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1% tax committee ready for public presentation

Jane Howard

The 1% Local Option Sales Tax Committee made up of the entire county board and representatives of other local governmental units spent almost four hours Monday, August 10, 2009 deliberating over what projects to include in the proposed tax coming to a referendum this fall.

Seven projects were discussed: outdoor recreational facilities in Grand Marais, outdoor recreational facilities at Birch Grove Community Center in Tofte, countywide ultra-high-speed broadband Internet access, a Grand Marais Public Library addition, a multi-purpose community center building, a biomass-fueled energy plant to provide heat and electricity to public—and possibly residential and business—buildings in Grand Marais, and capital improvements to Gunflint Hills Golf Course.

The committee and consultant Mike Fischer talked about how to determine which projects should be included. Fischer suggested that they consider the amount of outside funding each project would leverage. Another consideration was how much benefit voters from various parts of the county would perceive

from each project.

Fischer also suggested that they consider which projects could bring revenue to the county (broadband, energy plant, golf course) vs. which projects would add quality to the community but would not generate revenue or would require ongoing subsidy (outdoor recreational facilities, the library, and the community center).

The group also discussed keeping projects that would not be possible without the 1% tax.

In preparing to discuss the possibilities with the community at a public meeting to be held at the courthouse at 7 p.m. Monday, August 24, the committee tentatively suggested that the biomass plant and the golf course improvements be left off the list and that the other five projects be funded in the following amounts: Grand Marais outdoor recreation, \$600,000; Birch Grove outdoor recreation, \$500,000; broadband, \$9,200,000; library, \$700,000; and community center, \$9,000,000.

The legislation authorizing the tax allows the county to collect financing costs in excess of the

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Photo by Jennifer Updyke Ismail
Wrapping up summer with a splash! Benjamin Ismail, from Cairo, Egypt, was visiting family in Grand Portage recently. He enjoyed the beach and reveled in splashing in the waves at Red Rock Bay.

No more July 4 fireworks for West End?

Rhonda Silence

An unexpected misfire of a round at the 2009 Independence Day fireworks display in Tofte resulted in a frightening explosion, but no serious injuries. However, the ensuing news coverage, which included video taken on cell phones, garnered the attention of the State Fire Marshal, who recently informed the Tofte Fire Department that there were multiple problems with conducting the volunteer pyrotechnical show. At the Tofte Town Meeting on Thursday, August 13, longtime fireworks volunteer John Nelson told the Tofte Town Board that 2009 may have been the last year for West End fireworks.

Nelson's revelation came after Supervisor Paul James acknowledged receipt of \$500 from the township of Lutsen in support of the West End fireworks display. Tofte resident Jerry Gervais asked if the township wanted to increase the amount it budgets for fireworks. He noted that the township had spent the same amount—\$2,500—for many years. James concurred, noting that if the community felt a need for more, the other townships could be asked to contribute more to the Tofte display.

Nelson said the price of the fireworks may be a moot point in light of recent contact from the fire marshal. "With all the new restrictions, we may not be able to do fireworks at all," said Nelson.

Nelson said according to the fire marshal, the site used for fireworks is too close to homes and businesses. He said for every inch of shell diameter, operators must be 70 feet away. "That's 380 feet," he said, noting that there is nowhere on the Tofte bay that would work.

Supervisor D.C. Olsen asked if the fire department would look into another location. Nelson said some volunteers suggested setting the fireworks off at Carlton Peak, overlooking Tofte, but said he doubted that the state would allow that. He added, "In a year that is dry at all—like this year—I would be hesitant to set them off inland."

County Commissioner Bruce Martinson, on hand to give his county board report, asked if the firefighters had considered setting the fireworks off from the water. Nelson said he wasn't sure firefighters would want to set off pyrotechnics from a confined space like a barge. He also pointed out that it could be expensive to find a suitable vessel.

Supervisor Paul James asked if the boat landing at Taconite Harbor in Schroeder would meet the distance requirements. Martinson said the town of Schroeder had a fireworks display there in 2002, when the safe harbor was dedicated. The fireworks were set off on Gull Island. "It's a perfect place," said Martinson. "There is all kinds of parking there."

An additional problem, said Nelson, is that there must be someone in the fireworks team with pyrotech-



File photo/Don Score

An unplanned explosion at the July 4, 2009 fireworks earned the attention of the State Fire Marshall.

nic licensing. "To be a licensed operator, you have to have five years of training. It doesn't matter that we have been doing this for 32 years."

Nelson said licensing could possibly be obtained by one of the experienced volunteers if they attended and assisted with displays in other areas. He said the township could also hire someone with training to oversee future 4th of July events. The board acknowledged that it would be difficult to find someone on the busy Independence Day weekend.

"I'm not saying it's a done deal," said Nelson. "But I wanted to let you know what's going on."

The board agreed to meet with fire department volunteers to explore options. "Maybe after this runs in the newspaper, someone with fireworks licensing will contact us," said Supervisor James.

Supervisor Olsen said, "Let's not give up."

Noxious weeds spraying nixed

Jane Howard

After considerable discussion with members of the public, the county board voted Tuesday, August 18, 2009 to deny County Engineer/Agricultural Inspector Shae Kosmalski's request for permission to obtain quotes on spraying for noxious weeds. Kosmalski told the board she was trying to do her job as "ag" inspector, which requires that she make sure the county controls noxious weeds. Local citizens brought up strong objections, however, to the application of chemicals to control noxious weeds.

Kosmalski recommended treatment on 13 acres along county rights-of-way not already treated by the U.S. Forest Service. She recommended focusing on roads, trailheads, gravel pits, and parking lots. Eleven invasive species have been identified by the state as dangerous, she said.

MN Statute 18.75 states, "It is the policy of the legislature that residents of the state be protected from the injurious effects of noxious weeds on public health, the environment, public roads, crops, livestock, and other property."

Bob LaMettry said he assumed the goal was control rather than eradication. Kosmalski said yes, control is the goal, especially with knapweed and purple loosestrife, although funding will affect how much they can do. Biological control methods, such as certain kinds of bugs, are being studied but are still in the testing stage, she said. Noxious weed herbicides are selectively bred, she said, and don't target all plants.

LaMettry asked if lupines were on the state's list of nox-

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Grand Portage receives \$2 million for Housing Authority

Rhonda Silence

Thanks to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the community of Grand Portage will see the construction of several new housing units. Gale Carlson, executive director of the Grand Portage Housing Authority, said she heard the good news at the regional meeting of the Great Lakes Indian Housing Association at Ho Chunk, Wisconsin. "The Great Lakes region did really well," said Carlson. "We received 25% of all the money earmarked for the United States."

Grand Portage submitted a grant application for the maximum for which it was eligible—\$2 million, which was granted. Also receiving \$2

million was Boise Forte and the Lower Sioux Nation. Fond du Lac received \$2.6 million and White Earth and Leech Lake each received \$3 million. Carlson said grant writer and tribal planner David Danze assisted with the grant application. She said the amounts were awarded by a complicated formula, which factors in area, population, and project planning.

Carlson said the grant money will enable the Grand Portage Housing Authority to construct 14 housing units, a mix of new construction and purchase of existing homes. Tentative plans, submitted with the grant application call for construction of six duplexes. "I had a 'mini-plan' to demonstrate

what we would do with the funding," said Carlson in a phone interview this week. "Now the work begins. We have to find lots, complete environmental review, and get bids ready."

The Recovery Act grant money is to be "fast-tracked." Carlson said bids must be in place, or "obligated" within six months and funding must be spent within three years.

Carlson said this is especially good news for community members on the waiting list for housing. She said there are 16 people on the authority's housing list and five on a list for apartments. "This grant gets us closer to meeting our housing needs," said Carlson.