

Monday, June 1, 2026



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County, city, several officers named in civil rights lawsuit

Posted Monday, September 29, 2025 3:20 pm

By Heather Schaefer Editor

A Rhinelander man has filed a federal lawsuit alleging seven Oneida County sheriff's deputies and two city police officers violated his civil rights.

According to the complaint, filed Sept. 23 in the United States District Court for the Western District of Wisconsin, plaintiff Jacob G. Larson alleges illegal search and seizure, unreasonable extension of seizure, unlawful arrest and failure to intervene.

The complaint details two separate interactions Larson had with law enforcement in

February 2025.

Larson alleges county deputies first detained him at a local dental office on Feb. 13.

According to the complaint, Larson was dropping off his child, who had an appointment, and the deputies were responding to a "tip" that he had driven while smelling of intoxicants.

"When the deputies located Larson, they did not smell intoxicants," the complaint states.

"They had no other evidence that Larson had driven under the influence. Nevertheless, the deputies detained Plaintiff Larson, frisked him, and forced him to perform field sobriety tests. All of this was done without reasonable suspicion that Plaintiff Larson had committed a crime or was armed or dangerous."

Ultimately, one of the deputies advised Larson that he did not believe Larson was impaired and no traffic citations or warnings were issued.

One week later, on Feb. 20, Larson alleges sheriff's deputies "unlawfully seized, frisked, searched, and (de facto) arrested" him "without reasonable suspicion, much less probable cause."

In that instance, the complaint alleges, the deputies were investigating a domestic dispute involving Larson's brother, Jordan.

According to the complaint, the reporting party told 911 dispatch that Jacob Larson's vehicle had pulled up to the house following the dispute but they didn't know if Jordan Larson had left in the vehicle or not. There was no indication that Jacob Larson had any involvement in the dispute, according to the complaint.

Later, deputies observed Larson's vehicle at a local gas station.

"The deputies knew what Jordan Larson looked like based on prior interactions," the complaint alleges. "The deputies observed only one male, later identified as Plaintiff Larson, pumping gas into the vehicle. They knew this was not Jordan Larson. Upon arriving at the scene, one of the deputies yelled out, 'Jacob!' referring to Jacob Larson. One of the deputies approached Plaintiff Larson and ordered him to step towards them. After this order, Plaintiff Larson was not free to leave. The deputies then placed Plaintiff Larson in handcuffs or watched and failed to intervene. At the time the deputies placed Plaintiff Larson in handcuffs, they lacked reasonable suspicion that (he) had committed, was committing, or would commit a crime. The other deputies were also aware that there was not reasonable suspicion that Plaintiff Larson had committed, was committing, or would commit a crime; however, they failed to intervene when (he) was placed in handcuffs. After they placed Plaintiff Larson in handcuffs, one deputy reached into Larson's back pants pocket and pulled out his wallet. Plaintiff Larson did not consent to this search of his person. The Oneida deputies did not have a warrant to search Plaintiff Larson's person, and they lacked any lawful exception to the warrant requirement. The deputy then opened Plaintiff Larson's wallet and located his driver's license. The driver's license indicated the man in handcuffs was Plaintiff Jacob Larson, not his brother Jordan Larson. At this point, the Oneida deputies had additional evidence that the man was not Jordan Larson. A deputy then told the

remaining deputies that they had detained Jacob Larson, not Jordan Larson. The deputies, however, still did not release Plaintiff. Instead, one of them frisked Plaintiff, while the others failed to intervene. Besides a lack of reasonable suspicion that Plaintiff had committed a crime, there was also no reason to believe he was armed and dangerous. The frisk yielded no contraband. Still, the Oneida deputies failed to release Plaintiff.”

A few moments later, two Rhinelander officers arrived on scene and learned from the deputies that the man being held was Jacob Larson not Jordan.

According to the complaint, the deputies and Rhinelander police defendants “proceeded to question Plaintiff Larson about his brother’s whereabouts.”

Larson was handcuffed and questioned for approximately 30 minutes after the officers knew he was not Jordan, the complaint alleges.

Ultimately, no charges of any kind were filed against Jacob Larson.

The complaint lists a total of eight counts.

Count 1, against deputies Joseph Hallihan and Mitchell Ellis, alleges illegal search and failure to intervene in connection with the Feb. 13 incident. Count 2 alleges the same two officers unreasonably extended the seizure of the plaintiff on Feb. 13.

Count 3 alleges unreasonable seizure against deputies Christopher Coniglio, Thomas Williams, Matthew Rudolph, Andrew Berg and Luke Drummond regarding the Feb. 20 incident. Count 4 alleges illegal search/failure to intervene against deputies Coniglio, Williams, Rudolph, Berg and Drummond also related to the Feb. 20 incident. Counts 5 and 6 allege unlawful arrest and illegal seizure. Coniglio, Williams, Rudolph, Berg and Drummond are listed as defendants as are City of Rhinelander officers Kurt Helke and Ryan Larsen.

The final two counts allege that Oneida County and the City of Rhinelander are liable for the actions of their officers as they were all on duty and acting within the scope of their employment during the incidents in question.

John H. Bradley, of the Madison law firm Strang Bradley, is representing the plaintiff.

In response to a request for comment, he noted that the “Fourth Amendment protects everyone—parents picking up kids from the dentist, or someone filling up at the gas station. Those rights belong to all of us, and that’s why this case matters.”

“The goal of this lawsuit is not only to vindicate Mr. Larson’s rights, but to ensure that this doesn’t happen to anyone else in Rhinelander, Oneida County, or Wisconsin,” he added.

“Now that Mr. Larson’s civil rights lawsuit has been filed, the insurance companies for the City of Rhinelander and Oneida County need to take a look at the facts and decide whether they want to concede that the officers violated Mr. Larson’s constitutional rights and resolve this case fairly and inexpensively. If they choose not to, we are prepared to present the case to a jury and let the community determine whether Mr. Larson’s constitutional rights were violated and, if so, what remedy is appropriate.”

It should be noted that Strang Bradley represented another Oneida County resident, Corey Rossiter, in a separate recent civil rights lawsuit against Oneida County. That lawsuit was

settled in July with the county agreeing to pay \$4,001 plus costs and attorney's fees. For his part, Rhinelander city attorney Steven R. Sorenson stated that the city had yet to be served with a copy of the complaint at the time this reporter contacted him. He also noted that the plaintiff did not submit a notice of claim prior to filing the lawsuit.

"As far as the role of the officers based on the alleged facts in the pleadings, Oneida County Officers were in charge of the incidents and the City Officers were any backup if needed," he wrote in an email to the Star Journal. "The suggested charges were not city charges so it seems likely the City had no involvement other than observation and scene control if needed. Based on the pleadings this was solely a Sheriff's Department matter and they would have had jurisdiction. Again this is based on the facts in the pleadings I have no independent information."

Rhinelander Police Chief Lloyd Gauthier and Oneida County Sheriff Grady Hartman declined to comment.

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School board raises deductibles, specialist copays, and employee premium share in health plan renewal

BY HEATHER SCHAEFER
EDITOR

On May 19 the School District of Rhineland Board of Education made several changes to the district's employee health insurance plan for the 2026-27 school year. The series of votes followed a lengthy discussion about how to manage projected cost increases while protecting both employees and the district's budget.

District administrator Eric Berber and benefits manager Ed Kozlowski presented data showing the plan cost a 4.0% increase in the 2025-26 plan year, totaling an estimated \$1,000,000. The current 2025-26 plan year has also seen the budget in recent months, though it remained in a slim surplus position through March, they reported.

With medical costs trending up roughly 8% annually and prescription drug costs rising at 11.2%, actuarial modeling projected a 2% increase — or about \$1.8 million — would be needed to maintain the plan at its current design, the board members said. The district budget for a \$1 million increase.

What Was Approved
The board voted to:

- Increase the deductible on Plan One from \$1,000 for a single individual \$2,000 for a family to \$1,200 single \$2,000 family.
- Increase the specialist office copay from \$50 to \$60 for both plans.
- Raise the full-time employee premium cost share from 4.0% to 8% for both plans.

The 8% premium share is projected to bring the district's increased health insurance spending to approximately \$1 million — in line with what was budgeted.

At that rate, a single employee on Plan Two would see roughly a \$1,600 increase in their monthly premium contribution.

What Was Rejected
The administration's proposal to increase the emergency room copay from \$100 to \$200 within both plans generated considerable discussion.

Board member Mike Roberts made an impassioned case against raising the ER copay, arguing the existing \$100 copay was already a "sticker" and that families facing a medical emergency shouldn't be penalized further.

"I hate to put a family in a situation where it's a burden and they have a child with an asthma or something, and they're weighing whether they're going to spend an extra \$100 while there in the emergency room to get proper medication earlier or wait till Monday to try and get office visit," Roberts said. "To me that just seems excessive."

Board member Ben Lunsburg, a retired police captain, argued in favor of all of the proposed changes, noting that school district employees enjoy a significantly richer benefits package than many of their peers in the area.

"I know the city and county do not have a plan like this," he said, adding that he would love to have access to a plan with much favorable terms. He urged his fellow board members to be satisfied if the considerable work the administration had put into developing its recommendations and to consider the fiscal responsibility owed to taxpayers.

Board member Diane Frey, a retired school administrator, echoed that sentiment, warning the board against incremental thinking at a moment of budgetary pressure. "We can't do it and then this thing" he said, "not this fast, the time, we got some time here."

Ultimately, the panel chose to reject the administration's proposal and keep the ER co-pay at \$100. A vote promise motion to raise it to \$200 failed with Frey and Lunsburg voting in favor.

Roberts also pushed back on the proposed specialist copay increase, noting that patients rarely seek out specialists on their own initiative.

"Families don't decide if they want to see a specialist."

Plan commission recommends approval of rezoning for new subdivision

BY HEATHER SCHAEFER
EDITOR

On May 19 the city plan commission voted unanimously to recommend approval of a zoning map amendment that would open the way for a 16-acre mixed-use subdivision on Rhineland's west side, overcoming vocal opposition from residents of the adjacent West Wind Drive neighborhood.

The commission voted 7-0 to recommend rezoning three parcels from R-1 (Single Residential) to R-1 (Mixed Residential) to allow for the proposed "Gateway Preserve" development. The recommendation now advances to the Rhineland Common Council, which holds final authority over the rezoning decision.

According to city administrator Patrick Brown, the matter was expected to be included on the agenda for the council's May 26 meeting, which took place after the adjournment.

The Proposed Development
Developer Alejandro Jimenez, a West Wind Drive resident and owner of Casa Medicina and the A&W restaurant, is proposing a subdivision on approximately 16 acres located in the East End of the Northwoods Quarter of Section 1, Township 36 North, Range 8 West, within the city limits.



Planning and rezoning plan that would allow mixed-use development on the Rhineland west side. Rhineland City administrator Patrick Brown addresses the Rhineland plan commission during a public hearing on May 19, 2026. Photo by Heather Schaefer for the Northwoods Star Journal.

See **SUBDIVISION**, page 2

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JUNE EVENT SCHEDULE 2026

MONDAYS	St Germain Flea Market Community Park, 8am-3pm
MONDAYS	St Germain Chamber BINGO! Community Center, Doors Open 6:00pm
JUNE 6	FORK On the River Charity Paddle (visit www.feddourtrailskids.org for info)
JUNE 13	Walk in the Woods Art Fair, Wine Walk Chamber Park, 9am-3pm
JUNE 19-20	St Germain Town Garage Sale 8am-3pm
WED NIGHTS	Concert Crawl Series, 6:30-8:00pm Check the website for locations
JUNE 28	St Germain Freedom 5K and 1K Community Park, Races Start at 8:30am
JUNE 28	St Germain Independence Day Celebration All Day including Fireworks at Dusk

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