

February 22, 2023 |  
Seward County Independent | The Milford Times

# SEWARD COUNTY *Progress*

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EMILY HEMPHILL/SCI/MT

A new mural by local artist and Concordia University art professor Seth Boggs greets customers as they pull into the Jimmy John’s drive-thru. Jimmy John’s is one of seven new businesses that have opened on Seward’s downtown square in the past year.

# Seven businesses open on downtown square

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN  
Seward County Independent

The historic Seward square does not look the same as it did at this time last year. In fact, it has seen considerable growth over the last five years through the Seward Downtown Revitalization Plan.

Jonathan Jank, president and CEO of the Seward County Chamber and Development Partnership, said the town received two rounds of funding from the Nebraska Department of Economic Development that helped finance this growth.

Jank said reinvesting in the square is extremely important for the town’s success in the future, and doing so has helped make the square a destination for people to come visit the Seward community.

Looking at all the new businesses and old businesses that have seen new growth, Jank said he felt overwhelmed – in a good way.

“It’s been tremendous to see the historic downtown district have a new life breathed into it,” he said.

The businesses that have been added to the square over the past year are as follows:

**Bagels & Joe**

The first Bagels & Joe to exist outside of Lincoln is pouring a new energy into the historic Seward square. Located at 522 Seward Street, it officially opened its doors during the last week of September 2022.

Aside from just “bagels and joe,” the shop serves paninis, breakfast sandwiches, deli sandwiches, salads, smoothies and more. It also caters events.

Store manager Taylor Linde said JD’s Coffee Shop, which formerly occupied the space, reached out to the company to let them know it would be closing its doors and to propose the idea of Bagels & Joe moving into the space.

“They just thought that

we’d be a good fit for being here, and the community still wanted to have a coffee shop,” she said.

Bagels & Joe agreed and thought it would be a good time and place to expand outside of Lincoln. According to Linde, the first Bagels & Joe was established 30 years ago on Lincoln’s Old Cheney Road. Since then, it has opened five more shops in the area, making Seward its sixth location.

As the Seward location is only in its beginning stages, Linde said the team is still trying to figure out what methods work best for serving Seward efficiently. She said she has appreciated getting feedback and support from the community and has enjoyed seeing the shop’s business grow.

Linde said the first few days after opening were extremely busy but rewarding. She said one of the best things about managing the Seward location has been getting to know the kind and welcoming community that

surrounds it and those who work alongside her.

“I’ve worked at all the Bagels & Joe stores, and this is the best one,” she said. “I love the workers here.”

Taylan Ulrich, who is training to be the back-of-house manager, said she has had the same experience.

“My favorite thing is the community and how all the employees click really well,” she said. “It’s just a really fun environment to work in.”

**The Golden Snail Boutique**

A new secondhand store, The Golden Snail Boutique at 641 Seward Street hit the square with its grand opening on Sept. 27, 2022. Owner Nina Mihajlovic sells home decor, furniture, clothing, vintage finds, antiques, accessories and more.

Mihajlovic runs the store on her own and said she enjoys the authenticity of being able to have personal interactions with all of her customers.

She said running this

business is a combination of everything she has ever liked. She enjoys finding items to sell and figuring out how to display them. It’s the customers that give her work purpose.

“It’s fulfilling when you see people find their perfect thing and they just love what it is,” she said. “The creative side of things is really filling my cup.”

In 2020, Mihajlovic had a baby and left her career as a trust administrator to stay home with her daughter. However, she ended up wanting something to do outside of the home and missed being creative.

Mihajlovic said she has always loved fashion, decorating and collecting unique items. She decided that instead of just keeping those items at home or trying to sell them online, she would open her own store.

“I ended up finding out that I was equally as happy helping people find treasures as I was when I was just find-

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# Downtown

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ing them for myself,” she said.

Mihajlovic said she decided on the name The Golden Snail because she wanted to come up with something that was unique, fun and different. She said it reminds her of the times she went outside with her childhood friends to find snails after it rained.

She said community members were encouraging as she opened her business, and she has enjoyed making connections with new people through her store.

Mihajlovic lives in Lincoln but has always been connected to the Seward community through friends and family. She said she was a bit nervous to open a store in a community that she did not live in but was glad she took the leap of faith because she has had a great experience and met positive people.

“Seward has been very kind,” she said. “It’s been fun to spend more time up here in this way, too.”

**Emily Nix Photography**  
Say cheese! Emily Nix Photography, established in 2018, opened its studio at 647 Seward Street in January 2022.

Owner Emily Nix offers portraits including maternity, newborn, weddings, senior photos and family shoots. She also does product and branding shoots. Outside of the studio, she does interior and landscape photos.

Nix said she wanted to have her own photography studio because it allows her to expand her services for clients and continue working with them even during the colder months when outdoor shoots are not as feasible. She said she thinks the location on the square is perfect for her.

“I love the location,” she said. “I think the building is beautifully done, and the natural light is just absolutely perfect. It’s one of my favorite places to be.”

Nix said the location has

been a joy to develop and has given her the opportunity to be a physical, tangible part of the community.

“Also [I get] to continue to grow a passion of mine, which is photography, and hopefully provide clients a really beautiful space in this town to be photographed.

**Put the Needle on the Record**  
A new store came to the square in 2022 with hopes to bring joy to customers through music.

Put the Needle on the Record sells new and used vinyl, CDs, cassettes, turntables, T-shirts, memorabilia and more.

Owners Casey and Karen Sorensen-Kindt opened the store at 635 Seward Street on June 4, 2022.

Casey said they previously operated Put The Needle on the Record in Oklahoma, but they moved to Seward to be closer to their daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren.

He said they brought a lot

of items from their previous store with them to Seward, and everything seemed to fall into place for them to open up shop on the square.

“Really, it was a matter of a good place and a good location at the right price that kind of inspired us to give it another shot,” he said.

He said the store has had visitors ranging in age from 10 years old to more than 90 years old.

“It’s been people from Seward, but also people from surrounding cities and visitors from out of state,” he said. “It’s been fantastic.”

He said the thing he enjoys most about his job is getting to work with his wife, who has the same passion for music that he does.

“This is just something that we both really love to do,” he said. “We get to make customers happy. Music is pretty easy to do that with. When they come in, most people are pretty excited, and we then get to help them find what they want.”

**Domino’s Pizza**  
Domino’s Pizza baked itself into the Seward square when it opened its doors Dec. 28. The location at 132 S. Fifth Street offers carry-out, delivery services and some dine-in seating options. It sells pizza, pasta, sandwiches, chicken wings and desserts.

Store manager Samantha Black said Dominos had been looking to get into a smaller community for a while. Then, one of its delivery drivers who is from Seward, pointed out that there were no locations in the town. So, the franchisee jumped on the chance to open a shop in Seward.

Black said the community has responded extremely well to the restaurant.

“I was actually kind of surprised,” she said. “On Facebook, a couple people were hesitant about another pizza place, but we’ve had a great turnout, met some great people and have actually

**(continued on 25)**



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# Pleasant Dale VFD gets first ambulance

BY EMILY HEMPHILL  
emily@sewardindependent.com

COVID-19 caused much chaos in Seward County, but at least one positive came from the situation: an ambulance for the Pleasant Dale Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department.

PDVFD acquired its first ambulance two years after it began fundraising in 2020.

“We had thought about it for awhile, but it was something we never really thought we could do,” PDVFD Training Officer Joey Carder said. “It was really during COVID when we truly started looking.”

The department voted on whether to add an ambulance to its fleet in June 2020 after it realized COVID was putting more people at risk than necessary. Since the department didn’t have an ambulance, it relied on other departments to assist with rescue calls.

“More than anything, we were trying to limit exposure from everybody responding to calls,” Carder said. “Any call where somebody needed transport, our department went in, then we had to have somebody come in just to do transport.”

That wasn’t just the case for illness calls, though. PDVFD responds to accidents on Interstate 80 between Seward and Lincoln, yet it had to call another department each time to take patients to the hospital.

“Long-term, it’s going to be a benefit not only for our department, but for Milford and Malcolm who also cover stretches of the interstate,”



The Pleasant Dale Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department acquired its first ambulance last fall. Pictured are, from left, community partner Gerry Dunlap, Jenna Meyer and Kerri Meyer of Meyer Automotive, Crystal Ploen and Al Ploen, who won the Chevy Trailblazer then donated it back, and Colton Wehrs, Cody Rohrig and Joey Carder of PDVFD.

Carder said.

The department put its heart and soul into fundraising with a number of different campaigns to appeal to different audiences. Over 18 months, it held a coyote hunt, a street dance and a concert and accepted traditional donations. The proceeds totaled only \$20,000, which wasn’t nearly enough to meet the goal.

“It was a lot of work and not a lot of money raised,” Carder said.

Some grants were available, but because PDVFD covers such a small geographic area with a relatively low population, it wasn’t having much luck.

“Even though we applied for them, we got turned down. We realized grants weren’t going to be our best

way to go,” Carder said.

The inaugural Seward County Gives campaign kicked off last May and netted the department another \$55,000.

“That one got us a really good start,” Carder said. “We went door to door to let people in our district know what was going on.”

At the same time, Bobby Meyer of Meyer Automotive in Seward approached the department with an idea.

“Instead of just making a cash donation, they wanted to see if we would be open to (them) donating a vehicle to raffle off,” Carder said.

Bob Meyer donated a 2022 Chevy Trailblazer, and the department got to work selling 1,500 raffle tickets at \$50 each, raising an additional \$75,000.

The winners of the Trailblazer, Crystal and Al Ploen, decided to donate the vehicle back to the department, raising even more money.

“Bob had said from the beginning, ‘If they don’t want the vehicle, we’ll buy it back at sticker price,’ so that was a really good chunk,” Carder said.

“At that point, we had enough money for an ambulance and all the equipment and training for a couple people to update their licenses,” Carder said.

The department purchased a used 2008 ambulance from the Bennington Fire Department for \$33,000. It came with a power cot, but PDVFD needed to purchase a stair chair, oxygen tank and 12-lead electrocardiogram device and pay for minor

repairs.

Anyone on the department who drives the ambulance had to complete a driver training course and a classroom safety course.

In addition, the department had to upgrade its license, which required a full EMS inspection from the state to evaluate equipment, record-keeping and training standards before it could take the ambulance on calls.

Carder said the department is grateful for the community support it received.

“This was all community-based. We didn’t have to take any money from our village (budget) to do it,” he said. “This is one thing our department truly came together on. Everyone played a role in it.”

# Utica market under new ownership as cooperative

BY STEPHANIE CROSTON  
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Centennial Market is its name. Service to Utica and the surrounding area is its game.

Centennial Market is the new name of the grocery store in Utica. Located at 620 D Street, the store was formerly owned by Pac ‘N’ Save.

In 2012, a group of five couples got together to see about bringing a grocery store to Utica, Mark Greckel said. Greckel and his wife Nancy were one of the couples.

Garry and Betty Dittmar, Ron and Deb Tomes, LaVerne and Linda Stuhr and Don and Ruth Olson were the other couples.

“The town needed a grocery store,” Greckel said.

They created an limited liability company called Our Town Utica Investments and worked with Affiliated Foods to design the building and choose the necessary equipment.

Ron Tomes and Greckel had the original idea after going home to get more food for a function.

“It was at the point of just do it,” Greckel said.

They received funding through investors, the Southeast Nebraska Development District, First Bank of Utica and TIF funds, Greckel said.

“Looking back, it was a gutsy move,” he said. “But it has been good.”



The Utica grocery store, Centennial Market, is now a locally owned cooperative but offers the same services it did when it was part of Pac ‘N’ Save.

They chose to build a new building that Pac ‘N’ Save would lease. It opened Feb. 5, 2013. The lease was for five years, and Pac ‘N’ Save renewed it in 2018. When it came up again this year, Pac ‘N’ Save chose not to renew it.

Garry Dittmar said they discussed options and decided to go with a cooperative. Centennial Market Co-op was formed with the goal of getting more investors.

“We want to make it community owned,” Greckel said.

“It’s really important to have a grocery store in town,” Dittmar added.

Greckel said studies have shown small towns start to shrink when they lose their grocery store. The goal of the Centennial Market Co-op is to keep that from happening in Utica.

The co-op worked with three women from Nebraska Extension to get set up. Dittmar said co-ops are becoming more popular in towns around the state. The biggest chal-

lenge for Centennial Market has been switching everything over from the LLC.

“We’re finally there,” Dittmar said. “There are a couple items to finalize.”

He said Pac ‘N’ Save has helped them make the switch. Manager Jay Bloom and the rest of the employees also stayed, which has helped in the transition.

The store officially became the co-op on Nov. 1.

As of Dec. 9, Centennial Market was able to accept electronic benefit transfer or EBT and credit cards. Greckel said they’re working on Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children or WIC acceptance, as well.

Dittmar said the store is definitely used, not just by residents of Utica, but by people in the surrounding towns, too.

“I see so many faces I don’t know,” he said.

Both Dittmar and Greckel have deep roots in Utica. Dittmar moved to town at age 4, and Greckel was born and raised there.

“We have so much to offer,” Dittmar said.

Anyone who would like to invest in the cooperative can contact Dittmar or Greckel. It’s also important to shop at the Market.

“If you want a grocery store, you need to use it,” Dittmar said.



# Farewell, Sheri's: Milford bar and grill to relocate, rename

BY KEATON BURGESS  
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The Sheri's Grill and Bar building has been in the Milford area since 1967 and has been open for 14 and a half years. Soon, the current location will close to open at a new location at 503 First St. and will change its name to Uptown Tavern.

Todd Vegas, one of the owners of Sheri's Grill and Bar, said they decided to move locations from the current location at 121 US-6 because of the current building's condition.

"The facility we are at would not be good to repair," he said. "It would cost more than



Uptown Tavern will open at 503 First St. in Milford.

we'd like it to, so it's better to move now."

Vegas said they chose the new location because a neighbor was building there.

"It just worked out well for us," he said.

The new name came from a bar Vegas' grandfather used to own in 1948 called Uptown Tavern in a lot that Vegas grew up across from.

"Some of the Sheri's regulars suggested the name and it seemed to fit," he said. "The thing that's cool about

the building is that are two silver columns that were originally at our new site that were re-finished and will be put back with the building. That location also used to host an old dime store and city hall."

Along with the new name and location, Vegas said there will be changes with the bar and grill.

"The new location will be a completely different style and be more of a sports bar," he said. "There will be 14 TVs with NFL Ticket. There

will also be a wall in between to separate the bar from the dining area."

Although the grill and bar will be moving, Vegas said there will be some similarities between the new and the old.

"The menu will stay pretty much the same with a few tweaks with some of the new kitchen equipment we now have," he said. "The staff will also stay the same, which I'm super excited about."



The new covered entrance at the Seward United Methodist Church is nearly complete, with work wrapping up on new offices and restrooms inside the church.

## United Methodist Church wraps up addition project

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN  
Seward County Independent

Seward United Methodist Church broke ground on its Gather and Grow addition project in 2022 and will wrap up construction in 2023.

The project aims to make the longstanding building more secure, accessible, community-focused and inviting.

The groundbreaking ceremony was held June 5, and the Rev. Mary Kay Toddy said there was wonderful participation from church members of all ages.

"It was a day of great excitement," she said. "And, it coincided with Pentecost, which was a wonderful kind of coming together of the church holiday that celebrates the birth of the church and the groundbreaking as we look forward into the future."

With this project, the church is getting a new main entrance that has a covering and no stairs to make it accessible for wheelchairs. The entrance is also getting a drive-up loop to allow for a smooth drop-off process.

Additionally, Bright Beginnings Child Development Center housed within the church will get a new office better situated to the center's needs. New parking spaces and a new entrance on the south side of the building will serve as BBCDC's main drop-off spot and will lead kids right by the director's office.

The building's main entrance will be in the line of sight of the administrator's office, with the goal of making both entrances more secure.

The expansion also includes

adding a new door for egress in the sanctuary and more bathrooms in the church, including wheelchair-accessible bathrooms and a family bathroom.

The Rev. Jo Ellen Axthelm said the existing bathrooms were located far from the main entrance and the sanctuary, which made it difficult for the older population to get to them.

"We're adding things that are really needed and will help make the building a lot more accessible, safe, welcoming and inviting," Axthelm said.

Axthelm said she hopes the expansion's new welcoming space will provide for better fellowship before and after worship.

"Right now, people have to come down a hallway and then down another hallway to get to the fellowship hall so they can have fellowship," she said. "A lot of people will probably stay and gather in the new welcoming space, which will be much larger so people can visit."

Scheele-Kayton Construction is the contractor and Clark and Enersen is the architectural firm for the project. Totty said everyone, including the members of the church's Building Improvement Committee, has been marvelous to work with.

"It's been a lot of work, but it has not been burdensome work," she said. "It has been work that I've looked forward to being a part of all along."

Totty said the project will likely be finished in February, and the ribbon cutting is tentatively set for March 5.

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# Upper Big Blue NRD marks 50th year

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN  
Seward County Independent

The Upper Big Blue Natural Resources District celebrated its 50th anniversary last July as it continued to work to protect Nebraska's natural resources.

This year, the Upper Big Blue made improvements to recreation areas in the district including Oxbow Trail in Ulysses, Smith Creek near Utica, Pioneer Trails Recreation Area near Aurora and Bruce L. Anderson Recreation Area near York.

Upper Big Blue public relations manager Chrystal Houston said the updates included installing a security light with a siren system, new restrooms, parking stalls and sidewalks at Oxbow Trial and Smith Creek to make them more accessible.

New playground equipment was installed at Bruce L. Anderson Recreation Area and Pioneer Trails.

"We're making a major effort to improve the facilities so that the people who use them can have a great summer," Richard Bohaty, an Upper Big Blue board member, said.

One of the main issues the Upper Big Blue worked with this year is managing nitrate levels in the groundwater. Houston said these levels have increased, and Seward is now in phase three of management.

This means there must be increased reporting on these levels and there are more rules producers must follow.

The UBBNRD said although these levels are not



Tammy Partsch, tourism and promotions coordinator for Nebraska City Tourism and Commerce, holds a ceremonial shovel while Seward County Commissioner Ken Schmieding adds his name to the handle.

dangerous, they're at the point where it is important to look into what can be done to manage them, such as specific farming practices, so they do not become an issue.

Houston said there are two main programs the Upper Big Blue is promoting to producers in order to help with this – the Nebraska Carbon Soil Project and the Water Quality Improvement Incentives Program.

The Nebraska Carbon Soil Project is a coalition between NRDs in the state, The Nature Conservancy and corporate partners that encourage agricultural practices that improve soil health, including diverse

crop rotations, cover crops and no-till practices.

The Water Quality Improvement Incentive Program offers incentives for people in specific areas who are using the agricultural practices outlined in the NCSP.

"We would love to see more producers get in touch with the NRD and find out which program would work best for their operation so we can help support transitioning to those practices," Houston said. "They're really important for preventing additional leaching nitrate into drinking water and for protecting soil and water quality more gener-

ally through improving soil health."

Another challenge the Upper Big Blue faced in 2022 was the effects of the drought that plagued the area. The NRD works to manage water supply levels, and these levels have decreased in Seward, Houston said.

"After this year of drought, it's going to be increasingly important for us to manage our water supply appropriately," she said. "If this trend continues, additional rules and regulations would be put into effect."

As a local tax-based organization, the Upper Big Blue is also continuously faced with the question of how to

do the most good with the least amount of taxation.

"It's a balancing act of competing ideas and priorities," Houston said. "Everybody really wants to make a difference, and everybody is filled with great ideas of how we can make all of these things happen. But, there is only a small amount that can actually be accomplished when we're trying to be especially frugal with our taxation."

This past year, the Upper Big Blue also continued to work with the City of Seward on its plans to help fund the Seward Trail Project. The existing trail is about three miles of trails from Plum Creek Park to South Columbia Avenue.

Jack Wergin, UBBNRD department manager, said the Upper Big Blue has an agreement with the City of Seward to add another five miles of trails to complete a loop around the city.

"It will run from South Columbia over to the fairgrounds and up the west side of Seward, and then through the north side, back to Plum Creek ballparks," Wergin said.

Seward, York and Hamilton counties are the only counties in Nebraska that have their own individual hazard mitigation plans, which are put in place with the goal to reduce loss of life and property during natural disasters, Wergin said. The Upper Big Blue has been working on updating those plans this year and will continue to do so in the future.

Since 2017, another one of

(continued on 25)

# Milford art club adds color to Troyer wall

BY BEN LAMPMAN  
Seward County Independent

The Milford High School art club has finished work on a mural on the wall of the Troyer Insurance building downtown.

The students completed the mural in early December. The work includes images of corn, a cross and, of course, an eagle – the school mascot.

The club, consisting of more than 20 students, set out to work on the mural with the intention to create a piece of art representative of Milford as a community as well as the people who live there.

"We all came up with ideas on what we thought about the Milford community, and we all tried to incorporate that into the mural," Ren Jensen, an art club member involved in the mural, said.

Sarah Spahr, another art club member, said the mural started with the phone booth design, and other pictures representing the community were painted around it, tying them together.

"The original design was going to be the shadow of the phone booth," Spahr said. "And then we tied it all together, outlining each one with a phone cord to show how it's all connected."

The mural is on the Troyer Insur-



The Milford High art club designed and painted a mural at the corner of First and A streets at the end of last year. Pictured are artists (from left) Elena Prentice, Tasha Anderson, Aubrey Burton and Naomi Jones.

ance building at the corner of First and A streets.

T.J. Reynolds, owner of Troyer Insurance, said he and his wife, Sandra Troyer, decided the blank wall could use some color. They asked

Milford High art teacher Mindy Burton, who sponsors the club, if her students would be interested in painting something.

Reynolds said they are happy with how the mural turned out, and he ap-

preciates the ties to the community of Milford.

"It's got a bunch of different things that represent the town in it," Reynolds said. "They did a wonderful job. I think it looks really good."

Reynolds said he is hopeful that this wasn't a one-time event. He has offered the wall for future art endeavors.

"I kind of discussed it with Mindy. It's really up to her, but we're hopeful that they'll continue year after year to either add to the mural or to paint new ones where it's available," he said.

Burton said she is proud of the students and hopes for more community art projects, including expanding the mural in the future.

The students are also excited for the future of the art club. Spahr said they are discussing opportunities to teach and create art at the elementary school, and Jensen said the group does fundraising and window painting as well.

For the students, being able to be involved in the creation of the mural was a unique experience, and the community of Milford will see it for a long time.

"It's just nice to be a part of something, especially something historic," Jensen said.



# Splash pad part of \$500,000 park renovation

BY EMILY HEMPHILL  
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Milford’s uptown park is about to get cooler – and splashier. A splash pad is planned as part of an overall park renovation. The half-million-dollar project is being funded by private donations and grants.

So far, dirt has been moved and low walls have been poured to surround the splash pad. Seating is being installed, and a rock underlay is expected to go in yet this winter, according to City Clerk Jeanne Hoggins.

She said the hope is to have the project finished in time for an opening ceremony Memorial Day weekend. “We have to see how the spring weather goes,” Hoggins said.



EMILY HEMPHILL/SCI/MT

Low concrete walls have been poured in Milford’s uptown park. The walls will surround a new splash pad that is expected to open this summer.

Milford Mayor Patrick Kelley said he noticed splash pads were becoming popular in other communities. “I began talking with community members about bringing something like that to Milford,” he said. “There was a lot of positive feedback from those

conversations.” The splash pad will include a variety of water features, such as overhead sprinklers, ground sprayers and rock fountains. The park renovation also will include new benches, climbing rocks and walkways, and playground equip-

ment will be updated to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The city has worked with JEO Consulting Group for almost two years to put the plans together. JEO estimated the cost at \$537,260 in May 2021, though the cost of materials has since increased. The splash pad will account for \$325,000-\$375,000 of the total cost. The city received

\$275,000 toward the project from an anonymous donor and approved the use of \$212,260 from the Community Betterment Fund. The project received \$3,525.10 from the Seward County Gives campaign and a \$5,000 grant from the Wellsclapes program. Hoggins said another anonymous donation for \$50,000 is in the works. The remaining amount will come from the city’s Park Fund.

# Seward County Gives plans for second year

BY EMILY HEMPHILL  
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Generous donors to the inaugural Seward County Gives event in 2022 raised just over \$162,000 for 24 organizations. Their goal? To help leave a positive mark on the county.

The first-ever online giving campaign spanned five days last May and helped fund 24 projects ranging from new buildings to nursing home crafts to an ambulance.

The campaign allowed donors to contribute to nonprofits either by giving online, stopping by an in-person giving station or attending one of the many events held during the week.

Volunteer organizer Misty Ahmic and a board of others worked with the Legacy Fund for Seward County, an affiliate of the Nebraska Community Foundation, to get the ball rolling and to collect sponsor matches to further increase giving.

“I approached the Legacy Fund... because I was seeing the same people at each fundraiser I attended, and I knew that meant the same people were being asked,” Ahmic said. “(Seward County Gives) was a way to put the ask in front of everyone – and a way to make it easy to create awareness of all the amazing work these organizations are doing.”

In the weeks leading up to the giving, Ahmic said she spent a lot of time sharing information that people didn’t know.

“It’s not just about money,” she said.

It’s about raising awareness, too. “For example, everyone just assumes all the volunteer fire departments have an ambulance, and when you find out Pleasant Dale doesn’t, it may not initially be important to you until I mention that if you’re driving to Lincoln and something happens within their district, they must rely on someone else to respond. That is when it gets real,” Ahmic said.

The campaign was one piece of the puzzle that helped Pleasant Dale raise enough money to purchase

an ambulance and train its rescue personnel to use it. Other fire and rescue departments benefited, too. Utica used the money it raised for new air tanks for firefighters because their old ones could no longer be serviced. Garland’s ambulance got a life-saving electrocardiogram device. Staplehurst firefighters purchased new bunker gear because half their old sets were past their 10-year fire-protection lifespan.

Other organizations that received donations included Foster Friends, the Nebraska National Guard Museum, Hope Crisis Center, Seward-ish Giving Tree, Blue River Pet Rescue, City of Milford, Illuminate Seward, Kiwanis Club of Milford, Kiwanis Club of Seward Foundation, Legacy Fund for Seward County, Helping Hands Kiwanis, Olde Glory Foundation, Our Redeemer Lutheran Church and School, Seward Arts Council, Seward Fourth of July Celebration, Seward United Methodist Church, Southeast Nebraska CASA, Utica Ball Organization, Utica Community Foundation and the Village of Utica Parks and Pool Committee.

The campaign was backed by local corporate sponsors who offered a match based on the number of donations received.

The 2023 fundraiser kicked off with an informational meeting for organizations Feb. 1, with applications due March 1.

Giving will run from May 1 to May 5.

The Seward County Gives board is planning an agency fair during the week, where organizations will showcase their projects on the courthouse square in Seward.

“We think it will be good so people can come out and learn about all the organizations at once,” Ahmic said.

Each organization also will have a webpage to share its project.

“Ultimately, the need will never go away. Awareness will never cease to be an issue,” Ahmic said.

More information is available at [sewardcountylegacy.org/seward-county-gives](http://sewardcountylegacy.org/seward-county-gives).

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# NE National Guard Museum boasts busy year

BY GERALD D. "JERRY" MEYER  
NENG Historian

**January**  
The NENG Museum was featured on Channel 10/11's "Pure Nebraska" for the upcoming 160th anniversary of the battle of Fort Donelson, Tennessee. Reporter Jon Vanderford did the interview on the NENG's First Nebraska Regiment at the battle in February 1862, which helped promote an unknown Union general to national prominence (Ulysses S. Grant).

**February**  
A Nebraska Delegation attended the 160th anniversary celebration at Fort Donelson. Members from Seward were Chuck and Jan Matzke and Jerry and Mary Meyer. The delegation laid a wreath at the exact location of the stand of the First Nebraska on Wynn's Ferry Road. The Nebraska soldiers played a huge role in the victory.

**March**  
The Grand Island Junior ROTC class came to the museum for a tour and lunch. The air force cadets enjoyed a special behind-the-scenes tour of the lower levels and outside exhibits. The meal was catered and served on the main floor. The group was about 95 cadets and monitors.

**April**  
Annual Arbor Day tree planting was done at the NENG Museum. The students and dignitaries planted two oak trees on the west property of the museum.

**May**  
The NENG Museum was part of the Nebraska Tourism Passport Program 2022 this year. The program ran from May to September and included having the museum open on Saturdays. The docents at the museum covered the Saturdays and the program was huge success. The NENG Museum saw 8,546 patrons during the time period!

**June**  
Two big events in June are the Run to St. Lo Memorial 5K and St. John Summer Horizons. The Run to St. Lo had about 200+ runners involved (including a Shadow Run with the NENG on the Texas-Mexico border). This year involved the Berry Law team trophies. Summer Horizons is a series of classes for a week at the museum on World War I, World War II and rockets.



President and Mrs. Abraham Lincoln and Gen. and Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant are flanked by First Nebraska Regiment soldiers at the NENG Museum in July.



This PA31-17 World War II Higgins Boat landing craft was discovered in Lake Shasta, California. It was removed and is currently undergoing stabilization and filming for a documentary. The boat has ties to Maj. John Cattle of Seward who participated in the landings of Sicily in 1943.



Major Gen. Daryl Bohac speaks at his farewell party at the NENG Museum in December.

**July**  
President and Mrs. Abraham Lincoln and Gen. and Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant were actors for 2022 at the Museum. They participated in Chautauqua-style presentations, leadership seminars, presidential receptions and the Civil War Revue. They helped the museum celebrate the 160th anniversary of the battle of Fort Donelson. Following the July 4 holiday was the annual Liberation Tour 2022 to Europe hosted by the NENG Historical Society and organized by Executive Travel. The trip focuses on the path of the 134th Infantry in World War II.



The annual Arbor Day tree planting was at the NENG Museum.

POW/MIA Recognition Day was also at the museum. Clifford Johnson from Beatrice is still listed as MIA in World War II from the 134th Infantry Regiment. Over 1,000 MIAs from Nebraska are still listed from World War I, World War II and Korea.

**October**  
The Museum was up for Outstanding Tourist Site at the annual Tourism Conference in South Sioux City.

**November**  
Christmas in the Military saw veterans and patrons gather at the Museum for kolaches and coffee. The museum lighted up the M792 Gamma Goat which was a parade entry winner in the annual lighted parade for patriotism and number of lights.

**December**  
A highlight of December was the first of many farewell parties for Major Gen. Daryl Bohac (Adjutant General of Nebraska). Bohac will retire in 2023. The museum hosted a get together of donors and veterans to thank him.



Members of the Nebraska Delegation (Mary Meyer and Chuck and Jan Matzke) at the Fort Donelson National Battlefield, Tennessee, for the 160th anniversary of the battle and to lay a wreath at the site where the NENG's First Nebraska Regiment fought and defeated the Confederates in February, 1862.



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BY SCOLAR



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# Volzke family business reaches 50 years in Seward

BY STEPHANIE CROSTON  
scroston@sewardindependent.com

What started almost on a whim has become a staple in Seward.

Volzke Funeral Home was founded in 1972 by Deroyce Volzke. Today, his son Jeff runs the business with his son Jaden.

Deroyce originally farmed in the Utica area, Jeff said.

“He couldn’t stand plowing,” he said with a grin.

Deroyce served in the U.S. Army from 1961 to 1969 and was part of the detail that provided military honors at funerals.

“That piqued his interest,” Jeff said.

He didn’t know anything about the funeral business or being a mortician, but he took classes at Concordia College (now university) and attended mortuary school in San Francisco, where he earned his license.

When he returned to Seward after serving in the army, Deroyce ran an ambulance service, which was more for emergency transportation, Jeff said. He kept his vehicle at the former youth center.

One day, Deroyce’s father



Jaden Volzke, left, stands with his father, Jeff Volzke, after completing mortuary school.

was at coffee in Seward and was looking for a property that Deroyce could use for a funeral home.

A two-story white house stood at the corner of Second and Main streets. The

Volzkes bought the property, demolished the house and built the funeral home.

“My dad gambled on this at a young age,” Jeff said.

Deroyce was the sole mortician and funeral director at Volzke Mortuary for 22 years until Jeff came back.

“I’ve been around it my whole life,” Jeff said. “My dad never tried to talk me into it. He asked me what I wanted to do, and I didn’t know. He told me to go to school somewhere and figure it out.”

Jeff described himself as

more of a hands-on person, so he went to Southeast Community College and studied machine tool technology. He worked in Lincoln for two years, which was good experience, he said.

“But it was not for me,” he said. “I woke up one morning, and I knew what I wanted.”

He started taking night classes at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the prerequisite science classes at Concordia.

Jeff went to Dallas for

mortuary school and earned his license in 1993. After a one-year apprenticeship, “I’ve been here ever since,” he said.

Some of Jaden’s first memories are of playing hide and seek in the casket room at Volzke Funeral Home, he said. He used to wash the cars and mow the lawn, as well.

Having Jaden join the business has fallen into place in the last year, Jeff said.

Jaden earned his license from the Dallas Institute of Funeral Service, as well, and is currently serving his apprenticeship.

Jaden’s time at DIFS was primarily during the pandemic, which made classes more challenging, he said. However, he passed both parts of the national test on the first attempt and passed the state test, as well.

While in Dallas, Jaden worked with a classmate’s family in Fort Worth, Texas, helping remove and transport bodies.

“I saw a lot,” he said.

Working in Texas gave him a chance to see how different ethnicities and religions celebrate their dead.

He always knew he wanted to join his father in the funeral business.

“I’ve learned a lot,” he said. “A small town is a lot different. A small town is more personal. You talk to the families.”

In Texas, that personal connection doesn’t always happen, Jaden said.

Jeff said the advent of cell phones has changed the business quite a bit. Before cell phones, calls came to the family’s home phone at all hours. Now, the office phone can be forwarded to a cell phone, which makes access easier.

He also never expected to record funerals to put them online. That has become a popular option, however, especially during the pandemic when people weren’t able to attend funerals in person.

“It’s been 50 years,” Jeff said.

Both Jeff and Jaden look forward to continuing to serve the people of Seward.



Deroyce Volzke opens the doors to Volzke Funeral Home in Seward.



Jeff Volzke, left, shares the good news with his father Deroyce Volzke after graduating from the Dallas Institute of Funeral Service in 1993.

# QR codes bring cemeteries into 21st century

BY BEN LAMPMAN  
Seward County Independent

The City of Seward’s cemeteries are making it easier than ever to find and remember loved ones.

The City of Seward owns three cemeteries: The Seward Cemetery, The Anderson Cemetery and The Greenwood Cemetery.

Earlier this year, these cemeteries added a convenient

way for people to locate specific burials.

John Brandl, a member of the Cemetery Board, said the move was inspired by an outdated system where people looking for specific burial sites had to check the cemetery kiosk for the information.

“We’ve been looking for a while because we were working off literally old recipe cards and giant 10 pound – as

I call them ‘Harry Potter books’ – with all our information, so very old school,” Brandl said.

Brandl said he and Kent Chelewski were placed on the cemetery board with no background in the industry.

He said looking at the systems in place with a fresh set of eyes inspired a search for a mapping service they could use for the undertaking.

Brandl and Chelewski

settled on Web Cemeteries, which Brandl said is also used by cemeteries in Omaha.

Chelewski said the two made the decision in January of this year, and the program was officially rolled out three months later.

The site can be accessed by either scanning one of the on-site QR codes with a smartphone camera or found online under Cemetery

Information on the City of Seward’s website. It allows users to search for burials by name, giving the full location.

“Instead of going to the kiosk or the information center that we have outside and looking in the old book, and then looking on the old map that’s plastered behind the plexiglass and then trying to figure out where you’re at, (continued on 22)



# Village of Bee still going strong after 135 years

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN  
Seward County Independent

The Village of Bee, which was established in 1887 and is now home to about 200 people, celebrated its 135th anniversary in 2022.

Christopher Shipley, chairman of the Village Board of Trustees, said the thing he appreciates most about living in Bee is that its citizens are good-natured and have a good perspective on life.

“As a small community, generally speaking, we look out for each other, but we respect each other’s space,” he said.

Shipley said he believes the residents of Bee also enjoy living in a place that is a bit off the beaten path but still has close access to the interstate and Highway 15.

“It’s a very quiet com-



Over 180 people showed up in downtown Bee April 22, 2018, for the Bee Buzz Run, a fundraiser hosted annually to help restore the Bee States Ballroom. Lisa Ricenbaw of Beaver Crossing, left, and Stephanie Peaks of Staplehurst run for the finish line during the 2018 race.

munity,” he said. “It’s one in which neighbors interact and kids go out and play together and ride a bike on the streets, you know, all those types of things that in a larger community you might have a challenge.”

Notable spots in the village include its post office, fire station, church, historic ballroom, restaurant and baseball field.

Bee’s States Ballroom hosts a variety of events including basketball tournaments, chicken dinners, dinner theaters and dances. It is also a common venue for wedding receptions, anniversary parties and graduation celebrations.

Milo Navratil Field is the home field of the Bee Bombers baseball team and hosts several baseball games on Friday nights throughout the summer.

Flatland Market and Bar opened its doors in Bee in November 2022. Owners Danielle and Christopher Shipley serve customers food and drinks Wednesdays through Sundays.

“We’ve had an amazing community response,” Danielle Shipley said. “People have been really positive about it, and so we’re very excited.”

Danielle, who moved to Bee about 10 years ago, said she enjoys all the opportunities for community involvement in the town.

“There’s always something going on here,” she said. “As soon as we’re done with one event, it’s time for another. Right now, we’re doing the basketball tournaments, and as soon as those are over it’s time to start looking at the Buzz Run and the church’s chicken dinner.”

# Business booms at new Flatland Market and Bar in Bee

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN  
Seward County Independent

Flatland Market and Bar was well-received when it opened its doors in Bee on Nov. 30, 2022. The bar is owned and operated by founders Chris and Danielle Shipley, who have hired several employees.

The Shipleys moved from Lincoln

to Bee about 10 years ago.

Danielle, who watched her father run his own business throughout her childhood, said she had always thought about wanting to own a business.

The Shipleys settled on the idea of owning a bar. They thought it would be fun, but also a benefit for the community.

Danielle eventually left her full-time job as vice president of contracts for a software company in Lincoln. She and Chris bought the land for the business and began setting things in motion.

Then, Lou and Mary Anne’s Bar closed, and they knew the town needed a new place to gather as soon as possible.

Lou and Mary Anne’s was a long-time staple in Bee, famous statewide for its legendary Friday night fish fries.

“There was a lot of concern about what would happen to the town without a bar,” Danielle said. “It was a busy community for as small as it is, and people didn’t want to see it fade

(continued on 22)



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COURTESY IMAGE

A rendering shows Petsource by Scoular’s existing facility and the expansion that’s underway in the rail campus on the south side of Seward, west of Highway 15.

# Petsource on track to triple capacity, create jobs

BY BEN LAMPMAN  
Seward County Independent

A little over a year after announcing a large-scale expansion project, a Seward-based pet food company is making progress on its capacity-tripling venture.

The \$75 million project to expand Petsource by Scoular, a manufacturer of freeze-dried pet food, is scheduled to be completed this summer.

Petsource is an indirect, wholly owned and independently operated subsidiary of Omaha-based Scoular.

According to Scoular, this expansion is predicted to triple production capacity and create up to 75 new jobs at the Seward facility.

Though Scoular has been in business since 1892, Jon Huessner, operations manager at Petsource, said the Seward-based company was started in 2020.

He said the quick expansion in part is because of rising pet ownership during the pandemic.

He said the COVID-19 pandemic substantially increased pet ownership to a record 70% of U.S. households.

Huessner said Petsource is a turnkey contract manufacturer, meaning Petsource does not make its own branded products but instead assists in the recipe, processing, production and packaging of goods on a contracted basis.

Petsource specializes in freeze-dried dog food, which is a way of producing pet food that is less processed than traditional kibble.

Huessner said freeze-dried dog food is a “niche” in the pet food aisle because of the price and quality differences compared to other types.

“If you go to Petco or PetSmart and you go down the aisle, it has freeze-dried dog food. It’s always expensive stuff,” Huessner said. “The great thing about this product is that it’s a very clean label. It’s just basically pure protein that dogs need for their diet.”

Despite being a niche in the pet food market, Petsource is more than a niche in Seward, and the ongoing

expansion project is proof.

Huessner said the decision to expand the plant came as Petsource management realized they could not meet demand with the existing facility.

“Within a year of running the plant, we found out the demand was so high that we were running out of capacity,” Huessner said.

He said Petsource management received approval from Scoular, and the nearly 1-year-old business broke ground on the expansion in summer 2022.

While in-progress, Huessner said the expansion is on track to be completed in summer 2023, noting that construction on the building is almost complete.

He said the next steps to be completed this spring are the finishing infrastructure, as well as receiving and installing the rest of the required equipment.

“Most of the building is done. Now we can start running more of the electrical, air, steam and gas, refrigeration – all those things will be happening this winter or spring,” Huessner said. “Equipment arrivals will happen in the spring. We’ve already started receiving some of the major equipment, but it takes months to get it all installed.”

The goal is to be operational by late summer or early fall.

# CU music building closer to completion

BY KEATON BURGESS  
reporter@sewardindependent.com

Concordia University continues to work on its new music building and hopes to have students in it before seniors graduate in May.

Dave Kumm, executive vice president of CU, said construction started in April of 2021 and was expected to be done in July of 2022. That date got backed up because of challenges with the economy and materials.

He said the main challenge was in the construction industry.

“Initially, there was a big delay with material delivery,” he said. “Also, the labor shortage impacted it dramatically.”

Getting contractors and workers on board was tough.

“We were competing against Lincoln doing a lot of large projects,” Kumm said.

Kumm said some places thought they had a contractor lined up, and they would lose them to another job.

Now that CU has mostly overcome these challenges, Kumm said they have a date in mind for the building to be finished.

“I am setting March 23 as the date they will turn it



COURTESY IMAGE

Renovations to Concordia’s music building will merge old and new into one cohesive learning and performance space.

over to me,” he said. “I’ve told them it’s important to me that our seniors who are supposed to be in there get at least one month in the new building. I’ve been working it out with the music faculty, and it may not be perfect, but we should get them in the building in April.”

Kumm said that after a recent meeting, even though the landscaping and other minor things won’t be

finished, everything is still pointing to the building being completed on March 23. He also mentioned a small fire on Dec. 7 didn’t push the date back.

“We lost a day’s worth of work because the fire investigators were doing their investigation,” he said. “They’ve got some repair work to do and we had a restoration company come in and check for any smoke

damage. For the most part, there were no real big issues.”

After they finish the building, get furniture and all the other necessities, Kumm said it will cost a little under \$18 million.

“That’s an all-in type cost,” he said.

Kumm said that the building will be top-notch.

“It’s bringing something forward to the music depart-

ment that they haven’t had,” he said. “A lot of money and time has been spent on the acoustics and the sound absorption and we’re increasing the facility space by about 12,000 square feet.”

When students get the chance to go into the building, Kumm said he thinks they will be impressed.

“I think they’re going to be in awe at the facility they have to learn in,” he said.



# Our Redeemer enjoys building, starts on additions

BY KEATON BURGESS  
reporter@sewardindependent.com

After opening a new building about a year and a half ago, Our Redeemer Lutheran School in Staplehurst has started working on its second phase of the building.

Our Redeemer moved into its new building in October of 2021 and has been enjoying it.

“It’s nice being in a facility that is up to date and having everything on one level,” Principal Harlan Anson said. “It’s been great for our school and congregation for any activities that we might have.”

Anson said the technology being updated in the classrooms and chapel area has also been nice.

“They all have projectors in the ceilings and wireless internet all throughout the building,” he said. “There are also televisions that you can cast onto.”

Since the new building, Anson said the enrollment has gone up. He said there are 60 students enrolled this year.

“That’s the most we’ve had in about 27 years,” he said. “It’s gone up and continues to trend in that direction.”

With the first phase of the building completed, Our Redeemer has started on phase two, which will include a gym and multipurpose room.

Anson said the gym should be finished by September of 2023.

He said it can be used for many different things such as sports tournaments, wedding receptions, funeral luncheons, family get-togethers and more.

“Our old gym is extremely small,” Anson said. “The three-point line is the half-court line and the ceiling is very low. We are very blessed to have had a place that we can go when the weather wasn’t the greatest, but having this new gymnasium will be great.”

Anson said the gym will have speakers, screens and other up-to-date technology.



KEATON BURGESS/SCI/MT

Our Redeemer Lutheran School has started on phase two of its building, which includes a new gym and multi-purpose room. The gym is expected to be finished in September of 2023.

Along with more room in the gym, Anson said it will be a great thing for the community.

“Being in a small community like this, you have to work together with your neighbors,” he said. “We work with a lot of different groups, and

we are able to do a lot of things together for the betterment of our community.”

Anson said the next step in phase two is to lay the foundation for where the gym will go in the addition.



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# Crestview gets second life as apartment complex

BY EMILY HEMPHILL  
emily@sewardindependent.com

Milford will soon have new apartments for rent. Work is progressing on the transformation of the old Crestview Care Center into \$2.5 million apartment housing.

Hoppe Development of Lincoln is renovating the building at 1100 First Street into apartments, with the hope of having units available for rent by May.

The old nursing home has been sitting empty since November 2019 when its parent company, Azira Health, closed its doors and those of three other nursing facilities in Nebraska.

Jake Hoppe of Hoppe Development said the project will give new life to the space and help alleviate housing stress in Milford.

“A lot of the housing shortage is reflected both in housing that isn’t being built, but also in housing diversity. There’s single-family homes, or maybe a 30-plex apartment, but this will all be on a single floor,” Hoppe said. “It might be appropriate for a young professional, or it might be appropriate for a senior who wants to downsize and not take care of a larger house. Housing diversity is just having the right type of housing for people at different stages of their life.”

The mix of studio, one-bedroom and two-bed two-bath apartments will be



EMILY HEMPHILL/SCI/MT

The former Crestview Care Center building at 1100 First Street in Milford undergoes construction as it is transformed into apartments.

rented at market rate.

The units are not subsidized or low-income housing. They will, however, be considered “affordable housing” because of the financing for the project.

The Milford City Council approved a conditional use permit for the project last February, then underwent the process to approve \$256,000 in Tax Increment Financing.

The project also was awarded a loan from the Rural Workforce Housing Fund, a statewide program that allows Milford and Seward County to distribute loans to increase the supply and quality of housing in the community.

“That combination will allow us to offer high-quality apartments, just not at the price of brand-new construction,” Hoppe said.

The developer’s costs will be 60-70% cheaper because they are starting with an existing structure.

The property is under a redevelopment contract for \$100,000, but its valuation at the outset of the project was around \$750,000, according to the county assessor.

The building is getting a new roof and asbestos abatement. The exterior has remained largely intact, but the interior was completely gutted to make for flexibility in arranging ideal living units.

Each apartment will have its own entrance from the outside, with different front porch-like areas, as well as a courtyard in the back that

some units will open into.

The Milford Planning and Zoning Commission heard concerns last spring about additional traffic in the area since the building sits next door to Milford Elementary School.

“The conditional use permit stipulates that they have to put a buffer between the elementary school and the units,” City Clerk Jeanne Hoggins said.

Hoppe plans to use the trees growing between the

**(continued on 25)**

## The story continues... Library plans remodel after 20 years in current location

BY EMILY HEMPHILL  
emily@sewardindependent.com

Seward Memorial Library is continuing the story with plans to remodel parts of the library to make the space more useful for the community.

Library staff and patrons will celebrate 20 years in the building at 233 S. Fifth Street in 2023.

The Seward Library Foundation is starting its “The Story Continues” fundraising campaign with a goal of raising \$70,000 in donations to put toward the remodel – just the second major change in the building since it opened in 2003 after its “Writing the Next Chapter” fundraising campaign, which moved the collection across the street from its former location.

The “Finishing the Book” campaign to open the lower level was completed in 2013.

Library Director Becky Baker said the idea for a remodel came about as staff noticed the library’s computer lab is rarely used anymore.

“People bring in their own devices and use our Wi-Fi,” Baker said.

The lab contains 16 desktop computer stations for the public to use. The computers



COURTESY PHOTO

The computer lab at Seward Memorial Library has become nearly obsolete, with most patrons bringing their own devices and using the library’s wireless internet. The lab will be turned into offices, spurring a remodel of other spaces throughout the building.

take up a large amount of space and are only used a few times a day.

Baker said instead of the lab, the library plans to make laptops available that patrons can use anywhere in the building, along with wireless printing, making the lab obsolete.

“What to do with that room really started this,” Baker said.

The lab will become office space for the director and assistant director, as well as space for storage.

What is currently Baker’s office will become the Library of Things, containing Fit4Seward equipment, outdoor games and other devices the library has available for checkout, such as projectors, tool and musical instruments.

In the lower level, items in the Genealogy Room will move upstairs to the Heritage Room (currently available as a meeting space), and the Genealogy Room will become another meeting room.

The Used Book Nook will be divided into two more study rooms to accommodate the higher-than-expected use of the library’s two existing study rooms.

The Used Book Nook will move to one side of the downstairs staff room, with the other side remaining storage and staff workspace.

Much thought went into plans for the current layout 20 years ago when the library was built, and Baker said the changes will help the library stay relevant for the next 20 years.

“From when we opened to now, it’s a totally different world,” she said. “When we opened, I just knew we’d need a second computer lab. Now, it’s hardly used.”

Though the library received a large financial gift in recent years, Baker said

it can only spend the interest off the investment, which isn’t generating much in today’s economy. The library also recently competed a shelf improvement project that cost around \$44,000 of which \$12,000 was donated.

“We believe there is support in the community to continue making the library better,” Baker said.

The Foundation met in late January to discuss the next steps for the project. Baker said she hopes work on the remodel will begin sometime in 2023, and the Foundation will work with architectural firm Clark & Enersen to identify spaces to recognize donors.

“We’re trying to find the best way to serve the community moving forward,” Baker said.

Donations may be made by mailing a check to the Seward Library Foundation, P.O. Box 42, Seward, NE 68434 or by dropping off a check at the library, 233 S. Fifth Street in Seward.

To make an online donation, go to [friendsofsewardlibrary.org](http://friendsofsewardlibrary.org) and click on the “Donate” button, then designate the Seward Library Foundation in the comments.





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Claudius Jones  
Founder, 1873  
State Bank of Nebraska



John Cattle  
President, 1881-1901  
State Bank of Nebraska



Walter Cattle  
President, 1901-1931  
State Bank of Nebraska



Robert T. Cattle, Sr.  
President, 1931-1960  
Cattle National Bank



John W. Cattle, Sr.  
President and CEO, 1960-1992  
Cattle National Bank

# Family owned Cattle Bank celebrates 150 years

BY BEN LAMPMAN  
Seward County Independent

In 1973, the Independent ran a story, “More Than 100 Years of Growth, Change” on the 100-year anniversary of Cattle Bank in Seward. Fifty years later, though, there is plenty that hasn’t changed for the bank. Cattle Bank has two locations in Seward, as well as two in Lincoln. Bank President Ryne Seaman and Vice President Rebecca Vahle said despite the growth and change, the bank remains owned and operated by the Cattle family as it has been since 1881. According to the centennial article, Cattle Bank – then called the State Bank of Nebraska – was founded in 1873 by Claudius Jones, who also founded Jones Bank in Seward. He was forced to sell in 1876 to a man named Oskabock because of his health. John Cattle and his three sons, farmers from England who had incentive to move to Nebraska by prospects such as the British Steamship Company and the Burlington Railroad, bought the bank

from Oskabock in 1881. Robert Cattle, one of John’s sons, married Mercedes Brown, a relative of Claudius Jones, in 1912. This officially connected the Cattle family with the original founders of the bank. Their son, John Cattle Sr., managed the bank until 1991 when he passed the reins to his son, John W. Cattle Jr. John Sr.’s wife, Virginia Cattle, is a current chairperson emeritus following a career on the Board of Directors at the bank since 1967. She said she has always valued how Cattle Bank is quick to accept changes, becoming one of the first in the state to move to digital banking. The tendency to embrace new ways of banking allowed the company to stay with the times, Virginia said, though there are some things that won’t change. This includes the familial atmosphere of a family owned bank. While her day-to-day life did not really consist of banking, Virginia said she fondly remembers John Sr. bringing prospective employees to meet her for lunch. One of these prospects,



COURTESY PHOTO  
An August 1911 photo shows the State Bank of Nebraska, which became Cattle National Bank in 1930.

Seaman, remembers one such meeting with the Cattles in 1989. “I can remember the day of my interview,” Seaman said. “Basically being interviewed by the entire family felt a bit odd.” Vahle, the daughter of Virginia and John Sr., also remembers Seaman’s interview, though she fondly remembers his disposition and his outfit that day – enough to purchase it again at a yard sale years later. “He was extremely nervous,” Vahle said. “He had a suit on, and that suit went to a garage sale, and I bought it and presented it at a Christmas party to him.” Seaman said he always valued the family owned aspect of the bank, though he also recognized that he isn’t a blood relative. For that reason, he said he is surprised

to be president. “I just wanted a job at the time. I never expected to be president of the organization,” Seaman said. While he isn’t related to the Cattles by blood, Vahle said Seaman, as well as all the bank employees, should feel like part of the family. “We think of him as family. The whole staff, we look out for each other,” Vahle said. “Everyone refers to it as their ‘bank family.’ It’s very important for our family that they feel that way.” Seaman said the bank is planning to celebrate the 150th anniversary all year. Both Seaman and Vahle said they are proud to work at Cattle Bank. “It’s a community bank, so in effect our success is tied to the success of the community,” Seaman said. “If they succeed, we succeed and vice-versa.”

He said the future of independently owned financial institutions in Nebraska is in jeopardy, though Cattles doesn’t plan on going anywhere soon. “There were over 400 independently owned financial institutions in Nebraska, most being family owned. Today there are 160, and within 10 years, it’s expected to be 100,” Seaman said. “Our mission is to be one of those 100 institutions.” To get there, Vahle and Seaman said the bank will keep growing and changing to stay ahead, though one thing that won’t be going anywhere anytime soon is the personal feel of banking and working at Cattle Bank.

## We’re ready to meet the challenge of the 80’s!

Left to right: Sherry Luebke, Judy Colberg, Glenda Burwell, Connie Tonniges.

Left to right: Clint Jensen, Lowell Jepson, Jay Cattle, Bob Anderson, Kevin Keller, Fred Steinheider, Laurie Jirovsky, Donna Lindquist, Suzanne Kolterman, Myra Ruether, Pat Saf, Twink Waas, Jeanne Wiemer, Rhoda Bredow, Vi Kovar, John Cattle Sr., Margaret Engler, Diane Rerucha, John Munn.

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Main Bank - 5th & Seward  
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A 1980s advertisement showcases the Cattle National Bank staff at the main bank and motor bank in Seward.

COURTESY PHOTO







# St. John Lutheran Church reaches 145-year milestone

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN  
Seward County Independent

St. John Lutheran Church in Seward celebrated its 145th anniversary in 2022, which Pastor Scott Bruick said is a reminder of God’s continuing faithfulness to his children.

St. John began as a house church in Seward. For seven years, the Rev. Theodore Gruber, who served nearby at Immanuel Lutheran Church at Middle Creek near Garland, used to come on horseback to give the sermons.

“One of the men in the congregation would keep a look out for him, see him approaching and then would notify others in town so they could get together and have their church service,” church member and local historian Dr. Jerry Pfabe said.

St. John officially was chartered 1877. The congregation gathered in the church’s first building in 1879. That building is still standing at Third and Seward streets.

In 1884, St. John opened its grade school and later opened a child development center, which provides early childhood education and care to toddlers through pre-kindergarteners.

The center was relocated for expansion in 2016 and can now serve up to 140 children.

The child development center and grade school earned a “School of Distinction” designation through National Lutheran School Accreditation in 2019. Bruick said the Step Up to Quality program in Nebraska gave the child development center high ratings.

Bruick said God’s grace has been with the congregation all 145 years, even during hardship.



St. John Lutheran Church celebrated its 145th anniversary in 2022. The church now sits at the corner of North Columbia Avenue and East Hillcrest Drive in Seward.

“From our difficult days in the early 2000s, the congregation has experienced a new life of being humbled before the Lord and seeing God’s gift of grace and forgiveness,” Bruick said.

Bruick said a great bright point for many church members has been the joy of its worship life, especially through music.

“We can speak the hope of Jesus Christ into the lives of one another and our neighbors,” he said. “We do that a lot in times of crisis in the community, but also just in everyday life.”

Pfabe said he

has been part of a Bible study within the church that has given him an important community within a community.

“There are a lot of very bright people [in the Bible study group],” he said. “They ask good questions. They respond well to questions. They like to be challenged, and they like the participation.”

St. John also engages in a variety of community service and outreach efforts. It has a community food bank, “Christ’s Cupboard,” that is open three days a week and works with the Food Bank of Lincoln to help provide a

mobile distribution for Seward County.

“The food pantry is interesting because while it is not an attempt to convert people or get them into the membership at St. John, it is a sign that St. John cares about people in need,” Pfabe said.

According to Pfabe, St. John typically sends a group on a summer mission trip to an indigenous village in Alaska, has a Thanksgiving dinner open to all, regardless of church membership, and has a Steven Ministry program. Steven Ministers are trained people who meet with those in need to offer support and guidance.

Marlin Luebbe and his wife, Rita, have been heavily involved with St. John for many years and continue to help by making coffee on Sunday mornings. Marlin said he enjoys worshipping at St. John and hearing God’s word through the pastors.

“It’s kind of like going to a gas station and filling up with gas every week,” he said. “If I miss, I really feel like I’ve missed something for the week.”



St. John Child Development Center serves 140 children in Seward, with support from St. John Lutheran Church.

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# ALLO lays fiber in Seward County

BY KEATON BURGESS  
reporter@sewardindependent.com

ALLO Communications made its apperance in Seward County in 2022 with ground breaking ceremonies, construction and laying fiber in Milford and Seward.

The ALLO building is located in Seward at 640 Seward St., but ALLO will still support both Seward and Milford.

“We will be hiring local technicians and customer experience representatives,” Tanna Hanna, director of marketing and social media at Allo Communications said. “We believe in giving back to communities that we serve. Being local is a core value at ALLO.”

In September of 2022, Hanna said the construction process should end around the spring of 2023. The fiber laying process usually takes around seven to eight months.

The decision for ALLO to come to Seward County has been discussed for quite some time. “We are excited to start the project and continue our mission to connect as many homes, businesses, and government entities as possible to our all-fiber network,” she said.

Overall, Hanna said she is excited to see ALLO in the county.

“We are excited to bring an all-fiber network to Milford that will provide local support, TV, phone, and internet speeds up to 2.3 GIG for residents and up to 10GIG for businesses,” she said.



KEATON BURGESS/SCI/MT

Allo in Seward held a ribbon cutting with the Seward County Chamber and Development Partnership. Picutred are, from left, (front row) Amanda Wagner, Harrison Helmer, Alison Koch, Brenda Henning, Dave Miller, Sophie Bolubasz, Jerry Smith, and Jonathan Jank; and (back row) Derek Tesinsky, Tyler Rubottom, Darren Heitman, Ed Jarrett, Matt Moyer, Krista Fernau, Tony Thrash, Chasity Blair, Rick Gray, Andrew Vinton, Alyssa Wintz, Roger Chavez, Nathan McGahan and Jon McHenry.

# City invests in \$25 million wastewater upgrade

BY EMILY HEMPHILL  
emily@sewardindependent.com

The City of Seward is planning for a new \$25 million wastewater treatment facility to keep up with the community’s growing population.

The city is working with SEH Engineering to design a new, higher-capacity wastewater treatment plant.

Jeremiah Wendt, senior professional engineer with SEH, said the project required several layers of analysis to get state approval.

That process included a projection of population growth over the next 20 years, an evaluation of the current facility conditions, a cost analysis, public involvement via an open meeting and the exploration of alternative actions.

“It really takes a number of years to execute a project of this size,” City Engineer Mike Oneby said.

Wendt said Seward’s population is expected to grow about 1% per year over the next 20 years.

According to U.S. Census numbers, the population grew from 6,964 people in 2010 to 7,643 in 2020.

It is expected to reach 9,802 people by 2045.

“We look at those census numbers and how that impacts the flow and loading into

the wastewater treatment plant,” Wendt said.

They also account for future industrial growth, such as for large companies that may come to the Seward-Lincoln Regional Rail Campus.

“We have planned for 20 years of residential growth, 20 years of commercial growth and 20 years of industrial growth,” Oneby said.

Seward’s current wastewater treatment plant processes 1.5 million gallons of wastewater per day on average.

That includes everything from toilet waste to what drains down the kitchen sink to rainwater running down the street.

The plant can handle a peak flow of 7.1 million gallons, such as during a significant rain event.

The plant was built in 1959 and saw significant upgrades in 1977, but it hasn’t had many updates since.

Ultraviolet disinfection components were added in 2010 to disinfect the water before it dumps into the Blue River, but those components are in a floodplain and need to be raised up.

Some of the components still use 1959 technology.

Not only is the plant outdated, it makes it difficult for the operators to control what’s going on, Wendt said.

“It’s a very corrosive environment, so these – understandably – break down over time,” he said. “It is beyond its intended lifespan and can no longer handle additional growth. We don’t have the pumping capacity to keep up with these peak flows we’re expecting.”

Wendt said parts of the existing plant can be reused with updates and modifications, while integrating new components to expand capacity and update technology.

SEH considered three different types of systems for a new plant, with the three ranging in cost from approximately \$25 million to \$50 million for construction.

The firm also considered the environmental impact of each type of system and how many chemicals must be used in the treatment process.

The winner – a sequencing batch reactor – was most favorable in all aspects, Wendt said, with the lowest cost and smallest environmental impact.

The city council voted to raise wastewater rates by 15% in this fiscal year to help pay for the new plant.

Design for the new plant is expected to be finalized and submitted for state approval this spring.

Construction could begin as early as summer 2023 and could be

completed by 2025.

If the city does nothing to update the plant, the state could issue a mandate for upgrades, City Administrator Greg Butcher said.

“We don’t want to get behind the eight-ball where the state is mandating an upgrade,” Butcher said.

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# Schlueter Repair and Specialties expands, shifts focus

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN  
Seward County Independent

More than 20 years ago, Dan Schlueter of Schlueter Repair and Specialties started a business in his backyard. In recent years, both the space itself and the type of work he does have expanded.

Schlueter didn't always know he would one day open his own business. After attending trade school, he worked for an auto body shop in Lincoln and then in Seward. He stayed at the Seward body shop for three years before returning to the family farm in 1993, like he had always planned, to raise animals and crops with his brother.

However, it was difficult for the farm to yield enough to support two families, so Schlueter eventually began fixing things for people on the side – starting with painting tractors.

In 1999, he decided to build a shop in his backyard dedicated to bodywork, general welding fabrication and farm repair.

Over the last five years, he cut back on auto body work and began more custom fabrication, meaning he builds components that other companies will use.

He now gets to build equipment from scratch and figure out how to make it work.

He and his four employees build a variety of products including wall panel tables for the prefabricated home industry that end up being used across the United States and Canada, subcomponent



Jake Patton welds metal pieces together at Schlueter Repair and Specialties.

DOUG CARROLL/SCI/MT

nailers, framing tables and wall panels for welding booths in high schools.

In 2019, he expanded his shop to have more space and a new, fully equipped Computer Numerical Control area.

CNC allows for automated control of high-tech machining tools. This summer, he will add on another office space and more storage.

One of his employees is his son, Jared, who studied machining at Southeast Community College in Milford.

Jared previously worked for Lincoln Tool and Design and now helps his dad with machining and designing parts.

Jared said his favorite part about being in this line of work is that every day is different.

“Every job you get into is different,” he said. “There’s always a different way to go about it, because every part, kind of like in machines, none of it’s the same. It keeps it interesting.”

As someone who has experience working in repair, Dan said he knows people often make things without thinking about the person who may have to work on it down the road. So, he always keeps that person in mind as he determines how he wants to build something.

“When we build something or work on it, I always think, ‘Well, if I’m not the guy who would have to fix it later, I’m going to pretend like I am,’” he said. “I’m going to put it together to make it easier for the next guy.”



DOUG CARROLL/SCI/MT

ABOVE: Dan Schlueter cuts out pieces for a custom project.

LEFT: Owner Dan Schlueter, second from right, poses with his son Jared Schlueter, right, and employees Jake Patton and Chase Birkel in front of one of the pieces they recently finished at Schlueter Repair and Specialties.



# Cemeteries

(continued from 11) you just open up your phone and point your camera at it,” Brandl said.

Additionally, the site features a page for each burial containing information such as birth and death date, as well as the obituary, if available. Users are able to post digital memorials, including comments, photos and videos of the deceased for others to see on the page.

Brandl said this will allow for mourners to have an easier time seeing memories of their loved ones, some of which they might not have known existed.

“So when you pull up that information, you see their picture, you see the obituary that we add in there when we put them in at the burial, and then families can add photos, videos, notes, memories, whatsoever to that program,” Brandl said.

“When that person is

brought up by anybody, all that can be seen.”

Brandl said the digital memorials undergo moderation before they appear public on the page, as a means to avoid inappropriate posts, though it has yet to happen.

The cemetery board has also brought a fresh pair of eyes to other areas of cemetery operations as well. Brandl said they now have an iPad they can use to help people choose and purchase plots without having to do paperwork in the office.

“If we have a family that wants to buy a plot, we can do it right then and there with them,” he said.

The QR code system is also slated to provide more than ease of access to loved ones’ burials.

Chelewski said the next step in the project is implementing digital tours throughout the cemeteries, giving people directions to graves of

notable people.

Routes through cemeteries that would normally require a map or several signposts can now be conveniently pulled up on a smartphone.

In addition to the QR codes, Brandl said the cemetery board is also searching for antique military equipment to decorate the Veterans’ Memorial in Seward.

He said the project has been approved, and the next step is making it happen.

Brandl said the cemetery recently added a Civil War monument for Joe Gannon. Changes like these are what Brandl said he and Chelewski are happy to see with the city’s cemeteries.

“Just little things like that that are happening that hadn’t happened in the cemetery for a very long time,” Brandl said.

“I’m glad we’re making positive changes.”

# Flatland

(continued from 12) away. So, we thought this was probably the right time to do this.”

The bar, located on Rock Creek Road, is open Wednesdays through Sundays. Aside from drinks, it serves a variety of food including burgers, sandwiches, Phillies, Reubens, homemade potato salad, breakfasts on weekends and more.

Sometimes, the bar dedicates certain days to certain foods, such as pizza a couple days of the week and wings on Sundays. On Thursday nights, the bar hosts “Thunder Thigh Thursdays” with marinated chicken thighs.

“We’ve got no shortage of ideas,” Danielle said. “So, it’s kind of an ever-growing menu right now.”

The bar hosts events when possible, such as trivia nights and music bingo.

Danielle said the thing she enjoys most about owning Flatland Market and Bar is the opportunity to be a fun, comfortable place in the community for years to come.

“I really like the opportunity to make things and to make people happy,” she said. “I like to see people enjoying themselves and enjoying what we make and enjoying what we do.”

Wendy Klement, a server at the bar, said her favorite things about her job are its atmosphere and the people she interacts with, both staff and customers.

“I really enjoy working here,” she said. “Danielle and Chris, the owners, are super easy to get along with and just the nicest people I’ve ever got to work with.”

Danielle said she and her husband feel lucky their bar has had an amazing response from the community. She said some customers have even traveled from other towns because they heard positive things about Flatland Market and Bar.

“People have been so excited, and we have new people coming in every week. We’ve had huge crowds, especially on evenings and weekends,” she said. “It’s been really amazing.”

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Mark joined the Suhr & Lichty Insurance team in 1984 after graduating from the University of Nebraska Kearney. He has since achieved numerous industry awards and professional insurance designations, including the industry's top designation Certified Insurance Counselor.



Thomas Suhr

Thomas joined the Suhr & Lichty Insurance team in 2019 after graduating from the University of Wyoming. Thomas graduated with a Bachelors Degree in Agriculture Ecology and is also a licensed crop insurance agent.



Shelley Scheele

Shelley joined the Suhr & Lichty Insurance team in 2004. Shelley is a graduate from Doane University in Crete, NE.



Jodi Barry

Jodi brings over 20 years of experience to her role at Suhr & Lichty Insurance, where she has served clients since 1998. She specializes in crop insurance.

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Diane joined the Suhr & Lichty Insurance team in 1988 after graduating from Nebraska Wesleyan University. She has since achieved numerous industry awards and professional insurance designations including the industry's top designation, Certified Insurance Counselor.



Diane Lichty

Tyler joined the Suhr & Lichty Insurance team in 2014 after graduating from Nebraska Wesleyan University. Tyler is a graduate of Seward High School in 2010. He has since earned his property and casualty insurance license, crop insurance license and earned his designation as an Authorized Insurance Producer.



Tyler Lichty

Liesel became part of the team in 2019. She is a life and health agent, a medicare advantage specialist, licensed in property and casualty insurance, and a valuable team member.



Liesel Pabian

Kerry joined the Suhr & Lichty team in March of 2021. She is a licensed property & casualty and crop insurance agent. Kerry is eager to grow with the team and brings lots of energy and hometown roots.



Kerry Stalsberg



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# From five grads to 150: Seward schools continue to grow

BY EMILY HEMPHILL  
emily@sewardindependent.com

A lot has changed at Seward Public Schools over the past 155 years, but one constant remains: support from the community.

The school district celebrated its 155th anniversary in 2022, having started in 1866 with students from 13 local families.

Five students graduated that year, and the district has continued to grow since. In 2022, it awarded diplomas to 150 students.

Dr. Josh Fields has served the district for 11 years, with six of those as superintendent. His job is to oversee the happenings at the elementary, middle and high schools, as well as the district office.

Fields researched the history of the district as he prepared to welcome staff back for the 2022-23 school year last fall. He found that community involvement always has been evident at SPS.

“I think about how supportive our community is of education. I really believe we have many parents that choose to come to Seward because of our schools,” Fields said. “Also, our relationship with our parochial schools. Ninety percent of those students become our students in high school.”

SPS is known as School District No. 9 – the number the schools in Seward were assigned as other school districts began popping up throughout the county in the late 1800s.

“The school districts began organizing about the time the county was organizing 1866-67. They are numbered roughly in order of their organization,” said Joan Shurtliff of the Seward County Genealogical Society.

According to Shurtliff, about 95 districts were spread throughout the county at one point – many of them one-room country schoolhouses encompassing grades 1-8.

“If a student graduated from the eighth grade, that was a big deal,” Shurtliff said. “By the 1880s, there was more interest in adding grades 9-12.”

Fields pointed out that the district retained its number 9 as other schools consolidated or closed as early as the 1930s.

As more and more students from neighboring communities migrated to SPS, the district got serious about expanding.

In 2022, the district enrolled 1,500 students in grades preK-12 and operated with 220 staff – quite a bit larger than its humble beginnings in the late 1800s.

“Our success with academics and with our students is our number one success,” Fields said.

He said he’s proud of how the district has kept up with emerging technology and expanded its career



COURTESY PHOTO

The old Seward Public School buildings stand along what is now Highway 34 and Third Street. The largest building is now The Rock church.

and college readiness opportunities.

“We have a lot of kids that have the ability to do job internships and get involved in the trades, but also take college credits or get an idea of careers they might be interested in through our SENCAP program,” Fields said.

SENCAP is the Southeast Nebraska Career Academy Partnership through Southeast Community College, which offers juniors and seniors college-level courses in agriculture, business, construction, criminal justice, education, health sciences, information technology, and manufacturing in energy and welding.

Fields said SPS weathered the COVID-19 storm and has mostly recovered from the difficulties brought on by school shutdowns.

“We’re still very cautious of that learning loss. We had summer school the last two years to help bridge that gap,” he said.

The pandemic quickly showed educators how important the social aspect of education is for students and teachers alike.

“The trend has changed. Five years ago, people were leaning toward virtual,” Fields said. “COVID taught us kids need that interaction with others. They need that social piece that’s such a huge part of sports, band, fine arts – those things that help develop the student completely.”

SPS continues to update its buildings and forge partnerships with other entities in the community – something Fields said is a vital part of a strong school district.

“We appreciate the parents’ support and that of the staff and the students,” he said.

## Timeline of Seward Public Schools

**1866** – 13 families north of Seward meet to discuss the importance of good education. They vote to build a schoolhouse in time for the start of school that fall.

**1871** – Residents officially deem Seward the county seat.

**1873** – The railroad comes through Seward, bringing new families daily.

**1874** – A vote of the board of education leads to construction of a brick schoolhouse on the corner of Third and South streets for students in first through 12th grades. Later, more one-room elementary schools are built to accommodate the growing number of children.

**1904** – A new high school is built a few years before the courthouse is erected in the town square. All the one-room elementary schools are converted to homes, and students meet in the original school building from 1874.

**1915** – A new high school is built northeast of the 1904 building, and kindergarten through sixth grades move into the old high school.

**1917** – Young men left high school in droves to fight in World War I.

**1930s** – The board of education pushes for construction of a new elementary building south of the high school. The original elementary building is removed. Other school districts in Seward County begin to close, and Seward’s class sizes double from 20 to 40 per class.

**1949** – The Nebraska Legislature passes the Reorganization of School Districts Act, which begins plans for a new school to include a gym, home economics room and extra classrooms. Voters pass a bond to connect the 1904, 1915 and 1930 buildings.

**1957** – The district refuses to enroll new freshmen because of crowding, and talks begin on building a new high school.

**1960** – Ten smaller school districts merge with Seward.

**1963** – A new high school is built for grades 10-12.

**1972** – Overcrowding becomes an issue again as Concordia High School closes its doors. Remodeling begins at the high school.

**1980** – A fifth-grade wing is added to the elementary building. The high school gets an addition, as well as subsequent additions in 1990, 1996 and 2002.

**1990** – A new elementary school is built on Pinewood Avenue.

**1991** – All the school buildings reorganize grade levels: 9-12 at the high school, 5-8 at the middle school (the building combined in 1949) and K-4 at the new elementary school.

**1992** – Elementary schools in Garland, Goehner and Staplehurst/Ulysses begin to close, sending students to Seward.

**1999** – An addition is added to the elementary school to accommodate the growth.

**2012** – A new middle school is built near Waverly Road, and the former school building is eventually sold to The Rock church.

**2013** – Seward Elementary gets another addition, with remodeling and upgrades each year for several years.



PHOTO COURTESY SEWARD COUNTY GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

A class stands outside the District 31 Hamlin School in J Precinct, organized in 1873.



# SCCDP launches gift cards in place of Chamber Bucks

BY EMILY HEMPHILL  
emily@sewardindependent.com

The Chamber Bucks program has long been a part of Seward County's business community. The program is underwent a new change in 2022 – making the switch from paper checks to plastic gift cards.

The gift cards launched in June in cooperation with the company Miconex.

The Seward County Chamber and Development Partnership, which oversees the program, said the newly renamed Seward County Gift Card program will make it more convenient for shoppers to use the bucks and easier for businesses to accept them.

Chamber Bucks often are given as gifts or prizes, with SCCDP selling about \$100,000 in bucks each year. Those dollars go back to member businesses.

“Chamber Bucks has been very successful, especially with large employers using the checks for their staff rewards and incentives through the year,”



SCCDP President and CEO Jonathan Jank said.

Consumers can purchase gift cards the same way they used to purchase the paper checks – by stopping by the SCCDP office at 616 Bradford Street in Seward or calling (402) 643-4189.

The cards also can be purchased online and mailed to the purchaser, adding another level of convenience.

Chamber Buck checks were available for a maximum of \$25 each because of the cash back option. Businesses decided if they gave cash back for the remaining balance of the check or if they deducted the used portion from the amount listed on the check.

That isn't an issue with the cards, as a running balance is kept electronically, similar to a preloaded Visa card or other gift card.

“This makes the gift card easy to use for both small and large purchases, without the need to worry about change being given from a check,” Jank said. “We believe this will spread out the benefit of the gift card to even more businesses and make the gift card both user friendly and attractive for businesses and customers alike.”

The cards have a cap of \$500 each and are not reloadable.

Just like the paper bucks, the cards never expire and can be used

at any SCCDP member business.

Consumers should keep in mind that some communities in Seward County, including Milford, Utica and Beaver Crossing, have their own “chamber bucks” programs. Some businesses accept both the local and countywide bucks, while some only take one or the other.

SCCDP businesses have signs to post in their windows letting people know where the

new gift cards are accepted.

People in possession of paper bucks can still spend them until they're used up.

The gift cards come with a 2-4% transaction fee that businesses have to pay, much like they do with other cards.

Another advantage, though, is that the SCCDP can track where and what people are spending the gift cards on and can then

share that data with member businesses.

SCCDP expects the gift cards will help businesses that have e-commerce options, as the cards may be used for online purchases, too.

“Shop local is as important as ever. Small businesses from all sectors need our support,” Jank said. “This will help us to grow our shop local program here in Seward County.”

## Building Lasting Relationships for 140 Years!



**1883**

Claudius Jones & a group of businessmen founded Jones National Bank. It was located on the northeast corner of the square.



**1958**

Jones National Bank moved to its present location at 203 S 6th St.



**1979**

The bank established a trust company & changed its name to Jones National Bank & Trust Company and completed an addition.



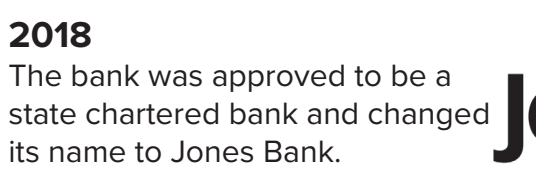
**2004**

The bank opened a branch in Milford.



**2014**

The bank remodeled and added two additions to the Main Bank in Seward.



**2018**

The bank was approved to be a state chartered bank and changed its name to Jones Bank.



**2019**

Jones Bank acquired Oak Creek Valley Bank in Valparaiso.

Jones Bank is excited to celebrate our 140th anniversary this year. We've been building lasting relationships since 1883 and value our relationship with customers!



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# Downtown

(continued from 4)  
ally got a couple regulars at this point.”  
Those customers are important, and Black said her favorite part about working at Domino’s has been the new people she has met.

**Generation V E-Cigarettes & Vape Bar**  
Generation V E-Cigarettes & Vape Bar started its journey in Seward off with a bang last year when it opened its doors on the Fourth of July.  
The store at 645 Seward Street sells electronic cigarettes, vapes, CBD products, delta-8 products, disposables, juices and more.  
Aria Budden, the store manager, said Generation V noticed many of its Lincoln customers hailed from Seward and other surrounding small towns.  
It started opening more locations in smaller communities so people would not have to travel 35-45 minutes to shop.  
Budden said although she thinks there are a lot of people who don’t know the store is there yet, the customers who have come in have enjoyed their experiences.  
There are a variety of reasons people may use Generation V products, and Budden said many people do not recognize all of them.  
“A lot of the community, especially the older community, comes in here for our CBD and our delta-8 gummies because a lot of those are really good at alleviating joint pain or helping with anxiety,” she said.  
Budden said Generation V is one of the best companies she has

worked for because of the open-door policy with management and the enjoyment of working with the other staff members.

**Jimmy John’s**  
Jimmy John’s, known for its customizable sandwiches, opened its first location in Seward on the square last year at 132 S. Fifth Street. The store has dine-in, carry-out and delivery options.  
Store manager Devin Nygrenn said the franchise owner, Sam Nixon, enjoys having locations in small towns and has found great success investing in those developing markets.  
Upon opening its doors on March 1, Nygrenn said Jimmy John’s employees felt welcomed by the community.  
Representatives of other businesses on the square stopped by the restaurant to welcome its staff to Seward.  
“The response from the community in general has just been really fantastic. I think people really enjoy us being here, and I really enjoy it, too,” he said. “It’s a really great community.”  
Nygrenn said he has enjoyed the way the small-town atmosphere in Seward allows him to get to know his customers more personally, and he appreciates the staff he works with, many of whom attend school at Seward High or Concordia University.  
“The thing that I enjoy the most about being here in this location is the staff that I’ve been able to work with,” he said. “They’ve all been really good people.”

# Upper Big Blue

(continued from 7)  
the NRD’s main projects has continued to be Project GROW (Growing Rotational crops On Wellfield). Project GROW aims to improve soil health, decrease soil erosion, improve water holding capacity and maintain profitability on a 160-acre plot of land just east of the new ball field complex in York. According to its website, it does this by using no-till, diverse cover crops and proven crop rotations.  
The NRD also has a Tree Conservation Program that allows people to bulk order a variety of trees from their website, and the NRD assists with planting for any orders of 150 or more trees.  
To celebrate the NRD’s 50 years of tree planting, the Upper Big Blue offered each community within its district a ceremonial tree planting

this year and reimbursed the cost of a nursery stock tree up to \$300 per community.  
“That was a really nice project because it gave us the opportunity to go out in the community with community leaders and provide something of real value, a tree, that’s going to continue to grow and mature and benefit the community,” Houston said.  
In all, Houston said she enjoys the opportunity for reflection that this anniversary has provided.  
“Since 1972, Nebraska’s NRDs have been protecting lives, protecting properties and protecting the future, through all kinds of programs and projects throughout the state,” she said. “We’re especially proud of the work that we’ve done over the last 50 years, whether it’s trees planted or dams constructed.”

# Crestview

(continued from 15)  
two properties and add more landscaping to create the necessary buffer.  
He said the area will not see much more traffic than it did when the nursing home was operational.  
“We did not do a traffic study, but looking at other multifamily unit traffic studies, at the peak times, it doesn’t impact traffic too much,” Hoppe said. “There might be nine or 10 trips in the peak times, which is not a level people will really feel.”  
Hoppe said this was his third project of this type, following others in Fremont and West Point.

Those communities also experienced nursing home shutdowns – something he noticed was an unfortunate trend in smaller towns.  
“It really came out of seeing in the news that there were a lot of facilities like this being closed down. They were usually in really nice areas of town, not exposed to floodplains or other negative residential features,” Hoppe said. “We started looking into how to renovate these into nice units and address some of these housing shortages at the right price points to give these communities an option of what they can do when this happens.”

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# Council considers bringing keno, lottery games to Milford

**BY EMILY HEMPHILL**  
emily@sewardindependent.com

Keno and other lottery-style games could find their way to Milford at the request of two local bar owners.

Todd Vegas and Robert Struwe, owners of Sheri's Grill and Bar, which soon will become Uptown Tavern on First Street, are working with Big Red Keno to bring the games to the tavern.

Nicholas Thielen, deputy general counsel from EHPV

Management Group of Omaha, working with Big Red Keno, spoke to the Milford City Council in January.

"He came out and went through some of the information as far as what Milford might see for revenue, what the money can be spent on and how it all works," City Clerk Jeanne Hoggins said following the meeting.

Hoggins said the city would receive 8¾% of any funds generated by keno and lottery games but said

Thielen was unsure how much revenue Milford could potentially generate.

"He gave some examples. Sterling in 2021 received \$2,300. Eagle received \$17,000. The small town of Kramer received \$53,000," Hoggins said.

By law, the revenue the city receives must be spent on community betterment projects.

First, though, the city would have to undergo a lengthy process to authorize

Uptown Tavern or any other establishment to offer keno and other lottery games.

The first step in that process is to hold an election.

"It has to go to a vote of the people," Hoggins said. "Since there's no election (coming up), we have to pay for a special election. That's an expense we weren't planning on."

The city council held a public hearing an ultimately approved putting the measure on a special election

ballot at a special meeting Feb. 15.

The election will be held May 9.

If voters elect to allow the games, the city must then work through interlocal agreements and get approval from the state, then from Big Red Keno.

The games wouldn't be available to play until September or October.

"It's quite a process to get this all in place," Hoggins said.

# Utica care center could use open-concept Green House model

**BY EMILY HEMPHILL**  
emily@sewardindependent.com

Community members are discussing options for a new senior care center in Utica.

About 50 people attended a presentation Dec. 12, 2022, to learn about one option – a Green House model – and the logistics of building and operating such a facility.

Ten students from a business plan class at Concordia University in Seward researched what it would take to open a care center in Utica. They presented their findings, which included potential locations, a three-year operational cost analysis and a look at who the center would serve.

"Utica's in a strong position from a countywide standpoint. We're the ninth-fastest-growing county in the state," said Jonathan Jank, president and CEO of the Seward County Chamber and Development Partnership. "We want to make sure we're doing something that's in the best interest of the community moving forward."

The former Utica Community Care Center was built in 1967 through a community development project. It was a 41-bed, skilled nursing facility that followed the traditional nursing home model.

The center closed just a month after it and Crestview Care Center in Milford, along with centers in Blue Hill and Columbus, were bought by Azira Health in September 2019. The closures displaced 95 residents in Seward County and, collectively, 205 residents and 240 employees across the state.

The Utica Care Center sat empty until it was torn down Dec. 27, 2022.

The three acres the building occupied will be turned into housing, but the need for skilled senior care continues.



Austin Jablonski from Concordia University presents ideas for a new senior care center in Utica Dec. 12 at the Village Auditorium.

but also with jobs.

According to their presentation, data from the 2021 Utica Citizen Survey show that people who grew up in Utica want to stay in the community, so they need jobs and a place to go when they age out of their own homes.

**The Green House Project**

The students suggested using a Green House Project model for the new center. The Green House Project is a nonprofit organization that operates care centers across the United States.

The model has gained traction over the past 20 years as a way to return control over daily living activities and decision-making to residents.

The model houses 10 to 12 residents in a cottage, each with their own bedroom and bathroom. Kitchen and living spaces are shared to create a sense of social connectedness and allow for better relationship building, which in turn improves the quality of life.

The cottages are staffed with a highly trained nursing aide who does everything from cooking meals to washing clothes to assisting with personal care.

Jesse McConnell, an architect with Peters and Associates, has worked with Green House models in the past. He said it's a way for residents to participate in their own care.

"Each kitchen has a CNA to do the cooking, but if the residents want to come in and it's safe to do, they allow them to do that," McConnell

said. "Each cottage is its own entity. They might meet monthly to decide what they want for food...but they still have a monitored diet to some extent. Each facility evolves into what the schedule of the residents is, and over time, it evolves into the cottage schedule."

So, if a resident wants to sleep later or each a late lunch, for example, they have the freedom to do so.

"It gives that ownership back to that resident. They're participating in their daily caregiving and not being told what they're going to do. We want these to be more like home," McConnell said.

Green House Project staff are coached in a way that empowers them to build relationships with residents, thereby reducing the amount of turnover in both residents and staff.

**Jobs and finances**

In Utica, the idea is to build three separate cottages of about 7,000 square feet each. They would offer a combination of assisted living and skilled nursing services.

The students suggested locating the cottages near the existing baseball fields and village shop or east of the village pump facility.

Jank said they could easily fit in existing residential areas as long as they comply with zoning regulations.

CU student Austin Jablonski said the center would open employment opportunities in the area with 27 jobs to fill.

For comparison, the former Utica Community

Care Center had a nearly one-to-one ratio of residents to employees with about 40 staff.

"With Centennial High, there would be a lot of part-time job opportunities, as well as volunteering and CNA training," Jablonski said. "With Concordia University, the same plus some community outreach. Concordia offers a Master of Healthcare Administration, so it would be an internship opportunity for a lot of students."

The students looked at other facilities of similar size and scope to put together a three-year financial plan based on 36 residents.

"It will operate at a loss in year one because of depreciation, but by year three it will approach the break-even point," CU student Jack Nelson said.

They anticipate a 79% occupancy rate in the first year, with that rate increasing to 89% in year two and reaching 100% in year three.

It would cost around \$8 million to build the three cottages, according to their research.

"That's with 80% debt financing at an 8% rate, with 20% investment equity," said Todd Johnson, accounting professor at CU. "When you're spending in that upper \$7-8 million range...it takes until about that third year until it will create positive cash flows."

The center could be run as a for-profit business or as a nonprofit with the ability to receive charitable donations or charitable investments. In that case, people could pay up front to reserve a spot for a loved one when the time comes.

Steve Palandri, a local resident interested in working on the project, said the idea came from a visit to The SunPorch, a Green House home in Smith Center, Kansas.

"That town is much like Utica. They're farming and ag-based. They have a high work ethic," Palandri said. "They are partnering also with a university nearby plus a high school. They're doing a lot of good things for the community, providing a gateway for students who are interested in the medical field. There's dignity and respect for those who live

there and those who choose to work there."

Palandri said the Green House model improves the quality of life for residents and staff because of the level of freedom and lower costs associated with operating such a facility compared to a traditional nursing home.

Staff are trained to be able to assist with everything instead of having separate staff to do laundry, clean, prepare meals and provide personal care services.

He said the federal government pays about 80% for covered chronic care through Medicare and Medicaid. Facilities are supposed to be reimbursed for all of those costs, but they often aren't, and when they are, the payments don't come on time.

That's what happened with the former Utica Community Care Center, he said. When most residents were on Medicaid, the facility was not reimbursed at 100%, and there was little source of other income, so it became harder and harder for them to keep their doors open.

Palandri said with the Green House model, the cottages could incorporate commercial space, too, where a storefront could be built in tandem with the care facility to add more benefit for the community.

"For example, it could bring at least a part-time pharmacy to town, because there's going to be an increased need for pharmaceutical services," he said. "This is only one possibility. We don't know which direction the community would like to go unless we get your feedback."

Those in attendance at the presentation asked questions about how the center would be funded, who would operate it, direct access to the highway for emergency medical situations and whether Utica is large enough to draw the number of employees needed for a care center.

"This is not a definitive solution that when the students present this, this is what it's going to be," Jank said. "It's the start of a larger conversation. We will need engagement from all ages and stages of life to make this successful."



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