

February 21, 2024
Seward County Independent | The Milford Times

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Togetherness integral part of county’s success

BY EMILY HEMPHILL
emily@sewardindependent.com

“Alone we can do so little. Together, we can do so much,” said the late Helen Keller.

Togetherness describes Seward County.

Together, we appreciate our past.

Together, we support one another in the present.

Together, we look ahead to the future.

Seward County has grown and changed in all areas over the past year – from residential and industrial growth to wider healthcare availability, from education enhancements to artistic evolution.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Seward County is the ninth-fastest growing county in Nebraska, based on the most-recent 2020 census.

The City of Seward alone has experienced a steady growth of about 1% per year over the last 14 years.

Our population grew from 6,964 people in 2010 to 7,643 in 2020. It is expected to reach 9,802 people by 2045.

Driving through our communities, it is easy to see this growth.

We see it in Seward’s new storefronts, the Rail Campus, Concordia’s new Borland Center and in the footprint of what will soon become the Seward Wellness Center.

We see it in Utica’s Centennial Market Cooperative and the village’s effort for a new community swimming pool.

We see it in Milford’s new splash pad, cutting-edge technology at Southeast Community College and in the success of students in our local school districts.

We see it in community betterment projects in the villages dotting our county map – from fire department fundraisers to new homes and beautification efforts.

None of this would happen without togetherness.

It takes everyone working toward a common goal – many common goals – to make our county the unique place it is to live, work and play.

It takes city, village and county boards, civic clubs, school administrators and educators, pastors, doctors and nurses, business owners, developers, service providers, artists and everyone in between.

As we highlight the achievements of these entities over the past year, we hope this edition of “Seward County Progress” shines a light on the togetherness of our communities.

“Together, we can do so much.” This is Seward County. This is Progress.



DOUG CARROLL
Construction workers begin pouring the footings for the new Seward Wellness Center.



DOUG CARROLL
Concordia held a ribbon cutting ceremony on Sept. 23, 2023 with speeches by Kurt von Kampen, chair of the music department, and president Bernard Bull. See story on page 27.

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EMILY HEMPHILL/SCI

The site of the Seward Wellness Center is abuzz with activity in late February as steel for the structure is assembled on the ground.

Wellness center walls in process

BY EMILY HEMPHILL
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The horizon north of Waverly Road will soon look different as the walls of the Seward Wellness Center begin to go up.

Nine truckloads of steel were delivered in late January.

Wellness Center Executive Director Joel Brase knocked on wood as he said

everything with the project is right on schedule.

“There’s been some exciting things happening on site,” Brase said. “All the footings for Building A, which is the gym area, have been poured, and they’re starting on Building B, which is the fitness center and studio.”

A large crane will arrive in late February. The steel walls will be constructed on the ground, then raised up to

frame the gym.

“We’re going to see a lot of progress soon. They’re continuing to work and getting things done up there,” he said.

Brase is working with Seward Changing the Game, the fundraising entity behind the project, to apply for two additional grants.

“That will hopefully, if we get them, will help divert some money that either we can use for the endowment or start,

already, a scholarship fund for any families in need,” Brase said.

The endowment will be used to replace equipment and systems as they age instead of relying on taxpayer dollars.

The scholarship fund will provide low-cost or free memberships for families with low incomes.

The center is expected to be completed by the spring of 2025.

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\$2 million in grants and three new centers help to close childcare gap

BY EMILY HEMPHILL
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Following Seward County’s designation as a childcare desert in 2021, an influx of nearly \$2 million in grant funds has helped three new centers and several existing providers close the childcare gap.

The funds were earmarked to help create at least 176 new licensed childcare spots, putting a large dent in the 189-spot gap Seward County had between the number of children needing care and the number of spots available.

“We identified the need, then things came together very quickly. All those resources aligned in a really great way,” said Jonathan Jank, president and CEO of the Seward County Chamber and Development Partnership.

Grants for capacity
The SCCDP received a \$30,000 grant from the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation’s Communities For Kids initiative.

That grant, which will be paid out over three years, is being used to pay for bi-monthly gatherings of childcare providers.

The meetings include a meal, networking opportunities and trainings for providers to elevate their skills.

Because of its involvement in Communities For Kids, the SCCDP was selected as one of 12 Nebraska organizations to receive additional money through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act.

The CRRSA funds must be used to build childcare capacity – or create additional spots for children in licensed facilities.

The CRRSA funds were distributed over two years. SCCDP received \$78,500 in 2022 and \$73,700 in 2023.

Those funds were distributed to both in-home providers and childcare centers.

Jacob Jennings, director of community affairs and vice president of the SCCDP, said a short application was circulated



COURTESY PHOTO

Construction continues on the preschool room of the Milford Childhood Learning Center in early February.

to local childcare providers. They explained how they would use the grant money.

“We had a team of childcare professionals, Educational Service Unit 6 representatives and the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation who reviewed the applications to decide how much is appropriate based on how much they’re increasing capacity,” Jennings said.

Jank said everybody who applied with eligible expenses received some funds, though they all received different amounts.

Jennings said while some in-home providers were among the grant recipients, it was more difficult for them to qualify because of the capacity-building requirement of the grant.

Providers must have a certain number of square feet available per child, and in-home providers are limited to the amount of space in their homes, unless they are willing or able to add on.

“It’s really hard for in-home providers to take advantage of that,” Jennings said. “We’re hoping

to see some of these grants turn into quality improvement,” instead of capacity-building.

The money was spent in a variety of ways, from outfitting new classrooms with cribs and advertising open staff positions to paying salaries for additional teachers and opening overnight spots for children of third-shift workers – all of which translate into additional childcare capacity.

Three new centers on horizon

An additional \$200,000 in grant money came from the American Rescue Plan Act, and another \$1.6 million from a Business and Childcare Partnership Grant through the State of Nebraska.

The ARPA funds were awarded to Carlee Carter, a York resident who is expanding her existing Little Cubs Daycare business by adding a Seward location to her two York locations.

The BCPG money went to Carter (\$376,714), Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Staplehurst for the Our

Redeemer Little Learners childcare center opening in its former school building this spring (\$576,941) and to Kathi and Kylie Schildt of Milford, who plan to open the Milford Childhood Learning Center this spring (\$646,926).

Jank said the three new childcare centers came about from people in the community who wanted to address the need for quality care.

“We have three new childcare centers coming to our county, which I think is exactly what the state was looking for when they were disseminating these dollars,” Jank said. “We’re fortunate in our county that we have three that we did not solicit, but they have become available. In our role on the economic development side, we welcome new business opportunities. We will continue to support our existing providers, and we also want to welcome new opportunities for business growth.”

Jank said he hopes the new centers will be large enough to accommodate several children

on a drop-in basis, which would allow in-home providers to take time away for medical appointments, trainings or vacation, and it could support other care centers when needed.

Our Redeemer Little Learners

Our Redeemer Little Learners is a collaboration with Our Redeemer Lutheran Church and School, with the childcare center occupying the former school building at 425 South Stree in Staplehurst. School classes are now held in the newly built Ministry Center across the street.

“While we were looking at building our new school, we’ve been talking about what uses we might have for the (former) building and the one that kept coming to the forefront was childcare,” said Paul Duer, project chairman for the ministry center and Little Learners.

The church congregation voted last May to move forward with the center, which will have the capacity to serve 94 children from infants to

school age.

The center was dedicated Feb. 18 before its official opening.

Little Cubs

Little Cubs Daycare and Learning Center will be located at 1313 285th Road in Seward, inside a building owned by the SCCDP.

It will be licensed to serve between 60 and 70 children ages 6 weeks to school age.

Carlee Carter, owner, also operates two childcare centers in York.

Milford Childhood Learning Center

The Milford Childhood Learning Center will operate as a licensed nonprofit childcare, serving at least 39 children. It operates under a board of directors.

The center will be housed in a building constructed by students at Southeast Community College, which is currently under renovation with the goal of opening in the next couple months.

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Civic Center aims for accessibility

BY EMILY HEMPHILL
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A \$2.8 million renovation is planned for the Seward Civic Center to update systems dating to the 1950s and improve handicap accessibility.

The Seward City Council approved the project in the fall of 2023, giving the Civic Center Commission the green light to move forward with its plans to modernize the building.

City Administrator Greg Butcher said Feb. 14 the design is finished and the project will be let out for bids yet this spring.

“We started these conversations many years ago as we were trying to address some of the ADA issues,” Mayor Josh Eickmeier said.

The building is owned by the City of Seward, but the renovation will be paid for through the Langworthy Trust, which created the Civic Center in 1955 with funds from lifelong Seward resident Jesse T. Langworthy.

The west addition, which includes the auditorium, was constructed in 1977.

Omaha-based archi-



COURTESY CLARK & ENERSEN

The south entrance to the Seward Civic Center will be rebuilt with new stairs and ADA-compliant ramps on both sides.

tectural firm Clark & Enersen was hired for the renovation.

Sen. Mark Kolterman, who serves on the Civic Center Commission, said the driving force behind the project is to fix the only connection between the east and west sides of the building: a narrow flight of stairs.

“You have to go down some steps to get over

there,” he said.

Or, go outside and maneuver into an elevator lift.

The commission plans to reconfigure conference and office spaces to make way for an interior ramp between the two sides of the building.

“The Civic Center Commission has looked at many, many things over the last five years,”

Kolterman said. “This keeps coming back as being the most cost-effective way of doing it.”

The commission also plans to address aging plumbing, heating and cooling systems, install new electrical panels and upgrade to more efficient lighting throughout the building.

Bathrooms will be brought up to code

with more fixtures and rearranged so men’s and women’s rooms are next to one another, not on opposite ends of the building as they currently are in the east half of the center.

Audio/visual technology will be improved in all spaces used for presentations, including the auditorium, both fireplace rooms upstairs, the A/V

Room and the lower level banquet room.

Changes will be made to the kitchens on both the lower level and main floor, turning them into a catering kitchen downstairs and a warming kitchen upstairs – meaning they will no longer have stoves.

“Nobody really cooks

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City looks at infrastructure to keep pace with growth

BY EMILY HEMPHILL
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As Seward continues to push its physical boundaries through growth, the city has taken on about 10 projects in the past year to accommodate that expansion.

Most of this work has happened behind the scenes – or rather, on the ground.

Street projects have comprised the city’s project road map in 2023 and 2024, with the upcoming Highway 15 reconstruction leading the charge.

“For the next couple years, everything will actually revolve around that,” City Administrator Greg Butcher said.

Highway 15

The Nebraska Department of Transportation will tear out Highway 15 beginning April 1.

It plans to reconstruct the crumbling base and widen the road in some areas to include a center turn lane all through downtown.

Crews have already begun survey work, minor utility relocates and removing trees in the path of the project, which runs from Ash Street on the south end of town north to Seward High School.

“Everything is on plan,” Butcher said. “They’re actually running a little early. We feel pretty prepared, but you never know what you’re going to get until you start taking the road out. They’re hoping most of the major construction will be completed in one year, but none of us control the weather.”

An open house is planned from 2 to 8 p.m. on Monday, March 25, at Seward Memorial Library for residents to learn more about how the project might affect them.

Water main replacement

The city is already starting to replace water mains underneath Highway 15 between Ash and Lincoln streets.

“We want to get that main settled in before the state comes in and replaces the road,” Butcher said, so the city

doesn’t have to tear up the new highway in a couple years.

Izaak Walton Road

The intersection at Highway 15 and Izaak Walton Road is connected to the NDOT project as well.

The city shifted the intersection and widened it to accommodate two-way truck traffic as this intersection will be part of the detour route while Highway 15 is closed.

New concrete was poured the week of Feb. 12, and Butcher said the intersection should reopen about a week before the NDOT project begins.

Bradford Street and Park Avenue

Drainage work is being done along both Bradford Street and Park Avenue to better control storm water and reduce pooling in the streets.

Butcher said this project has been dormant for the winter but should start up again within the next month.

Crews are working from the west end of those streets toward Highway 15.

“The goal is to meet up with the Highway 15 project and get all the storm sewers underneath that at the same time,” Butcher said.

East Seward Street

Previously gravel, East Seward Street was paved out to Highway 34 last fall, and Butcher said the project is nearly finished.

It will allow for heavier traffic flow as the Prairie View subdivision fills in with new homes.

“It really changes the focal point of the city,” Butcher said, especially for drivers entering Seward from the east.

The project included new street lamps to illuminate the area.

“That was a really dark intersection. People struggled to slow down or see it until they were right on it,” Butcher said. “When the homes and everything fill that in, it will be a completely different view as well.”

A few lighting issues will be corrected this spring, along with sod and finish work. The city will work with NDOT

to adjust speed limits approaching the East Seward and Highway 15 intersection, if necessary.

Natural gas expansion

Black Hills Energy built a temporary natural gas holding station in the Seward Rail Campus to bridge the gap for natural gas as the city approaches its capacity on its existing natural gas use.

The city gets its natural gas supply from Northern Natural Gas through a pipeline that runs to the north end of town. It is piped to a town border station and control center along North Columbia Avenue, just north of Hillcrest Drive.

Butcher said residential and industrial growth on the south side of town will now require a second town border station to serve the south end, but it will take a couple years to complete the process.

Construction of the full town border station is slated for 2025, and Black Hills will continue to work with Northern Natural Gas to complete the project.

At that point, the temporary facility will likely be removed.

Worthman Boulevard

In preparation for future development in the Rail Campus, the city is extending Worthman Boulevard.

Survey work was in progress the week of Feb. 12.

“This will set up all the utilities for additional lots to be available out to the west,” Butcher said.

The road will be designed with a cul-de-sac at the end, and drainage issues will be addressed as part of the extension.

Wastewater plant

A new wastewater treatment plant is in the works, but it will come with a hefty cost the city isn’t quite ready to pay.

Seward’s existing plant, built in the 1950s, is nearly at capacity.

A new facility is required in order to

allow the community to continue growing, but the cost is looming at \$32-\$34 million.

“Pre-pandemic, we were expecting a \$12 million facility,” Butcher said. “That’s a major increase.”

Unless it can find other funding, the city will have to rely on ratepayers to cover the cost.

“We want to make sure we turn over every stone possible for funding to keep the cost down for ratepayers. That’s the only money we have available,” Butcher said.

Grants are not plentiful for wastewater projects like they have been for drinking water infrastructure.

One possibility is Legislative Bill 1205, which could allocate up to \$20 million in leftover federal COVID relief funds to Seward’s wastewater facility.

A public hearing on the bill is scheduled for Feb. 21.

Water plant

Seward’s reverse-osmosis water treatment plant also is expanding to keep up with growth.

Butcher said the facility was built to hold two reverse osmosis membranes, or “skids,” but only two were installed upon construction.

Now, the city is adding the third to allow for processing of more water and quicker filling of the water towers during peak usage times.

“That’s becoming the choke point for the water system,” Butcher said. “By adding that third skid, it gives us time to bring one down and do maintenance in the summer if we need to.”

South water tower

Steel has been delivered for the south water tower replacement project.

Welding and construction crews will convene in early March, and the new tower will be erected over the next year.

Once it is operational and approved by the state, the old tower will be demolished.

City officials are still lining up artwork that will appear on the outside of the tower.

Utica group raising money for new pool

BY EMILY HEMPHILL
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The Utica Parks and Pool committee is raising money for a new swimming pool and hoping residents will vote yes on a bond issue in the May 14 Primary Election to support the \$4 million project.

The group has been working toward a new pool since 2022, gathering cost estimates and brainstorming designs.

It hopes to have a new pool in place within the next two years.

The bond campaign kicked off Jan. 22 and was followed by a town hall meeting in late February where residents could ask questions and learn more about the project.

The village’s current pool was built in 1964 and needs major repairs in order to remain func-

tional each swim season.

Kenna Kucera, a member of the Parks and Pool committee, said the existing pool isn’t appealing to kids or families, as it doesn’t have much more than a diving board to keep kids engaged.

“A lot of our kids will go to the Friend pool, the Seward pool or the York pool because it’s not entertaining for them,” Kucera said.

Plans for the new pool include:

- stairs and a zero-depth entry point;
- modernized bathhouse;
- chair lift for compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, as well as ADA compliance throughout the bathhouse and parking lot;
- a heating system that can be turned on and off as needed to regulate

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IMAGE COURTESY LAMP RYNEARSON ARCHITECTS

A rendering of Utica’s proposed new pool shows two slides, a play structure and a zero-depth entry point.



KEATON BURGESS

The First Street Flats apartments were unveiled with a ribbon cutting on June 8, 2023. Pictured are, from left, Max Wake, Tanner Roth, Riley Wiltfong, Gary Rolf, Nancy Dolezal, Gerald Homp, Jake Hoppe, Milford Mayor Patrick Kelley, Greg Dunlap, Evan Clark, Justin Johnson, Jonathan Jank, Erika Stauffer, Natasha Verwey, Jim Everts and Jacob Jennings.

First Street Flats adds needed housing options for Milford

BY EMILY HEMPHILL
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First Street Flats in Milford will celebrate its first anniversary in June, having opened last summer at 1100 First Street. The 21-unit apartment complex occupies the former Crestview Care Center property. Jake Hoppe of Hoppe

Development of Lincoln said the project of renovating the former care center into apartments was a true community effort. “We were invited to think about what we could do with this closed-down nursing home. Could we save what would otherwise be a blight in the communi-

ty?” he said. Crestview closed its doors in 2019 after Azira Health purchased it in September along with three other nursing facilities in Utica, Blue Hill and Columbus. By Nov. 21 that year, all four facilities were shut down. Milford Mayor Patrick

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Pool

Continued from 7

water temperature; a central sitting ledge in the water; a new concession and seating area; a family slide; a large twisty slide; a diving board; a basketball hoop; lap lanes; covered shade spots; a splash feature/toddler play area in shallow water; and 400 more square feet of space.

Committee member Danae Soliz said many of the features will make it easier for parents, especially those with kids of different ages. “As a mom, (the sitting ledge) is very appealing to me. I will have a 6-year-old wanting to be over here with their friends, but a 4-year-old over there in shallower water. I’ll be able to be just a few feet away from each,” she said, “and it will get parents in the water instead of in lawn chairs.” The family slide is designed for use by more than one person at a time, meaning parents can slide side-by-side

with their kids. Gierhan said the zero-entry grade will gradually slope toward a 4-foot depth before dropping into deeper water. The transition will accommodate younger kids. Currently, the pool’s shallowest point is 3 feet deep, and the baby pool is in a separate fenced-in area. “It’s hard for parents to be in the baby pool and the main pool. The main pool is too deep for younger kids, but they may be too big for the baby pool,” Gierhan said. The new design eliminates the baby pool and provides a designated play structure for toddlers inside the main pool.

Cost to renovate
The total cost is estimated at just below \$4 million. A vote of residents on May 14 will determine if the village may bond up to that amount to cover the cost, but Parks and Pool Chair Autumn Walford said the committee hopes to raise at least half that amount in donations, leaving the

village to bond around \$2 million. “We were told in the beginning, if you can raise half the money, we could possibly bond the other half. I say possibly because that could go up a little, it could go down a little,” she said. Having the bond authority will show architects and contractors that the funds are available so they can begin the project sooner without having to wait for fundraising to be complete. The committee also plans to pursue grants. Walford said having the support of the community through an election can show grantors the village is committed to the project. A \$2 million construction bond at a current interest rate of 4.75% would equal an annual payment by the village of \$160,000 for 20 years. That would mean a \$250-\$260 increase in taxes per year on a property valued at \$100,000, or just over \$20 per month. As of Jan. 22, the committee had raised just shy of \$55,000 for the project.

Neighbors Helping Neighbors



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.

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Funeral home reaches 150 years

BY STEPHANIE CROSTON
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From downtown to Jackson Avenue, furniture store to funeral home, Zabka-Perdue Funeral Home continues to provide services to the grieving in Seward.

The business, which opened Aug. 6, 1874, celebrates 150 years of continuous service in 2024. John Kribbeler opened a furniture and undertaking business at 636 Seward Street in 1874 and sold it 16 years later. W. H. Moore bought it in 1890 and owned it until 1913. He sold the business to Albert Chain.

Chain took over May 14, 1913. He arrived in Seward in time to witness a tornado that cut through town. Fay Wood joined Chain in 1916, and the firm became Chain and Wood.

Wilber Wood joined them in 1918. When Chain died in 1945, Wilber and Fay became partners and changed the name to Wood Brothers Chapel and Mortuary.

In 1955, John C. Wood came on board. He moved the funeral home to 410 Jackson Ave. in 1963. He sold the business to Greg and Dixie Zabka in 1998. Ten years later, Zabkas changed the business name to Zabka Funeral Home.

Brad and Jill Perdue joined the Zabkas June 20, 2011. They bought the funeral home in 2018 and changed its name to Zabka-Perdue Funeral Home in 2019.

They added a location in Dwight later and helped out with Lauber Funeral Home and Cremation Services in Milford following Bill Lauber's death.

Brad became interested in being a funeral director at age 13 when his great-grandmother died. The funeral director in Red Oak, Iowa, asked if he had questions, and that led to a tour of the business.

"I rode in the hearse to the cemetery," Brad said. "It was really intriguing."

He grew up on a farm and planned on farming for a career. Now, however, it's been 32 years since his career path

went a different direction.

Jill was going to be a kindergarten teacher. She and Brad were in school together and reconnected later.

"I knew it was his dream," she said. "We wanted to own a funeral home and work together."

Finding a locally owned funeral home was more of a challenge, however.

"They are hard to find," Jill said. "Corporations snatch them up."

After a stint in Knoxville, Tennessee, he and Jill spent 12 years in Colorado, where both their daughters were born. They moved to Sioux City, Iowa, to be closer to home and were there five years.

At that time, they were looking for another opportunity with the potential to purchase a business. A casket salesman suggested Seward.

"We spent 20 minutes and said we can't believe this town," Brad said.

They moved in June 2011.

"We were picky," Jill said. "Brad looked from 1992 to 2011."

Some of the places they considered had cemeteries included, but Jill said that would add a lot of work.

"We really thought we would buy in Colorado, but it didn't work out," she said.

Brad said each place he worked helped him learn more about what he was looking for in a business.

"Greg and Dixie were wonderful," Jill said. "They gave us an opportunity no one else did."

Brad has worked a variety of funerals, from services for celebrities to those for different religions. He said the easiest have been the Buddhist ceremonies.

"We didn't have to do anything," he said, adding that the religion's rituals take care of everything.

The most unique funeral he's conducted took place in a pumpkin patch, owned by the deceased's family.

"That was the neatest funeral ever," Jill said.

"Who thinks of an outdoor funeral?" Brad added.

Jill does more of the office work at Zabka-Perdue. After they got married,

she worked in banking, and that experience has helped a lot, she said.

Jill said owning their own business has been a godsend, even during the pandemic.

"A lot were stuck in their houses and nursing homes," Brad said.

"Covid was the most trying. It was scary at first," Jill said.

Their daughter Makena worked at the funeral home through high school, graduating in May 2021. She and her husband Nathan Bierbaum are the next generation.

"Every job has its ups and downs. It's nice we're all family," she said.

Makena and Nathan started dating in

high school, and that was Nathan's first introduction to the funeral home.

"I wanted nothing to do with the business," he said with a smile. "But then I got more curious."

He served as a pallbearer for a funeral, and that piqued his interest.

"I wanted to be a police officer," he said.

"A funeral director has better hours," Brad chimed in.

Nathan and Makena had no question about where to come after finishing mortuary school in Kansas City.

"Seward is home for sure," Makena said.



STEPHANIE CROSTON
The staff at Zabka-Perdue Funeral Home is, from left, Brad and Jill Perdue and Makena and Nathan Bierbaum.

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Meet Our Talented Team:



Mark Suhr

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. She is a licensed property and casualty insurance agent. 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 is a licensed property and casualty insurance agent. 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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Seven decades of Hartmannn Construction, LLC

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN
scireporter@sewardindependent.com

Bill Hartmannn founded Hartmann Construction 70 years ago. Today, his son runs the business with the same core values and dedication his father instilled in him.

After honing his land improvement skills in the Korean War, Bill developed Hartmann Construction, also known as Hartmannn Custom Service, in 1954 alongside his wife, Doris, and his two sons, Andy and Jon.

“Bill started out with nothing but integrity, honesty, faith and pure determination to work hard and cut out an honest living for his family,” said Dee Saucier-Hartmannn, Andy’s wife who also runs the company’s business office.

Hartmann Construction started out offering services including spraying farms, doing terrace work and leveling ground for irrigation.

Bill also owned a lime quarry with Greenhorn Lime in Garland for several decades. Andy said he remembers seeing seashells, shark teeth and fish fossils in the area because it used to be underwater. Bill later moved the business to the family farm in Seward, where it stands today.

Bill also advocated for those in his field of work in various aspects of his life. He was part of the Land Improvement Contractors of America organization and traveled to Washington, D.C. as a lobbyist 27 times to represent the concerns of his fellow contractors.

Andy and Dee said Bill, who was involved in many civic and community organizations, considered assisting in passing the One-Call Notification System Act in 1994 one of his greatest accomplishments. The law states that anyone who wants to excavate or disturb the surface of Nebraska ground must dial 811 at least two business days in advance to ensure all underground utilities are located.

Andy said he grew up watching his dad work and absorbing everything there was to know about the business. At the time, he did not even realize how much he was learning. He said he was on job sites running a sheepsfoot roller before he even had a driver’s license.

“As a young kid, I learned very, very early that you’re going to work 10 to 12 hours a day, and you had nothing to whine about. You’re just gonna do it because you were the boss’s kid and you had to do it,” he said.

At that time, the company had about five employees, and Andy said one of the neatest things about growing up in the business was getting to know them. He said there was a diverse group of people and it was interesting to learn about them all.

“As those guys start passing away, their kids would take over and then the accents sort of disappeared,” he said. “That’s just the way it is. As a youngster growing up, I think that’s one of the things that I really admire and kind of miss a little bit; the different accents and the different nationalities and mannerisms. It was just fun growing up during that era.”

Andy said he also loved working with customers in the farm community.

“Some people would bring lunch to us or maybe a snack in the afternoon.



Andy and Dee Hartmannn pose with a sign in front of some of the company’s equipment recently. Hartmannn Construction is celebrating 70 years of being in business.

Sometimes they would say ‘Okay, it’s three o’clock, let’s get ice cream somewhere,’” he said. “I always thought the hospitality was really, well, it was just the way we were.”

Andy and Jon learned alongside one another as they grew up in the business. Andy said even though he was just a young teenager, it was interesting and fun to be with his brother as he learned from their dad.

Jon stuck with the company his whole life, and Andy took a break to serve in the military.

He was in the Marine Corps from 1973-1975 and Air Guard from 1975-2000. He worked in heavy equipment, which he already knew about from working with his dad.

As things changed and the industry switched from land leveling to using pivot systems, the Hartmannns got into road construction. Andy said he enjoyed building roads because he can drive around any time and see what he helped create.

The Hartmannns also began offering concrete crushing services.

“I think it’s very, very important that we recycle as much as we can, and concrete and asphalt is part of the recycling of material that is made,” he said. “It’s recycled and then you use it in pretty much the same type of environment.”

At its peak, Hartmannn Construction employed about 22 people.

Bill ran the company while slowly giving his sons greater responsibilities until he died in March of 2021. Jon followed two months later, leaving Andy to carry out the business’s legacy. Andy said he strives to continue to operate the company with the same beliefs and commitment as his dad.

Andy was witness to many changes in the industry over the years. When he started out, he and his family ran the equipment with no cabs. Whatever the weather conditions were was what they worked in.

He also remembers going from cable-operated machines to hydraulic was a big change, and everything was gear driven until around the 1970s, when automatic transmissions and power shifts started coming into play.

Andy said things are now so computerized that people have to call someone to come out with a computer to see what is wrong. He said this can be frustrating because, in the past, someone who is handy with mechanics could diagnose it themselves.

Andy said growing up working with nature gave him a strong appreciation for history and the world around him. He said he is always impressed by the fact that history has been around longer than humans ever have.

“I just feel blessed that I was able to be born here and raised here and understand how nature works. It’s very impressive what God created,” he said. “We as human beings learn to adapt to what we have in front of us and learn the land correctly.”

He said he loves telling people about the way the local land has changed over thousands of years. About a mile and a half east of their farm, the ground is more hilly, rugged and dry than it is on the west side of the county because there used to be a glacier there.

“Most people don’t even realize that,” he said. “It impresses me how the land is different when you get down to it.”

Dee said the family farm is a histor-

ical site that has been in Doris’ family for more than 100 years. The business is on the farm, and Andy and Dee, who have three adult children who work outside of the construction business, have a home on the land as well. Doris also lives on the farm in the home she grew up in.

Andy said it is heartwarming to think about all the memories he has visiting his grandparents there as a child. He said he remembers them teaching him to milk cows, pump water and collect eggs.

“My favorite part about working here is continuing a family business. I think that’s really important in society today,” Dee said. “With everybody that works here, it’s like a big family. The employees are awesome – sometimes I joke around and say they’re our kids.”

Hartmannn construction now employs around eight people at a time but has been looking for more. Nowadays, the workforce is depleted because people seem to not want to get their hands dirty and work hard, Andy said.

Andy said one of the most fulfilling things about his job has always been helping people fulfill their dreams, whatever they may be. He said that is one of the things that makes him want to keep doing this work.

“That’s one thing Dad always talked about and I always enjoyed was going to a project, whether it was a one hour project or a couple year project, was we were there to help fulfill somebody’s dream that they had to build something,” he said. “That was, and still is today, a joy I have when I drive off a project and know that the person wanted us to do and trusted us to do that project for them.”

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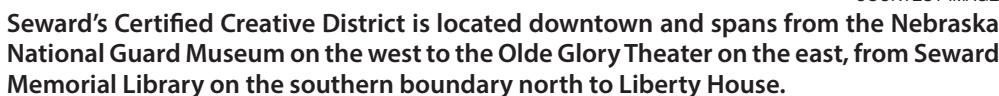
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BY EMILY HEMPHILL
emily@sewardindependent.com

"Also, we are going to incorpo-



She said using the funds for the music series and the residency will provide something for the whole community

The Creative District designation was a collaborative effort among the Seward

The Creative Districts program was created by the Nebraska Legislature in 2020 with the goal of promoting and supporting economic development in communities dedicated to growing their arts-related economic sectors.

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Hughes Brothers’ new 70,000 square foot steel tubing building is being built on the northeast corner of the property.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN HUGHES

Hughes Brothers approaches finish line on steel tubing building, prepares for next upgrade

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN
scireporter@sewardindependent.com

Hughes Brothers in Seward is in the process of adding 130,000 square feet worth of new additions that will help its processes run more efficiently in the coming years.

Its steel tubing building, which is being built on the northeast corner of the Hughes Brothers’ property, is just a few months away from completion.

Hughes Brothers President John Hughes said the \$10 million steel tubing building will be 200 feet by 350 feet for a total of 70,000 square feet. The company started planning the project in February of 2023 and broke ground in May. It plans to complete it in June and will be adding \$2 million in machinery and equipment as it is being finished.

Hughes Brothers hopes to have the building ready for use in July.

For the past 20 years, Hughes Brothers has been using four work centers in its main building to make its steel tube products. After buying the tubes from steel companies, Hughes Brothers cuts them to length, welds parts into or onto them and galvanizes them before shipping them off as a final product.

Hughes said the new building will make the process significantly quicker and more efficient, which will help the company retain its customers.



A look inside the construction of Hughes Brothers’ new steel tubing building, which will house all its steel tube fabrication equipment and processes.

Right now, five or six months often go by between the time a customer orders a steel tube and the time Hughes Brothers is able to have it finished for them. Hughes said the most exciting thing about the new building is that it will help them shorten those lead times to one or two months.

“That’s really where our lead times should be at with those things,” he said.

Hughes said the company plans to begin working on a new galvanizing building sometime in 2025, as they would like to wait until the steel tube building is finished to take on another project.

The galvanizing building will be

directly west of the steel tube building and will span 200 feet by 300 feet for a total of 60,000 square feet. Hughes Brothers is still in the planning stages for the building and is not yet sure when it will be finished.

Rising prices put a bit of a wrench in their initial plans.

“We haven’t given up. It’s going to happen,” Hughes said. “We’ll just need to maybe do some things ourselves that we weren’t really planning on doing.”

Hughes hopes to break ground on the project in 2025. The company wants to finish with the steel tube building project before it starts on the galvanizing building to ensure nothing

is rushed.

The company’s current galvanizing tank can handle 24-foot tubes or shorter, but most of the tubes Hughes Brothers works with are outside of that range. Hughes Brothers ships tubes over 24 feet to be galvanized at Valmont Coatings in Valley, Nebraska.

Hughes Brothers is planning for the new building to have a series of 35-foot tanks. Hughes said this will allow it to galvanize longer items and more items at once, which will increase its efficiency and product quality and will help operations run more smoothly.

As with the steel tubing building, this will help decrease lead times.

“We need to shorten those lead times so our customers stay happy. That’s really the main thing,” he said.

Hughes Brothers will still send any tubes longer than 35 feet to Valmont.

Hughes said these improvements are coming at the perfect time because the electric utility industry is booming.

“We’ve just become very, very busy here in the last few years, and we just need to expand our capacity to keep up with the demand,” he said.

Hughes said the state wants to ensure everyone has electricity, especially with the recent cold weather.

“It’s an important thing, and we’re a small part of that puzzle,” he said.

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Seward golf course welcomes Italian restaurant open to all

BY AMY HAUSMAN
amy@friendsentinel.com

Seward Community Golf Course has announced a new addition that will be open to the public: Calabria, a new Italian restaurant named after a famous region of Italy.

The restaurant was approved at the Seward City Council’s Jan. 2 meeting, with the six-month contract. The sit-down restaurant is scheduled to open March 1.

Chef Benny Sahiti and his wife Abigail Sivits run the family-owned restaurants, which have become their babies. They moved to Crete from Nebraska City, where the original restaurant is, to open a location at College Heights Country Club.

Calabria just finished its first successful golf season at College Heights Country Club in Crete and will bring that experience to Seward.

“Now they understand golf,” City Administrator Greg Butcher said. “Trying to match those two things together, it’s a very intricate dance. Understanding the ebbs and flows of the season and how to get people to come in when they’re

not in season. That really sets us up well for this opportunity.”

Eickmeier said it has been hard to find a good fit for someone to offer food and alcohol since golf is seasonal, not year-round.

“It’s a niche. It’s a seasonal operation. It could be a year-round restaurant, it’s just challenging because the golfers aren’t necessarily there year-round,” Seward Mayor, Joshua Eickmeier, said. “Through conversations with administration in Crete, we have learned of the positive golf membership response to the restaurant this past summer and now into the winter. Calabria comes to us highly recommended from those involved in Crete.”

Due to the great success seen in Crete and a desire to be in Seward as well, the owners were drawn to SCGC and inquired about the opportunity several months ago to expand once again, said Eickmeier.

“We were considering the location, population and support when weighing our options. We began speaking with the Seward golf course and it became a logical fit for



AMY HAUSMAN

Chef Benny Sahiti heats things up in the kitchen of Calabria Italian Restaturant, at the Crete location. The restaturant owned by Sahiti and his wife Abigail Sivits will open their Seward location on March 1 at the Seward Community Golf Course. The family owned restaurant is open to the public.

both of us,” Sahiti said.

Butcher said this will allow the facility to be open all year, as Calabria will serve the general public, not just golfers.

Sahiti has been in the restaurant business for as long as he can remember.

It is something that he grew up around and he is passionate about.

“The menu is full of recipes that have been passed down from generations,” Sahiti said. “Everything is made from scratch daily and

we can customize for food allergies and special requests.”

In addition to the regular menu, Calabria will feature specials not found on their daily menu and will be available for catering as well.

“We’re very excited about this opportunity. We’ve obviously been working very hard on trying to enhance the golf experience, especially for the golfers, but also for

CONTINUED ON 19

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Civic Center

CONTINUED FROM 6

down there that we have been able to find anymore,” Kolterman said.

The lower level will gain storage for tables and chairs, and furnishings in the upstairs fireplace rooms will be updated while maintaining the character of the spaces.

Kolterman said other than technology updates, the auditorium will stay the same for now.

“We really don’t have a lot of plans to change that right now because of cost, but we know that these bathrooms are woefully inadequate,” he said.

An addition will be added to the rear of the west building to expand the bathrooms near the auditorium.

Office spaces that house the Seward County Chamber and Development Partnership will be renovated to better fit the needs of the SCCDP.

The south entrance

to the east half of the building will be made accessible by ramps, and the worn steps will be rebuilt.

HVAC systems will be replaced and put on a central control system.

Kolterman said the project will be completed in three phases, with phases 1 and 2 bid together.

“We’re looking at several million dollars if we did it all at once,” he said.

The Langworthy Trust has enough funds to complete the first two phases, then will follow up with the third phase in a few years.

Phase three includes the west side bathrooms, SCCDP offices and the south entrance.

Groups that regularly meet in the Civic Center were notified of the need to temporarily relocate while the work is being completed.

Butcher said those groups should be able to use the facility again by the end of the year.



A drawing shows the planned renovations to the main floor of the Seward Civic Center. A wheelchair ramp will be built through the middle, connecting the east and west sides of the building.

“Our number one priority is ADA access.

The youngest users in our community, from the Boy Scouts, up to our oldest seniors utilize that, so we

want to make sure it’s up to where it should be.”



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Petsource by Scoular put \$75 million toward growing its capabilities in Seward County over the past two years

Petsource triples capacity, doubles employees

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN
scireporter@sewardindependent.com

Petsource by Scoular completed its \$75 million expansion project last November, solidifying its position in the top 10 largest employers in Seward County and tripling its capacity.

The expansion created 75 new jobs at the company, which now employs more than 150 people.

Scoular, an employee-owned \$10 billion agribusiness with headquarters in Omaha, opened the Seward Petsource facility in 2020 and quickly realized the company would outgrow its capacity limit, Petsource President Amy Patterson said. In the fall of 2021, the pet food company went to its board of directors and requested additional support to build an expansion.

After being given the go-ahead, Petsource began designing the project.

Petsource broke ground on the expansion in the summer of 2022 and spent about 18 months completing it. The company expanded its front office space to accommodate its growing team, added more production space to its raw meat processing area, increased the capacity for its freeze dried manufacturing

and grow its space for its finished goods manufacturing.

The expansion also facilitated the company to add capabilities to its portfolio. As its customers innovate for their brands, Patterson said Petsource can now help them add different shapes, types of products and types of packaging to their final products.

“The additional capacity has allowed us to support more customers that we weren’t able to support in our original build, and maybe additional capabilities that we are able to provide now that we didn’t have in the past,” she said.

Pedro Delapaz of Bee, the Seward plant manager, said he loves the curiosity and excitement surrounding the expansion and enjoys having the privilege of working with more employees in and around Seward County.

“We really want to provide (our employees) with the best training that we can get them so that they are able to really focus and understand the whys behind why we do what we do and just engage with the people here,” he said. “That’s the most exciting part of all of this. Everybody is excited; everybody wants to make the best product out there.”

Patterson said she is looking forward to learning how to



The Petsource plant in Seward carries out all the steps of manufacturing its product in the same facility.

operate in a larger facility and continue to add value for customers and staff members. She believes one of the company’s most important responsibilities is providing development opportunities for its employees.

This is an ideal time to expand the pet food business, as pet ownership in the United States skyrocketed to a record 70% of all households during the pandemic. Scoular said the expansion is a vital part of larger strategic growth plans supporting the pet food industry.

Petsource was one of the first companies in the country to bring all the steps of manufacturing freeze-dried pet food – including recipe development, raw meat processing, freeze drying and packaging – under one roof.

In a press release, Gov. Jim Pillen congratulated the company on its growth in Seward County over the past four years.

“We’re excited to see Petsource grow, and so quickly,” said Jonathan Jank, President and CEO of the Seward County Chamber and Development

Partnership. “Any time we have a local business expand, that’s a good thing.”

Patterson said it is always a pleasure to talk to people about their four-legged family members, and it is fun to work somewhere that produces something pets love.

“It brings the importance of what we do home,” she said. “We get to see the joy that our pet food brings to those pets. Those pets give us so much joy and happiness and comfort, that is is really rewarding to be able to do something that is going to support the health and wellness of the pets that we have at home.”

Patterson said she enjoys being part of a new and growing team and feels a strong responsibility for Petsource to give back to the community as it expands. She said Petsource is extremely grateful for the overwhelming support it has received from Seward County.

“We have been so fortunate to join the Seward County community. We were creating this from scratch, and the business and community leaders were also helping us to create the support for Petsource,” she said. “The community has embraced us at every step of our journey and has really been a resource for me and our team.”

Flats

Continued from 8

Kelley said it fell to the city to figure out what to do with the building that sat empty until 2022.

“Originally when Crestview closed, I reached out to Kevin Wingard, superintendent at Milford Public Schools, and a couple different school board members to get their take on any interest in the space. We wanted them to have the first option at that space,” Kelley said, since the care center was next door to Milford Elementary.

He said the school district had no use for the land, so the city began exploring other options. “Hoppe and his team

seemed like the perfect fit,” Kelley said.

Hoppe Development had tackled similar projects before, renovating former care centers in Fremont and West Point into housing.

“These nursing homes were closing all over Nebraska,” Hoppe said.

They worked through a public engagement process with the City of Milford, the Seward County Chamber and Development Partnership and neighbors living near the building to come up with a solution and address any issues along the way, Hoppe said.

At the time, the building was valued at \$750,000, and Hoppe planned a \$2.5 mil-

lion renovation with Scheele-Kayton Construction of Lincoln as the general contractor for the project.

Hoppe secured a loan from the Rural Workforce Housing Fund, a statewide program that allows county-level nonprofits to distribute loans to increase the supply and quality of affordable housing in their communities.

The City of Milford contributed more than \$30,000 of LB 840 (local option sales tax) funds to the Workforce Housing fund.

The project also received \$256,000 in Tax Increment Financing, which allows a developer to defer taxes on the

valuation increase for up to 15 years, and Hoppe worked with two local banks for financing.

“This was a great combination of public and private funds coming together to bring added housing options to Milford,” Kelley said.

Hoppe said the one-bedroom, two-bedroom and studio apartments rent at the market rate. They are not subsidized and have no income restrictions, but they cost renters less because of the Workforce Housing dollars and because they started with the framework of the original building, not all-new construction.

All 21 apartments were leased by the end of

June.

Jacob Jennings, community affairs director and vice president of the Seward County Chamber and Development Partnership, said the apartments are a good fit for Milford.

“First Street Flats makes a lot of sense. It’s in a great location right there by the elementary school and across from the high school,” Jennings said.

Kelley said the apartments fill a gap in the community the city has been working to fill for quite some time.

“Once we got Timber Creek (subdivision) going and established on its path, we knew that rental property was a space we

needed to heavily focus on,” Kelley said. “I think this does that. Certainly, we know we will have additional needs in that space.”

Kelley said First Street Flats will help integrate college students into the community and hopefully get them thinking about living in Milford after graduation.

“We’re trying to get the kids to come off of campus and get into the heart of Milford and explore a little bit more,” he said. “We think about them as we make steps and try to improve our community.”



Milford splash pad opens

Milford Mayor Patrick Kelley, right, poses with former Nebraska Cornhusker quarterback and Heisman award winner Eric Crouch following the splash pad dedication Oct. 12, 2023. Crouch’s company “Crouch Recreation” was hired to build the splash pad for Milford that was completed last summer.

DOUG CARROLL

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Cattle Bank celebrates 150 years of community-oriented business

BY KEATON BURGESS
reporter@sewardindependent.com

After Claudius Jones opened the doors to Cattle Bank in 1873, the bank continues to be a staple in the Seward community for 150 years.

Cattle Bank, the second oldest bank charter in Nebraska, now has four locations, two in Seward and two in Lincoln, and continues to be a family-run business.

After the bank changed hands a few times, John Cattle took over the bank in 1881, and it has been part of the Cattle family ever since.

John Cattle and his sons, Robert, John and Walter, were farmers in England and came to Nebraska in the 1870's, lured by the chance to invest in inexpensive land. The Cattle family bought the State Bank of Nebraska in 1881 but also continued to farm. After his wife died, John decided to return to England and Walter took over the bank. John's son Robert T. Cattle, Sr. began to work in the bank after he finished law school in 1911 and Robert married Mercedes Brown in 1912, who was the granddaughter of founder Claudius Jones.

The State Bank of Nebraska was eventually nationalized and took the name of The Cattle National Bank of Seward in 1930. John W. Cattle Sr. eventually took over the bank as president and CEO for 32 years after graduating from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and serving in the armed forces.

John W. Cattle Jr. became president and CEO of the bank in 1992 and served in this role until 2006.

Today, Ryne Seaman is the president and CEO of the bank and

joined the team in 2006.

"The first 10 years of my career, I mentored under John Cattle and have held several different positions within the bank," Seaman said. "I certainly didn't show up on John's doorstep thinking I'd ever be in a position as the president and CEO, but life's a lot about timing and attitude."

Becky Vahle, Cattle Sr's daughter vice president, on the board and chairman of the holding company, said one of Seaman's first duties was starting the ATM system.

"He was an instigator in the startup of it," she said.

On June 3, Virginia Cattle, Vahle's mother and a big part of the bank, passed away at 102.

"She stayed witty until the very last few days," Vahle said. "She was very involved and tried to keep up with the new people. She was a big part of all our lives."

As most places do over time, Seaman said things have changed at the banks.

"People want to bank electronically now," he said. "We think that a good mix between the physical branch locations and electronic banking is best."

"Since I've been here, technology has been the biggest change I've seen," Vahle said.

Although things have changed over time, Vahle and Seaman said the relationship-driven business model they have has stayed the same.

"We keep the personal touch with the customer," Vahle said. "Even if it's over the phone now rather than them coming in, we keep on that. We pride ourselves on our personal interest and connections with our customers."

"We believe our people are what differ-

entiates us from other financial institutions," Seaman said. "It can be difficult to build those relationships electronically, but that's what we believe differentiates ourselves is the relationship side of things."

Along with the relationships, Vahle and Seaman believes the family history gives people something to connect with.

"I think it connects us with other families," Vahle said. "It shows we're not just a big corporate business. The decisions are made here."

"I think if you spoke to some of our staff, that's the reason they stay," Seaman said.

"We have tenure that the average is over 13 years. You're part of a family and a team."

Vahle said her father would go around the bank and check in with everyone and see how their family was doing on a regular.

Another thing that has been important to Cattle Bank over the years is the support for the Seward community. Vahle and Seaman said the community is important to them and they try to support as much as they can.

"The stronger the community gets, the stronger we get," Vahle said. "The community means everything to us."

"We are truly what they call a community bank," Seaman said. "Our success is tied to the community that we serve and we think our community often succeeds as well. It's kind of a give and take between the two."

Vahle said Cattle tries to be loyal to the community and support things going on.

Seaman said part of the bank's belief is giving back to the community.

"Looking at some of the community support

we've provided, we do anything that is community-related," he said.

Some of the examples include financial support and serving on boards such as Seaman

being the president of the Seward School Board and other things such as city council.

Looking towards the future, Seaman said Cattle is continuing to expand its virtual

branch.

"For the technology piece, as far as online account openings for both loan and deposits, we're hoping to do that in a fairly short order," he said.

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Calabria

CONTINUED FROM 15
the community at large when we took over the golf course," Eickmeier said. "We had Nate's on the Nine. We had Par 15. We've learned a lot from those experiences on what makes sense."
Eickmeier said having a full-service restaurant at the course will encourage non-residents to visit

Seward for golf or the dining experience.
"We've put a lot of effort into improving the physical course itself, the play," Eickmeier said. "Now we're having to get into some work with the clubhouse as well to give that well-rounded experience. This exceeds our expectations."

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Connecting communities

ALLO established in Milford and Seward

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN
scireporter@sewardindependent.com

ALLO Communications completed installing its fiber internet services in Milford and Seward last year. Fiber connections provide for faster internet that can handle more information at a time than cable. ALLO announced its plans to come to Seward and Milford in November of 2021 and started constructing the fiber network in July and August, respectively, of the following year.

ALLO did a ubiquitous build, meaning its services were available to everyone within the city limits, including residents, schools, businesses and government entities.

“We don’t cherry pick, because we want to make sure everyone has the opportunity to get connected,” said Dave Miller, the general manager for eastern Nebraska for ALLO Communications.

Miller said ALLO wanted to provide better connectivity and increase competition among current internet providers in Seward County. He said the COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the need for reliable connectivity as more people had to work and study from home.

“Our Seward County Broadband Task Force, in partnership with our county commissioners, have stated that fiber is our preferred technology,” said Jonathan Jank, President and CEO of the Seward County Chamber and Development Partnership. “It is a way to future-proof our county and sort of the technologies that are to come.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALYSSA WINTZ WITH ALLO COMMUNICATIONS

Eric Schwieger, a critical infrastructure engineer for ALLO, spent his summer installing fiber internet capabilities in Seward County.

ALLO divided the communities into grids of about 800-1,000 homes and businesses called Passive Optical Networks and built in each of the grids. It completed all the construction in Milford on June 16, 2023, and finished in Seward on Sept. 12, 2023.

Miller, who now lives in Lincoln, used to live in Milford and was a pastor at Bellwood Mennonite Church for around 10 years. He said he remembers getting frustrated with the lack of quality options for internet at

the time. This made the project especially meaningful for him.

“I was just extremely happy to be able to do it because I would have friends in Seward and Milford saying, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re going to go work at ALLO? How soon can we get ALLO? We need ALLO,’” he said. “To be able to be part of making that happen is just a great feeling of accomplishment.”

Whenever ALLO comes into a community, it warns residents to expect some disruptions and hassle due to the nature of construction.

A few months after construction started, Milford residents reported more inconveniences than usual, including

power loss, lack of communication between residents and ALLO’s contractor and yards dug up in the wrong places due to bad locates.

“We actually had a contractor that was not meeting the standards that we expect them to, and they just weren’t doing the standard of work that we expect and desire,” Miller said.

ALLO ultimately let the contractor go, Miller said. For every issue a resident reported, the company sent in their restoration team, and ALLO personally contacted the resident and worked to resolve it with them.

Miller said he contacted the mayor amidst the disruptions and proposed that ALLO meet with

residents at a city council meeting, which was held a few months ago.

“I think (the community) appreciated the fact that we were there in person just to really be accountable and to own it,” Miller said. “It’s all about having a good long-term relationship, which ultimately leads to trust.”

Miller said the meeting was extremely beneficial because ALLO got to hear directly from residents, note their concerns and figure out how to work together to resolve them.

“(The project) caused quite a bit of turmoil initially, but ALLO was very, very willing to come out to one of our council meetings and meet with the people and talk to them and work out their difficult situations that had occurred,” said Milford City Clerk Jeanne Hoggins.

Miller said residents have enjoyed that ALLO has a physical store in Seward so they can speak with someone face-to-face if they have questions. He said he has also gotten feedback that residents have been enjoying the reliable connectivity ALLO offers because they don’t have to worry about their internet buffering or their channels freezing up or pixelating.

“Milford has exceeded our expectations of what we normally see for customers that sign up for our service, and that goes for not just residents but

it also goes for businesses. Seward is on track for the same,” Miller said.

Hoggins said the city office switched to ALLO’s internet and phone service and loves it.

“We’re just very, very pleased that they came into town. We pursued them for several years before they actually made that move, so we felt very good about having them,” she said.

Miller said ALLO is now looking into providing public WiFi in community spaces in Seward and Milford, such as the city parks. WiFi for the Seward Wellness Center is already in the works.

ALLO is also working to expand into more nearby rural areas – such as the areas between Milford and Pleasant Dale, Milford and Crete and around Dorchester – as government funding becomes available. Miller said ALLO hopes to start on those projects this summer.

ALLO recently received a \$9.2 million grant called the Capital Projects Fund to deploy fiber in the rural northeast section of Seward. It is also looking into how rural areas of Seward and Milford may be able to get funds for fiber internet through the federal Broadband Equity Access and Deployment program.

“As the communities grow, we want to grow right along with them,” Miller said.

Seward County Gives increases financial impact in second year

BY EMILY HEMPHILL
emily@sewardindependent.com

For the second year running, the Seward County Gives fundraising drive in May 2023 accumulated thousands of dollars for local nonprofits in just five days.

Donations totaled \$255,779.01 in 2023 and were spread across 38 organizations.

Those figures surpassed the inaugural event in 2022, which raised \$162,000 for 24 organizations.

The City of Milford topped the 2023 leaderboard with more than \$50,000 in donations which will help replace old, outdated equipment in the city park with new, accessible play equipment.

Six volunteer fire departments received dona-



tions to use toward new life-saving equipment, educational devices and protective gear.

Other organizations like Sixpence, the Seward-ish Giving Tree and the Hope Crisis Center used the donations they received to directly assist people in need of

diapers for their children, money for food or a hand getting back on their feet.

The missions of participating organizations covered a wide range, from creating better conditions for shelter pets and preserving a historic log cabin to sprucing up ball fields and beautify-

ing cemeteries.

A new addition to the campaign in its second year was “Lunch on the Lawn,” a midweek fair showcasing each organization. The fair served as a way for donors to make their donations in person while learning more about each organization’s goals.

Donors also could purchase an “I Love Seward County” T-shirt designed by Utica resident Amber Crouch, with \$5 from the sale of each shirt donated to the purchaser’s preferred organization.

The 2024 week of giving will run May 4-9.

Organizations interested in participating must submit an application by March 1.

Details are available at www.sewardcountygives.com or www.facebook.com/sewardcountygives.

Chamber

CONTINUED FROM 20

“We want the area to be the best it can be,” he said. “We want to foster a place where people want to live, work and play.”

Seward County is the ninth fastest growing county in the state, thanks in part to its proximity to Lincoln. Jank said that allows the county to see unique opportunities.

Assets include agriculture, manufacturing, education, finance – all work together to build a diverse economy, he said. The historic downtown district is a valuable piece of that, and

the new creative district will help connect arts and culture.

“We have to have enough for people to see and want to be here,” Jank said. “Speed to market matters, and we are incredibly fortunate to have everything here.”

To celebrate 125 years of existence is monumental, he said.

“We want to honor the town mothers and fathers that build this place we call home,” Jank said.

More information on celebration events will be announced later, he said.

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Rescuers train to prevent grain bin tragedies

BY EMILY HEMPHILL
emily@sewardindependent.com

A few first responders remember what they were doing 20 years ago on Nov. 24, 2003, the day Troy Childers died.

Childers became trapped in a grain bin near Tamora and ultimately suffocated as he was engulfed by soybeans.

He was 28.

Utica Volunteer Fire Chief Curtis Deremer said rescuers planned to observe a moment of silence in Childers' honor, but they spent a Saturday practicing to make sure no situation ends that way again.

Utica Fire and Central Valley Ag hosted 17 volunteer first responders from seven area departments Aug. 19 for a grain bin engulfment training at the CVA elevator in Utica.

Deremer said they wanted to be prepared, especially with the harvest season coming up.

"It's a very small window between a rescue and a recovery," Deremer said.

On Aug. 15, an 81-year-old man died near Lindsay after being trapped in a bin.

In late July, Henderson, York and Bradshaw rescuers responded to assist a man stuck in a Henderson bin.

"He had his feet on the ground, but he couldn't get out," said Dan Greenwalt of the Henderson Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department.

He said it took three hours and a firetruck with an aerial ladder to rescue the man.

Greenwalt and two other Henderson responders attended the training in Utica.

The training was done atop a grain truck parked inside the elevator, not an actual grain bin.

Geoff Rose of Henderson was first into the grain truck, harnessed to a rope and connected to the ceiling. He was buried up to his waist in corn kernels. Four rescuers then went into the



Mike Luebbe of the Garland Volunteer Fire Department sets a grain auger aside after using it to draw corn kernels away from the patient's legs during a grain bin rescue training Aug. 19 in Utica. In the background, a rescue team helps Geoff Rose of the Henderson VFD climb out of the cofferdam used for the exercise.

truck to dig him out.

Rescuers at the training had the advantage of tie-off points in the ceiling above them to connect their harnesses.

In an actual grain bin, those points are often few and far between, meaning rescuers will have a more difficult time getting into the bin and sometimes have to work from mid-air.

"It's difficult to pull them out if they're more than knee-deep," said Cameron Clifford, a member of Central Valley Ag's Rope Rescue Team 4.

The team is one of five rope rescue teams that serve central and southeast Nebraska. Team 4 is based in Utica and primarily covers the surrounding four counties.

It has a trailer ready

to roll with ropes, pulleys, harnesses, helmets, a cofferdam, auger, rescue basket and other equipment to take to the site of a grain bin accident.

The teams practice eight days a year at a minimum and will assist first responders with rescues in commercial settings as well as on private farms.

"We don't do anything without being safe," Clifford said.

To get Rose out of the grain, rescuers used a cofferdam.

The dam consists of metal panels that snap together in a circle to form a tube. It can then be forced into the grain to create a barrier around the patient and prevent more grain from falling against them.

"When you are in a grain bin, you have

that cone effect," said Jon Propst of the Tamora Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department.

"When you're walking down to them, you're pushing more grain onto them."

Once the dam was in place, rescuers used an auger powered by a cordless drill to draw the grain around Rose's legs out of the dam.

They were then able to pull him out using a 4:1 rope and pulley system.

Rose spent about an hour in the grain – and that was a quick rescue, with rescuers already on scene, convenient tie-off points and all equipment ready. An actual rescue could take much, much longer.

"It was controlled, so I wasn't uncomfortable," Rose said. "It might be different out

in the field with no harness, if I was buried up to my chest or something."

Greenwalt said first responders have to think on their feet in a grain bin situation because it's easy to make the problem worse.

"Time is of the essence, but slow and smooth. You have to be deliberate with everything you do," Greenwalt said.

He said rescuers also must take other factors into account, like the patient's medical condition, whether they're conscious and the potential for heat exhaustion of the patient or rescue personnel.

On the day of the training, temperatures reached 95°F with around 80% humidity.

"It was hot in there," Rose said, as he emerged soaked in

sweat.

The departments ran through a couple rounds of rescue, with Greenwalt being the second person buried in the corn.

Participants debriefed after each round to discuss what went well and what could have gone better.

"There is no good way to do it. We find the best way we are able to do it," Greenwalt said.

He said only a few area fire departments are equipped with cofferdams and other grain-specific rescue equipment, largely because of the cost.

"It costs a lot of money to be ready for something you rarely use," Greenwalt said, "but it's better to have it and not need it."

EMILY HEMPHILL

Boggs continues with murals around area

BY KEATON BURGESS
reporter@sewardindependent.com

An artist and professor at Concordia University continues to paint murals around Seward including his newest, a patriotic mural at 210 Alvo Road.

Seth Boggs, originally from Neligh, knew he wanted to be an artist growing up.

“When I was growing up, I took all the art classes I could in high school and had a really good mentorship there,” he said.

When it came time for college, Boggs said he visited Concordia and loved it after meeting the faculty and seeing the facility.

“I was pretty much sold at that point,” he said. “I originally thought about doing architecture.”

Boggs said it was on the visit to Concordia and talking about graphic design that sold him. He also did his graduate work through the Art Institute of Boston.

Now, Boggs has painted many murals

and buildings around town including the ones at The Alps Bark Park, Hobson Automotive, a wall in Beaver Crossing, Jimmy Johns and indoor ones at an apartment in downtown Seward and at The Rock Lutheran Church.

Boggs’ newest mural is at 210 Alvo Road. The mural shows an eagle in front of the stars and stripes including “In God We Trust” written on it.

“Working with the building owner, David Harman, he said he wanted something that was patriotic,” he said. “He had some thoughts in his mind, and then I came back with some interpretations of different ways we could go with it. Then we narrowed it down to the specific design.”

Boggs said he sometimes takes a photo of the wall and puts together a design.

Out of the murals he’s done, Boggs said he doesn’t have a favorite and that he’s enjoyed them all. He did mention the mural at The Alps Bark Park was



Seth Boggs stands with one of his new murals at 210 Alvo Road.

COURTESY PHOTO

the biggest wall he’s worked with.

“It was a really eye-opening experience having to cover that much square footage with spray paint,” he said. “There are sections that are painted with a brush, but for the most part, like the dogs themselves, all the stripes, for the most part, are spray painted.”

Boggs said he feels the piece was important to him because it helped him find his style and helped him become friends with Scott Dinslage.

CONTINUED ON 26



KEATON BURGESS

Concordia art professor Seth Boggs has painted many murals around the Seward area including one at The Alps Bark Park (pictured) and a new one at 210 Alvo Road.

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NNGM welcomes PA31-17 to Seward



STEPHANIE CROSTON/SCI

Volunteers finish removing the plywood crate from around the Higgins boat at the Nebraska National Guard Museum July 3.

Lost and found

BY STEPHANIE CROSTON
scroston@sewardindependent.com

After World War II, military equipment was sold as surplus, and that included Higgins boats. The shallow-draft craft were good for transportation and could be used to ferry people and equipment across almost any body of water.

Those that were sold went for \$400 to \$500.

Jerry Meyer, historian at the Nebraska National Guard Museum in Seward, was keeping his eyes open.

“I look for boats, but that leads to rabbit holes or money,” he said. “There was the legend of the lake in California.”

The legend said a Higgins boat was at the bottom of a lake. Raising it would cost thousands of dollars, and who knew what kind of shape it was in, he said.

In 2021, Meyer received a phone call from an Englishman named James Dunsdon. He was driving past Lake Shasta, which was much lower than usual because of the drought, and saw part of a boat sticking up out of the water. He knew immediately what it was – the rounded stern gave it away.

“He’s from southern England, but he was brought up around Hig-



STEPHANIE CROSTON/SCI

From left, Viviana Hollenbeck, James Dunsdon, Eric Hollenbeck, Becky Vahle and Ryne Seaman unveil the information card for the Higgins boat behind them. Eric Hollenbeck is the star of “The Craftsman” on the Magnolia Network and helped preserve the boat. Dunsdon is the boat’s finder. Vahle and Seaman are with Cattle National Bank in Seward.

gins boats,” Meyer said.

Dunsdon called the World War II Museum in New Orleans, but it has a Higgins boat built especially for it.

“Higgins only built 20,094 landing craft. The World War II Museum has number 20,095, built specifically for the museum,”

Meyer said.

That museum told Dunsdon about the NNGM. Dunsdon called. “It was in rough shape,” Meyer said. “But I knew it was a Higgins boat.”

The rounded stern is a defining characteristic of the landing craft Higgins Industries built during

World War II.

Then Meyer saw the number painted on the side – PA31-17. That meant the craft belonged to the USS Monrovia, Lt. Gen. George Patton’s command ship for the invasion of Sicily in 1943.

“John Cattle landed at Sicily,” Meyer said.

Cattle was a Seward native who served in the Army in World War II.

Meyer asked how much it would cost to salvage the boat. The amount given was the exact amount the museum had recently received from Dr. Van and Becky Vahle of Seward. Becky Vahle is Cattle’s

daughter.

It was a no-brainer, Vahle said.

“We had heard about it,” she said. “All the pieces fell into place.”

“We only had one day to get it out before the lake started to refill,” Meyer said.

The boat was recovered Dec. 21, 2021, and taken to Blue Ox Millworks in Eureka, California.

Eric Hollenbeck worked to stabilize the craft, not to restore it, however.

“It will be a ghost boat,” Meyer said.

Hollenbeck is the star of “The Craftsman” on Magnolia Network. His work on the Higgins boat, along with its history, trip to Seward and final home at the museum, will be part of his show. A film crew has been following the project.

A museum in Oklahoma offered to take the boat off Dunsdon’s hands, Meyer said. But then he came to Seward.

“The boat does belong here,” he told Meyer.

While its ultimate home has not been finalized, the boat will be kept in the museum’s restoration bay.

“Higgins is still teaching us today,” Meyer said. “This is the most significant artifact we will have.”

“The boat can tell stories if we allow her to tell them.”

Boggs

(CONTINUED FROM 1A)

“We really became friends through that whole process.”

As for why Boggs feels murals are important in towns, because engaging in public art generates excitement and ultimately leads to increased foot traffic, which benefits surrounding businesses.

Boggs also said art can reflect a community and its surroundings.

“Artwork helps express a community’s values and creates an elevated sense of awareness for community members and visitors,” he said. “Art represents life in many ways. When community members see themselves reflected in social spaces, they feel a sense of respect, ultimately allowing for people to identify with the place they are from, live in or are visiting. Art brings people together. Displaying art in public places and making it accessible to everyone inspires engagement and a feeling of belonging to a community.”

Eber named assistant principal of year

BY STEPHANIE CROSTON
scroston@sewardindependent.com

Just two years into his tenure as assistant principal at Seward High, Rich Eber is an award winner.

Eber was named the Nebraska State Association of Secondary School Principals Region I Assistant Principal of the Year April 19.

“I think I was the only one who didn’t know,” he said.

As assistant principal, Eber’s duties include supporting students, teachers and administration. He works with attendance and discipline, as well as with the alternative school to make it more a part of the school district.

Eber taught at Seward High for six years before moving into his administrative role. As a former teacher, he said he can relate to what goes on in the classroom and

the stresses that have come after Covid-19.

In addition to working with students and teachers, Eber also gets to attend events as a supervisor, which he enjoys.

Eber didn’t set out to be in education, however.

“My goal was to be a professional baseball player, and it was until my last play at UNK,” he said.

Eber played catcher and designated hitter for the Lopers. Coaching was a natural step, but he was not certified to teach. He went back to Tampa, Florida, and got his teacher certification.

“I got into teaching so I could coach, but once I started teaching, my priority changed,” he said.

He found he loved teaching and now misses being in the classroom.

He started taking administrative classes to learn the other side of education and

improve his classroom skills. As he learned more, he saw where his path could lead.

“I want to help every student,” he said.

SHS Principal Scott Axt and Activities Director John Moody have been good mentors, he said, answering all his questions.

Eber said his wife Amy has been supportive of his move to administrative and his children Jolie, who will turn 13 soon, and Nicholas, who is 9, think his role is OK.

He’s looking forward to being able to attend his children’s activities once they reach high school.

He said his goals include continuing to learn new ways to reach out to students, parents and the community, which is part of the district’s mission statement – “Make every student a success.”

He said the award is a team recognition for the staff, students and



COURTESY PHOTOS
Rich Eber, right, was named the region’s assistant principal of the year. He is pictured with SHS principal Scott Axt.

administration.

“It’s a labor of love. I love Seward and Seward Public

Schools,” he said. “I

hope I’m here until I retire.”

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CUNE updates buildings, programs in 2023

BY KEATON BURGESS
reporter@sewardindependent.com

Concordia University, Nebraska continued to update buildings and programs in 2023 and plan for more upgrades in 2024.

One of the biggest updates in 2023 was the new music building, The Borland Center for Music and Theatre.

Emily Witt, Associate Vice President of Marketing and Communications, said the new building has been a great addition.

“The Borland Center for Music and Theatre has been a blessing for our music and theatre students, faculty and staff,” she said. “The state-of-the-art features allow for more flexibility and functionality, while the additional space in band and choir rooms will continue to accommodate our growing ensembles.”

Although there are a few minor aesthetic things that still need to be finished, the building is used by the students and staff and has been a great asset.

Concordia also completed a full renovation



FILE PHOTO

Construction was done the past few years on the Music building for Concordia University. Students have now been in the building and using it.

of Dorcas Hall, a dorm, updated furniture in the Thom Education Leadership Center and replaced 80% of building roofs because of the hail storm in 2022.

Concordia is also started recruiting for its new Paul Scholars Pro-

gram which will launch this upcoming fall for undergraduate students.

Paul Scholars is a work college program that sets students up with nearby businesses to allow students to have a variety of work opportunities so they can choose a field

they’re passionate about.

“Students accepted into the program will earn full tuition covered through a combination of institutional aid, Paul Scholar scholarship and job income while gaining experience in the career field,” Witt said.

For graduate students, Concordia has added four new programs/majors including The Sower Fellowship Nonprofit Management certificate that will equip students to serve and lead in nonprofit organizations through courses and

hands-on experiences designed specifically for the opportunities and challenges faced in the nonprofit sector, the new Master of Science in Family Life Education that prepares students to guide their church congregations using faith-focused family science perspectives to protect and strengthen marriages and families, a Master of Arts in Marriage and Family Therapy that prepares students to become licensed therapists and combines modern psychology with Christ-focused perspectives of marriage, families and communities and a Master of Education in Educational Administration for Christian Schools that focuses on equipping school administrators with effective strategies for supervising, managing and leading in a Christian school.

Concordia has also planned to make renovations to Esther Hall, a dorm, in 2024 and Kim Boyce was named as chief operating officer, which is responsible for leading the university's strategic planning efforts and overseeing multiple university operational areas.



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