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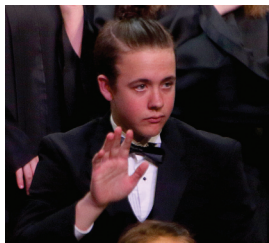
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## today in the TIMES



**New Mercer chamber director**  
Business, Page 10



**Choral showcase**  
Page 14

## GAS WATCH

Nat. Average: .....\$2.32  
WI Average:.....\$2.30  
Green Bay:.....\$2.18  
Madison: .....\$2.25  
Milwaukee:.....\$2.09  
Minocqua: .....\$2.29

Latest prices reported for one gallon of unleaded gasoline according to local observations and GasBuddy.com as of 6 a.m., Monday, April 3, 2017.

## INDEX

Classifieds .....25-27  
Crossword .....11  
Dining .....4  
Employment .....28,29  
Legals .....30  
Letters .....8  
Obituaries .....6  
Opinion .....9  
Sports .....15-19  
Town News .....20-24



## AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH

# In NY, a school for children with ASD stands the test of time

A foundation, a school, a compelling story of parents making a difference

By Richard Moore  
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

First in a series

It is often said of pioneers that necessity and vision are the twin blades by which they blaze their trails, hacking away dense overgrowth and tangled brush to clear

a path to progress and survival, but just as often it seems courage is the implement that slashes away the final impediments to passage.

Or, as the English film director Gurinder Chadha has put it, a pioneer is never afraid of what is ahead: "When a door is ajar, you need to open it fully. And once

you are in that room, you need to see what other doors there might be and where they might lead."

And that is just what a group of pioneering parents did more than 20 years ago now, in the shadows of New York City, when they set out to establish a specialized school for their children on the

See **Autism**. . . page 12



Dean Hall/Lakeland Times

## 'FOOLISH' FIREFIGHTERS

Ready to run in heavy fire fighting gear, Team Jumping Jesters, from the left, Luke Steffes, Brian Turner, Jessica Zink and Andrew Alesauskas are four of over 500 participants at the start of this year's Only Fools Run at Midnight 5K run/walk on April 1, in Minocqua.

## Stepp lays out DNR plans in new budget

### Agency continues to shrink

By Richard Moore  
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources secretary Cathy Stepp went before the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee last week to give details about the agency's 2017-19 proposed budget, and the big



Stepp

news is the budget would continue to shrink and so would the number of employees.

As proposed by the governor, the DNR's two-year budget would be \$547.6 million for 2017-18 and \$549 million for the second year, or a 2.5 percent decrease from the 2016-17 base

budget. Most of that, Stepp told lawmakers, represents standard budget adjustments, not cuts to programs or services.

The proposed two-year budget also calls for a decrease in 43.5 full-time employees, but Stepp said 32.5 of those positions would be transferred as part of a statewide enterprise effort to streamline and consolidate human resource, finance, and technology-management

See **Stepp**. . . page 13



HEALTH CARE IN THE NORTHWOODS

## Health care in the newsroom

An effort to gather Northwoods health care experiences

By Jessica Leighty  
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

In an effort to shine a light on local health care, *The Lakeland Times* has

begun a series titled, "Health care in the Northwoods." As part of the series, we are asking individuals to share their experiences, good and bad, with our organization.

We understand health care is a deeply personal topic and it can be difficult to share such stories. To encourage public participation and offer rec-

### EDITOR'S NOTE

The Lakeland Times will be producing a series of stories on the health care in our community and what it means to you. We hope this will engage the community to look at how not only how fortunate we are, what we can do better. It is our desire that when this series is complete that you, our readers, will be informed about how complex health care is and where it is headed in the future. If you have any topics you would like to explore, please send us an email at Health-care@lakelandtimes.com or call 715-356-5236 and ask for Evan.

See **Health**. . . page 24

## Tribal concerns committee to come to county board

### Committee looks to get county drug problem up front

By Brian Jopek  
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

Illegal illicit drug use in Vilas County and more precisely, in the Lac du Flambeau area, has been a problem for some time, a problem written about in articles pub-

See **Concerns**. . . page 7



# Autism

From page 1

spectrum in a day and age when autism services were few and schools serving an autistic population were almost unheard of.

Undeterred by the general lack of services available at the time to families with children with autism, undaunted when public school districts said it was impossible to provide the one-on-one therapy they knew their children needed, unflinching when New York State rejected their request for a charter school, eight families came together in the early 1990s and opened a very big door, forming the Foundation for Educating Children with Autism (FECA) and partnering with Devereux New York, part of a national organization serving a wide range of developmentally disabled individuals, to create a new school with an autism-specific mission.

By all accounts, these determined pioneers defied the odds.

Twenty-one years later, Devereux CARES (Center for Autism Research and Educational Services) — formerly the Devereux Millwood Learning Center — has stood the test of time. The school grew quickly from 12 to 48 students, the capacity it still serves, and successfully prepares autistic children for productive lives by using the time-tested and proven therapy of applied behavior analysis (ABA) as well as by providing an intensive educational setting that stresses vocational training and community integration.

Specifically, the school, which recently moved from Millwood to Mt. Kisco, employs the Lovaas model of applied behavior analysis, developed and refined over the course of 40 years by UCLA psychologist Dr. Ivar Lovaas. In 1987, Lovaas published the first study demonstrating how applied behavior therapy could improve learning in children with autism.

The Lovaas Institute describes the model as behavioral treatment generally started with children between the ages of two and eight, in which children typically transition to different services as they progress through elementary school. The model represents a comprehensive, integrated program in which skills complement and build upon each other, based on a child’s unique needs, and emphasizes individualization of curriculum based on each child’s strengths and weaknesses, the institute states.

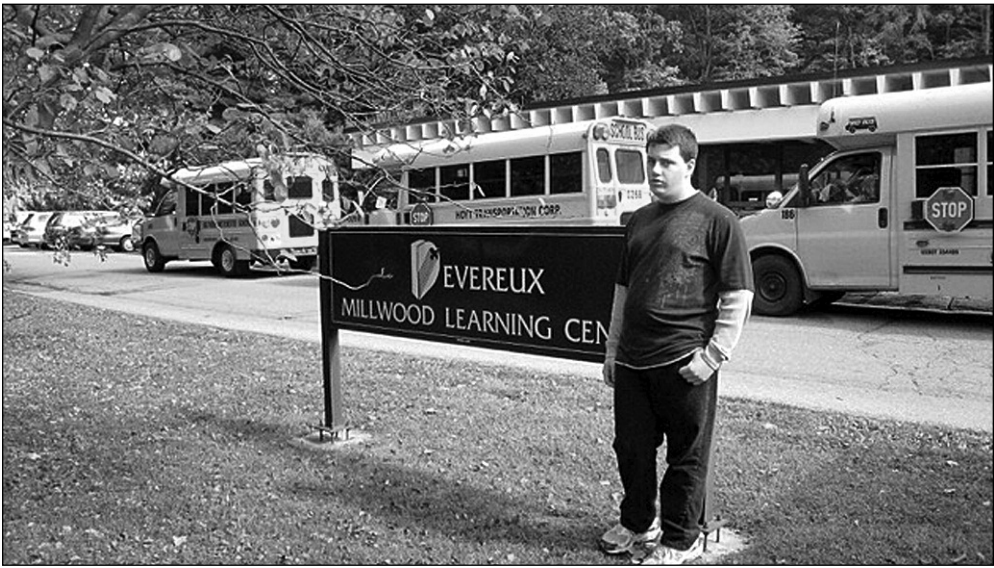
One-on-one therapy is essential in the original model. As Devereux describes it on its website, the hope is that the child will learn independently or at least learn with less intervention, and, as the school’s longevity demonstrates, successful outcomes have been indisputably achieved.

### Opening more doors

Over the years, too, the family-driven foundation that created the school has kept its pioneering spirit vibrant by continuing to open new doors to see where they might lead. Those were vital doors to pry open, too, as children with autism became adults with autism, for just as there were a lack of services and educational opportunities for autistic children, FECA realized there was the same lack of opportunities for adults with autism.

That realization led to a foundation name change — to the Foundation for Empowering Citizens with Autism — and to an array of new vocational, entrepreneurial, and employment programs to assist adults with autism.

About five years ago, for example, FECA partnered with Devereux to establish the Devereux Adult Program, in which 18 young men caravan throughout the county to various job and volunteer sites. The foundation has also launched the Opportunity Network for Employers and Employ-



Contributed photograph

Buses bringing students to Devereux Millwood Learning Center in New York City come from all over the metropolitan New York area.

ees, which seeks to expand opportunities for a growing population of adults with autism to volunteer and obtain gainful employment.

Most recently, the foundation provided seed money to a new enterprise called Extraordinary Ventures New York, which was incorporated in 2015 to research and develop small businesses in which adults with autism can work within their communities, earn a paycheck, and continue to develop skill sets.

EVNY has already launched a successful gifts business that includes candles and jewelry and recently established an office solutions business.

In the 21 years since the opening of the school, FECA and Devereux CARES have objectively accomplished what few others have, not only a much-envied longevity in successfully educating and graduating students with autism but moving beyond and above to successfully engage the stated objective of virtually every educational enterprise focusing on autism — the successful transition and integration of individuals with ASD into their communities.

In addition, they have created a model for others to follow, and which others already are, as a new wave of students with autism takes aim at the nation’s public school systems.

What’s more, the compelling story of eight families and their journey to build a specialized school that would serve the needs of their children with ASD, at a time when public school districts either could not or would not adequately serve those needs, is not merely a testament to the power of determination and courage of pioneering families in the face of huge obstacles, it underscores just how important parental involvement is in the success of schools created to serve children on the spectrum.

### The journey

Today, there are a multitude of successful schools upon which to model a program with a focus on autism, from a range of private schools to a burgeoning charter school movement, including Lionsgate Academy in Minnesota and, even more recently, the Arizona Autism Charter School, which is also an ABA-based program.

That simply wasn’t the case in 1994, when many families were already grappling with Autism Spectrum Disorder in their children. There were a few models, but not many, and autism itself wasn’t on the public radar, with only about one in 10,000 children being diagnosed as on the spectrum.

The landscape was spare, in other words, and families found themselves floundering.

Meet Melanie Schaffran, who with her husband Drew and son Brett, formed one of eight original founding families of FECA. Throughout FECA’s history, Melanie Schaffran has been a driving force both in

the foundation and in the school — she says she has considered them to be her third child — and today serves as president of the FECA board of directors and as president of the board of Extraordinary Ventures.

“My son is now 27,” Schaffran told *The Times* in a recent interview. “When he was diagnosed, it was on his birthday at age two. Between a year and about 16 months, whatever limited language he had, he lost. He was 10 weeks premature, but I had been reassured that had nothing to do with it, and he kind of caught up in his other markers but clearly, shortly after his first birthday, where he really didn’t have much language, it was clear that something more was going on as we couldn’t even sustain eye contact with him. It was more than just a language delay, and he was diagnosed at two.”

At the time, the Schaffrans lived in Chappaqua, New York. They had moved there because of the high quality of the public schools, and Schaffran said they were excited about those schools for their then three-and-a-half-year-old daughter. But the schools came up short on autism services, Schaffran said.

“So we began kind of flailing around, trying to find services for him, and not knowing what to do, and at the time our neurologist sent us to a psychiatrist,” she said. “At that point they were medicating. They thought it was still sort of a psychological disorder. The medical establishment simply had no answers or even a path to follow.”

And neither did the therapies of the day, Schaffran says.

“We did all kinds of noninvasive but different therapies,” she said. “Nothing was working. We took him to one of the best therapeutic nurseries in the Bronx at Albert Einstein, and he basically screamed and cried most of the time we were there. One of the kind of whacko therapies that we did was auditory integration therapy. I used to drive him up to Yale for 10 days straight for this therapy and the only good thing that came out of it is that I met another mother whose twins went to the Princeton Child Development Institute.”

### Let me hear your voice

And that’s where Schaffran discovered ABA.

“It’s considered the Harvard of ABA schools,” she said. “She gave me a book called ‘Let Me Hear Your Voice.’ It was a mother’s story of basically recovering her two kids through applied behavior analysis. She brought these therapists into her home and they did intensive therapy and, in addition, with the book you could start with some immediate therapeutic drills, so it was not just a mother’s story but there was actually some helpful things to start with.”

As luck would have it, Schaffran said, one of the therapists in the book lived in Chappaqua.

“So I called her, and she came over and

we immediately launched an in-home 40-60 hours a week intensive one-to-one therapy with our child,” she said. “We went to the nursery in the morning, and we came home, and he immediately went up to his room and to the one-to-one therapy. At the time, ABA was not really well known on the East Coast. Ivar Lovaas was a professor at UCLA, and New Jersey had a couple of these schools, Princeton, and Alpine Learning Group was another one that was an offshoot of Princeton.”

The problem was, Schaffran said, many parents in New York were clamoring to get in, but the model was 24 kids in a school and that meant the waiting lists were crazy.

Of course, all trailblazers need a little good fortune, and this group had theirs. According to the Devereux website, one of the parents spotted an ad in a local Penny Saver newspaper in Westchester County. It was from another parent with an autistic child inviting parents of children with autism to meet and share strategies, in particular to find ways to convince local school districts to support ABA programs.

That network of parents became a parents’ resource group that included the Schaffrans.

“You know, let’s meet at the church in your town or wherever,” Schaffran said when she described the group’s beginnings. “And once a month we would meet and every month it would be a larger group. And they all had themselves, or most of them, come to applied behavior analysis as the therapy that really seemed to be working.”

In their case, Schaffran said, their son was four-and-a-half when he started ABA and, having no language, within a week he was imitating and within a month he was reciting the alphabet.

“After being in a classroom with him for two years where he was mainly quiet — we knew there was intelligence behind those beautiful blue eyes but we couldn’t access it — so to go from the other therapies that weren’t working to this, we just embraced it as the therapy that worked,” she said. “And it was also scientifically based. You did drills and the curriculum was hierarchical.”

One thing built on the next, Schaffran said, and, if he wasn’t learning a skill within two days, the onus was on the therapist to take it apart and try a different tack or a different reward to maintain his attention; the fault was not with the student.

“We weren’t blaming him if he wasn’t learning,” she said. “So we came together. It was very clear through this initial group that there were some older parents whose sons and daughters were more my son’s age, and eight families just eventually got together and realized that we couldn’t be doing this in our home forever.”

It’s not that they hadn’t tried to get the services they needed in the school districts, Schaffran said.

“We had each gone to our various school districts,” she said. “They said, ‘I’m sorry, wish we could help you but the one-to-one model is just something we can’t sustain in our school district.’ They’re used to a 6-1-3 (six students, one teacher, and up to three aides) special ed classroom ratio.”

### A diverse cross-section

So, by 1994, Schaffran said, those eight families began meeting in their various homes and within a couple of months they were meeting several days a week.

“We knew this was going to be an enormous undertaking,” she said. “And the interesting thing is that it was a real cross-section of America. My husband’s a lawyer, there was a woman who worked for the state government, a couple of CPAs, a plumber’s wife, a dentist, a college professor — it was a real interesting and eclectic group. We all came together with the same

# Autism

From page 12

mission. So we established the Foundation for Educating Children with Autism — FECA — and we just set about figuring out what we had to do.”

And what they had to do was make their case to the people who counted.

“We started going to Albany, to our state Legislature, to talk to the governor’s office, the education department, to try and figure out what kind of help we could get,” Schaffran said. “We started going to our various school districts. Most of them said, ‘We can’t do this but we’ll support you creating a school.’”

Unfortunately, Schaffran said, the political environment was not a good one and not a good one in particular for charter schools. A moratorium had been placed on charters, she said, while the education budget was slashed by 30 percent. Still, she said, they had connections and a number of the components they needed came together.

There was reason for optimism. “So what we did is, we searched for a site, and we went through nine lease negotiations, and we found a site in Millwood,” she said. “We did a national survey, hired a director and curriculum director. We decided to put on a conference and invited Ivar Lovaas out from California.”

The result was amazing, Schaffran said.

“We had 1,600 people from all over the country who came to this initial conference,” she said. “It gives you an idea of the zero-to-100 speed at which people found a therapy that was working for their kids and then were just desperate to find resources. So we had Ivar out and had a two-day conference. One day was education and the other day was medical research. I think we made over \$200,000 on that first conference and that provided the seed money for us to get started.”

The group bought a curriculum from Princeton, and, of course, they had no shortage of students.

“We certainly had the kids,” she said. “The plan was to open with two classes of 12 kids with one-to-one — one-to-one was very critical and that it would be ABA.”

## The other shoe drops

And then, out of the blue, Schaffran said, they were stopped in their tracks by the Republican governor at the time, George Pataki.

“His office just said, ‘No, we’re not going to support any charter schools,’” Schaffran recalls. “We were just astounded.”

But fate helps those who help themselves, and so fate intervened.

“Just by happenstance my husband worked for a large national firm and at his office in Philadelphia, one of the partners said, ‘You know, I have a client, Devereux, have you ever heard of them?’ And Devereux started in the Philadelphia area, and they’re the largest national organization in supporting residential developmental and physically disabled individuals in existence, over 100 years.”

As it turns out, they had a facil-

ity just north of New York and Drew Schaffran’s partner suggested he talk with them.

“They had never operated a day school before,” Melanie Schaffran said. “They had only operated residential. The end result was that we developed a memorandum of understanding with them. We would give them all the components that we had established, the school would be a Devereux school, and the memorandum of understanding required that it be ABA, that it be one-to-one, and that FECA would provide the additional funding necessary to maintain the one-to-one.”

From the beginning, Schaffran says, the parents had decided they wanted the school to be a publicly funded school.

“We did not want this to be a private school where the ability of a family to pay a very high tuition would be an obstacle,” she said. “That was the whole reason why we had to go through the charter process and get state approval. What it meant was that each child would have to go through their school district for a referral and if they were referred, then the school district would pay a certain amount of tuition, which was high, I think it was \$55,000 at the time, but it did not cover the one-to-one. So FECA for about 10 years raised about a half-million dollars just to maintain the one-to-one funding.”

The rest is history, as they say, FECA’s partnership with Devereux clicked, and the school was off and running.

## Punctuating the story

Schaffran’s story is a compelling one, not least because it took place more than 20 years ago, at a time when most people could not conceive of so many children with autism, much less comprehend the unique dictates of their learning processes and the implications that has for educating and preparing those children for adult life.

But for those considering starting a school — there are many more families in need today than then — her story also offers up relevant exclamation points for today’s context, an underlying continuity of fact in the ongoing struggle to adequately educate children with ASD.

First, the model must cater to the needs of the student population, rather than the other way around. Devereux CARES and Lionsgate in Minnesota offer different models, Devereaux following a stricter, though even so an evolving, fidelity to ABA, given most students’ more severe location on the spectrum; Lionsgate is multidisciplinary, befitting a generally higher functioning population.

The point is, each comprehends that an autism-specific educational environment must emphasize not just individual attention but attention to the specific individual’s needs, allowing them to learn at their own pace, while helping to integrate basic independent living skills into the educational goal.

Second, if you build it, they will come. Schaffran points out that, using the Princeton model they chose to follow, the original size called for 24 students, but they soon doubled that, and that was in

the mid-1900s before the explosion of autism numbers nationwide.

“The need was just so great,” she says. “And the expenses of the rent and everything that Devereux encountered ended up requiring that the model be doubled from the original.”

Third, and undoubtedly critically important to its long-term success, the school was parent-driven.

“I viewed it and the foundation as my third child,” Schaffran said. “And as a result of this relationship, it was our school that we felt that we started, there were a couple of us who were involved very intimately on a day-to-day basis, not the running of the school so much but just maintaining its integrity and the quality and we would always be at the task, just constantly saying, ‘We think you should be doing this, and we’ll raise the money to make it happen,’ and so that was the relationship for quite a few years.”

In the ensuing years, that parent-driven approach has helped the foundation carry onto the next level, to the transitional and vocational needs of these children as they enter adulthood, and that will be the focus of the next story in the series.

In the end, Melanie Schaffran, her husband Drew, and the other families equally involved in getting the foundation and school started are pioneers who have blazed a trail for ever more parents who now seek to follow in their footsteps.

Many face the same long odds and obstacles that the FECA families faced, and overcame, and many can take confidence from the success story of these determined parents. Devereux is proof that children with autism can — with the right therapy and the right environment — lead productive lives.

“The right kind of therapy can make all the difference in the lives of these individuals, who each have their own unique potential,” Schaffran says. “You’re talking about a life-long disability. This is not something, as much as parents in the early days thought it was curable, it’s not likely to be cured. Perhaps there will be an understanding of what causes it and we can prevent autism in the future, but the kids who are on this planet are going to have autism for the rest of their lives, but they have a great potential to learn with the right kind of therapy.”

That has an emotional and human impact, Schaffran said, but it has a fiscal impact, too.

“This is going to affect the financial state of states and municipalities and our country over decades to come, if we have kids who will then become adults who have no capability of being productive members of society,” she said.

Schools such as Devereux CARES, and those that follow, can help prevent that outcome, and Schaffran said that is the message lawmakers and policy makers must hear.

“This, this is where we start,” Schaffran said.

*Richard Moore is the author of The New Bossism of the American Left and can be reached at [www.rmmoore1.com](http://www.rmmoore1.com).*

# Stepp

From page 1

activities.

Seven of eight other positions to be eliminated are federally funded project positions that will come to the end of their maximum four-year life, she said, while the remaining three positions are vacant.

“None of these changes will have a direct impact on carrying out our core mission,” Stepp testified.

## Alignment

Stepp spent much of her budget testimony discussing the agency’s ongoing alignment process.

“We at the DNR recently conducted nearly a year-and-a-half internal study of the work we do,” Stepp said. “We prioritized work that supports our core mission of protecting and enhancing our state’s natural resources for all. We are in the process of implementing a department-wide plan that will align both our financial and human resources with the core work necessary to carry out our mission more effectively and efficiently.”

Stepp said the agency’s leadership team realized they could not and should not go to legislators and taxpayers just to ask for more funding or staffing to solve problems.

“DNR needed a solid and workable business plan in place to utilize the resources we already have available to do necessary work and be able to show a true need if or when it should arise,” she said. “Once fully implemented, we believe this alignment effort will be that business plan and we will be able to show that we can carry out our responsibilities to the environment and the people of this state.”

The alignment effort will allow the agency the flexibility to reallocate positions to its water quality permitting section to meet needs in the Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations program, Stepp said.

“As we pointed out during a recent Joint Committee on Audit hearing, this will help reduce the permit-to-staff ratio so staff can spend more time in the field monitoring, inspecting, and ultimately protecting the quality of our water,” she said.

The alignment plan will also increase efficiencies in park and recreational services, Stepp said.

“One element of the plan took a look at how we deliver public safety services at all of our recreational properties, while ensuring a meaningful recreational experience for our visitors,” she said. “This will be accomplished by consolidating our credentialed law enforcement officers into one unit housed in the DNR’s law enforcement program, which will allow park and forest rangers to do their core

work of maintaining the properties and making sure visitors enjoy their time there through enhanced customer service.”

## Natural Resources Magazine

The governor’s budget eliminates the agency’s *Natural Resources Magazine*, and Stepp said that decision simply reflects the realities of the agency’s mission and the realities of the current age.

“While the magazine has a loyal following and is supported by subscriptions, it became clear as our staff continued to examine what they did and why, through a department-wide core work analysis, that we at the Wisconsin DNR are stewards of our resources and not magazine publishers,” Stepp told the committee. “It takes a good deal of behind-the-scenes work to publish and distribute the six *Natural Resources Magazines* every year. In order to obtain the full complement of stories, we have to rely on staff to take time away from their own core work to research and write those stories.”

Half of the 228 stories published over the past two years were written by staff members, Stepp said.

“These hours and funding are not covered by subscriptions, so the notion that this is a totally self-sustaining publication doesn’t really paint a complete picture,” she said. “We feel our public information time and effort can be more effectively utilized by focusing on communication tools that are more immediate in this digital age and have the potential of spreading the word of DNR’s mission and work to a larger audience.”

In addition, Stepp said, even one of the state’s largest newspapers recently announced it was cutting back on elements of its print coverage because technology is changing the way people consume news and information—through smartphones, tablets, and the Internet.

“Our social media and digital distribution reach is far greater than our print magazine subscriptions,” she said.

And while 36,663 people elected to subscribe to the magazine on their own, Stepp said, that was only about 0.006 percent of the state’s estimated 5.7 million people.

## State parks

Stepp told lawmakers that Wisconsin’s state parks, when compared to other state parks, have long been considered the jewel of the nation.

And, she said, even with a fee increase in the last biennial budget, a record 17.4 million people visited state parks in 2016, up from 16.5 million the previous year.

“In order to keep that stellar reputation, our parks need to be maintained and enhanced to provide the best

See Stepp. . . page 24