

MINNESOTA

LOCAL • STATE • REGION

Killing prompts calls for increased school security

Students statewide report feeling less safe at school.

By KYELAND JACKSON and JEREMY OLSON
Star Tribune staff writers

The fatal stabbing Friday in St. Paul's Harding High School occurred amid a growing sense among Minnesota students that their schools are no

longer as safe.

Leaders across the Twin Cities responded with urgent calls to increase security and protect students after the deadly encounter between two students. The Teamsters Local 320 union, which counts the mother of the slain 15-year-old boy as a member, asked "elected leadership to partner with us in making this

change now."

"A young 10th-grade student lost his life when he should have been safe in one of our schools," the union said. "A mother lost her son, and we are all in a state of shock and grief."

The victim's name has not been released, and St. Paul police spokesman Mike Ernster gave no updates Saturday about what led to the stabbing.

He said the medical examiner would release the teenager's name Monday.

Harding Principal Be Vang said Monday's classes are canceled to give staff and students "time and space to process this traumatic event."

A candlelight vigil organized by the St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) is planned from 6 to 7 p.m. Monday.

Several people believed to be immediate family members of the victim have not responded to inquiries from the Star Tribune. Authorities also haven't named any students involved in the stabbing, including the 16-year-old who was taken into police custody Friday.

Fatal violence on Minnesota high school campuses is rare, though the stabbing

came about one year after a shooting left another 15-year-old dead outside the South Education Building in Richfield. Results from the recent Minnesota Student Survey nonetheless show a worrisome decline in student perceptions of safety.

Among high school juniors, the share who said See **HARDING** on B6 ►

Closing of Aldi store another low blow

MYRON MEDCALF



For north Minneapolis resident Tasha Powell, it's her great-aunt. That's who she considered

when text messages bombarded her phone about a local grocery store's decision to leave north Minneapolis this week.

Her great-aunt loves to walk, and the Aldi off Penn Avenue sat about a block from the 78-year-old's home.

It was not only an extension of her independence but a portal for her connection to her community.

Powell would sometimes see her great-aunt at the grocery store, which announced its abrupt closing this week, and they'd talk and check on one another.

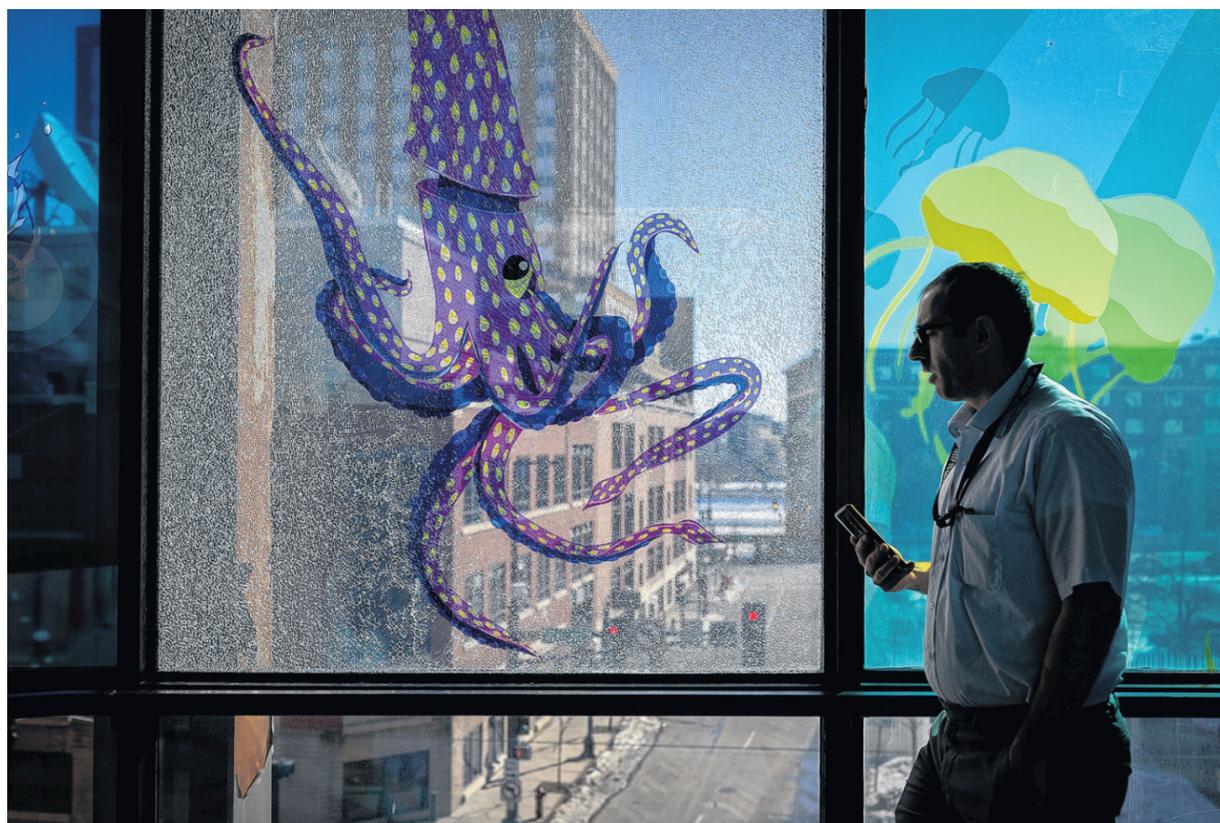
"Losing a grocery store in the community that's already short grocery stores ... we are all human, we all have to eat, we all have to feed ourselves to live," said Powell, co-founder and president of Appetite For Change, the West Broadway community nonprofit that uses food for the social good, according to its website. "More importantly, affordability. And that's what Aldi was in this community."

The closing of Aldi in a key location for Black and impoverished Minneapolis neighborhoods, where residents had easy access to affordable nourishment by foot, bus or car, is another disastrous decision for a community that's often assessed according to its challenges and rarely promoted for its light and positivity.

Those challenges will persist with this decision by a major grocer that, according to City Council Member Jeremiah Ellison and building owner David Wellington, did not offer local officials advance notice or an opportunity to create temporary or permanent solutions, choosing instead to force residents to find other, often more costly, places to get their food. That move will create more logistical, social, economic and health disparities for the people who live there, too.

The crime, violence and other problems will be blamed and highlighted in the conversation about this decision, while the seeds of scarcity and their offspring will be proverbially buried deep in the ground where Minnesotans will not have to acknowledge them. That's the formula here. Attack the problem, ignore the cause.

But the cost of poverty is immense. It's not just food insecurity and financial gaps. It's death. Per the Poor People's Campaign, a national organization that works to address socioeconomic disparities, more than 250,000 See **MEDCALF** on B2 ►



SKITTISH ABOUT THE SKYWAYS



TRAFFIC DOWN, ANXIETY UP

A man made his way last week past the shattered windows that line parts of the St. Paul skyway system, top, and Don Gustafson, above, did his daily cleaning to remove trash and urine. Fewer commuters are using the walkways, adding to safety fears.

With crime fears rising, St. Paul aims for safer, cleaner network

Story by KATIE GALIOTO
Photos by ELIZABETH FLORES
Star Tribune staff

Before the pandemic, Christine Davis would use St. Paul's skyways to walk to the Xcel Energy Center from the other side of downtown during her lunch breaks. She's made the trek once since, and doesn't plan to do it again.

"Things are just different now," Davis said. "If you're not paying attention, you can find yourself in potentially risky situations."

City leaders are turning their attention to St. Paul's skyway system after hearing concerns from downtown residents, workers, business owners and property managers. Since the pandemic began, many say parts of the five-mile network have become unsafe, unsanitary and uncomfortable.

Commercial vacancies, the decline in commuters and a lack of upkeep have contributed to a mood shift over the years. Anxiety rose further after two men were fatally shot in December in a building that connects the skyway system to the Green Line Central Station.

"I was really clear after we saw the double homicide that things need to change — that it was no longer acceptable to just make incremental improvements," said City Council Member Rebecca Noecker, who represents downtown. "We really need a totally new approach."

Part of that effort is already happening. Police have added some overtime patrols in the skyways, Downtown Beat Commander Laura Bolduan said, and the Metro Transit building where the shooting happened has been temporarily locked to deter criminal behavior.

Improvements to the facility, including an See **SKYWAY** on B6 ►

Minneapolis wants its stadium debt removed by state

Under Walz plan, city still on the hook for \$333M.

By DAVE ORRICK
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Now that Minnesota lawmakers appear warm to the idea of paying off taxpayer construction loans on U.S. Bank Stadium, the city of Minneapolis wants in on that action. Thanks to flush state cof-

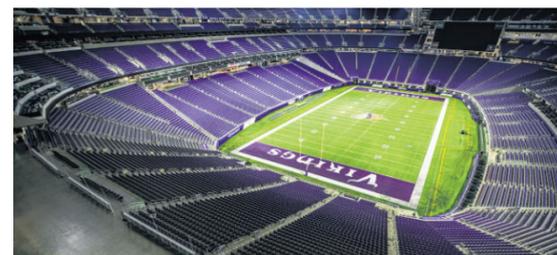
fers, Gov. Tim Walz supports forgiving a portion — some \$60 million — of the city's obligations to the state as part of his proposed budget, which includes paying off all the taxpayer debt on the stadium more than 20 years early.

But that plan wouldn't zero out all of Minneapolis' obligations to the home of the Vikings. Most notably, the city

would still be on the hook for annual payments to the state through 2046 that would ultimately total around \$333 million, according to city and state finance records.

The city wants that wiped out as well.

"We're talking about a state asset," Mayor Jacob Frey said in an interview. "Minneapolis is part of the state. What hap- See **STADIUM** on B6 ►



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Gov. Tim Walz favors forgiving \$60 million of the city's debt.

ST. PAUL LOOKS TO CLEAN UP ITS SKYWAYS

◀ **SKYWAY** from B1
intercom system and window treatments, are in progress, according to agency spokesman Drew Kerr. Metro Transit is also reviewing proposals that could bring supplemental security to this and other transit locations later this year, he said.

Meanwhile, officials are trying to figure out how to remedy less urgent, but still persistent, complaints about the skyways — things like litter, graffiti and spills that are left to fester.

“These very high-profile recent tragic events have brought into brighter focus conditions that have always been allowed to exist in the skyway system,” said Heide Kempf-Schwarze, board chair of the Greater St. Paul Building and Management Association and senior property manager at Wells Fargo Place. “They’ve been going on for far too long without consequence.”

Public-private partnership

Since the beginning of construction on St. Paul’s skyway system in the late 1960s, the second-story corridors have been controversial. Some downtowners love the haven from Minnesota winters, while others argue the skyways pull resources and vitality from the streetscape.

Unlike the mostly private system in Minneapolis, nearly all of St. Paul’s skyways were built by the city and are governed by agreements with building owners, who are responsible for maintenance and monitoring.

In 2017, St. Paul overhauled the skyway section of its city code in response to complaints about crime, litter and accessibility. The city started allowing skyways to close at midnight instead of 2 a.m., and required building owners to provide video surveillance or security personnel.

City leaders touted the changes as a success in the years that followed. Then COVID struck.

“Some of the behaviors and challenges that are there have been there, but they were less noticed because you had such an influx of people navigating through the skyways,” Bolduan said. “We also could be seeing, after the pandemic, more people struggling with housing and addiction.”



Deteriorating skyways have been a problem for some time in St. Paul, and a double homicide in December intensified concerns about safety.

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‘Worse these days’

During lunch hour Wednesday, Kirk McElwain walked alone through the passage in the Victory Ramp building, an empty, white-walled stretch of skyway. After 40 years working in downtown St. Paul, McElwain said he’s seen the area have its ups and downs.

“The skyways are definitely worse these days,” he said. “They’re more beat up. There’s more vandalism. There’s drugs in the skyway. More panhandling.”

Bilal Saleem, owner of B’s Barbershop in the Alliance Bank Center, said he thinks more police presence could “deter a lot of the negativity.” Archie Dickens, a seven-year resident of downtown who stopped by for a haircut, agreed.

“Before the pandemic, we had a parade of people in the skyways all day long,” Saleem

said. “It’s slowed down like molasses. ... And the people that are still coming to work down here, a lot of them are living in fear.”

Larry Thomas carried his lunch through the St. Paul Athletic Club, a dark and vacant corridor that the city has tried to animate by sometimes having staff work in adjacent glass-walled offices.

“For me, personally, it feels the same,” he said. “I think people are just seeing more because it’s not as busy.”

Near Union Depot, Don Gustafson pushed a floor scrubber through the walkway he cleans daily, sometimes for hours. He said his crew has dealt with an increase in vandalism, litter, urine and drugs.

“We’re trying really, really hard to make it better and better,” Gustafson said, nodding to a man who thanked him for

the improved smell.

Hope for a reset

Joe Spencer, president of the St. Paul Downtown Alliance, said the skyways have always been complex — the winding design left some awkward spaces and blind corners.

But recent complaints, even the less egregious ones — about smoking, stained carpets, dirty walls and broken windows — have elevated the skyways to a policy and programming priority.

“I think a great concern is just the overall kind of feel and experience in the skyway,” Spencer said, adding that the system needs “almost a reset of the basic social compact about what this space is for.”

Noecker is planning to bring a proposal to the City Council that would make it easier for the city to step in

when building owners aren’t keeping up their properties. Instead of having to pursue criminal prosecution, as it currently does, the city would be able to complete maintenance work and assess the property owner for the cost.

In addition to better enforcement of building standards, city officials are brainstorming ways to make the skyways more welcoming, including pop-up shops to fill vacant storefronts.

“If you have a responsibility for safety and security downtown, we want you to be a part of these conversations,” said Deputy Mayor Jaime Tincher.

Officials also say there’s a need for better coordination and communication among the various groups tasked with keeping the skyways safe, such as police, community ambassadors and private security.

Solutions can start small, too, Noecker said. For instance, high school students at the St. Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists are teaming up with the Minnesota Museum of American Art to paint a mural on the Victory Ramp wall.

And leaders are still betting big on foot traffic downtown, even though workers have yet to return in full force nearly three years after the COVID-19 outbreak. Spencer said a cellphone data tracking service shows skyway traffic during the workday is at about 60% of pre-pandemic levels.

“I am a relentless optimist — and I believe that we are going to bring thousands more residents and workers to downtown St. Paul,” Noecker said. “That is what I work on every single day.”

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Shock, grief, dread follow killing at St. Paul high school

◀ **HARDING** from B1
they “strongly” believed their schools were safe declined from 52% in 2013 to 26% in 2022, according to survey results.

The share who said they believed they were unsafe more than doubled from 6% to 13%.

St. Paul Public Schools did not participate in the 2022 survey, so student perceptions from that district weren’t available. But about 16% of juniors surveyed in other schools across Ramsey County said they felt unsafe.

A district spokesperson said Saturday that the level of violence seen Friday at Harding is rare and that there’s no record of a student previously being killed in a St. Paul public school.

District educators said they expect many students to struggle with grief and trauma over the killing.

“I’m enraged. I’m sad,” said Leah VanDassor, president of SPFE, Local 28. “I know there have been far too many similar incidents around our community that have left many of us heartbroken and hopeless.”

The union is affiliated with Education Minnesota, which marked the Feb. 1, 2022, Richfield shooting with calls to fund more mental health services for students.

The most effective security for high schools has been a nationwide dispute. St. Paul schools stopped using police as school resource officers (SROs) in 2020 and instead deployed school liaison workers who carried pepper spray and handcuffs.

Studies have found that the resource officers can contribute to equity problems, such

as the referral of more misbehaving minority students to law enforcement than white students.

Upset parents wondered if circumstances demand more police presence at St. Paul schools. Joseph Moore said his 14-year-old son was robbed at Como Park High School in December.

“How much longer do we have to live in constant fear for our children’s safety?” he asked.

The stabbing occurred the same week that Minnesota lawmakers introduced safe

schools legislation that would increase funding for security, drug prevention and cybersecurity.

“My heart goes out to the Harding High Community and the family and friends of the lost student,” said Rep. Mary Frances Clardy, DFL-Inver Grove Heights, the lead author of the bill.

Some residents, including Satara Strong-Allen with Love First Community Engagement, gathered people at the Indigenous Roots Cultural Arts Center on Friday to help them come to grips with the killing

and to heal. Strong-Allen said the community must uplift and support young people in order to deter such encounters from happening again.

“I think a lot of people are overwhelmed — shocked, you know? It’s not an incident where you can just quickly move on,” Strong-Allen said. The “community is tired of this, and so moving forward I think it’s really important to invest into our young people.”

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Minneapolis wants state to remove the remainder of its stadium debt

◀ **STADIUM** from B1
pens in Minneapolis impacts every portion of the state. This is a smart financial move for the state of Minnesota, and we’re part of that. If the debt is fully prepaid, Minneapolis’ portion should be as well.”

The political prospects of the city’s hopes are unclear.

Walz’s plan to pay off the debt is about as straightforward as the state cutting a check. But clearing the city’s ledger on its portion of the construction cost is more complicated. It would require a change in the state laws that enabled the stadium to be built seven years ago.

On the other hand, giving Minneapolis what it’s asking for would not require the state actually spending any more money; instead, the state would be giving up a source of revenue: annual payments from Minneapolis into the state’s general fund.

Original stadium deal

Back when the stadium was approved, the grand compromise — it was bipartisan, bicameral and included the city and the Vikings — split the cost of building the stadium almost equally between the private and public sectors, with the private sector picking up 55% and the public 45%. The city and state split the latter, with the city agreeing to pony up 30% and the state 70%.

When the final construction tab came in at roughly \$1.1 billion, that left the Vikings and additional private sources ponying up about \$620 million, the state owing about \$350 million and the city of Minneapolis — where the stadium is located — committed to around \$150 million.

Important note: Those dollar amounts are from the original price tag. Paying that money meant taking out long-term loans, which meant

interest, which meant the final amount paid would be significantly more — bringing the total to around \$880 million from the public sector.

Avoiding much of that interest accruing is one of the reasons why paying off the stadium early has garnered bipartisan support; it would save taxpayers about \$226 million.

Another reason: There’s a big pile of cash to do it.

Stadium reserve fund

Under Walz’s plan, which was first floated by lawmakers from both parties last year, the vast majority of the payoff would come from the stadium reserve fund. The fund is brimming with money as its source, electronic pulltabs, grew in popularity since they were approved as part of the original stadium plan.

That, combined with a projected record surplus in the state’s general fund, has cre-

ated fertile ground for paying down the stadium debt, which stands at \$377 million. Here are the projected numbers: The stadium reserve fund will have about \$368 million, and the general fund will have a surplus of about \$176 billion.

Minneapolis, meanwhile, has seen its funding sources for stadium debt payments — a mix of local hospitality and sales taxes — strained since the pandemic began.

The city has just begun to make payments on its obligations for stadium costs. From 2016 to 2020, the state essentially covered for the city’s payments to allow the city to pay off debt from the Minneapolis Convention Center. It’s those payments that Walz has proposed to forgive, amounting to a roughly \$60 million savings for the city.

Lobbying begins

The city’s side of stadium

financing is a complex series of commitments to different aspects of the stadium, and those supporting the city’s position will have to convince lawmakers that they’re not trying to freeload off the state’s current largesse.

The city’s argument to lawmakers is that if the public debt does get paid off early — as Walz has proposed and lawmakers from both parties seem enthusiastic about — the city shouldn’t have to make any payments to the state over that debt. But it’s unclear how that will play with lawmakers, since the original law was drafted so that the city would have to make payments regardless.

State Sen. Nick Frentz, DFL-Mankato, the lead sponsor of one stadium debt bill already introduced at the Capitol, was noncommittal when asked whether he supported the city being relieved of its future con-

struction payments. “I’m confident that if the House, Senate and governor work together, we can get the best result for the state of Minnesota,” he said in an interview, noting that many lawmakers have just begun learning the intricacies of the issue.

The city has other obligations to the stadium, which it shares with the Vikings, including annual payments to a fund for operating expenses and to another fund for capital improvements.

Those payments and how they’re calculated could serve as bargaining chips in negotiations between the city and any skeptical lawmakers.

It’s also possible the issue could become tied up in larger talks about the state’s overall two-year budget, which often isn’t hammered out until May.

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