

Looking Back: *Top Stories of 2009*

Recession, poor economy dominated 2009

After reaching historic levels earlier this year, the unemployment rate in Lincoln County is showing some signs of improvement as 2009 draws to a close.

The most recent numbers released by the state Department of Workforce Development (DWD) show unemployment in the county is at 9.7 percent, which remains well over the 6.2 percent rate that existed at this same time last year. However, the newest numbers do show some signs of improvement, as the month prior the unemployment rate was at 10.1 percent, or a .4 percent decrease.

Getting below double-digit unemployment rates has been a longtime coming for a county that's economy is based largely on manufacturing. Earlier this year as the global economic meltdown reached recession levels, unemployment in Lincoln County peaked at over 12.5 percent.

A DWD spokesperson told the *Tomahawk Leader* earlier this year counties like Lincoln County are typically the first and hardest hit when economic hard times occur. In 2007, over 30 percent of the local workforce was employed in manufacturing. He added a silver lining for the county is that it typically experiences an influx of tourism dollars during the summer months, which would increase hiring and help soften the local blow.

The economic downturn was noticeable at several of Tomahawk's larger manufacturers, which adjusted by implementing temporary layoffs and in certain situations were forced to let employees go.

With the unemployment rate decrease from October to November (December rates have not yet been released) Lincoln County is nearly on par with the national average, which also dropped during the same period from 9.5 percent to 9.4 percent. The percentage of unemployed across the country is 2.9 percent higher than it was a year ago at the same time.

The state unemployment rate saw a .1 percent increase from October to November, which increased from 7.7 percent to 7.8 percent over the period.

Domke sentenced to life in prison for 2008 murder

An 18-year-old Tomahawk man was sentenced to life in prison after being found guilty as party to a crime of first-degree intentional homicide in the death of a Zephyr Fuel Station attendee.

Derek Domke was sentenced to 45 years in prison in the death of Rochelle Anderson, 25, who was brutally attacked and beaten while working at the fueling station on March 22, 2008. As part of the sentence, Domke will not be eligible for parole until he reaches age 63, or in 2053.

Officers were drawn to the horrific crime scene on the night of Anderson's murder after an officer stopped at the station to investigate why it appeared open after regular store hours. Her body was discovered beaten and stabbed to death outside the men's bathroom on the north side of the building. Several items had been stolen, including cash, cigarettes and energy drinks. Bloody palm and finger prints recovered from the scene later linked Domke to the crime.

During the ongoing trial, Domke confessed in letters he sent out of prison that he had been involved in the robbery of the station, but he denied taking part in the attack that led to Anderson's death. Investigators followed up on the claim the teenager did not act alone, but additional evidence taken from the scene and tested at FBI crime labs earlier this year did not support the claim that someone else had taken part.

In December, Domke, now 19, filed a motion with the court to withdraw his guilty plea, stating he was unable to understand the consequences based on his mental status at the time. He has also requested to be re-sentenced. Wauwatosa attorney James Rebholz is representing Domke in the case, which will go before Judge Hartley Feb. 3 of this year.

Louis goes to prison for 2007 murder

After almost two years and four lawyers, the 26-year-old Rhinelander man accused of brutally killing a Tomahawk woman in 2007 was sentenced to life in prison early last year.

Seth Louis was charged in Lincoln County Court in January for party to a crime first-degree intentional homicide for stabbing to death his former co-worker, Tracy Maurer, 42, at her home in Tomahawk. Louis received 49 years in prison and will not be eligible to apply for extended supervision until he reaches 75 in the year 2057.

Louis told detectives Maurer had found out about several robberies he and two Rhinelander female teenagers were involved in. A computer Louis had sold Maurer was among several that had been stolen from Rhinelander area businesses in the months leading up to the homicide. During sentencing, it was also stated Maurer may have known about Louis' relationship with then 16-year-old Katie Decker, who was also involved in the robbery spree. Louis told detectives Maurer had threatened to go to police about the information she had.

Along with Decker, information provided by Louis implicated a second Rhinelander female teenager in the murder. In March, Heather Ward entered a no contest plea to party to a crime of felony murder and armed robbery.

According to court records, Ward was with Louis and served as a lookout outside the home on the night he broke into Maurer's home and repeatedly stabbed Maurer up to 80 times. She also helped conceal evidence that later linked Louis to the murder. Ward was sentenced to five years in prison and five years of extended supervision for her involvement.

Decker was also sentenced in 2008 for her part in Maurer's homicide. In February, Decker was charged in Oneida County for harboring a felon and providing false information to investigators. For hiding a bag of bloody clothing worn by Louis under a bedspring and then lying to officers about how she came into its possession, Decker was sentenced to 10 months in jail.

A charge against her of party to a crime of murder and armed robbery was amended in Lincoln County Court in April, after Decker agreed to enter a no contest plea on a felony charge of first-degree recklessly endangering safety. She received an additional 90-day sentence minus time already served for the charge.

State, nation face H1N1 scare

As 2009 ended, national and global effort continues toward controlling the swine flu (H1N1) outbreak.

At the close of the year, 47 deaths due to H1N1 complications had been reported in the state.

Swine flu is spread from person to person like the seasonal flu. It is a respiratory disease of pigs, but viruses can spread from person to person. Cases can range from mild to severe and can be serious.

To find up-to-date information, visit www.cdc.gov/swineflu or <http://pandemic.wi.gov> or call LCHD at 536-0307.

Sappers return home

After serving in Afghanistan for the past 10 months, members of the 951st "Sapper" Engineer Company were welcomed home by family and friends during a celebration that took place in downtown Tomahawk and in Rhinelander in November. As part of the Company's detail in Afghanistan, soldiers cleared roadsides of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and provided support for the 101st Airborne Division.

Amidst the celebration and tears during the return, soldiers paid respect to one of their own, Sgt. Ryan Adams, 26, of Rhinelander, who was killed on Oct. 2 when the vehicle he was in was hit during a rocket-propelled grenade attack while in the Logar Province. For many of the returning soldiers, including Adams, the one-year deployment marked the second time they've returned. In 2004, the Company celebrated its first return after spending a year in Iraq.

North Fourth Street, bridge replacement

Plans to replace Veterans Memorial Bridge and North Fourth Street in Tomahawk got ratcheted into high gear in 2009, after it was learned significant funds could be made available if the project were moved ahead one year.

Initial plans called for work to replace the bridge and road to start in the fall of 2011 and reach completion sometime during the summer of 2012. In August, plans changed after the city was notified \$5.4 million in guaranteed funds would be made available if work could start in 2010. After a month of consideration, it was agreed the city should move forward in accepting the funds being offered through the state Department of Transportation (DOT), which it secured for a bridge project through federal grants.

The new timeline calls for work to begin on replacing utilities attached to the bridge this summer, with the bulk of efforts taking place after the conclusion of the 2010 Tomahawk Fall Ride for MDA. Utilities from the bridge to the intersection of CTH A along North Fourth Street will also begin at that time.

During the fall and winter the bridge will be removed and will stay closed to through traffic until the project is complete. Beginning in the spring of 2011, work to replace the completely redesigned bridge and road will resume. Preliminary timelines call for all construction work to be completed prior to the July 4th holiday.

Plans have yet to be finalized as to what North Fourth Street will look like once complete. Among specifications that have been agreed upon and are required to be part of the project in accepting the funding include bike lanes, sidewalks and a three lane with center turn lane (TWTL) that will replace the current design.

Discussion has also taken place as to where or whether roundabouts should be included in the project. Within the coming weeks the city is expected to hold a public comment hearing to bring the road design to 60 percent complete. At that time further discussion is expected as to where roundabouts should be included in the project.

Nature notes: Deer harvest, water levels again down in 2009

Just like the water levels on area lakes and reservoirs, many taking part in the November nine-day gun deer season were left high and dry in 2009.

So sparse was the deer harvest compared to an even dismal year prior, Lincoln County was down nearly 20 percent for bucks and 80 percent does – over 54 percent overall, one Tomahawk man embarked on a campaign to make sure Madison is aware of the problem threatening to dismantle the annual statewide \$1 billion tradition.

Much of the blame for the lower than anticipated numbers fell on a heavy fog that shrouded the region opening morning. However, the lower-than-hoped-for harvest wasn't a deer-in-the-headlights eye-opener the DNR didn't completely see coming, as the earn-a-buck program aimed at reducing the size of the herd had been eliminated prior to the start of the season. Also gone locally since the DNR first began working to significantly reduce the deer population in the state was the extended T-zone hunt and \$1 additional doe tags. A plan to expand the season to 16 days next year has also since fallen by the wayside due in part to hunter discontent over the 2009 season.

Hunters weren't the only ones suffering in 2009, as many waterfront property owners, anglers and recreational users were again hampered by low water levels on area reservoirs and lakes due to the epic drought that continues to choke the region. Completing the seventh consecutive year, the drought affecting the Northwoods has reached historic proportions that haven't been seen since the country experienced the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

Coming off a fall in 2008 that saw little precipitation in the way of rain or snow, the Rice Reservoir (Lake Nokomis) is ending 2009 where it began the year at around eight feet below full. After rebounding for a good portion of the summer, the Spirit Reservoir is also ending the year on a down note at eight feet below full. It started 2009 at over 12 feet down.

The New Year is expected to bring some good news concerning water levels on area reservoirs, as Wisconsin Valley Improvement Company told the *Tomahawk Leader* it plans to hold back 20 percent more water on the flowages this spring.

Holding back the water will help fill up area reservoirs heading into 2010. What the reservoirs and area lakes look like through summer and heading into freeze-up next year will again be left up to Mother Nature.