrow Highway between Union Pier Road and Berrien Street.

Bunte said sewer authority officials moved their project up by a year so the work could be done before the corridor improvements were done. That work started in April.

Even though the sanitary sewer project is separate from the corridor project, it was important to have that work be done first.

When added together, the intersection is receiving close to \$10 million of work, said Steve Carlisle, director of engineering and transportation with Wightman, the firm that is overseeing the corridor project.

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VAN BUREN CIRCUIT COURT Man pleads guilty to 1986 murder in Bangor

DNA evidence revived cold case a year ago

By HP STAFF

PAW PAW — A former Bangor man pleaded guilty in 36th Circuit Court this week to slaying a Bangor woman in 1986 at her home.

Robert Waite, 50, who was 16 at the time of the crime, pleaded guilty on Tuesday to felony murder for strangling Wanda Wilkinson to death.



WAITE

Waite was charged in June 2019 with one felony count of homicide-open murder. He waived extradition from Florida in November 2019, where he had been serving a prison sentence for an unrelated kidnapping and sexual battery conviction. He is set to be released on those charges in 2034, according to Florida Department of Corrections online records.

Wilkinson’s daughter found her strangled mother in 1986. A nurse’s aide at South Haven Community Hospital at the time, Wilkinson, 59, was divorced and lived alone.

According to a WWMT-TV report, investigators said the strangulation occurred after an apparent break-in at Wilkinson’s home.

Waite, who is scheduled to be sentenced Oct. 19, could face 25 to 60 years in prison.

The case went cold until new DNA information was brought forward last year.

Detectives received the new DNA evidence in March 2019. It pertained to Waite, who was one of the initial suspects in Wilkinson’s death, according to a previous news release from the state police. Waite had always been a person of interest in the homicide and had never been ruled out.

Detectives went to Florida to interview Waite. During the interview, they said they received a full confession from Waite and were able to rule out any other suspects from the information given, according to state police.

VAN BUREN COUNTY

Three pipe bombs found

By HP STAFF

PAW PAW — An investigation is underway by police after a worker mowing grass in Pine Grove Township found what appeared to be three pipe bombs in a ditch.

The devices were found along County Road 388 on Wednesday, near the road’s intersection with 23 1/2 Street.

Van Buren County Sheriff Daniel Abbott reported deputies who responded to the scene called for assistance from the Berrien County Bomb Squad. Members of the squad were

able to disable the pipe bombs while the Pine Grove Fire Department assisted at the scene.

Anyone with information on where the bombs came from is asked to contact the Van Buren County Sheriff’s Department.

To provide anonymous crime tips to the Van Buren County Sheriff’s Office, send a text message to “CRIMES” (274637) with the keyword VBCTIP from a mobile phone.

To submit an online tip, go to www.vbcsheriff.com and at the top of the homepage follow the directions to submit a tip.

IN BRIEF

I&M crews to help in wake of hurricane

Indiana Michigan Power is sending more than 200 employees and contractors to assist with the restoration of power following the damage caused by Hurricane Laura.

Crews left their respective I&M Service Centers early Thursday to travel as far as Mississippi and Arkansas and will be prepared to deploy Friday morning. The sites where they will work have not yet been determined.

I&M will provide mutual assistance to Southwestern Electric Power Co., which serves parts of Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas.

SWEPSCO crews and contractors provided mutual assistance to I&M the week of Aug. 10 after a derecho caused wide-

spread power outages in Southwest Michigan and Northern Indiana.

Berrien sees another COVID-19 death

Berrien County added 14 new COVID-19 cases on Thursday, while also recording 15 recoveries and another coronavirus-related death.

The county is now at 70 total deaths. Since the county began tracking COVID-19 cases, there have been 1,397 confirmed cases and 1,240 recoveries.

Van Buren County added three new COVID-19 cases on Thursday.

Cass County also added three new cases during that same time.

Van Buren still has 13 total deaths, while Cass saw its death total rise to 16.

BENTON HARBOR

Youth Solutions gets \$10K boost for education initiatives

By TONY WITTKOWSKI
HP Staff Writer

BENTON HARBOR — Youth Solutions received some support from an organization celebrating a big milestone Thursday.

In celebration of its 10th year, Michigan College Access Network awarded a \$10,000 grant to Youth Solutions and Jobs for Michigan Graduates in support of college access and postsecondary attainment.

The grant was one of 10 grants MCAN was awarding over a 10-day period in connection with its 10th year, as part of its birthday tour.

On Thursday, MCAN Executive Director Ryan Fewins-Bliss presented a \$10,000 ceremonial check to Youth Solutions and JMG representatives with a limited crowd due to state-mandated restrictions.

“Jobs for Michigan’s Graduates is doing incredible work with youth across the state to ensure they have a future that includes education and employment. I’ve been impressed with their focus on post-secondary attainment and

their innovative program model,” Fewins-Bliss said. “They certainly deserve the acknowledgement and support we are giving them through our birthday celebration.”

The Benton Harbor program was the fourth stop in as many days, as Fewins-Bliss had previously visited Detroit, Fremont and Flint.

MCAN has helped Michigan’s postsecondary attainment rate increase for the 10th consecutive year, from 35.6 percent to 45.5 percent.

Since its inception three years ago, Youth Solutions relies on Kinexus’ leading program – Jobs for Michigan’s Graduates – to bring services to youth populations statewide.

Youth Solutions has operated as a subsidiary of the Benton Harbor-based nonprofit organization in an effort to ensure that young adults are educated, employed and career-bound.

Kristin Harrington, executive director of Youth Solutions, said the connectivity to higher education has never been more important than now during the COVID-19 crisis.



Tony Wittkowski / HP Staff

Ryan Fewins-Bliss, executive director of MCAN, hands a \$10,000 check to Kristin Harrington on behalf of the Jobs for Michigan graduates program Thursday in Benton Harbor.

“Our partnership with the Michigan College Access Network around accelerating postsecondary education and career pathways is a game-changer for Michigan youth,” she said. “MCAN is a best-in-class organization and the leader in postsecondary access. We are grateful for their confidence in JMG and eager to expand our collective efforts in the coming decade in service to young people.”

Harrington said the \$10,000 grant will go a long way to helping Youth Solutions accomplish its goals for the new five-year strategic plan that will be revealed in October.

Danny Jennings, a Youth Solutions specialist at Benton Harbor High School, said he wished he had a program similar to

Youth Solutions when he was a teenager. “We touch on soft skills and try to give our young people the self-assurance that they have some talents, some understanding, some skills, amenities and resources to be able to gravitate toward whatever type of field of work that they could be successful in,” Jennings said.

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