

THE Beacon-News

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A future weather warning

Federal agency cuts may endanger lives

By **Adriana Pérez**
Chicago Tribune

Melanie Snow and her husband talk about the weather like it's gossip.

Every day, they read National Weather Service discussions — technical documents from the agency where meteorologists explain the reasoning and rationale behind forecasts — from weather events in Chicago and across the country.

"We avidly consume those," Snow said. "And we're definitely

the people in our circle of friends who, if they really want to know the weather for their vacation, wedding, birthday party outside, etcetera, they call us and say: 'Give me the lowdown.'"

The couple met in college at Georgia Tech, where they both studied to become meteorologists. Then they didn't. She became a science educator and he became an actuary, but the weather bug stuck with them.

Now, weather hobbyists and enthusiasts — some like Snow and her husband, who might prefer to watch storm clouds from the safety of their porch and others who'd rather chase severe weather for the thrill — are feeling anxious about

what federal funding and staffing cuts under the Trump administration could mean for the data they rely on daily from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and its National Weather Service.

A back-and-forth on staffing has put the agency, like many others, in a state of limbo. Thousands of probationary employees were fired in mid-February, ordered by a federal judge to be rehired a month later and then put on administrative leave, only to see the U.S. Supreme Court block that rehiring order last month.

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A warm glow is seen to the north as storm clouds pass near Diversey Harbor from a cold front arriving after a day of extreme heat in Chicago on Aug. 27. **CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Deputy mayor prepares to depart

By **R. Christian Smith**
Beacon-News

When Aurora Deputy Mayor Guillermo Trujillo soon serves out his last day in the role, it won't be the first time he has retired from the city.

Trujillo previously spent 30 years at the Aurora Police Department before retiring for the first time. But around seven months into his retirement, Mayor Richard Irvin gave him a call.

At first, Trujillo thought Irvin was joking, he told The Beacon-News, but he eventually accepted the job as the city's second-ever deputy mayor. He was appointed in 2021 after former Deputy Mayor Chuck Nelson, the first person to ever hold the new position, retired.

Now, Trujillo is set to retire again, with his last workday scheduled for Tuesday. That's the day Mayor-elect John Laesch, alongside newly-elected and reelected members of the Aurora City Council, are set to be sworn into office.

As deputy mayor, Trujillo said he was Irvin's right-hand man, doing what he didn't have time to do and going where he didn't have time to go, so Irvin could focus on the bigger picture.



Mostly, that has meant dealing with resident and business complaints, he said, but he also helped to open better lines of communication between the mayor's office and public safety departments like police and fire. Plus, he also acts as a liaison between aldermen and city, he said.

The job has been interesting, Trujillo said, because he never knew what he was walking into. But it's that unpredictability, with no two days being the same, that he said has been his favorite thing about the job.

He's had to be able to multitask, know how to navigate the system and be personable, but still tell people what they need to hear, not what they necessarily wanted to hear, he said.

In person is how he preferred to do business, he said, so that residents could see him face-to-face as they talked out their problems. Even when the city wasn't able to help, Trujillo said he was still willing to listen to residents' concerns and point them in the right direction.

While his reliance on facts and evidence came from his time working at the Aurora Police Department, the deputy mayor job gave Trujillo a new perspective he didn't have in that previous career, he said. He now knows how City Hall really works, he said, and how important it is for residents to get involved.

His advice for Aurora residents is to be aware of their elected officials and to hold them accountable. He said that if there are things residents want changed, they

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ST. CHARLES



Community members paint a public mural on the pavement at the intersection of Walnut and Riverside avenues in downtown St. Charles on Saturday. **DAVID SHAROS/FOR BEACON-NEWS**

‘Paint the Riverside’ event unites community

By **David Sharos**
Chicago Tribune

Tessa Muenz of St. Charles found herself painting an intersection in downtown St. Charles during the annual Paint the Riverside event over the weekend.

"I've done this all the years its been offered and I love it. It's absolutely one of the most fun things I do all year," Muenz said on Saturday as she moved a roller dipped in paint backwards and forwards helping to paint a public mural right on the pavement at Walnut and Riverside avenues. "It's a little bit difficult sitting like this but it's still fun. I've actually done this for a couple hours before."

The St. Charles Arts Council offered the three-hour session,

“Rather than graffiti, it’s nice to have people paint in such a positive way. I love the fact there is fantastic art all around the downtown.”

— St. Charles Mayor Clint Hull

which the group's executive director Kathy Hill said "was a community-building event."

"This is our fourth year and we usually see a couple hundred people come out," Hill said before the event. "We've also been very lucky and we've never had anything but good weather on the days we've done this."

Saturday was no exception, as bright sunshine and temperatures in the low 70s greeted visitors.

Last year, a fox was painted on the street, with Hill saying more "mosaic or geometric" images were completed during years one and two of the event.

"Last year was the first time we did an actual image of something recognizable," she said. "This year, we're doing a colored spiral. It's an organized chaos."

Paint and supplies for the event are purchased by the Arts Council, Hill said, adding that the

group buys recycled paint from a company known as EarthPaint.

"The paint is a little bit thicker and it works very well for the street," she said.

Once again, an image was already taped out on the street and color coded which made painting the image simple for everyone.

"It's kind of a color-by-number," Hill said. "As far as the timing of this, we always try to do it before the Fine Arts Show, which will be May 24 and 25 this year."

"As far as painting the street, we wanted to have something that would involve the community, that everybody could participate in versus murals on a wall," Hill said.

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EAST AURORA SCHOOL DISTRICT 131

Leader receives award for work as school administrator

Recognition is part of annual Kane County education awards

By **Molly Morrow**
Aurora Beacon-News

David Ballard, East Aurora School District 131's associate superintendent of staff and student services, was recently recognized for his work as a school administrator by the Kane

County Regional Office of Education.

Along with other teachers and staff from districts in the county, Ballard, supported by family and district employees, received an award by the county Regional Office of Education on May 2 at the Q Center in St. Charles, according to a press release from the Kane County Regional Office of Education.



Ballard

The Kane County Educator of the Year Awards are a reminder of "what is worth advocating for in education," Regional Superintendent for Kane County Patricia Dal Santo said in the office's news release.

Nominations for the award, the press release said, are reviewed by a group of student teachers, retired teachers, university representatives, business

representatives, national board certified teachers and Kane County Regional Office of Education staff members.

Gemma Gurney of Central High School, part of Central Unit School District 301, took the top award, while a number of other teachers and staff — from districts in Aurora, Batavia, Geneva, St. Charles and more — also went home with awards.

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Weather

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Staff shortages have also temporarily suspended and reduced weather balloon releases that track temperature, pressure and wind speed in the Great Plains and Midwest.

Between recent buyouts and mass firings, nearly half of National Weather Service forecast offices had 20% vacancy rates as of April — and eight of 122 offices are missing more than 35% of their staff.

“A lot of people don’t know what goes into making a daily weather report that they access on their app. There are ... thousands of NOAA and National Weather Service people (who) are launching weather balloons every day and analyzing that data,” Snow said.

“Weather forecasting has come so far, especially in the last 20 years. And to see that decline because of underfunding and firing the people at these organizations is really only harmful (to) everyone — not just enthusiasts.”

While Snow and her husband avidly follow the weather forecasts, a hardy contingent of Illinois storm chasers endeavor to get up close and personal. They are concerned not only about a loss of information but also safety — theirs and those in the path of destructive storms.

“There’s a lot of chatter about what could happen. A lot of worry. We rely on an enormous amount of data that’s put out by the federal government in order to do what we do,” said Skip Talbot, a storm chaser from Springfield. “And vice versa.”

Endangering lives

Most storm chasers have a regular, full-time job, said Talbot, who is a software developer but has traveled a quarter million miles to document 150 tornadoes over the past 20 years.

“We actually do try to make contributions to scientific research as much as we can, and it’s really nice to be helpful out there, make your passion useful,” he said.

Growing up in Oak Brook, Talbot’s fascination was sparked by the strongest August tornado on record in the United States, which occurred in nearby Plainfield in 1990. The tornado, unusual and violent, took the lives of 29 people, injured 350 and caused an estimated \$160 million in damages. In college, Talbot took some meteorology courses and received training in spotting and reporting hazards. The weather service relies on storm chasers to be “their eyes out on the field,” he said, as they can’t see everything with radar.

On the ground, chasers also use information from the agency.

“They have a lot of tools that we don’t have around the road,” Talbot said.

For instance, official tornado warnings can help chasers decide where to go when they’re already out. “If there aren’t enough (meteorologists) to work every storm, then we’re not going to get that kind of heads up. ... Likewise, we see a lot of stuff when we’re chasing that the weather service just doesn’t know about,” he said.

Weather service offices don’t



Weather aficionado Melanie Snow in Chicago’s Lincoln Park on Thursday. CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE



Firefighters tie a U.S. flag to a fallen tree limb at dawn, April 10, 2015, after a tornado destroyed much of the town of Fairdale the previous night. JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

often have the bandwidth to track down every weather hazard, Talbot said. He has experienced this firsthand when he reports a tornado, and the local office is too busy or understaffed to investigate.

“If there’s less staff,” he said, “nothing will happen with that. So the log will be incorrect; there’ll be errors in the storm data. We’re already seeing some of that. Sometimes the weather service — and I don’t blame them — don’t have the time to put all of these minute details about what happened in these storms. They have to issue the day’s forecast and move on.”

Storm chasers and the public could be at risk if the weather service offers fewer frequent updates and safety warnings. The same could happen if there are limits on public access to NOAA’s high-resolution radar system that detects and analyzes weather as well as its satellite data on temperature, moisture, cloud cover and more.

Some worry about more than limited accessibility to real-time data; many storm chasers are frantically trying to download and compile archive radar data from past events that they rely on for their own research projects.

As extreme weather events intensify because of climate change from human greenhouse gas emissions, past and current data will only become more critical. In the Midwest, as the climate gets warmer and the atmosphere holds more humidity, severe storms are expected to become more frequent.

“I can’t tell you it’s going to cause such and such number of deaths. But I can tell you: You start removing people from these posts and start taking data away — yes,

inevitably, somebody is going to die because of that,” Talbot said.

According to a New York Times report, five former weather service directors signed an open letter May 2 warning that cuts to the organization by the Trump administration may endanger lives.

The letter notes that the coming weeks are expected to be especially busy for severe weather: “Airplanes can’t fly without weather observations and forecasts; ships crossing the oceans rely on storm forecasts to avoid the high seas; farmers rely on seasonal forecasts to plant and harvest their crops which feed us. Perhaps most importantly, NWS issues all of the tornado warnings, hurricane warnings, flood warnings, extreme wildfire conditions and other information during extreme weather events.”

Mutually beneficial relationship

Carrie Svihlik’s father was a meteorologist and oceanographer with the U.S. Navy, and she loved watching storm-chasing shows in the early 2010s. But the Kane County elementary school technology teacher never really thought of it as a career to pursue — until she realized modern-day technology and accessible government weather data meant amateur enthusiasts like her could take it up on the side.

“There are things that are taken for granted because they just work. They happen in the background,” Svihlik said. “And you don’t know these things are happening to make things run smoothly. NWS and NOAA are very efficient with what they do.”

Like Snow, Svihlik also shares



Kevin Smith gets a phone call as his friends and daughter, Amy Sue, 13, help demolish what’s left of his home in Plainfield on Aug. 31, 1990, three days after a deadly tornado tore through town. Debris from other buildings burns in the background. FRANK HANES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE



Donna Peek pauses while searching for items at what was her mother Jacklyn K. Klosa’s home in Fairdale, April 11, 2015. Klosa was one of two people killed during a tornado that caused major damage to most the town Thursday night. JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

her passion with her husband Chuck. When they started dating, it became a connection. The couple went on their first local chase a year after getting married, during the Rochelle-Fairdale tornado of 2015. It was one of 11 tornadoes to hit the state that day, and the strongest tornado to occur in northern Illinois in 25 years, killing two and injuring 22 people.

They’ve been chasing ever since, between three to six storms out of state every year, as time allows with their work schedules.

Enthusiasts say the relationship between storm chasers and the weather service is mutually beneficial and strengthens forecasting and warning services that the NWS estimates cost each American about \$4 a year. A recent study found that, with a budget of nearly \$1.4 billion, the weather service returns more than \$102 billion in estimated public value.

“We are all feeling the same things: stress, distress, panic, concern, anger, frustration and sadness, because this is something we’re all passionate and we care about,” Svihlik said. “That’s why (federal workers) got into those fields, and that’s why we do this hobby — we drive millions of miles to look at clouds. And sometimes the clouds don’t do the things that you drove a million miles (to see).”

Besides a regular flurry of hurricanes year in and year out, seeing snowflakes falling on her Florida hometown in January 1977 made a young Snow begin to ask questions about the weather.

“That’s one of the first things that got me hooked,” she said. “It

doesn’t snow in Tampa.”

Nowadays, her day job consists of writing high school curricula for an education technology company. She also recently joined the American Meteorological Society’s Weather Band committee board, which does outreach on all things weather.

Practically, she uses publicly accessible government data for everyday decisions. While visiting family in Florida recently and following weather discussions, Snow booked a later return flight once she realized hers would probably get canceled because of tornado activity in the Midwest. She was right.

For now, Snow said she has not noticed any scaling back in the weather service’s daily discussions that she and her husband read. But she worries as tornado season ramps up.

“It’ll be interesting to see how that changes,” she said. “I imagine, long term, that maybe some weather discussions are prioritized over others, (they) can’t do a discussion for every city or every event. Maybe we prioritize any tornado activity because it’s tornado season, or hurricane activity because it’s hurricane season, and other discussions fall to the wayside.”

Climate change will make this trade-off all the more challenging — and consequential, Snow said.

“To deny people access to that information is, really, denying them access to a quality of life,” she added.

Chicago Tribune’s Nara Schoenberg contributed.

Ballard

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Ballard has worked in education for 30 years, he said, and spent 13 of those years at East Aurora. He previously worked as a principal at Johnson Elementary and Fred Rodgers Magnet Academy, as well as served as the district’s executive director of secondary education.

Now, as the associate superintendent of staff and student services, Ballard oversees the district’s human resources department and student services, which includes special education and related services. A lot of his work

involves recruitment, hiring and retention of teachers and other staff, he said. But his team also, for example, helped plan a district-level awards event held on Thursday that recognized staff members and retirees.

The team Ballard oversees put together a book with recommendation letters from teachers, staff, parents and students that was submitted to the Kane County Regional Office of Education as part of his nomination.

He said it was emotional to read the letters written in support of him.

“I think I got about halfway through and I was getting a little

choked up, and another administrator came and knocked on my office (door),” he recalled. “I said, ‘Oh, thank you, gosh, I’m glad you’re here ... I was about to just break down.’”

And he said letters from students from his time as a principal stood out.

“I always tried to be visible as a principal,” Ballard told The Beacon-News on Friday. “I never wanted them to view having to come to the principal or talk to the principal as being a bad thing.”

Nominees for the Regional Office of Education awards at East Aurora are collected via an internal, anonymous vote, according

to district officials. A committee within the district determines one person to be nominated for each award category, which is then submitted by the HR department to the Kane County Regional Office of Education.

But, though his team is responsible for submitting the nominations, Ballard didn’t know that he would be chosen by the Regional Office of Education this year, and said he was surprised when his name was called.

Ballard was not the only nominee from East Aurora — three teachers and two other staff members were also nominated for different categories, according to

the Kane County ROE’s website.

Now, his work in the district will continue on as usual — if not busier, Ballard said, noting that the end of the school year and summer are the busiest times for recruiting and hiring staff for the coming school year.

And, as he works with his team on hiring for next year, among other responsibilities, Ballard noted that his win this year was a recognition of a group effort.

“I didn’t feel it was just my award,” he said on Friday. “I felt it was something that recognized all of us collectively.”

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Trujillo

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should make noise about it, but residents should also be aware that the city does not have control over everything.

Another difference between his time in the Aurora Police Department and his time as deputy mayor is how, in the latter role, Trujillo has been able to be proactive rather than reactive, he said. He has been working to make the city better for everyone, he said, rather than just

responding to things that happen.

And that work to make the city better was not done by choosing sides, according to Trujillo. No matter a person’s politics, skin color or side of the city, everyone was treated equally, he said.

Trujillo said the experience has been “awesome” but also humbling.

At an event honoring outgoing Mayor Richard Irvin and many from the mayor’s office on Tuesday night, Irvin remembered how he and Trujillo would face each other in court back when he was a defense attorney and Trujillo

worked at the police department.

“I came up against this dude that I was cross-examining on the stand that made me look foolish,” Irvin said. “I was like, ‘Man, I respect this dude.’”

In his own speech at the event, Trujillo called Irvin “a great man” and thanked him for believing in him even when he didn’t believe in himself.

He told The Beacon-News that he originally told Irvin he’d stay two years to see how he liked the job, but he ended up extending it to four. Plus, he was willing to stay on

another four years, he said, if Irvin had won the past election.

Trujillo said he gives Irvin a lot of credit for turning the city around. People need to realize where the city was, where it is now and where it hopefully is heading, he said.

It will be the camaraderie between city staff that Trujillo said he will miss the most. Over the past four years, it feels like he spent more time at City Hall than at his own house, he said.

Trujillo also thanked his family, including his wife Sally and his children, for supporting him. It

was because of them and city staff, he said, that he was able to do his best.

And, as a migrant who came to Aurora with his family at age 7, he hopes he did his culture and family proud, he said.

Although he will no longer be working at the city, Trujillo said he will still be living in Aurora.

Although he is hoping to stay retired, he said he has always been a “connector” and will continue to help people out as it fits into his life.

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Paint

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New St. Charles Mayor Clint Hull was one of the first to grab a roller at the event.

“We have such a great Arts Council and a great arts community and being able to do some-

thing in such a prominent area” is great, Hull said.

“Rather than graffiti, it’s nice to have people paint in such a positive way,” Hull said. “You look at the kids smile and all the adults smile. I love the fact there is fantastic art all around the downtown.”

A number of parents and their children were on hand including

St. Charles resident Parker Dunning who came with his two children and said Saturday was actually his third time doing the Arts Council painting project.

“We are frequent fliers. We circle the calendar every year and say let’s go paint,” Parker said. “We see this as something nice to do in the springtime — get outside and

something to do for the town. I have an office nearby and I get to see it every day too. When I drive by it’s nice to relive this and you remember being here and seeing it.”

Parker’s son Clarke, 10, was working hard with his roller and said he really likes painting.

“Look how much I’ve done,”

Parker said proudly as he dipped the roller in a tray to get more paint.

“I like to paint. I like painting the street and decorating the town. It’s hard work but there’s no trick. I just load it up and let it go.”

David Sharos is a freelance reporter for The Beacon-News.