

Coleman vs. Franken race so far: Lots of dust that keeps settling in the same place

Analysis by ERIC BLACK

A year and a half ago — we're talking January of '07 — this was the state of the 2008 U.S. Senate race in Minnesota:

Norm Coleman was labeled as vulnerable, because:

- he was a first-term Republican in a purple state that seemed, based on the 2006 results, to be blue-ing up;

- he had a lot Bush and Iraq stink on him as the popularity of the president and the war sank like twin stones into deep Minnesota lakes;

- in polls, Coleman had high negatives and an approval rating near, and often below, the important 50 percent level;

- 2008 was generally looking like it might be a Dem tsunami year, especially if the Dems had a strong presidential nominee atop the ticket.

Al Franken was understood to be his likeliest DFL opponent. Although technically an undeclared candidate in January of '07, Franken had spent more than a year openly preparing for the run. He had acquired a thick wad of IOUs from DFLers for whom he had campaigned and contributed to through his own PAC. There was excitement in DFL circles about Franken's star power but already — yes a year and a half ago and longer than that — palpable nervousness that the many vulgar, harsh and hyperpartisan things Franken had said and written made him less than the ideal candidate to take on the vulnerable but talented Coleman. The mantra of the Franken doubters was always this:

We want this to be a referendum on Bush,



Sen. Norm Coleman, left, has political baggage to deal with during the campaign — but so does Al Franken.



the war and Coleman's Bushiness. We don't want a DFL nominee who might give the Repubs a way to turn the race into a referendum on the temperamental suitability of the DFL challenger.

So DFLers were wondering whether someone politically talented, likeable and less baggage-laden might emerge to make sure that that campaign would focus on Coleman's record. A lot of DFLers were mulling a bid, as the old scribes used to write. But the one who seemed most likely to offer himself was attorney Mike Ciresi.

A year and a half later, with the election less than five months off, one of the impressive things about Minnesota's U.S. Senate race is how it keeps not changing, keeps stirring up dust but, after each cloud of dust settles, keeps reverting to the long-written script.

Coleman: Vulnerable for exactly the same reasons that he was identified as vulnerable in 2007.

Franken: Endorsed, high negatives, more baggage-laden than ever.

Ciresi: Having already run for the endorsement and gotten clobbered, thinking about offering himself one last time as a primary challenger.

DFLers: Palpably nervous that Franken's baggage will cost them a golden opportunity.

Jesse Ventura: OK, a year and a half ago, he wasn't mentioned much. He now casts a large, scraggly, shadow over the race, as he, too, mulls a bid.

So, after reading the latest tea leaves and talking to some of the smartest observers of Minnesota politics, here's my assessment of the race:

On Ciresi

He's been calling around for advice, and asking some political talent whether they will work for him if he enters a primary. If he's going to do it, he has to decide very soon and campaign immediately and non-stop, and he has to finance his own campaign, which he has often said he does not want to do.

No one to whom I talked thinks he will run. It might have been a closer call if the DFL convention had declined to endorse, or even if it had taken several ballots. Rep. Betty McCollum's public attacks on Franken were widely perceived as an effort to slow down Franken's march to the endorsement to help Ciresi justify getting back into the race. But Franken won on the first ballot.

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MINNPOST.WORLD

'La Nina' partly to blame for wild weather this year

By SHARON SCHMICKLE

Would you like someone or something to blame for the hail that savaged your garden, the incessant tornado warnings that scare the wits out of your kids and the swollen rivers that ravaged Iowa and now threaten further south?

An explanation wouldn't begin to restore flood-soaked river cities – or even, more trivially, repair the hostas in your yard. It would give some small measure of satisfaction, though, if we could understand why the weather is so wild this year.

But a full accounting is as elusive as a cloud-free day.

It is tempting to look to climate change because that is a dominant concern for these times. And global-warming experts predict that some regions will get more rain while others may dry up. But scientists still are sorting through those scenarios.

Meanwhile, they caution against drawing conclusions from any single year, even one as weird as this one has been.

Blame 'the little girl'

Instead, many scientists say at least part of the blame should go to the weather phenomenon called La Niña, Spanish for the little girl. The World Meteorological Organization said in February that we were in a La Niña phase and could expect cool temperatures, storms and heavy rain during at least the first half of this year.

A La Niña event occurs when easterly winds cool sea surface temperatures along the equator in the Pacific Ocean, according to NASA's Goddard Space

Flight Center.

These winds force cooler deep water up to the surface of the ocean.

"With this La Niña, the sea-surface temperatures are about two degrees colder than normal in the eastern Pacific and that's a pretty significant difference," said David Adamec of the Space Flight Center.

"I know it doesn't sound like much," he said. "But remember this is water that probably covers an area the size of the United States. It's like you put this big air conditioner out there – and the atmosphere is going to feel it."

This "air conditioner" influences weather in a vast region.

Cloud growth slows

"The cool water temperatures of a La Niña slow down cloud growth overhead, causing changes to the rainfall patterns from South America to Indonesia," NASA said.

Among other results, the changes affect the strength and location of the jet stream – the strong winds that guide weather patterns over the United States. The Northwest generally experiences cooler, wetter weather during a La Niña. On the Great Plains, residents normally see a colder than normal winter. Southern states typically get less rainfall.

A La Niña event is the reverse of an El Niño, where the ocean surface warms. The name El Niño – Spanish for "the little boy" – refers to the Christ child because the event usually becomes apparent around Christmas time.

When "the little girl" visits, she usually stays about a year.

The current La Niña started taking shape in mid-2007. Initially it was expected to last through March. But in February, the World Meteorological Organization said, "the likelihood of La Niña conditions remains heightened through the second quarter and, at a lower level of confidence, into the first part of the third quarter of 2008."

La Niña probably had something to do, at least indirectly, with Iowa's floods. A good share of Iowa's soil, especially in the state's eastern reaches, was saturated after heavier than usual snowfall La Niña caused last winter. When the rains came, there was no sponge to soak up the moisture, so it rushed to the rivers.

Unexplained tornadoes

La Niña also helps explain why this is shaping up to be the deadliest year for tornados since 1998, the Associated Press reported.

La Niña very likely was a factor in tornados that tore through Tennessee, Arkansas and Kentucky in February, the AP said.

But "the little girl" doesn't fully explain recent stormy weather. And scientists can't explain it either.

Puzzled scientists say that the Midwest seems to have been stuck for weeks in a rut between hot, sticky air on the East Coast and cool air parked in the West, the AP said. When those systems collide, the Midwest is hit by tornados, thunder storms and heavy rain.

While scientists can forecast hurricane seasons, predicting their land-bound cousins is much harder, research meteorologist Harold Brooks at the National

Severe Storms Lab in Norman, Okla., told the AP.

Crucial triggers are local

Tornadoes, like hurricanes, rely on large-scale weather phenomena, but the crucial triggers are extremely local weather conditions, Brooks said.

On top of that, tornadoes have a "Goldilocks" issue. To make a tornado, the conditions have to be just right. Too much or too little of one ingredient and there is no tornado. For example, wind shear – when upper and lower winds are at different speeds or coming from different directions – is crucial to create a funnel cloud. Too little and there is no spin. Too much and the tornado falls apart.

Meanwhile, there is reason for hope that an end is in sight.

La Niña is tired out, according to Iowa State University's extension service.

The measure of atmospheric pressure that defines a La Niña event has fallen recently, the service said. And the baffling cold and wet weather pattern is ending too.

"The two especially troublesome components of the winter and spring in the Corn Belt this year appear to be coming to an end," the service reported. "Although the end is not clearly in sight for the La Niña or for the cold-wet conditions, both are moving in the direction of ending."

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Interlachen prepping for next week's U.S. Women's Open



PAT BORZI

In his eight years as golf course superintendent at Interlachen

Country Club in Edina, Matt Rostal has dealt with just about every manner of Minnesota late winter/early spring weather condition. Lingering cold grounds. Late snow. Drenching rains. Unseasonable heat.

It's one thing getting a course ready for Interlachen's well-heeled members when the weather won't cooperate. It's another when you're preparing for next week's U.S. Women's Open, in a year when it snowed the first week of April, and grass everywhere took forever to green up and grow. By mid-May, Rostal was still dealing with winter damage to the grass on three of his greens, Nos. 1, 11 and 16.

"Patience. That's what I need," Rostal said late last week, explaining some of the behind-the-scenes logistics necessary for a national tournament. "It was so cold. You've just got to wait for the ground to warm up."

Now, Rostal said, "Everything's starting to pop." Though the course remains soft from last week's rains, club officials are more hopeful the fairways and greens will be in top shape for the Open than they had been.

A race with the weather

"If the tournament was the last week of May instead of the last week of June, we'd be really worried," said Interlachen club pro Jock Olson. "But we've had enough good weather that everything's looking really good."

A few more sunny days, Ros-

tal said, is all it needs. Practice rounds begin Monday, and tournament play runs from Thursday to the following Sunday. "I'd like it to dry up to firm the golf course up," Rostal said. "The USGA wants firm fairways and greens, and I'd like to give it to them."

If so, Interlachen — known for its undulating fairways and small, pitched greens — should be a tough test for a terrific field featuring Lorena Ochoa, the world's No. 1 player; the soon-to-be-retiring Annika Sorenstam; defending champion Cristie Kerr; and such crowd favorites as Natalie Gulbis and Michelle Wie. The 6,789-yard, par-73 layout is the longest in Open history, and more than 200 yards longer than the course played for the 2002 Solheim Cup. (A fifth par-5 adds the extra stroke.)

At it did for the Solheim Cup, the club flopped the nines so that the usual ninth hole will be No. 18 for the championship. Why? Logistics, mainly. According to tournament marketing and promotions director Amy Lillibridge, No. 9 — which finishes just below the magnificent white stucco clubhouse — had more room for grandstands and hospitality areas, making it a more desirable finishing hole. So No. 9 is No. 18, No. 1 is No. 10, etc.

'New' No. 18 hole site of Bobby Jones legend

The championship No. 18, a 530-yard par 5 with a huge pond on the right, is the course's signature hole. The legendary Bobby Jones, while winning the 1930 U.S. Open as the third leg of his Grand Slam, skulled a shot on the then-No. 9 hole that

skipped across the water in the second round. It landed dry on the far bank short of the green, and Jones chipped up and made the putt for birdie. Spectators claimed the ball hit a lily pad, which Jones never confirmed, according to an account on a website established by Jones' heirs. Nevertheless, a plaque on the course commemorates his famed "lily pad shot."

As usual for one of its championships, the U.S. Golf Association asked Rostal to narrow the fairways and let the rough grow out, to put a premium on accuracy and shotmaking. Fairways that had been 28 to 35 yards wide will be 25 to 28 yards now. Three cuts of rough run from 3 to 6 inches deep; usually, it's only 2-1/2 inches, Rostal said. The late spring challenged Rostal to produce rough that high, but Rostal is confident it will meet USGA specs. Three years ago, on its own, the club spent \$3 million renovating its bunkers, moving many closer to the fairways to provide more of a challenge.

The greens, a mixture of creeping bent and poa annua grass, need to be faster, too. With twice-daily cutting, Rostal expects to reach the USGA-mandated speed of 11.5 on the Stimpmeter, which is quick.

The USGA prefers firm fairways and greens so tee shots roll into the rough, and players can't bomb long or middle irons at the flag without fear of the ball scooting off the green. Imagine tossing a ball underhand onto a pillow instead of a hardwood floor. That's the difference. Soft grounds and forgiving greens often lead to lower scores, and the last thing the USGA wants is someone shooting

25-under-par in one of its glamour events.

"Ideally, we want this to be the hardest test of the year," said Mike Davis, the USGA senior director of rules and competitions, at a May 19 press conference at Interlachen. "But at the same time, we want to make sure that good shots are rewarded and bad shots are penalized."

Rostal likes how the course finishes. The club built a new tee for No. 17, a 441-yard par-4 that Rostal thinks might be the toughest hole on the course. A big hitter like Ochoa could carry the two bunkers on the left, leaving about 140 to 150 yards to the pin. But the rest? "The ladies are going to have a long, long shot going into the green," he said.

No. 18, he said, could produce a lot of birdies for those daring enough to go for the green in two, over the Jones pond.

"Those two holes coming down, someone's going to lose it on 17, and someone's going to win it on 18," Rostal said.

If it goes to a playoff, don't expect the 18-hole drama of Tiger vs. Rocco. The women will settle things on Sunday in a three-hole, aggregate-score format, followed by sudden death if necessary.

Lillibridge said ticket sales have been so brisk that the USGA expects to break the Open attendance record of 131,000 for the week, set in 2005 at Cherry Hills outside Denver. Tickets and tournament information are available there. Tickets may also be purchased at many Cub Foods stores or by calling 1-877-281-OPEN.

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Joel Kramer, CEO and editor

Coleman vs. Franken race so far

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Ciresi had pledged many times to abide by the endorsement (which seemed like a bad idea when Ciresi first made the pledge and seems even dumber now. There was never a moment when Ciresi seemed to have much of a chance of beating Franken for the endorsement.)

As an attorney, Ciresi is obviously smart, hard-working and successful. As a politician, he has demonstrated none of those qualities. In 2000, he lost an endorsement fight to state Sen. Jerry Janezich, who is not viewed as a political superstar. Then he ran in the primary and lost to Mark Dayton. In 2006, after some consideration, he decided not to enter the Senate race, and probably scored some points with party insiders for getting out of Amy Klobuchar's path.

My politically smart sources felt that if he wanted to take one more shot in 2008, he should have started preparing for 2008 on the day he announced his non-candidacy in 2006. Instead it was Franken who appeared at every bean feed.

Sean at MNPublicus wrote: "I like Mike Ciresi — I was hoping that he would provide a clear alternative to Al Franken — and he didn't. A guy whose pitch centered on 'I've never been outworked' was outworked by a comedian."

Ciresi suspended his campaign this year because he was running third in the endorsement fight behind Franken and professor Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, who got more bang per buck than either of his opponents.

The only recent poll of which I'm aware that matched Ciresi against Coleman showed him trailing by 10 points and running about the same as Franken.

The surprising thing, given the level and duration of DFL worries over Franken's potty-mouth baggage, is that no one except Ciresi, Nelson-Pallmeyer and Jim Cohen offered themselves for the DFL nomination. The same names (Tim Walz, R.T. Rybak, Tarryl Clark and others) kept being mentioned and kept not jumping in. My sources were unaware of anyone other than Ciresi who is seriously thinking about a primary challenge and, as

I said, none of them expect Ciresi to get in.

FYI: If you didn't read about it last week, an anonymous "Draft Ciresi" blog was launched last week.

On Coleman

He aired his first TV ad recently. It features Coleman looking somber and puppy-eyed, reading a very simple script. Coleman emphasizes "pulling people together," "bridging partisan divides," "not just criticizing," not just fighting, doing something. The ad ends with the on-screen words: "Norm Coleman: Bringing people together."

The point, not particularly subtle, displays the two-edged sword he will wield against Franken without, in this case, mentioning his opponent by name. Coleman seeks to contrast this "bringing people together" theme (which I confidently predict you will be hearing and seeing regularly) with Franken who has called Coleman a "butt boy" and characterized Republican politicians as "shameless dicks."

In the two latest polls — taken last week, one by Rasmussen Reports and one by SurveyUSA — Coleman leads Franken in both, but by a much wider margin (52-40 percent) in SurveyUSA than in Rasmussen (48-45). I can't tell you which of those is closer to reality. Rob Daves, who was the longtime director of the Strib's Minnesota Poll, is also the past president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) and now runs Daves and Associates Research, said that over recent cycles SurveyUSA has been better than Rasmussen at calling Minnesota races.

Before you get too exercised about either of those polls, you should know that neither of the June polls shows much movement from the May polls by the same organizations (Rasmussen had Coleman leading Franken by 2 percentage points in May, 3 in June; Survey USA had a gap of 10 points in May, 12 in June), so it's unlikely that recent events (Playboy flap, Franken's endorsement) are major factors here, at least yet.

In the Rasmussen poll, only 51 percent of Rasmussen's sample had a favorable impression of Coleman,

compared with 45 percent unfavorable. These numbers are not good, but actually show an improvement over the May Rasmussen poll, which showed Coleman's favorable/unfavorable ratio at 49/49.

Compare this, for example, with Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, another Republican incumbent in a recently blue-trending state who is considered to be in some danger. Coleman often mentions Collins as one whose independence from a party line voting record is similar to his own, and the rankings maintained by Congressional Quarterly bear that out.

But in a May Rasmussen poll Collins' favorable/unfavorable ratio stood at 70/29. Coleman is not a particularly popular incumbent and Team Franken undoubtedly will air some ads to drive Coleman's negatives back up.

In the most recent Minnesota Poll (taken May 12-15), Coleman's approval rating was 45 percent. Numbers like this will keep Coleman on the list of vulnerable incumbents.

Coleman also must stand for reelection in a presidential election year, when Democratic turnout usually rises more than Republican, and in a state where enthusiasm for the Dem's presumptive nominee, Barack Obama, is riding high.

Rasmussen polled the presidential race at the same time as the Senate race and found Obama leading John McCain in Minnesota by 52-39 percent. (A May Star Tribune poll also had Obama up by 13 points. An early June poll by SurveyUSA had Obama up by just 5.)

If Obama continues to post double-digit leads here, talk about Minnesota being a 2008 swing state will start to blow over.

On Franken

Franken survived a nervous-making week heading into the June 7 DFL convention over his infamous 2000 Playboy piece, the denunciation of same not only by the Minnesota GOP but by most of Minnesota's congressional Democrats, and then the follow-up revelation of a New York Magazine piece in which Franken brainstormed about rape jokes.

But Franken did get the first-

ballot endorsement and the polls about which that I've been obsessing above suggest that he hadn't really lost any ground to Coleman.

Some of the details of those polls should be alarming to Franken and his supporters. For example:

- If Coleman's favorable/unfavorable ratio of 51/45 in the Rasmussen is a disaster, then Franken's 46/50 is a catastrophe. The Star Tribune in May found that fewer people had an impression, but among those that did it was 39 percent unfavorable to 33 percent favorable. Several of my sources said that Franken's problem is not just the potty-mouth material but also the generally supercilious, argumentative way that he comes across.

- All of the polls confirm that Minnesota has a lot more self-identified Dems than Repubs. That should be good news for Franken, but he isn't getting a big enough share of DFLers. Rasmussen found that while Coleman was supported by 92 percent of Republicans, Franken was supported by just 73 percent of Democrats. That's not good. In SurveyUSA, Coleman carries Repubs by 89-9; Franken carries DFLers by just 71-20. Republicans traditionally cross over less often than Democrats, but Franken's almost 20-point gaps are bigger than normal.

- Franken should benefit from Obama's likely strength in Minnesota, especially in bringing out new young voters for whom the magic word is "change." But what kind of change? University of Minnesota political scientist Kathryn Pearson said that a big part of Obama's appeal is the idea of post-partisanship, moving beyond anger and polarization of recent years. Can someone with Franken's track record and temper ride that part of the Obama coat-tail? Why in the Rasmussen polls (and bear in mind, this is the best poll for Franken) is Obama leading McCain by 13 points while Franken trails Coleman by 3?

Eric Black writes about national and state politics, foreign affairs and other topics. He can be reached at eblack@minnpost.com.

The Daily Glean: The attack of the low-sloping foreheads

By DAVID BRAUER

Two local teens were charged in Monday's horrific double murder of a mom and her 10-year-old son. The Strib's Rochelle Olson and David Chanen report that the alleged gang members finked on each other. Prosecutors claim the pair knew the woman's 15-year-old son, jailed in Chicago at the time; MPR's Mark Zdechlik says the duo were allegedly welcomed into the home to watch TV and wound up stabbing the mom 100 times and crushing the boy's skull with the tube.

Northwest Airlines will ax nearly a tenth of its fall flight schedule; it had planned a 5 percent cut, the PiPress' John Welbes writes. Unspecified job losses will follow, beginning with buyouts. MPR's Bob Collins provides NWA CEO Doug Steenland's memo — yes, the cuts are another reason to merge with Delta! The airline is parking its least efficient — and noisiest? — planes. Here under the flight path, we're grasping for silver linings.

Related: KSTP reports that starting today, Sun Country won't let you pay cash for cabin purchases; you'll have to use a Visa or Mastercard.

It's a different journalistic era, so the Strib hasn't sent busloads of reporters to Iowa just because there's a flood in the next state. In fact, several days after the washout, Jon Tevlin is the Strib's first on-scene scribe. Still, he crafts a Minnesota-focused flood tale — Minneapolis cops on the lookout for Cedar Rapids thieves, Albert Lea meal deliverers, a Bemidji orchestra conductor home to help.

Tempting fate, KSTP offers a good breakdown on why a St. Paul flood is unlikely. Levees can hold back twice the highest water levels ever recorded. The record, by the way, was set in 1965.

Al Franken seemed to score some Senate race points yesterday. In the Strib, he was able to say he was "astounded" Norm Coleman still thinks going to war in Iraq is the right decision. Reminding

voters of that event is a net win for the DFLer. Franken also asserted civilians, not generals, should decide whether to stay in Iraq.

Who says there's no good news? Minnesota's reported meth labs have declined 87 percent since 2004, according to a draft report cited by the Strib's Joy Powell. Recent restrictions put the raw materials off limits; Minnesota's drop is greater than the nation's 70 percent decline. The bad news: meth is still coming in, readymade from Mexico. But Dakota County lab busts are down from 28 in 2004 to one this year, drastically reducing property damage.

Also seemingly good: the Strib headlines "No vapor hazards in St. Louis Park" — but it's a bit misleading. Soil tests found no "hazardous conditions or injuries" in 268 homes and businesses near volatile organic compound contamination. However, 53 properties had readings "exceeding [state] screening levels," the Strib's Herón Márquez Estrada reports. That means no "imminent danger," but more investigation is needed.

Fascinating story from Finance & Commerce's Betsy Sundquist: nearly half the folks who take the state's manicurist test fail. This does not necessarily mean your cuticles are endangered. The test is only offered in English, but many potential nail polishers don't speak the language. Nationally, 43 percent of manicurists are Vietnamese. Other states offer the tests in multiple languages, but our bureaucrats don't seem willing.

While new Minnesota Chief Justice Eric Magnuson argues in the Strib for less-contested judicial elections, the PiPress's Emily Gurnon says pro-election activist Greg Wersal was in district court arguing for looser judicial fundraising rules. Wersal doesn't like Minnesota's law preventing judicial candidates from personally soliciting contributions. Last time Wersal fought the state to the U.S. Supreme Court, he won.

Back to Magnuson: In a wide-

ranging Strib q-and-a, the new chief favors "retention elections," where the electorate can vote out judges, but only the governor can appoint. Magnuson says Wisconsin's wide-open races are what Minnesotans should avoid: "Special-interest groups, attack ads, one-issue campaign themes — really, really brutal." He also favors an evaluation board to go with the current judicial selection panel.

Best Buy's sales are up, profits are down and most analysts are happy. Such are the lowered expectations of a near-recessionary economy. Government stimulus checks helped first-quarter numbers, Finance & Commerce's Kendall Anderson writes. Flat-screen TVs, gaming consoles and "foreign currency exchange fluctuations" floated the bottom line. The PiPress's Gita Sitaramiah says Best Buy CEO Brad Anderson termed one downbeat analyst's report "irrational."

The PiPress's Megan Boldt reports that 89.5 percent of Minnesota high school freshman passed a writing graduation test. That's impressive, considering diplomas are three years away. However, the pass rate is down a percent from last year's inaugural effort. The white-black achievement gap: 94 percent-69 percent. St. Paul's pass rate: 73 percent. Minneapolis dropped from 73 percent to 67 percent, the Strib's Norman Draper notes.

MPR's Sea Stachura says Minnesota River farmers are major contributors to the Gulf of Mexico's dead zone. Hoping to reduce the oxygen-starved zone by a third, feds want farmers to cut back on phosphorous use. However farm advocates say fertilizer prices are already making that happen. Stachura notes a rebound is tough; contamination is rising and the current flood will make it worse. Other helpful approaches: more wetlands and less urban runoff.

Hennepin County will spend \$1.2 million to demolish just 50 boarded homes, MPR's Brandt Williams reports. They'll slap

\$17,500 assessments on the properties to recoup 70 percent of the costs, even if that makes tough-neighborhood sites tougher to sell. North Minneapolis Councilmember Don Samuels says a vacant lot is better than some board-ups, which attract squatters and vandals.

A second protester group is suing St. Paul over a GOP Convention route. KARE's Scott Goldberg says the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign can't even get a march permit to march; it wants to go on the convention's second day. For locals with long memories, the group is lead by Cheri Honkala, who organized a ton of poor people's protests here in the '80s before moving to Philadelphia.

Since we've had remorseless Pawlenty-for-VP speculation, the Strib's Steve Brandt takes license to game plan Minneapolis City Hall should Mayor R.T. Rybak move to the Obama administration. Relatively conservative DFL Council President Barb Johnson would become an unlikely mayor — but only if Rybak resigned after March '09. He'd almost certainly leave before that, forcing a special election for a less-than-one-year term. Several councilmembers would tear each others' eyes out to get the job.

KARE's Boyd Huppert says the Golden Valley Fire Department is advertising for on-call firefighters ... on the sides of its trucks. Statewide, there's a shortage of fill-ins, who make \$8 an hour in the FDGV.

WCCO offers a fun report on a teen yo-yo champ. Amazing walk-the-dogs ensue.

MPR provides a classic good-news-is-really-bad-news headline: "South Dakota drought ends, West Nile season begins."

Nort spews: Congrats to KG — I wished like hell you'd done it here, but thanks for screaming "Sota!" right after you became a world champ. Special Soar Winner here. The Twins beat the Nationals 2-1 on Justin Morneau's homer. D.C. Sore Loser here.

COMMUNITY VOICES

Firefox and Opera meet the big bad Web

By SUSAN LEACH

Mozilla's Firefox and Opera Software's Opera are making a little bit of history this week with new security features, for which the developers deserve our thanks. Firefox and Opera could be the first Web browsers ever released that attempt to block malicious software, or "malware" for short. Microsoft expects to follow their lead in Internet Explorer.

The Web might be the most dangerous part of the Internet. It has surpassed email as presumably the most lucrative target for organized crime. Years ago, the ratio of spam and infected email to useful email peaked where I worked. That week our postmaster discarded 98 percent of incoming mail as junk. In a much wider context, Message-Labs stopped about 80 percent for their customers during May this year. But while scams and phishing will always be with us, people can learn to resist clicking links in email. Criminals shifted some of their focus to the Web, which was unprepared for them.

Jeremiah Grossman of WhiteHat Security guessed that 70 percent of the world's Web sites are open to cross-site scripting, also known as XSS, a vulnerability that Symantec reports site administrators usually

don't bother to fix. Grossman and Ofer Shezaf of Breach Security and their colleagues also document Web-based attacks that have really happened.

This user was greeted by only two Web applications this month that knew how to complete a transaction without scripts, one at the United States Postal Service and one at Walgreens. A well-known store, on the other hand, triggered an XSS alert in my shopping cart during the last step of checkout. Frighteningly, my browser gave me a choice: Send my credit card number, or abandon the week's groceries.

What it takes to avoid and prevent Web-based attacks altogether may sound draconian. Web users can turn scripting off, or they can add an extension like NoScript for Firefox and decide for themselves when to execute scripts. Many web developers think that abstaining from scripts is too limiting – a majority of sites require JavaScript to run. Instead, developers have difficult responsibilities (to validate input, filter output and submit their work to testing and security audits).

Firefox 3 and Opera 9.5 add a bit more help. Opera (pictured below) is probably the first web browser in history to have an anti-malware feature built in. Opera warnings work

page-by-page and come from their partners Haute Secure, Netcraft and PhishTank. Firefox integrates site-by-site data from Google and StopBadware. Both Firefox and Opera ask their users not to proceed to web sites that are identified as malicious or fraudulent.

Both browsers allow users to click through their blocks. Mozilla had considered having Firefox stop outright when it encountered a dangerous site. (At the time of the Firefox release, StopBadware tallied about 130,000 bad URLs.) Users would have been constrained, not only from reaching malicious code, but also from reaching Web sites flagged by mistake (for example, by deceptive reporting, untimely re-indexing, or false positives in legitimate reporting).

Mozilla changed its mind. Like the Web standard for danger messages, which is in progress, this welcome change of heart means that users who are not otherwise censored will not be cut off entirely from parts of the Web. Brian Krebs of The Washington Post was the first to note false negatives, the errors in the other direction.

It has been said that Web 2.0 design is not insecure but it has expanded the attack surface, which is a fancy term for making things worse. The

JavaScript language, which holds Ajax software together, is among the easiest for budding criminals to learn. In O'Reilly's "Web Security & Commerce," the authors said:

"Java and JavaScript are both here to stay, as both of the languages give web developers powerful techniques for creating new content for the Web. Unfortunately, both of these languages have profound security implications. The challenge for software vendors will be to discover ways of making the implementations of these languages secure enough so that users can download and run programs from any web site without fear."

Simson Garfinkel and Eugene H. Spafford wrote that more than 10 years ago.

In graduate school in 1983, Fred Cohen shared his ideas which became the foundation of antiviral software. For this 25th anniversary of computer anti-virus research, celebrate with a "No, thank you" to scripts and a "Thank you!" for the Opera and Firefox developers who decided to keep the Web worldwide.

Susan Lesch owns Textet and lives in San Diego and Minneapolis. She owned Mac Virus 10 years ago, which David Harley operates.

The Web might be the most dangerous part of the Internet. It has surpassed email as presumably the most lucrative target for organized crime.

Want to add your voice?

If you're interested in joining the discussion by writing a Community Voices article, email Susan Albright at salbright@minnpost.com.