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Tom Cherveny / West Central Tribune

CORNLAND USA is hosting an open house for its upcoming opening in the lower level of the Olivia Community Center, formerly the Minnesota National Guard Armory, from 4 to 8 p.m. Thursday. Sara Maher, with the Pages of Our Communities Foundation serving Renville County, is shown Nov. 24, in a play barn built of wood by Lilliput Play Homes of Finleyville, Pennsylvania, for the STEM and learning center.

CORNLAND USA TO OPEN IN OLIVIA'S NEW COMMUNITY CENTER

BY TOM CHERVENY
West Central Tribune

OLIVIA

Children in Renville County can move their play indoors this winter thanks to a local foundation.

CORNLAND USA is hosting an open house from 4 to 8 p.m. Thursday in the lower level of the Olivia Community Center, formerly the Minnesota Army National Guard Armory. The event is an opportunity to showcase the new indoor play facility for children. It's billed as a STEM and sensory center for the skills it will help children ages 0 to 8 years develop, but it is also all about having fun.

"It's our Christmas gift to the city of Olivia," said Sara Maher, representing the Pages of Our Communities Foundation. The organization maintains the legacy of Jim and Mary Page by giving back to the community in a variety of ways, from efforts to support cancer survivors to developing recreational activities to improve the community.

In this case, the foundation is making what is a roughly $100,000 investment to provide the center that combines science, technology, engineering and math with sensory learning. It includes hand-built, wooden playhouse versions of the Olivia Fire Hall, FM Bank, a BOLD school bus and a CORNLAND USA barn. They were built on-site by Lilliput Play Homes Inc., of Finleyville, Pennsylvania.

Tom Cherveny / West Central Tribune

Workers Justin Shaenenhean, left, and Tyler Rush with Lilliput Play Homes, of Finleyville, Pennsylvania, put the final touches on a play FM Bank on Nov. 24, in the CORNLAND USA learning center in the Olivia Community Center, formerly the National Guard Armory.

The playhouses are but entry points to a variety of fun activities. There's everything from a toy airplane and a slide on the fire hall to a 4-H-built vegetable garden. Stuffed animals, magnetic building toys, firefighter outfits, a "flight lab" powered by a powerful fan, and a Chutes and Ladders-style rolling ball game are samples of what's available. There's also a comfortable reading area for children, complete with a couple of rocking chairs for adults.

The lower level of the community center occupied by CORNLAND USA

CORNLAND on A2

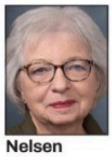
Willmar Council delays approval of final budget and levy

BY JENNIFER KOTILA
West Central Tribune

Obregon

Ask

Butterfield



Nelsen

Gardner

WILLMAR — The Willmar City Council on Monday delayed a vote to approve the final 2026 budget and levy until its Dec. 15 meeting.

The vote was delayed after a defeated motion to eliminate the Director of Community Growth position held by Pablo Obregon, effective Jan. 31, 2026, in order to reduce the budget and levy.

Willmar City Councilor Justin Ask made the motion to delay approval of the final budget and levy until the Dec. 15 meeting to allow the council to continue discussing ways to reduce them, which passed unanimously.

Ask previously asked for a work session, calling it an opportunity to work together on budget decreases. Then the council "can come back in two weeks and take a look at some of the serious cuts … that I'd like to see happen."

The final proposed levy presented to the council at Monday's meeting was approximately $12.1 million, which represents an increase of $954,389, or 8.6%, over the 2025 levy of roughly $11.1 million.

Willmar Finance Director Tom Odens explained that the tax levy is broken into three main pieces for the city of Willmar, with the main portion being the general levy that funds all the city departments minus wastewater. The other portions of the levy are for capital improvements and the levy for a new city hall in the future.

He further explained that for every dollar levied, about 38 cents goes toward public safety, 23 cents goes toward public works, 22 cents goes toward general government and the remaining 17 cents goes toward culture and recreation.

The final proposed general fund budget is approximately $23 million, an increase of $965,806, or 4.37%, over the 2025 general fund budget of roughly $22.1 million.

The total proposed budget for the city of Willmar in 2026 is $61.9 million, which includes approximately $23.1 million for general operating, $12.9 million for capital improvements, $4.2 million in special revenue, $7.1 million in debt service and $14.6 million in wastewater enterprise funds.

During council work sessions and regular meetings on the budget and levy, discussions address the capital improvement plan and the general fund budget of $22.1 million.

Willmar City Councilor Tom Butterfield made the motion to eliminate the Director of Community Growth position, which was seconded by Councilor Rick Fagerlie. Both voted in favor of the motion.

Ask spoke in favor of eliminating the position during the discussion, but he later voted no — after some hesitation — along with Councilors Audrey Nelsen, Tom Gilbertson, Stephen Gardner, Vicki Davis and Carl Shuldes.

When making his motion, Butterfield noted the position held by Obregon was supported by a $450,000 grant from Blue Cross Blue Shield in 2022 and those funds have now been spent. Obregon was hired for the position in March of 2023. The starting salary range for the position was $92,596 to $120,375.

Referencing the public

COUNCIL on A9

Tom Cherveny / West Central Tribune

A playhouse-size fire station, with a slide, is among the STEM and learning center attractions that are part of CORNLAND USA in the Olivia Community Center. An open house will be held at the center from 4 to 8 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 4.

Tom Cherveny / West Central Tribune

The name CORNLAND USA for the STEM and learning center in Olivia is a nod to history, when Trojan Seed hosted an annual event by that name. It attracted as many as 5,000 visitors in the mid-1970s.

CORNLAND

CONTINUED from A1

offers ample space and is equipped with a kitchen and an open area. Maher said the city is looking to staff it for about 15 hours a week. It will also be available for rent by families or child care centers.

Children must be accompanied by adults during their visits. Initial plans include a $125 yearly membership for families, or a $7 per person visit pass.

It's a place for young families to gather together and have a good time. It's also a place where preschool children can meet and get to know one another, said Maher.

All of this came together in about a three-month period, according to Maher. Many of the ideas of what to include came from child care providers Laurie Lubitz and Carol Rothmeier. "Without their help, it wouldn't be possible," she said.

Maher said the idea for the center came after she heard how many in the community bring their children to The Village Children's Museum in Willmar and The Wheel and Cog Children's Museum in Hutchinson for STEM and learning center fun.

"So I thought, why not have something here in Renville County, especially in the wintertime when the roads can be icy," said Maher.

The decision to call the center CORNLAND USA is a nod to Renville County's history and its role as an agricultural center. Maher's late father, Bob Rauenhorst, was president of Trojan Seeds when it hosted an annual extravaganza called "CORNLAND USA" at its campus outside of Olivia in the mid-1970s. The summer event attracted up to 5,000 people and featured the likes of Gov. Wendell Anderson and Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey as featured speakers.

"It was so much fun," said Maher while recalling her time at the annual company event as the young daughter of the company president. Her father was an ideas person, she said, and saw the event as an opportunity to market the company and community.

His focus on marketing is still at work today: He promoted the construction of the Olivia Corn Monument in 1973 to ensure it was taller than the cob of corn that stood in Rochester at the time.

Maher hopes the modern-day version of CORNLAND USA will help promote the local economy, just as the original event once did. Parents or grandparents can bring their children to the center for a few hours of fun, and use their time in town to shop for groceries or enjoy a meal. "Keeping it local," she said.

West Central Tribune file photo

Olivia's Corn Monument was erected in 1973 to recognize the community's growing seed corn industry and agricultural heritage.

StormTRACKER

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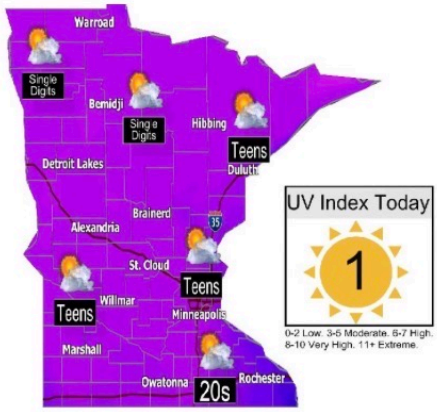
WILLMAR FORECAST

Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
11/-13	17/16	29/13	21/3
Partly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy
Wind: NW 16 mph	Wind: S 18 mph	Wind: NW 9 mph	Wind: NE 10 mph

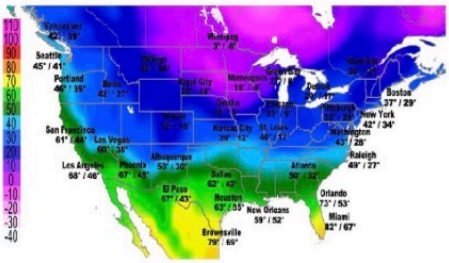
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
13/5	27/18	29/23	27/11
Mostly Cloudy	PM Snow Showers	PM Snow Showers	Partly Cloudy
Wind: E 8 mph	Wind: S 10 mph	Wind: SW 11 mph	Wind: NW 15 mph

*Average wind speed for each day



Regional Weather	Today Hi	Today Lo	Tomorrow Hi	Tomorrow Lo
Bemidji, MN	5	-10	16	12
Duluth, MN	12	-6	12	10
Eau Claire, WI	21	-7	13	8
Fargo, ND	8	-9	18	14
International Falls, MN	6	-9	14	12

Regional Weather	Today Hi	Today Lo	Tomorrow Hi	Tomorrow Lo
Marshall, MN	12	-10	23	21
Minneapolis, MN	16	-6	14	13
Rochester, MN	21	-7	12	9
Sioux Falls, SD	14	-8	25	22
St. Cloud, MN	12	-13	14	13



StormTRACKER Forecast

Mostly cloudy and breezy for today. Very cold with temperatures dropping to the single digits this afternoon.

Almanac Through 6 pm Tuesday

Temperature High Low