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Preferred Mutual Insurance Company puts people first



Preferred Mutual donates \$5,000 to Good Shepherd Communities in New Berlin. (Submitted photo)

KELLI MILLER
EVENING SUN

NEW BERLIN — Preferred Mutual Insurance Company was founded in New Berlin in 1896 and has been an active member of the community ever since.

They are headquartered in New Berlin and provide proper-

ty and casualty insurance coverage to more than 232,000 individuals and businesses through a network of more than 560 independent agents located throughout New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire.

Preferred Mutual's leadership team includes experienced board members and executives

who oversee and support the company's mission, vision, and business.

A year of community support

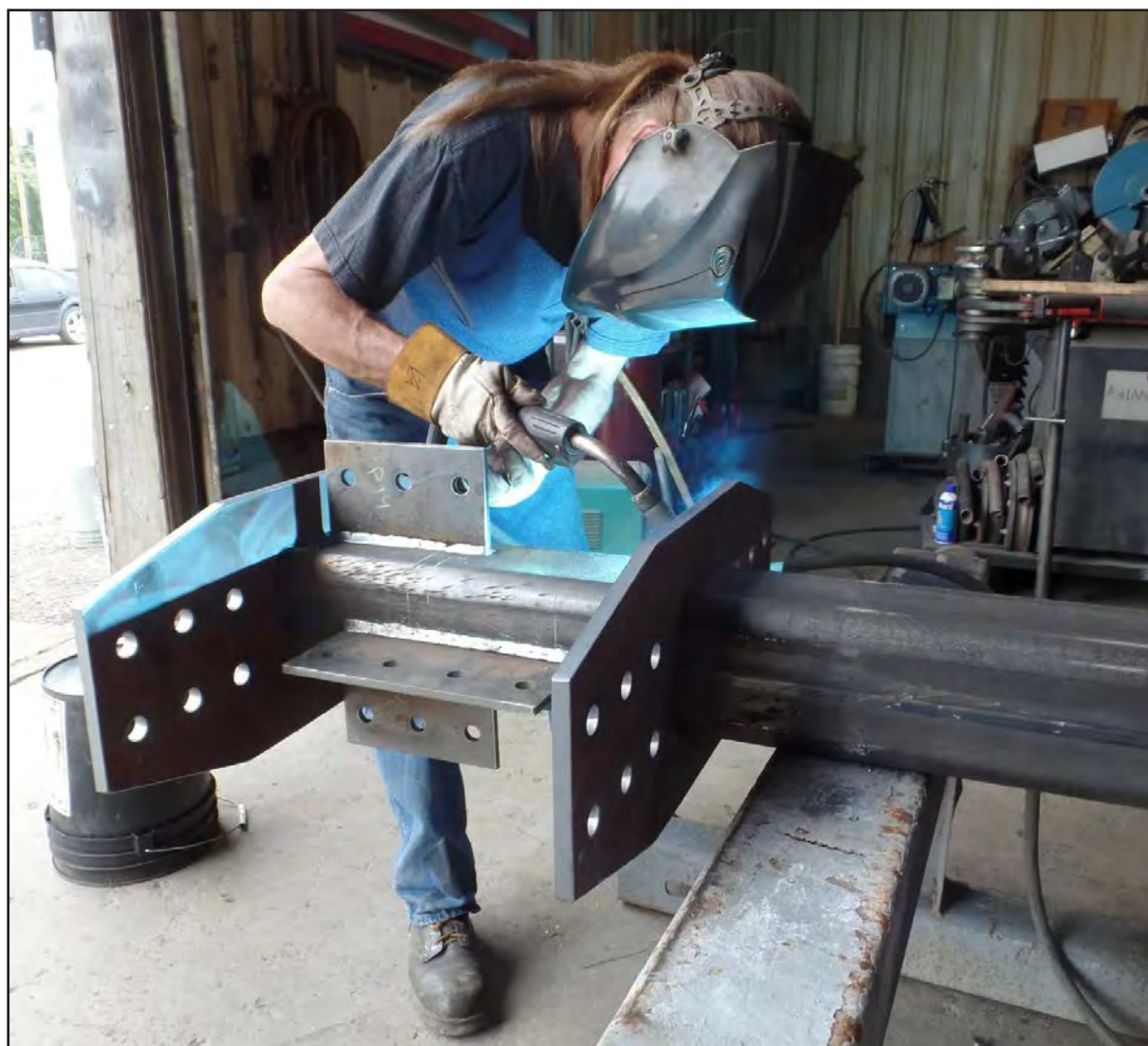
Preferred Mutual President and CEO Benedikt Sander said supporting the community is the reason they exist. They support involvement that improves

the quality of life where their employees live and also support organizations that provide disaster relief, safe housing, transportation, and opportunities for small business growth and development.

"Being engaged in the community is always important to

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Steel Sales touts diversification in industry plagued by red tape



A Steel Sales Inc. employee welds inside the fabrication shop at the company's Sherburne headquarters. (Photo from Steel Sales website)

SHAWN MAGRATH
EVENING SUN

SHERBURNE — With an eye on opportunities to grow its line of commercial and agricultural wear parts, along with a stronger outside sales department that's expanded over the last year, Steel Sales Inc. execs have ironclad hopes of drumming up even more business in the coming year.

Steel Sales, located along Route 12 just south of the Village of Sherburne, is coming off a good year that saw the addition of a third outside salesman to its team, as well as national recognition for reaching its five-year milestone as a Hardox Wearparts certified vendor.

The company also carried out efforts in the last year to start contracting with local agencies for crucial business services, such as IT, financial advising, and website design — all of which are services that had previously been outsourced to other regions. The move, the

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Business SPOTLIGHT



The iconic Gilligan's Island storefront, located in Sherburne. (Submitted photo)

Gilligan's Island

SOPHIA ROOT

EVENING SUN

SHERBURNE — Gilligan's Island in Sherburne is a family restaurant and ice cream shop.

Aside from their unique and homemade ice cream, they sell burgers, sandwiches, wraps, sides and a complete menu of sides and salads.

Gilligan's Island is a long-time member of the Chenango County community.

Owner Michael Lagoe said he is grateful for the support provided by Sherburne and the surrounding areas saying, we are "grateful to live and work in such a close-knit community."

Annually, Gilligan's Island sells 100,000 ice cream cones and sundaes and about 35,000 burgers.

Lagoe grew up in the area and went away to Binghamton for college and experienced life in a larger community. However, when it comes to raising a family, Lagoe wouldn't want to do it anywhere other than in a small town. He came to Sherburne and bought Gilligan's Island in 2007.

Built in the 1960's, Gilligan's Island started off as an ice cream shop. Unique to the time and location, it included a drive through window. Lagoe likes to think that it was most likely one of the first drive through windows in our area, as the drive through was conceptualized in the late 1950's and was initially popularized on the west coast.

The restaurant building has become iconic in local communities, and patrons often take pictures outside of the iconic signage, according to Lagoe. A significant part of the weekend crowd are college students from Colgate, and Lagoe is grateful for their support. As a matter of fact: "Raider Passion (a crowd favorite ice cream flavor) was developed at Colgate", said Lagoe.

Acknowledging that they do not conduct business in a high-income area, Lagoe is grateful that Gilligan's Island have been able to "...keep it affordable" through COVID-19. Through the years, they've had great reliable help from friends and family in the area. Their employees provide great food and service and are happy to be a staple in the community.

One of the "shining moments" for Lagoe as a business owner this was in 2020 on the weekend of the Sherburne Pageant of Bands.

The annual event is the biggest fundraiser for the Sherburne Fire Department, and due to the cancellation, they were going to go without that money. Gilligan's Island was lucky enough to stay open through the pandemic, and so they donated 20% of their profits to the Sherburne Fire Department.

This day was busy for Gilligan's Island, and they were happy to donate \$4,400 when it was all said and done.

On Mondays and Wednesdays between October and March, Gilligan's Island hosts Community Fundraiser Nights, where they support a different group every night. Whichever group is participating gets 20% of the profits made that evening. These groups can take home \$300 to \$600 a night, depending on the community participation. Lagoe is happy to host these to support participants, and to stimulate the support of small businesses over the cold winter months.

To learn more about Gilligan's Island or to view their menu visit www.gilliganssherburne.com or follow them on Facebook at Gilligan's Restaurant.

Preferred Mutual Insurance Company puts people first -



Preferred Mutual employees Brady Cabral, Chris Cabral, Stacy Smith, Karen Galavotti, Mike Asma, Avery Solloway, Mike Solloway, Michele Graham, and Peter Karaman volunteer at Gus Macker. (Submitted photo)



Preferred Mutual employees Cheryl Naubereit, Colleen Ackerman, Deb Harris, and April Crandall volunteer at Colorscape Chenango. (Submitted photo)



Preferred Mutual employees volunteer at the Norwich YMCA to support Helping Hands. (Submitted photo)



Preferred Mutual employees volunteer at the Chenango County SPCA. (Submitted photo)

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Preferred Mutual Insurance Company puts people first -

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Preferred and always important to the people that work at Preferred," said Sander. "One thing we did last year was create what we call 'Team Chenango,' and we put more structure behind our community engagement."

He said the company supported local projects involving Giving Thursday, Helping Hands, and the United Way to give back to the community. They were also active with youth contributions, scholarships and sponsorships. The company works with other organizations such as the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, the American Red Cross, Chenango Memorial Hospital, Chase Health, and more.

"It's been amazing to be involved and every time more people want to volunteer," he added.

Preferred employees volunteer for a number of programs including Adopt-A-Highway, Habitat for Humanity, Salvation Army flood relief.

"This has been a huge success, not only tapping into what I think is important to us and our people but also really making a difference and making this a much more structured part of what we do," said Sander.

He said community participation was popular with employees and a huge success.

"We are very excited to continue this tradition by getting more involved with new charities in the community because there is definitely a lot of need in Chenango County, and we want to do our part to support our neighbors," said Sander.

Preferred Mutual announced in 2023 they received a Financial Strength Rating from AM Best Company and for the 21st consecutive year, they were reaffirmed with an "A" (Excellent) with a "Stable" outlook. Excellent ratings are given to insurance companies who not only have excellent financial stability but are able to meet the contractual needs of the policyholders.

AM Best acknowledged Preferred Mutual's operating performance is supported by solid underwriting results and consistent investment earnings.

Facing Future Challenges

Sander said, "On the people side, there are some things we started last year which I'm really excited to continue into the future. It's really around people who attend the meet-



Preferred Mutual Insurance Company located at 1 Preferred Way was founded in New Berlin in 1896 and has been a part of the community ever since. (Submitted photo)

ings with local superintendents in Chenango County, so I'm excited to find more ways to recruit from the high schools and support the students at the high schools that choose to not attend college, to make sure we can help them navigate the path and hopefully vilify directly from being high school graduates and make this a more structured path; that would be wonderful."

"We're also working with Le Moyne College and want to give them a great career path and put more structure to make sure we have the right way to attract them and develop the students to have long term careers," said Sanders, adding, "Hopefully with us."

"Wherever you are, there are always plus and minuses, and so we always have to manage the strengths and manage the challenges," he added.

He said, "Small companies like us, who work in one, two, or three states have a base network of CEO's and have to uncompetete so we can share protective screening without any anti-trust concerns."

He said he talked to some CEO's who are based in big cities with many universities and they complain about the intense competition of talent.

"You might think how amazing it is to be in big city with a lot of Universities and a lot of talent coming through, but wherever you're based there are plus and minus's, so we like where we are," Sanders added.

Sander said the company has been in rural areas and working around the challenges. "There are absolutely great people everywhere," he said of the local area.

"That's one reason we decid-

ed to partner with local superintendents with places like Le Moyne and Utica College, as they have a good risk management program," said Sander. "We want to make sure we find the people that want to work for a company like ours -where we grow our managers, leaders, over time."

"We have to work a little harder in finding talent and building our leaders, we can't assume we can just find them and that's ok," he said. "We've been doing this for a long time as well."

He said they haven't really seen a lot of challenges in retention in keeping strong people but once again, they have to do the right thing.

"Talent attraction can be a challenge," said Sander. "it's not so much a challenge for the typical entry level positions but positions such as cyber security and technology, where we need a specialist, that's where we need to reach out further to find that talent."

He said their search for such a specialist led them to Albany where they hired their cyber technology manager to improve safety with customers and data.

"You can't always hire locally, but when you can it makes things a lot easier," he added.

Sander said they have 300 over all employees and about half of them in Central New York with most in Chenango and Otsego County. He said the New Berlin property has about a handful at this time with underwriters and key persons based locally with more in Norwich than New Berlin.

Investing in their employees

Sander said their training

programs go across all levels in the company.

He said last year they hired a gentleman from Le Moyne into a risk management underwriting role and he's still receiving a lot of general industry training.

"Insurance is a wonderful industry to join because there's a lot of industry wide education," he added. "We use a lot of industry training, we're teaching classes, and leaders are teaching classes to our more junior employees so they can earn a general insurance designation to commercial underwriting."

He said along the way, the employees become part of the system and culture.

"I worked with much larger companies before I came

to Preferred and the ability to tailor to the needs of the individual and tailor to the needs of the community, it's just so much easier when you can do the thinking with five people as opposed to 500 so you can tailor and make it specific," he explained.

Heading into the future with technology

Sander said, "There are several things that will always be important to Preferred Mutual and it's the focus on customers, the focus on our agents- to whom our customers find us because we're not such a brand name, and more broadly, our focus on our people, and focus on technology."

He said a founding principal was customer focus and

technology help support that priority.

"Technology is a huge focus for us as insurance is heavily dependent on technology," he added. From the holder policy, where you pay your bill, when you adjust your claim, all of those things depend on technology."

"We made the decision over the last few months to replace our old technology and go with the much more current state of technology with more in the cloud, more integrated, and more third party data," he said, "Which also allows us to tap into some other more cloud based, AI based technology, which is our big focus for the next three years."

He said, "Like many countries, we have used our technology for 10, 20, maybe even 30 years and while the technology serves just fine, we know how much more powerful technology has become."

"We're real excited to lay the foundation for the next bit of growth and service our customers over the next 30 years," said Sander. "I'm very excited for the company and for all of us because this will build a new future."

"We're all about serving our customers, focusing on our people, our talent, and our pricing, technology and products then obviously the financial results," Sander said.

He said the company strongly believes in always doing the right things.

"If you treat the people well and invest in them, give them a career path; then you'll get great performance for the company and for everyone on the team," said Sanders.


For more information go to www.preferredmutual.com




Preferred Mutual employees volunteer for earth day clean up. (Submitted photo)

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Founded in 1966, Oliver's Campers is a third-generation family owned and operated RV dealership located in Norwich. (Submitted photo)

Business SPOTLIGHT Oliver's Campers

SOPHIA ROOT
EVENING SUN

NORWICH – Oliver's Campers is a third-generation family owned and operated RV dealership located in Norwich since 1966.

Oliver's offers new and used travel trailers, fifth wheels, and pop-ups. They also offer a wide variety of parts in their store and have a full-service department that can handle any RV repair.

Oliver's Campers is owned by Jim Oliver, whose sons Andrew, Tyler, and Jordan manage day to day operations of the dealership.

Tyler Oliver discussed the history of the business, saying, "My grandparents enjoyed taking their family camping and decided to offer that experience to our community. They started by ordering 3 pop-up trailers, that they set up in their side yard, in January, yes, January, of 1966. It took off from there."

Aside from being a true family affair, Oliver's Campers is also loyal to Norwich and surrounding communities. The dealership sponsors community events and advertises on local placemats but has made a concentrated effort in the past

few years to get more involved.

The business donates to the UHS Chenango Memorial Hospital Auxiliary, Friends of Rogers, Chenango SPCA and are involved in YMCA and little league teams. Additionally, they have participated in the annual Tree Lighting Festival in downtown Norwich for the past few years, setting up a fire pit and giving out s'mores.

While the rural setting of Norwich and Chenango County lends to camping, it presents some unique issues for consumers. Since there is no main highway that runs through Norwich and customers must come here to pick up their campers, they see Oliver's Campers as a hidden gem.

Tyler said the dealership has sold to customers from Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and Maine. "The outsiders appreciate the legit family-owned business out in the middle of nowhere, and always say they are pleased with the beautiful drive and are surprised at all Norwich has to offer."

He said he is proud of the community and organizational involvement he and his brothers have taken on in the past few years.

"We love to have the Oliver name out there in the Norwich community. We are glad that we can give back monetarily and with hands on involvement," said Tyler.

Born and raised in Norwich, Tyler has never seen himself

anywhere else. He appreciates the local environment and the family ties that are here for him.

The dealership has eighteen employees, who are the greatest resource to the company.

"As we have grown, we've depended on them to ensure our family-orientated environment still exists. We've gone from 6 employees, 4 of which being Olivers, to 18 employees. Getting them to not only buy into the 'Oliver way' but promote it has been extremely important in our growth," said Tyler.

In 2022 the company sold 290 campers out of their Norwich store. To put this growth into perspective, just 10 years ago in 2013, they sold 76. Oliver's Campers is coming off a few great years with the increase in camping during COVID. The industry has started to level itself out and the company is excited to see where it goes.

Recently, Oliver's Campers built a second building in LaFayette for service and bolstered their service department here in Norwich. They are currently running a Fall Savings Event, there are deals offered on all their current inventory, including new.

Oliver's Campers is open Monday-Friday 9am-5:30pm, and Saturday 9am-1pm. To learn more about the dealership: visit their website www.oliverscampers.com or Oliver's Campers on Facebook.

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Chenango County Historical Society programs are made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

Steel Sales touts diversification in industry plagued by red tape -



Steel Sales Inc. remains focused on offering a wide range of products for every need, from hobby fabrication to large scale construction. (Photo from Steel Sales website)



Despite hardships of attracting and retaining employees in recent years, more than half of the employees at Steel Sales in Sherburne have been with the company for over a decade. The company is looking to expand its outside sales department this year. (Photo from Steel Sales website)

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company says, is a solid investment in the local area which, in turn, is good for business.

Now the company aims to keep the momentum going into the new year, said Steel Sales owner Brenda Westcott.

Looking to expand

Westcott has been at the helm of Steel Sales since 1993. Roughly half of Steel Sales' 30 employees have been with the company for a decade or longer, incentivized by a competitive salary and employee benefits. Company leaders continually work with other local agencies to attract new hires.

"We're currently looking for a fourth person for outside sales," said Westcott. "It's going to help us cover the 22 counties around us that we service."

For more than three decades, Steel Sales has been a premiere source for steel, aluminum, and stainless steel in sheets, shapes and structural sections. The company has invested heavily in its fabrication services over the years so that it could offer a wide range of products and services in steel supplies and custom fabrication for hobbyists, contractors, and large scale operations.

"Our business is extremely and equally diversified between

hobbyists who will walk in the door and a lot of industries, big and small," said Westcott. "We're very diversified when it comes to the size of projects. It could be a \$10 sale or a \$100,000 sale."

Westcott said the company is looking to expand in 2024, and is now entertaining the notion of investing millions into new fabrication equipment.

But in spite of its accomplishments, business isn't easy, Westcott noted. Like countless small businesses across the state, she explained that many of Sherburne Steel's tentative investments are contingent on the direction of the state and federal legislature which, in recent years, has inundated the company with red tape and regulations that have hampered growth.

"The regulations that they impose on companies really cripple free enterprise and it's just gotten worse," said Westcott, adding her reluctance to invest heavily in her business until after the elections. "I'm not interested in putting a lot of money into things. Even though we are very fortunate, our country is in a very sad state right now. We need to see if that turns around in 2024."

Finding workers and student outreach

Attracting new blood has also been a challenge, more so now than ever before, she added. Last year, Steel Sales management conducted close to 100 interviews for full-time positions in the company; yet hiring and retention continues to be a strain on the company.

"For years and years, we didn't experience much turnover. But in the last couple of years, that's changed," Westcott said. "Our lowest positions in entry level sales and entry level warehouse has seen more turnover. It's difficult - like people aren't interested in working."

To right the ship, Steel Sales is collaborating with educational institutions, including the Sherburne-Earlville School District, SUNY Morrisville, and DCMO BOCES in Norwich to showcase prospective job opportunities. Hopes are that these collaborations ultimately lead to more local hires within the company.

"We've been working with BOCES for over 10 years with work experience internship programs for welding. Students spend time for two weeks here to get an understanding of the industry with some real life experience," said Steel Sales General Manager Josh Newman.

Newman said that by simply exposing students to available opportunities, Steel Sales

increases its chances of recruiting new graduates for entry level jobs that may lead to long lasting careers in the area.

"Alongside doing that shadowing program, we give tours of our facility for students. It's a benefit to us to help them," he said. "It's a mutual relationship that we have that inspires and educates the local youth about

the employment opportunities in our area after they're done with school."

For the time being, Westcott said Steel Sales is staying positive, with a focus primarily on diversification of services in order to suit customers' needs.

"That's a major thing we're looking to continue in 2024," she added. "We may not know

if we want to invest in another million dollar piece of equipment until I know what's going to happen with the elections, but being diversified as we are with the different types of customers we serve helps to keep some of our challenges to a minimum."

More about Steel Sales Inc. can be found on the company's website, steelsalesinc.com.

Sherburne-Earlville

Nickname Change

General Information and FAQs

What Is Happening?
In June 2022, the New York State Supreme Court ruled that New York public school districts may no longer use Indigenous nicknames, symbols or mascots.

In April 2023, the New York State Department of Education determined the Sherburne-Earlville Central School District must change its nickname - "Marauders" - because of its previous association with Indigenous mascots and imagery.

Boards of education for approximately 60 New York school districts were given until June 30, 2023 to commit to eliminating the use of Indigenous nicknames, symbols and/or mascots. The deadline to complete this is June 30, 2025.

What has SECS D done so far?
The "Marauders" nickname and a variety of Indigenous mascots represented Sherburne Central School for years before it merged with Earlville Central School in 1967. Both the nickname and the Indigenous imagery carried over to represent the merged district.

In 2001, then-NYSED Commissioner Richard Mills urged boards of education across the state to end the use of Native American mascots as, he wrote, they can become a barrier to building a safe and nurturing school community and can hinder the academic achievements of all students.

SECS D complied in 2002, adopting a wolf as its official mascot/logo and removing all Indigenous imagery from the district. The "Marauders" nickname carried on, though, as it had not been deemed inappropriate by the NYSED until this past April.

In light of rulings by the NYSED and the NYS Supreme Court, the SECS D Board of Education has adopted a plan to change the "Marauders" nickname with the help of students, families, and community members.

SECS D already has started to phase out the use of the "Marauders" nickname in district

communications and will remove it from anything related to the district as soon as practical (buildings, uniforms, billboards, etc.).

What happens if we say no?
Refusing to change our nickname is not an option. If a school district does not comply, the NYSED may take actions against the district as prescribed under Education Law § 306. These actions may include the removal of school officers and the withholding of State Aid.

What happens next?
SECS D will hold a Community Forum at 6:00 p.m. February 28 at the Middle School/High School Auditorium to discuss the next steps involved in changing the district's nickname.

The Community Forum will be open to all residents of the Sherburne-Earlville Central School District and will be largely for informational purposes. Those who attend will have an opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas with the SECS D Board of Education and Administration.

Following the Community Forum, a list of potential nicknames will be compiled in March. SECS D students will then vote to determine the new district nickname, which will be announced before the end of this school year.

Please note
SECS D adopted official wolf-related logos during a district-wide rebranding effort in the 2021-2022 school year. These logos and our official Branding Guide are online at <https://www.secsd.org/BrandingGuide.aspx>.

Pending the results of nickname voting, further discussion regarding the continued use of these official wolf-related logos may be required.

SECS D's official school colors will remain Maroon and White regardless of voting results.

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