

RUNNING IT BACK

FORMER BISON HOLMGREN DEFENDS RED RIVER VALLEY AMATEUR GOLF TITLE. **SPORTS**

The Forum

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Under the billion-dollar Project Tundra venture, Minkota Power Cooperative is looking to retrofit Milton Young Station, a central North Dakota coal plant, to capture and store its own carbon emissions.

How to fund Project Tundra

Carbon capture loans could leave ND taxpayers on the hook for \$250M

By Adam Willis
awillis@forumcomm.com

BISMARCK — North Dakota taxpayers could wind up footing the bill for a \$250 million loan program established by lawmakers this legislative session for the state's flagship and unproven carbon capture venture.

Top Republican lawmakers said the loans outlined in a bill passed this session are intended for Project Tundra, the ambitious, billion-dollar venture to capture and store carbon emissions off of a coal plant in central North Dakota.

If it succeeds, Project Tundra would be the world's largest carbon capture facility. A holy grail of clean energy

innovation, the breakthrough would grant a new lease on life to North Dakota's declining coal industry and provide a blueprint for the decarbonization of coal-fired power plants around the globe.

But when lawmakers approached the Bank of North Dakota, the country's only state-owned bank, about taking on the loan program, bank officials declined, saying they would never approve a loan of its magnitude, subsidized interest rates or risk on their own balance sheet.

Instead, they wrote language for the bill that made up to \$250 million available to the state for

FUNDING: Page A8

A DIFFERENT APPROACH



Chris Flynn / The Forum

Kristy Tran works as a mentor with a 7-year-old girl identified as "B" recently at the Fargo Public Library. The two are part of a nonprofit known as Friends of the Children.

F-M nonprofit helps children with professional mentors

Fargo
When the young girl first met her mentor, Kristy Tran, she wasn't interested in conversation or doing anything unfamiliar.



Robin Huebner reports

Now, the 7-year-old who has autism chats with ease about her favorite toys and activities, while she puts a puzzle together in rapid-fire fashion at the Fargo Public Library

main branch downtown. "Just finding those quirks and stuff that she likes, she will just

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Chris Flynn / The Forum

John Fisher is executive director of the Fargo-Moorhead chapter of Friends of the Children, a nonprofit that hires paid professional mentors to work with at-risk children.

Child COVID-19 vaccinations off to slow start in ND



David Samson / The Forum

Essentia Health registered nurse Kari Ayers gives a COVID-19 vaccine shot to Kyzien Dumas, 15, at the community vaccination center in the former Gordmans store in Fargo on May 24.

By Jeremy Turley
Forum News Service

BISMARCK — North Dakota children 12 and up became eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine more than two months ago, but the vast majority of parents haven't signed off on their kids getting the jab.

More than 85% of North Dakota children ages 12-17 had not yet gotten a first or second dose of the COVID-19 shot as of Monday, June 14, according to the latest data from the state Department of Health.

Meanwhile, child vaccination rates in neighboring Minnesota and the nation at large are more than double North Dakota's rate.

State immunization coordinator Molly Howell said there are likely several reasons parents haven't taken their children in for the vaccine. Some simply might not have gotten around to making an appointment or don't see much of a need to get their kid vaccinated until closer to the beginning of the school year, Howell

said. Other parents may have reservations about the safety of the vaccine or don't believe COVID-19 is a serious illness — sentiments Howell and a consensus of experts view as misguided.



Connell

Dr. Joan Connell, a Bismarck pediatrician who serves as the state's field medical officer, said the vaccination rate for children mirrors

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Today's weather



65°
46°
Mostly Cloudy & Breezy
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UND president's first year a 'breath of fresh air' for staff

By Sydney Mook
Forum News Service

Andrew Armacost's first year as president of the University of North Dakota wasn't exactly typical.

As president, Armacost dealt with a number of topics throughout the year, including diversity, equity and inclusion issues on campus, a legislative session and making connections with faculty, staff and students virtually due to

the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

"Leadership is a test every day, whether it's a global pandemic, or some other issue that arises on campus," he said. "You don't get chosen for a position like this to have photo ops every day and just enjoy the easy, fun stuff. It's to lead the campus, to look out and create vision. It's also to respond to crises."

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MENTORS

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bloom and talk your ear off," said Tran, who is 26.

The two are part of Friends of the Children, a nonprofit in Fargo that mentors at-risk children.

The Fargo-Moorhead chapter got its start in late 2019, just before COVID-19 hit.

Executive Director John Fisher said what makes the organization unique is its mentorship commitment all the way through the child's high school graduation, and that it does so with paid professional mentors, rather than volunteers.

Fisher said the approach is proven to be most successful for these children, who often have more negative than positive forces in their lives.

Despite barriers of the pandemic, the organization was able to hire four professional mentors or "Friends" and enroll 32 children, and managed to continue face-to-face outings or interactions throughout the shutdown.

It has 42 more children on a waiting list, Fisher said. He said he hopes to add two more mentors and 16 more children in the coming year.

"We want to continue that growth strategy. We would love to exceed it," he said.

Risk vs. protective factors

The national Friends of the Children organization got its start 26 years ago by Duncan Campbell, a philanthropist in Portland, Ore.

He'd heard about a study touting interventions in a child's life that could break the cycle of



Chris Flynn / The Forum

A girl identified as "B" colors a picture recently at the Fargo Public Library in downtown Fargo. The Friends of the Children nonprofit, which she is involved with, does not identify participating children by name.

intergenerational poverty, but it had to start young.

About five years ago, the national organization began an aggressive expansion project, and two years ago, the Fargo-Moorhead chapter came online.

Fisher said they work with local social service agencies, public schools and other like-minded nonprofits to identify children who could be helped.

The goal is to find kids, ages 4 through 6, who have the highest number of risk factors and the least number of protective factors in their lives.

Risk factors include homelessness, being in foster care, or having a single parent, a teenage parent or a parent who is incarcerated.

"If there's not some intervention in a substantive way, we know where this story is likely going to go," Fisher said.

Protective factors could be having two parents at home, or a financial picture above the poverty line, he said.

While the focus is on the child, mentors

work with parents or caregivers to schedule outings. Each child gets four hours a week with a mentor, 52 weeks a year, for 12 years, Fisher said.

"We are in that child's life for their entire childhood," he said.

'Best job ever'

Experiencing trauma, especially as a child, can have lifelong consequences.

"For these little heads and these little hearts, it starts to build up calluses that have reverberations for the rest of their life," Fisher said.

Because of that, Friends of the Children seeks mentors who are committed, caring and have the ability to see the world through a trauma-informed lens.

Since there is no fee to participating children, and the mentors are paid, the nonprofit relies heavily on fundraising.

"We are looking for organizations and individuals that have a heart for the kind of work that we're doing," he said.

It may turn out to be money well-spent.

Fisher said an

VACCINES

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are turning down the shot for their kids.

Both Howell and Connell noted that North Dakota has more than enough Pfizer vaccines — the only shot authorized for people under 18.

The two agreed getting children vaccinated should be a high priority for parents given the risks of COVID-19 and the disease's capacity to upend everyday life.

The latest national figures suggest coronavirus-related hospitalizations are on the rise among adoles-

cents, and even though children are generally at a lower risk of serious illness than adults, kids can struggle with COVID-19, Connell said. She added that some children who catch the virus have trouble getting back to their baseline health, including high school athletes who performed at an elite level before their diagnosis.

Howell noted that more than 300 children have died from the respiratory disease across the nation, making COVID-19 more deadly for kids than influenza. North Dakota has reported the death of a 17-year-old from the illness.

Connell said children have sacrificed a

lot since the pandemic began, and vaccinations present a safe and effective way to bring stability back to kids' lives. Having a COVID-19 outbreak at a summer camp or during fall football can be traumatic, and "we don't need more needless loss," Connell added.

On top of the benefits of the jab children, Howell said the younger age groups can contribute to the goal of herd immunity from COVID-19 by getting vaccinated. More immunizations in kids translates to a lower likelihood of illness and death for their grandparents, she said.

Since the odds of schools requiring the COVID-19 vaccine for students are low, Howell and Connell said it may take time to the adolescent vaccination rate to climb up to the adult rate. Parents may want to consult with their children's pediatricians before vaccinating, which gives Howell hope that more will get on board this summer when kids go to the doctor for other vaccinations or sports physicals.

Contact Jeremy Turley at jturley@forumcomm.com or on Twitter at [@jeremyturley](https://twitter.com/jeremyturley)

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The Forum
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3 experts quit FDA committee over Alzheimer's drug approval

By Paul John Scott
Forum News Service

ROCHESTER, Minn. — A Mayo neurologist who recently quit an FDA expert panel in protest has been joined by two others asserting the agency erred in going against experts to approve a new drug for Alzheimer's disease.

In leaving the FDA's Peripheral and Central Nervous System Advisory Committee last week, Mayo Clinic neurologist Dr. David Knopman was joined by Dr. Joel S. Perlmutter, a neurologist at Washington University in St. Louis, and Harvard Medical School ethicist Dr. Aaron Kesselheim.

Knopman was a site investigator for one of two major studies of aducanumab, the first treatment meant to fight Alzheimer's by targeting brain amyloid, a plaque associated with the disease. The drug, manufactured by Biogen for sale as Aduhelm, is effective at reducing amyloid plaque but has only weak data supporting its benefits in reducing cognitive symptoms, according to critics.

As a member of the expert panel and a trial investigator who helped to study the drug, Knopman did not take part in the panel's deliberations when it voted overwhelmingly to reject aducanumab in December. He did publish a paper suggesting the

need for more study.

A statistician who advised the panel compared the evidence in support of the drug to shooting a rifle at a barn, "then painting a target around the bullet holes."

Faced with such opposition from reviewers, the FDA usually declines to approve drugs for sale. Instead the agency last week granted the treatment's conditional approval. The news elicited cheers among Alzheimer's patient groups and sent Biogen's stock soaring. The drugmaker plans to charge \$56,000 annually for the drug, which will largely be funded by Medicare.

In a resignation email to the FDA that Kopman shared with The Washington Post, the physician wrote that "the approval of aducanumab ... made a mockery of the [advisory] committee's consultative process," adding that FDA staff had asked "biased questions" of the panel, and that the approval "appears [to] have been foreordained."

Contacted for permission to ask Knopman to elaborate, Mayo Clinic Communications Manager Kevin Punsky offered the following: "David Knopman, M.D., has resigned from the FDA's Peripheral and Central Nervous System Advisory Committee. He was honored to serve on the committee. Despite his disagreement with the FDA's decision to approve the Alzheimer's drug aducanumab, he believes the FDA advisory committees provide valuable input to the FDA and the public."

Acting FDA chief in spotlight

The aducanumab approval has cast a spotlight on the administrator currently at the helm of the FDA, interim commissioner Dr. Janet Woodcock, an agency veteran during previous actions to approve drugs against expert opinion.

As a longtime head of the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, Woodcock has come under fire this year from drug safety groups for her oversight as the opioid epidemic ravaged the nation.

A March letter by the patient advocacy group Breast Cancer Action opposed her potential nomination to lead the agency by asserting that Woodcock "is well-known for relaxing the criteria needed for certain drugs to reach the market ..."

In a January letter, 28 anti-opioid organizations cited Woodcock's oversight in "approving Zohydro despite a vote of 11-2 against approval by a scientific advisory committee," a 2018 move ushering an ultra potent painkiller to market in a period of widespread addiction.

Joining Knopman with his own resignation letter, Harvard's Kesselheim cited the agency's 2016 decision to approve a muscular dystrophy drug called eteplirsen, another approval which experts had rejected.

Though the panel has now shrunk by one third, as of Tuesday, June 15, the three departed experts are still listed on the FDA webpage for the PCNS panel.