
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

January 2025

Prairie Dog's predictions for 2025

The University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics announces its annexation of the city of Iowa City. The latest expansion is approved by the Board of Regents, on the condition that no ideological agenda is included in the new city charter.

Caitlin Clark announces her retirement from professional basketball. "I need a break from all the attention," says Clark after becoming the first female monk at the New Melleray monastery in Dubuque. She denies that a deal is in the works for her to endorse Trappist caskets crafted at the monastery.

Governor Kim Reynolds submits a new plan to the federal government to address childhood hunger in Iowa: each low-income child will be provided with a bow and three arrows. According to Department of Human Services director Kelly Garcia, the plan will build self-sufficiency, reduce obesity, and honor the sacred traditions of the state's original hunter-gatherers.

Citing decreased readership and rising production costs, the Gannett-owned *Iowa City Press-Citizen* begins to duplicate the *Des Moines Register* three days later rather than two.

Loosened gaming regulations in Iowa allow gamblers to bet on the number of wrecks on I-380, the number of

quarterbacks leaving the Hawkeye football team, and how much money Dan Kehl will spend to block a casino in Cedar Rapids.

Newly appointed Lieutenant-Governor Chris Cournoyer puts her Scott County home on the market. The lease requires the next owner to claim that Representative Marionette Miller-Meeks lives there.

In response to a recommendation by the Board of Regents, the University of Iowa changes the name of its College of Liberal Arts to the College of Liberty and Freedom Arts.

Iowa City elects the first deer to the City Council. In its victory speech the deer exclaims, "We are no longer a minority in this town!"

The Johnson County Board of Supervisors votes to ban discrimination, firearms, concentrated animal feeding operations, pipelines, poverty, and war. One week later the Iowa Legislature votes to ban Johnson County.

The Satanic Temple's booth is the surprise hit of the Iowa State Fair. Thousands enjoy deep-fried devil's food cake on a stick and tattoo decals of The First Amendment while visiting the Butter Satan.

Having won Johnson County by a single vote, Nikki Haley moves to

Coralville to prepare for the 2028 Republican caucuses.

The deer on the city council in Iowa City introduces a resolution to require all Iowa City residents to become vegan. The measure fails by one vote.

Governor Reynolds proposes a ban on "ambiguously-gendered names" for children born in Iowa. Her proposal exempts Kim, Chris, and Kelly. The only Republican to object is House Speaker Pat Grassley.

Although quick to support honored Iowa institutions like meatpacking plants, ethanol, and the caucuses, Senator Grassley remains silent as Donald Trump sues the Selzer poll and *Des Moines Register*.

Planned Parenthood and the Emma Goldman Clinic merge into a non-profit travel agency as they send women to neighboring states for health care no longer available in Iowa.

On the off-chance that Iowa will matter, Gavin Newsom, Gretchen Whitmer, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez schedule vacations at Lake Okoboji.

More Iowans gradually realize that the state's new flat income tax shifts the burden to the middle class while cutting revenue for education and other basic services. No prediction is available as to how they will vote in 2026.

—*Prairie Dog.*

Hog-tied: Part One

A report by the Iowa Cancer Registry issued in 2024 hit like a thunderbolt with its finding that almost twice as many cancer cases had been found than were recorded by the same Registry fifty years earlier. The state's population increased only thirteen percent in the same period.

According to the Registry, Iowa—the only state with a significant increase in cancer incidence from 2015 to 2019—now has climbed to the second-highest overall cancer incidence in the nation.

Those peak-level statistics include sub-categories of new cancers where Iowa leads the nation: oral cavity and pharyngeal cancers. Our state is in the top five of leukemias and melanomas.

Coincidental with the record-breaking surge of cancers in Iowa has been the relentless and ever-growing dominance of industrial agriculture and the health-threatening practices that come with it: excessive use of nitrogen-based chemical fertilizers mixed with the slathering of untreated livestock wastes (mostly confined poultry, pigs, and cattle) equivalent to the volume of wastes created by 180 million humans.

Iowans can smell and taste the deteriorating qualities of their water and air. They know that cancer is non-partisan and strikes regardless of zip code. Iowans want government agencies to do something about the adverse health consequences.

Yet, industrial-agricultural interests have “hog-tied” lawmakers and Iowa's major political parties whose business is to get those lawmakers elected. As a result, the quality of Iowa's most precious natural resources is deteriorating rapidly.

Two events on Saturday, June 15, 2024, happening simultaneously

nearly 200 miles apart, provide a graphic example of the distance between one of those parties—Iowa Democrats—and grass roots Iowans when it comes to sound environmental politics and policies.

At the Prairie Meadows Events Center in Altoona, approximately 300 delegates (about three persons per county) met for the Democratic Party state convention to consider party platform issues and to hear remarks by their leaders. According to press reports, organizational leaders directed the party's candidates and rank-and-file activists to exert “message discipline” by focusing on only two central issues: women's reproductive health care and public education.

“Iowans are voting on two issues this year,” Iowa House Minority Leader Konfrst pontificated, according to news outlets. “What's on their mind is public education and abortion.” If any party leader spoke meaningfully about water quality or other fundamental environmental issues, their words were not memorable and—except for a few wise souls who veered from leadership-directed messaging—were not addressed on the campaign trail in the months that followed.

In Decorah, on that same afternoon in Republican-dominated Winneshiek County, nearly 200 persons crowded in to participate in the inaugural meeting of a new water-quality activist group: the Driftless Water Defenders (DWD). Chris Jones, DWD's president, warned the group about the alarming and unhealthy trends regarding Iowa's water quality. Tests show that approximately one-third of Iowans (more than one million of us) are drinking from water sources whose nitrate concentrations exceed the amounts that scientists know pose health risks. It is not a coincidence, Jones intoned, that the new era of

industrial agriculture is characterized by Iowa's 2nd-in-the-nation rates of new cancers, and that we are the only state where cancer rates are increasing.

The depth of interest and support for effective clean water actions is supported by the results of a recently released public opinion survey by the Winneshiek County Board of Supervisors. Surveyors found that more than 98 percent of residents in that county strongly support protecting the county's air and water quality. (Recall that Republicans win most of the elections in that area; Donald Trump won 54% of the votes in 2024.)

The Republicans handily won Iowa's November elections. We can anticipate status quo, ineffectual enforcement by the Reynolds administration of our environmental protection laws.

Even had the Democrats done better in the election, it is difficult to imagine how Iowa's water or air quality might have improved as a result. Most Democratic candidates, following the party's leadership's instructions during their campaigns, failed to encourage or create a new, more forceful environmental legislative agenda.

In this moment of history, when huge public needs are pitted against captured regulatory agencies, we must look to other avenues for effective action.

One such avenue is the creation of citizen-based public interest groups, prepared to advocate, educate, and, when necessary, to litigate. One such newly formed group is Driftless Water Defenders (DWD).

—Jim Larew practices law in Iowa City. Part Two will appear in the next issue of the Prairie Progressive.

No one is coming to save us

I think everyone in the Midwest knows what an oncoming storm feels like. The dark skies, the gloom, the dread and eventual resignation. And, in the case of a summer storm, that slightly ozone smell of incoming electricity.

That's exactly what it feels like to be a union barista, too.

At Starbucks Workers United, we know that the Trump Administration is going to bring down corporate wrath onto the National Labor Relations Board and labor laws across the country. No one is coming to save us. We must do it ourselves.

This is the fundamental understanding behind every worker organizing in the service industry right now. Working conditions, to put it simply, suck. Low wages, long hours on your feet, back-breaking work, and every single day you are subjected to hundreds of members of the general public. And the people at the top of the industry don't care about any of it.

We, the workers, are the only ones who care about the conditions we work in. We know this. It's what drives us to organize. No one is coming to save us except ourselves.

This is what drove the initial union drive at Starbucks four years ago. Workers then had no idea that four years later their fight would cover hundreds of stores across the nation. On our Christmas Eve picket line in Iowa City, we had the pleasure of greeting one of those first union organizers.

James had helped organize his store in Buffalo, New York, in 2020. He was here visiting family in Iowa and has since moved on from working at Starbucks. I asked

him a few questions about what it had been like and found that our experiences in organizing had some great similarities and some huge differences.

The Buffalo stores had experienced intense union busting. Anyone who's ever looked into the SBWU organizing drive knows that the union busting leveled on those first few stores passed the point of outrageous very early in their campaign. Firings, closings, meetings with managers from all over the district. Howard Schultz himself made the trip from Seattle to New York for a meeting with organizing partners. Twice.

Four years later James was excited to see that not only had the union persisted—it grew. The hard work he and his coworkers put in just to start something had turned into an organizing drive that many at the time thought was impossible.

Between then and now the union has blossomed into over 500 stores and over 12,000 workers.

Starbucks Workers United has already provided the service industry with one major shift—paid parental leave for workers. Previously, retail workers (the baristas) at Starbucks stores were allowed six paid weeks of maternity leave, with no paid leave being offered to non-birthing partners. Starbucks corporate workers, however, are afforded eighteen weeks for maternity and twelve weeks for paternity leave. When SBWU brought this up to Starbucks, the company refused to comment on the disparity.

Weeks later, an announcement came down to all of our partners just in time for the holidays; paid parental leave for retail workers was

being changed to match the corporate worker policy. There was nothing in this announcement about why these benefits hadn't been previously offered to retail workers, only that Starbucks was changing its policy. A new industry standard has now been set—eighteen weeks of paid parental leave.

This win is significant. I've seen mothers in this industry work right up until their due date in an effort to preserve their measly six weeks of leave. It's dangerous and exploitative, and it's going to end. Even if we win nothing else and our union is crushed under a flood of pro-corporate policies, I'll know that we accomplished something good.

Starbucks might feel emboldened by the incoming administration and the possible gutting of the NLRB, but they were still scared enough to admit that there is no fundamental difference between what corporate workers deserve and what retail workers deserve.

Iowa is a state where it's easy to see the impact of a corrupt government colluding with greedy corporations to line their own pockets while the people pay the price. I grew up here. I know the damage that can be done, and I'm not afraid of what's going to come.

Starbucks, however, is very afraid. Even with all the odds in their favor, just the thought of their stock dropping a few cents is enough to terrify the shareholders.

We won't know the true effects of our Christmas Eve strike until bargaining sessions begin again, but what we do know is that 12,000 workers and counting have experienced what it's like to win.

—Abigail Scheppmann is a Starbucks barista in Iowa City.

Take the money and eat

When I was a kid, I'd often hear good news/bad news jokes in the halls and lunchrooms of Byron Rice Elementary School in Des Moines. Most of them weren't that funny, but that kind of humor has come to mind in the wake of Governor Reynolds' approach to child hunger in our state.

The good news is that last August, thousands of Iowans raised their voices via calls, emails, social and conventional media and a petition that advocates presented to the governor. The petition called on her to implement the SUN Bucks program in 2025, providing \$120 in a Summer EBT card that would enable families to purchase healthy food of their own choosing. Around 240,000 of Iowa's kids already missed out on the program in the summer of 2024 due to the governor's inaction.

And it was a bit of good news when the governor announced her intent to do something to address the issue. However, instead of simply accepting around \$29 million in Sun Bucks benefits, she applied for a waiver to the USDA to do something completely different from the policy that passed a divided congress with bipartisan report.

The bad news is that the governor's proposal, however well intentioned, has serious problems. In lieu of a simple card that allows families to choose their purchases, her idea is to give low-income children whose families opt in to the program a box of food as chosen by the government. And presumably poor kids will be expected to eat that food whether they like it or not.

While it is to her credit that she at least proposed some action, it's still paternalistic. The USDA

subsequently denied Iowa's proposal, with one official saying, "Through this waiver request, the governor is asserting that the State knows better than its own families do about what their needs are."

Would we like total strangers to select our food at restaurants or grocery stores? Would most kids like that? Giving everyone the same contents doesn't allow for variations in tastes, dietary needs, allergy concerns, or cultural food traditions.

It's a bit like issuing everyone an identical pair of size 7 shoes. If you're lucky and the shoe fits like Cinderella's glass slipper, great. But it's probably not what many people would pick for themselves, and you're out of luck if your feet are bigger or smaller.

A spokesperson for Gov. Reynolds now says the state will again apply for a waiver under the new Trump administration. But even if the USDA grants the waiver—and I wouldn't bet the farm on that since it's so different from the enabling legislation and intent of federal lawmakers—the process would be so cumbersome that many would miss out even from this one-size-fits-all approach. By contrast, the SUN Bucks program ensures that the food credit goes directly and pretty much automatically to the vast majority of eligible children.

If Iowa's waiver request is denied by Trump's USDA, we'd be back to zero again, which puts hundreds of thousands of kids at risk of food insecurity.

Iowa's businesses and farms would also miss out on the economic impact of SUN Bucks. The governor's proposal would have the state purchase merchandise

wholesale from distributors. By contrast, farms, farmers markets, and grocery stores all across the state would benefit by the \$29 million the original program would bring—not counting the \$1.50 to \$1.80 multiplier effect in economic activity for each dollar spent.

Governor Reynolds needs to listen to what Iowans are saying about SUN Bucks.

"Many children are in need as parents struggle to keep a roof over the heads and the lights on; feeding their children should never be an issue, especially in Iowa," said Kelly, a SUN Bucks petition signer from Oelwein. "Yes, Iowans are resilient, yes, we're tough, but access to food due to pricing is forcing working parents to use food banks if they are lucky to have one nearby."

A letter signed by over 150 Iowa organizations puts it well: "In a country as wealthy as the United States, and in a state with as rich an agricultural tradition as Iowa, no child should ever go hungry. No matter who takes care of them, no matter where they live, no matter what."

Given all these issues, it would be a good idea to think again and take advantage of this federal food program as originally intended. It would be a win all around for kids, families, and communities.

Pick up your phone, get on your computer, and tell your state legislators: Take the federal money. Feed our kids.

—Jon Krieg is a regional communications specialist with the American Friends Service Committee in Des Moines.

Complex communities of survivors

A young Des Moines police officer who was helping us with a racoon issue hadn't yet been indoctrinated into how to handle the perception of crime in our neighborhood. He asked us point blank, "Do you hear gunfire at night?" My day starts around 3:00 a.m., so gunfire occurs regularly, sometimes within the neighborhood, but also across the street where a paved trail system winds along a wooded area by the Des Moines River and poaching runs rampant. We have the luxury to lock the doors, pull the blinds, stay away from the windows, and stick earbuds in to drown out the potential threat. Others aren't so fortunate.

At our neighborhood association meeting, the appointed Des Moines community police officer gave an update on recent crime activity. There had been a domestic stabbing and a fatal gang related shooting. Even though both tragedies happened only a block away, they were targeted violent deaths. The presentation was delivered to reassure the audience that we needn't be concerned about our safety or property values. Some didn't buy into this message. Long-term residents sold their homes to investors to convert into rentals.

Flashing lights greeted us on our walk a short time ago. The usual police cars and fire trucks were joined by the coroner and criminal investigation vans. The vehicles were parked at the entrance to the Tai Dam Village, which borders part of the Trestle to Trestle Trail in our neighborhood. Although the vehicles were running, there were no occupants and no way to find out what happened. So, we ordered an incident report from the Des Moines Police Department.

It stated that a homeless woman was walking in the woods, going to a homeless camp when she noticed a female hanging from a tree. She called the police with someone else's phone, because she did not have one.

Officers located the female in the woods hanging from a tree...by her neck with a rope tied to a branch. Medics and ME were called and declared the female deceased. IDENT was called and processed the scene. ME and IDENT didn't notice anything suspicious about the suicide. ME took possession of the body. The deceased female had no ID on her person and was not able to be identified.

The incident occurred on 11/04/2024 at 13:51 and the case was closed on 11/05/2024.

The victim was Elizabeth Sue Phillips. According to her obituary, she enjoyed styling hair, going on walks, converting new items out of old ones, and spending time with friends and family, including her children, nieces and nephews. She also left behind a grandchild, "Although she left us too soon, Elizabeth's memory will live on in the hearts of those who knew and loved her. She will be remembered for her vibrant personality and contagious laughter."

Given Elizabeth's hobbies, it made more sense for her to choose a different form of suicide. Hanging is violent. Men prefer it along with fatal gunshots. Women tend to prefer slicing wrists or swallowing a bottle of pills. What wasn't in the police report was Elizabeth's activities before her death.

She had visited a campsite just down the trail from where her body was found. It was one of many

encampments that lay scattered along the banks of the Des Moines River. Mary, who lives in a tent with her veteran husband and a lovely dog described the events leading up to the hanging. Although they are labeled as homeless camps, these are complex communities of survivors. Mary described how Elizabeth had visited their camp with a known unsavory male character. Food is shared with fellow survivors and that was the first and last time Mary saw Elizabeth. The night before she died, a loud truck was heard driving down the trail in the direction of the hanging tree. Mary and her husband chose to remain in the safety of their tent. Their dog scares away the wild animals that pose a threat. Nothing can protect against the persistent gunfire or an unidentified vehicle that invades their otherwise peaceful existence. Mary carries doubts about the circumstances of Elizabeth's death. She also understands why members of these closely knit communities may simply give up, tired of living in fear.

The government plays a key role in disrupting their feeling of safety and security. Periodic signs are posted along the trail with maps outlining where and when they will infiltrate and take down these encampments or homes. It's a Whac-A-Mole game. As one campsite is destroyed, another one pops up. Mary's campsite is now gone. Although I look for her along the trail on my daily walk, the only thing left is the memory of the pain, fear and resignation that she carries.

—Stephanie-Fawkes Lee is a public policy advocate dedicated to strengthening Constitutional freedoms and related social issues.

Demons in the sky

Superman comic books were a staple in my youth and of a generation or two before me. The Man of Steel could leap a tall building in a single bound; there was no need for a running start. He could use his X-ray vision to see through objects and super-hearing came along in Action Comics #11. Superman was so fast he couldn't be seen by the human eye; he was faster than a speeding bullet and could travel at the speed of light and stop on a dime. Eventually, he could time-travel by running through a "time barrier." His most impressive action was his ability to fly, not just fly, but to defy gravity.

Yes, Superman was an oddity. Or was he? Luis 'Lue' Elizondo is the former head of the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (AATIP), the Pentagon unit that researched UFOs, now known as unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP). He is the author of *Imminent*, an insider's rendition of the Pentagon's quasi-secret project that keeps track of and researches unexplainable flying objects.

Elizondo gives the reader undiluted information about his personal experiences with UAP. His second-hand information is thoroughly researched and double-checked before it is considered viable. Although a few words or paragraphs are blacked out by the Department of Defense, it doesn't interrupt the flow of the book.

The author's indignation toward other agencies, particularly the U.S. Air Force, for refusing to share information is obvious. It shouldn't surprise anyone that the flow of critical information between government agencies is stymied by jealousy and power grabs.

Anyone who has spent time in the military, or even on a federal government payroll, will recognize the use of acronyms—an overwhelming use of acronyms. It can be frustrating, but so was life in the Armed Forces, trying to keep track of the ABCs one needed to know.

Descriptions of perceived activity by pilots and other observers is remarkable: "The objects would change elevation from 30,000 feet down to sea level in the blink of an eye. They would stop in midair, then shoot away in a different direction. Some were small, the size of a beach ball, while others were much larger."

Aliens are among us!

These objects would dive into the ocean without creating a wave or a splash. Reports indicate that the most common size and type of a UAP were orbs or spheres, brightly lit, some "white, yellow, blue, red, and green," but the most reported shade was a luminous blue. "If you got close to one of these, you could expect to be injured."

Documentation of what is believed to be implants removed from patients is plentiful. The fact that several sightings near top secret locations and operations demonstrate that this phenomenon has the power to delve into internal machinery and minds.

Elizondo mentions Roswell, the Colares incidents, and other noteworthy locations that were highlight of newsreels and science fiction magazines, but in reality,

the Italians have documented more than 15,000 instances of encounters since 1901. Unexplainable incidents and sightings have occurred all over the world, including Russia, South America, and especially over New Jersey in the past few months.

With all the mystery and secrecy exposed in *Imminent*, it's understandable to be afraid of the possibility of sharing our planet with the unknown from different dimensions. However, in my take, the scariest part of the book was Elizondo's mention of the Collins Elite, "a powerful circle of religious fundamentalists who shaped policy within the Department of Defense." I share Elizondo's shock: "To entertain the notion that some generals and their staff of zealots actively promoted a religious agenda, which drove policy, inside of a sacred yet *secular* national security institution, was simply a bridge too far." Some of those within the Pentagon seriously believe the UAPs are demons.

Luis Elizondo is courageous, intelligent, and most of all, credible. This book is a revelation that is long overdue.

The evidence is irrefutable. Aliens are among us! There can be no doubt.

Fortunately, Iowans have nothing to fear. The foresight and consciousness of Iowa's legislative body and governor have prohibited aliens from coming into the state. But to be safe, I recommend that *Prairie Progressive* readers go out and purchase some Kryptonite.

— Marty Ryan was born in Carroll, grew up in Vail, and now lives in Des Moines.

When the rich rob the poor, it's called business.
When the poor fight back, it's called violence.

—Mark Twain

Thank you to our generous readers
for 24 renewals and seven gift
subs in the last four months.



Jan 9

Jo Co Dems Legacy Club
Jerry Harrington, author of
Thunder from the Prairie
Noon, Coralville Public Library
Info: wm.gerhard@gmail.com

Jan 13

First day of Iowa
General Assembly

Jan 19, 1920

ACLU founded

Jan 25, 1915

Supreme Court upheld "yellow
dog" contract forbidding
membership in labor unions

Jan 26, 1945

Auschwitz liberated

Feb 13-14, 1945

Firebombing of Dresden

Feb 14, 1920

League of Women
Voters founded

Feb 18, 1970

Chicago Seven found not guilty
of conspiracy to incite riot

Feb 19, 1940

Smokey Robinson born

Feb 21, 1965

Malcolm X assassinated

Mar 6, 1965

Civil rights marchers beaten
near Selma, Alabama

Mar 8, 1965

First American combat
troops enter Vietnam

Mar 10, 1910

Bayard Rustin born

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