



Crews have begun work on the collapsed roof of Iola Westco, above. The furniture store will move down the block to the old Country Mart venue. At top right, Easton Dougan of Triple D Plumbing removes components of a restroom in the building. Below, Gary Hoffmeier will oversee the electric work in the refurbished building. REGISTER/RICHARD LUKEN



County's COVID rank improves

By VICKIE MOSS
The Iola Register

Allen County made significant improvement in the Kansas COVID-19 Rankings, and nearly reached the 50% mark in vaccinations as the omicron variant continues to surge.

In spite of those positives, though, another 77 new cases were reported since Monday, according to a list kept by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

The county, which had been consistently ranked about 80th out of 105 Kansas counties, improved to 49th on Wednesday.

The rankings are based on vaccination rates, positive cases and testing rates.

The county scored best on case rates, ranking 35th. Testing rate has con-

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Westco work starts

By RICHARD LUKEN
The Iola Register

Four months after Iola's Westco outlet was shuttered when its roof collapsed during a torrential rainstorm, work has begun to move the furniture store down the block.

Crews began a two-pronged effort this week to rehab the shopping plaza building in the 700 block of North State Street.

The old Country Mart store area is being gutted and refurbished to house the furniture store.

It will require entirely new electrical and climate control systems, as well as new plumbing fixtures, noted Gary Hoffmeier of Hoffmeier Electric, one of the contractors involved in the work.

Meanwhile, the demolition

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Performing on the fly

By RICHARD LUKEN
The Iola Register

Imaginations are running wild this month at the Iola Community Theatre.

A group of local performers will serve up their ability to perform spontaneous skits Saturday, and again Jan. 22 at the ICT Warehouse for Pop Up Improv Nights.

"The community has a lot of funny, talented people that need an outlet to help deal with everything that is going on right now, and this is the perfect way to do it," said Mandy Moyer, president of ICT's Board of Directors. "I am excited by the enthusiasm that we have received for the improv team and know that the community is going to have as much fun as we are having!"

The group, under the direction of Marmaton Valley High

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From left, Nic Olson, Halie Luken and Rachel Shaffer act out an impromptu scene involving a heart transplant during an improvised skit at the Iola Community Theatre Warehouse. REGISTER/RICHARD LUKEN

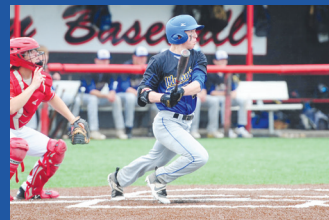
Allen County COVID-19 Case Count

Cases since 1/1077
Total cases*2,971
Deaths27

*Since the start of the pandemic

Sources: Southeast Kansas Multi-County Health Departments, Kansas Department of Health and Environment

Herrmann shines at tournament



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Supreme Court's chief appeals for more reliable judiciary funding model

By TIM CARPENTER
Kansas Reflector

TOPEKA — Kansas Supreme Court Chief Justice Marla Luckert proposed during a Tuesday speech to a joint session of the Kansas Legislature adoption of a judicial branch budget model tied to general state revenue rather than volatile court fee funds and requested state resources to add 13 district judges and 10 magistrate judges.

Luckert, who has served as a judge or justice for nearly 30 years, expressed gratitude for the Legislature's commitment

to raise judicial pay 5% in the current and upcoming fiscal years and by working to bring salaries of every court employee up to market rates. She praised state lawmakers for authorizing the hiring of additional court service officers to perform statutory duties assigned by the Legislature.

"To say the enhancement had a profound impact is an understatement," Luckert said. "Your commitment made employees feel valued. And, in turn, morale improved, and resiliency grew."

She recommended the Legislature end reliance on a bud-

get model linked to fees paid by people engaged in the court system. She said fluctuations in fee revenue caused staffing problems because most of the state budget was devoted to court employees. A solution would be to funnel court fees to the state's general treasury and make appropriations to the judicial branch part of the routine budget process.

In addition, the chief justice said a caseload study indicated the judicial branch had need for an additional 13 district judges, 10 district magistrate judges and staff to

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Kansas Supreme Court Chief Justice Marla Luckert urged a joint session of the Kansas Legislature to consider a way of stabilizing the judicial branch's funding stream and to add nearly two dozen judges statewide. (TIM CARPENTER/KANSAS REFLECTOR)

Vol. 124, No. 72
Iola, KS
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Improv: Event to raise money for repairs

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School drama instructor Halie Luken, has been practicing on Wednesday and Sunday evenings over the past several weeks in the run-up to this month's shows.

Iolans Judd Wiltse, Rhiannon Jordan, Rachel Shaffer, Hayley Derryberry and Cody Easley and Piqua's Nic Olson will perform a number of skits, most often coming from ideas brought by the audience. (Think of television's "Whose Line Is It, Anyway?")

Moyer and Luken will be a part of the fun as well.

Tickets cost \$5 at the door.

Proceeds will go toward building maintenance.

The corner of the building at 203 S. Jefferson Ave. was hit sometime in November, Moyer noted, causing bricks to topple over onto the roof, causing damage to the roof, as well as the wall.

The repairs have already been done, but the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted ICT's cash flow, much like other entertainment outlets,



Judd Wiltse, left, and Rhiannon Jordan improvise a skit at the ICT Warehouse. At right, Hayley Derryberry, from left, Cody Easley and Rachel Shaffer warm up for an improv skit at the Iola Community Theatre.

Moyer noted.

"This is a way to have fun and bring in funds for the repairs," she said.

An improv troupe has been in the works for several years, but those plans were stymied at



the onset of the pandemic, Moyer added. "We're finally making the dream a reality."

Derryberry, who has

experience in long-form improvisation, will coordinate a long-form improv show for sometime later this year.

Pipeline spills 300,000 gallons of diesel near New Orleans

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A severely corroded pipeline ruptured and spilled more than 300,000 gallons of diesel fuel just outside New Orleans after the operator delayed needed repairs, according to federal records.

Most of the fuel drained into two artificial ponds called "borrow pits" and thousands of fish, birds and other animals were killed, state and local officials said Wednesday. The spill also contaminated soil, according to state and federal officials.

The pipeline's owner said 315,000 gallons of fuel with some water mixed in had been skimmed and recovered, primarily from the ponds. Cleanup work is ongoing.

The spill from the 16-inch-diameter line operated by Collins Pipeline Co. was discovered Dec. 27 near a levee in St. Bernard Parish, just east of New Orleans, according to documents

from the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration. The spill had not been previously publicly reported.

An inspection of the 42-year-old Meraux Pipeline more than a year earlier, in October 2020, revealed external corrosion along a 22-foot section of pipe at the same site as the spill, federal records show.

The pipe had apparently lost 75% of its metal where the corrosion was worst, which would have required immediate repair, according to the records. But work was delayed and the line continued operating after a second inspection concluded the corrosion was not bad enough to require immediate repair under federal rules, the records show.

The spilled fuel also contaminated soil in an environmentally sensitive area near the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, a closed canal, according to state and federal officials.

Chief: Technology has helped

Continued from A1

support those judges.

"New judge positions have not been added since 2008. Currently, workloads in some parts of the state far exceed judicial capacity and the need for more judges and staff is great," Luckert said.

Kansas House Speaker Ron Ryckman, an

Olathe Republican, extended the invitation to the chief justice to present a State of the Judiciary report to the Legislature. It occurred on the same day Gov. Laura Kelly was set to deliver the State of the State speech in the House chamber.

"Today will mark the first State of the Judiciary in House chambers by a female chief justice, and the first time in Kansas history that the State of the Judiciary and the governor's State of the State address will be presented on the same day in House chambers. It is a privilege to have all three branches of government come together today to celebrate our state's successes, analyze the challenges and communicate priorities."

Luckert, appointed to the Supreme Court in 2002 by Republican Gov. Bill Graves, has served as chief justice since 2019. Her tenure as chief has coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has taken lives of judicial branch staff and dramatically altered operation of courts in Kansas.

"It was another unprecedented year marked by disruption of processes and tremendous uncertainty brought on by a worldwide pandemic," she

said.

The public health crisis expanded expectations among regular court consumers and the public for adoption of more online services and legal proceedings, Luckert said.

In response, she said, the judicial branch leveraged grants to develop technology aimed at

of operation, she said, half of all protection orders were being filed through the portal, Luckert said.

"These applicants usually lack help from an attorney. And, because of their circumstances, they often find it difficult — or even unsafe — to come to the courthouse. The portal eases those burdens," she said. She said the pandemic slowed implementation of the judicial branch's transition to a case management system deployed in only 26 counties. Additional counties will make the move in June, she said.

In April, the chief justice said, a mental health summit will examine options for improving the judicial system's response to behavioral health issues of people engaged in the courts. A special committee is working on new approach to resolving landlord-tenant disputes, she said.

— Kansas Supreme Court Chief Justice
Marla Luckert

modernizing court operations. That included a successful pilot project integrating a cellphone app to answer questions about handling traffic citations, she said. The courts adopted a web-based format enabling couples to apply online for a marriage license.

The judicial branch secured computer hardware and software to increase remote conferencing for clerks, interpreters and court service officers, she said. District courts conducted all types of hearings remotely unless constrained by constitutional protections. The appellate courts pivoted to remote oral arguments.

"Online hearings have allowed many Kansans to attend court without needing to take a day off work," Luckert said. "This, in turn, benefits our business community. We have found that judicious use of this technology can ease access and lower costs, which often improves due process and procedural fairness."

The judiciary's web portal has been used by individuals applying for protection from abuse orders. After six months

Wichita schools warn of school closures

WICHITA, Kan. (AP) — The Wichita school district is warning parents that temporary school closures may be necessary because so many teachers are out sick with COVID-19.

Superintendent Alicia Thompson told parents in an email that the district, which is the state's largest

with 47,000 students, hopes to give parents two to three days' notice before closing schools. But she said she couldn't promise decisions won't be made more quickly, The Wichita Eagle reports.

"Based on what we see happening in our district and our community, that notification

could be provided one day to take effect the following day," Thompson said.

At least two Kansas districts, including Bonner Springs and El Dorado, already have canceled classes. And virtual learning isn't an option because of limits that lawmakers put in place last year.

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