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A look ahead to the Fox Valley's 2011

By JAMEEL NAQVI

Last year, the headlines were dominated by the still-slumping economy and statewide elections.

The economy will continue to loom large, with school districts and municipalities set to negotiate contracts covering thousands of employees, including teachers, police officers and public works employees.

Here's a look at the stories likely to hog the front pages in 2011.

U-46 suit goes to trial

Families who claim Elgin school officials discriminated against minority students when they implemented boundary changes in 2004 may finally get their day in court this year.

The racial bias lawsuit against Elgin School District U-46, which alleges U-46 assigned minorities to inferior schools that are more crowded, is set to go to trial Feb. 28.

Meanwhile, attorneys for U-46 have argued that the plaintiffs do not have standing to bring the case against the district. If the argument is successful, the entire case against the district could be dismissed.

The plaintiffs' attorneys, responded in sealed motion in late December and say they do not believe U-46's argument is fatal to their case.

The next hearing on the district's motion to dismiss the case is Jan. 28.

New contracts in store

Both sides of the bargaining table in District U-46 agree upcoming contract talks will be a major factor in the district's efforts to eliminate a structural deficit pegged at \$40 million at the beginning of this school year.

Because U-46 negotiated a one-year contract extension with its teachers last year, all six of the contracts covering roughly 3,000 unionized employees in the district expire at the end of the 2010-11 school year.

By far the largest contract that will be negotiated is the one covering the district's 2,350 teachers.

Among the topics that may be on the table this year are a salary freeze, raises tied to the rate of inflation and issues surrounding teacher workload and substitute teachers.

Leaders in Cary Elementary District 26 also will be working on a new teachers contract this year.

Although voters approved \$15 million in working cash bonds in November and the district has already made \$6.6 million in cuts, District 26 officials say they still need to make \$4 million in cuts over the next three years.

District leaders are hoping contract talks with the teachers union, which rebuffed multiple efforts to renegotiate the existing agreement, will help avoid the need for deeper cuts.

County board new faces

In the wake of the 2010 Census, which is due to release local population numbers early this year, the Kane County Board will have to remap its 26 districts.

The 13 people elected in November 2010 were elected to 2-year terms. In 2012 every board seat will be up for election, some for 4-year terms, some for 2-year terms.

The board starts 2011 with eight new members, which may lead to some old topics being rehashed and a steep learning curve for the newcomers, especially when it comes to county finances.

Downtown Elgin's missing link

Elgin leaders hope the final link in their downtown revitalization is a new 1,500-foot-long pedestrian friendly overlook of the Fox River.

Demolition of a decrepit parking deck along Riverside Drive is expected to begin this spring and last 14 months, thanks to an \$8 million grant from the state.

Planners have said that if the city's Festival Park is the downtown's "front yard," then the Riverside Drive Promenade will be the city's "front porch."

New Fox River bridge

Construction on St. Charles' Red Gate Bridge is expected to begin in 2011.

The \$18 million to \$22 million project will create another Fox River crossing. That has created some controversy, as some area residents want to see the impact of the new Stearns Road Bridge Fox River crossing area before a new bridge is built.

Opponents of the bridge, including the village of Wayne, don't want traffic diverted through their residential areas. Wayne has even threatened to close Army Trail Road or bog it down with stop signs to thwart the purpose of the bridge.

Construction is expected to take two years. The city already has a plan to pay for the bridge with a combination of state and local funding, including \$6 million it has already socked away.

Mayor's race in Elgin

The campaign season will be in full swing in the new year in Elgin, where a contested mayoral election pits 3-term incumbent Ed Schock against Councilman Dave Kaptain.

Both men already appeared together in October at a forum sponsored by the Association for Legal Americans. There they agreed on many issues, but differed on their approach to developing the city.

Kaptain said two Elgins are developing: one that's wealthy and one that isn't. He said the best way to help the city is to help the poor first.

Schock defended the city's westward growth and said low-income housing is targeted to those with lower incomes, while newer housing gives people the opportunity to move up and stay in Elgin.

Hultgren to Washington

Republican Randy Hultgren enters Congress in an unfamiliar position.

After many years in the state legislature, Hultgren isn't used to being a member of the majority party. Now, he will enter the largest political stage he has ever been on with the longest to-do list he has ever promised.

At the top of that list is creating jobs for the 14th Congressional District and restoring stability for local business owners.

Those will be tough tasks for a freshman lawmaker who may see a competitive challenge to his seat just two years after taking the oath of office.

Algonquin bypass

The Illinois Department of Transportation will finally start work this year on a long-awaited bypass around Algonquin's downtown.

The bypass will span about a mile on Route 31 between Edgewood Drive and Rakow Road and is expected to alleviate traffic congestion in the area. The \$70 million project will include four bridges, retaining walls and a tunnel. As part of the project, portions of Route 31, Huntington Drive and Algonquin Road will be widened and resurfaced.

The bypass will run through Algonquin, Lake in the Hills, Cary and Crystal Lake.

Forest preserve district referendum

Tax hikes for the Kane County Forest Preserve District have been among the most successful ballot measures in the past decade — and another could be on the ballot in 2011.

Forest preserve tax increases passed in 1999, 2005 and 2007, giving the district \$230 million to buy and preserve thousands of acres of open space.

While the details are not yet known, District President John Hoscheit says the down economy has placed long-coveted property on the market at prices previously out of reach for the district.

The district may seek a tax hike because it has exhausted nearly all of the money taxpayers gave the district for the last large property buying spree.

New St. Charles festival

This year marks a time of big change for Noble Fool Theatricals, the theater company in-residence at Pheasant Run Resort in St. Charles.

Last summer, the company announced it will re-christen itself Fox Valley Repertory in January to reflect its commitment to the community it has called home for the last six years.

Along with its new name, the theater company this year will debut a summer arts festival, which will include two full-length Fox Valley Repertory productions and shows from St. Charles' Steel Beam Theatre, the Norris Cultural Arts Center and the Arcada Theatre.

"I want people to think of this as their theater, where they come to share, remember, reflect and laugh," artistic director John Gawlik said.

Ÿ Daily Herald staff writers James Fuller, Harry Hitzeman, Christopher Placek, Susan Sarkauskas and Barb Vitello contributed to this report.