

Environmental school features hands-on experience



Kaitlen Watson, 14, of Portage, takes what she's learned at River Crossing Environmental Charter School into the field at a controlled burn near Portage on April 28. Students at the charter school have a "field day" every Friday, participating in everything from wetland restoration to rock climbing.

Controversy aside, state embraces charter schools

By **SANDY CULLEN**
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School used to be a struggle for seventh-grader Justin Fobes, who said he was getting "straight F's" before enrolling at the River Crossing Environmental Charter School in Portage last fall.

"I just couldn't sit still," said Justin, 13.

At River Crossing, Justin is now getting A's and B's. And he no longer has trouble sitting still, Justin said, adding, "They actually tie you out."

Every Friday, the middle school's 18 students literally have a field day — doing everything from a con-

trolled prairie burn to restoring wetlands. Such hands-on approaches to learning are fueling the rapid increase in public charter schools in Wisconsin and other states as teachers, parents and others seek to help students not succeeding in regular classrooms.

But questions and controversies continue to swirl around charter schools, which emerged in the early 1990s as an alternative to traditional public schools. Advocates and critics debate whether they solve problems plaguing public education or siphon tax dollars from improving education for all public school students.

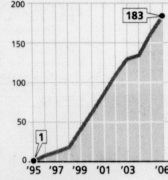
What is a charter school?

Charter schools are tuition-free, state-certified public schools that are tailored to specific educational needs or learning styles. They can be created and operated by local school districts or other entities, who enter into a charter with the local school board, which is responsible for ensuring that schools uphold the terms of that contract.

Wisconsin charter schools are exempt from most state regulations that apply to traditional public schools, giving them more flexibility, but students must take the state tests required of other students.

Charter schools operating in Wisconsin

The number of public charter schools in Wisconsin has grown steadily over the past decade. The state Department of Public Instruction would like to see 100 more charter schools open over the next three years.



NOTE: Data for academic years '95-'96 through '05-'06. SOURCE: Department of Public Instruction. State Journal

Please see **CHARTER**, Page A4

Mayor responds to water issues

Monday he'll announce plans to improve quality

By **RON SEELY**
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More than two years after complaints about brown tap water began surfacing, Madison Mayor Dave Cieslewicz will announce plans Monday to improve water quality and oversight of the Madison Water Utility.

It's too early to say how much the mayor's 10-point plan will cost, but Cieslewicz and others say higher water rates will be required as the utility struggles with discolored water from the mineral manganese, an aging infrastructure and other problems.

"I think the public, given a choice between higher rates and the health and safety of our water, would clearly choose the health and safety of our water," Cieslewicz said.

The plan follows a Wisconsin State Journal investigation that revealed numerous problems with management of the utility, including failures to be forthcoming about water quality and sloppy record keeping. The series also highlighted the challenges faced by the city and the utility in assuring clean and plentiful water in coming decades — aging infrastructure, increasing contaminants and a growing population.

Cieslewicz is calling for making utility management more accountable for decisions and information about the city's water supply, increasing the replacement of aging pipes and wells, and strengthening the connection between water issues and public health.

"Nothing is more important than the quality of our drinking water," the plan begins. "Madison families should not have to question the safety of the water coming out of their taps. This

Water Worries

The State Journal's four-part look at water quality is online at www.madison.com/wsj/water/. The site also features an interactive map where Madison residents can click on their city well to learn more about what's in their water.

INSIDE: The mayor's 10-point plan / Page A8

Please see **WATER**, Page A8



THE SOUNDS OF WAR
Authors take a fresh listen to Vietnam-era music

Two Madison writers, including UW music historian Craig Werner, have researched the tunes that affected veterans and protesters on the home front during the Vietnam War.

They found a striking difference between what songs captured attention from soldiers and civilians. Check out the Top 10 list of veterans' favorites, and more.

A&E / G1

NRA membership card is in her warm, live hand

MILWAUKEE — I am the NRA. Really! I had to join the National Rifle Association Friday to get into the "sacres of guns and gear" exhibit at the gun group's annual convention.

Figuring it will be a cold day here in Liberal Hades before the NRA ever brings its national convention to town, I headed down Interstate 94 to check out a different culture.

Was it worth it? Totally. I picked up enough pro-gun freebies and gear to annoy all my liberal friends back in Madison.

For my vegetarian boss, there were copies of Ted Nugent's



SUSAN LAMPERT SMITH

cookbook, "Kill 'Em and Grill 'Em." For my dad the municipal judge, a bumper sticker that reads "Soft Judges Make Hardened Criminals." I'm keeping the mini-Glock keychain and the bumper sticker with the classic Charlton Heston quote: "From my cold dead hands."

I now know where to buy camo nighties and thongs in

the mossy oak pattern. They're from "The Formal Sportsman," located, most excellently, on Chippendale Lane in Port Matilda, Pa. For the gents, the company offers camo tuxedos and camo dress shoes to ease those painful occasions when dressing up is required.

I think the "Go Sig!" women's T-shirts would solve the Downtown Madison mugging issue. Those thugs would think twice if they thought Badger co-eds were packing Sig Sauer handguns. Of course, this assumes the thugs:

- A) Can read.
- B) Know what a Sig is.

Please see **NRA**, Page A9

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Water

Continued from Page A1

plan is designed to protect and improve the quality of Madison's drinking water and restore confidence in the Water Utility."

The utility has faced much public criticism recently from residents who felt complaints of discolored water and potential health threats were not taken seriously enough.

Health officials last week advised residents who receive their water from two city wells — No. 3 on the East Side and No. 10 on the West Side — that people with liver problems and babies younger than 6 months old shouldn't drink the water because of high manganese levels.

Closer scrutiny

Cieslewicz acknowledged that the utility has not received enough attention and oversight from his office. Both the rise of manganese complaints and recent publicity have changed that, he said.

"They have been out of sight, out of mind," Cieslewicz said.

Now, however, that will change, according to Cieslewicz. He said he will be paying closer attention to utility business as will the City Council. Council members will be briefed on the drinking water initiative prior to an upcoming meeting.

Ald. Lauren Cnare, 3rd District, who also sits on the five-member Board of Water Commissioners, praised the mayor's plan.

"I think it's very workable," Cnare said. "What has not been fully understood on the water board is acknowledging the importance of fears people might have about their water and addressing those fears more quickly."

Much of the city's attention initially will apparently be focused on how utility managers go about correcting problems.

Water Utility General Manager David Denig-Chakroff is appointed by the mayor and his contract is up for renewal in June.

Cieslewicz said no decision has been made on the contract but added that, if renewed, the contract will include "enforceable performance benchmarks" for Denig-Chakroff and the utility.

The benchmarks will call for specific improvements in numerous areas, including water quality, public outreach, infrastructure improvement, internal management and successful fulfillment of the mayor's 10-point plan.

Denig-Chakroff said Friday that the establishment of new performance standards was not unexpected.

"It's a good idea," he added. "Everybody should have standards and benchmarks to shoot for. It's good management."

Step it up

Cieslewicz is also asking the utility to hasten both its development and implementation of wellhead protection plans and the replacement of aging pipes, wells and other equipment.

The State Journal found that the utility had only three completed wellhead protection plans on file with the city. Four others have been completed but are not yet in effect.

The plans are important because they provide information about areas around the 24 city wells, including potential sources of contamination. If they are on file, the city has more authority to control development, including potential polluters, around city wells.

Cieslewicz has ordered the utility to have plans in place for all wells by 2010 at the latest.

In addition, Cieslewicz is directing the utility to step up its planning for replacement of aging infrastructure.

In a study of the Madison water system released last year, a national engineering firm found the utility's investment in replacement of aging equipment is falling millions of dollars short of what is necessary to ensure clean and plentiful water in coming years.

Cieslewicz is directing the utility to complete by the fall a report that will detail how it intends to finance and implement an infrastructure replacement plan. And he is asking for a 20-year capital improvement program, in addition to the utility's current five-year program.

Lisa Lehnertz, who has liver

disease and worries about the impact of manganese-tainted water on her health, is happy that somebody is finally listening.

Lehnertz, who lives in an Isthmus neighborhood, said she has called the Madison Water Utility many times over the years about black flecks in her water and has had little in the way of a helpful response.

"I've called them off and on for years," Lehnertz said. "And there has really been nothing. So this at least is a start. I think they've really needed to do something."

"For me, this is a health issue."

THE MAYOR'S PLAN

Here is the 10-point plan proposed by Mayor Dave Cieslewicz for addressing problems in management and oversight of the city's drinking water.

- Develop and put in place wellhead protection plans for all 24 of the city's wells by 2010 at the latest.
- Continue an aggressive water main flushing and monitoring plan to address the problem of high manganese levels in Madison water.
- Improve public outreach by scheduling a joint hearing of the Board of Water Commissioners and the Joint Board of Health for Madison and Dane County. At the hearing, the public would be given the opportunity to discuss concerns about the



- city's drinking water.
- Change city ordinances to make the city's public health director a member of the Board of Water Commissioners. This is part of an overall effort to strengthen connections between drinking water and public health.
- Develop an enhanced water utility Web site, including an interactive program with which residents could look up information about the water in their home.
- Implement enforceable performance standards for the utility and its general manager.
- Accelerate efforts to replace aging infrastructure and plan for new growth.
- Create a technical water quality peer review task force to assist the Board of Water Commissioners in reviewing technical data.
- Create a citizen focus group to review the annual water report and ensure it adequately answers questions about drinking water.
- Build collaborative relationships with neighboring water utilities that share Madison's aquifer.

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