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Consultants have high hopes for local economy

Voyage Forward initiative brings in experts

BY EMILY GEDDE
Staff Writer

When Boise Inc. announced in May 2013 it would eliminate 265 jobs at its International Falls paper mill, panic set in.

It was unknown at that time how the layoffs would impact not only Boise employees and their families, but other businesses.

However, the panic subsided and people instead focused on how to restore and maintain the local economy. A committee of local, state and federal elected

officials teamed up with community leaders and formed response teams to leverage all available resources to help individuals and businesses.

From those response teams, Voyage Forward was born.

The Voyage Forward initiative seeks to secure the future of International Falls and Koochiching County. The effort kicked off in October, attracting more than 50 people ready to volunteer their time and effort to make a difference.

Fast forward three months

and strides are being made, say organizers.

Last week, consultants with Newmark Grubb Knight Frank, one of the world's leading commercial real estate advisory firms, assessed the strengths and weaknesses of Koochiching County and how it compares to a global market.

The consultants said they were pleased with what they saw, after meeting with about 150 people in several Koochiching County communities and Fort Frances.

"This is the best practice we've seen," said Robert Hess, NGKF executive managing director, consulting. "It's rare you come

into a small community and there are already so many people engaged, focused and organized into 'SWAT' teams and task forces to work on so many different issues."

During last week's visit, which will be the first of an expected three, Hess said it was just a kick-off to what's to come.

"We have some excellent partners here that have been involved early on," he said of Voyage Forward volunteers. "We have some champions to carry this cause... This isn't only going to be a city of International Falls initiative, it's going to be rural, too...It all matters."

What we need, what we have

Gregg Wassmansdorf, NGKF senior managing director, consulting, said a framework of success will develop based on tools the area has and can acquire.

"We'll look at what tools and capabilities this area has that allow local businesses to grow and thrive, but also be catalysts to attract new investment," Wassmansdorf said.

Local businesses, he said, include big, medium and small businesses in all areas of Koochiching County as well as Fort Frances.

"What's good for Fort

Voyage Forward to A7 ►

STAFF PHOTO BY EMILY GEDDE

**Ann Reff looks
through photos from
when she enlisted
with the U.S. Air
Force during World
War II.**



**Local veterans ride on
a float in a parade in
International Falls in
the 1940s.**



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

**Whenever Ann Reff wore
her uniform, she said she
felt so much pride.**



**The women of "Shot
from the Sky" pose
for a photo.**

**A young Ann Reff poses
on a plane her outfit "Shot
from the Sky" displayed to
people across the country.**



ANYTHING BUT DULL

Local veteran shares fond memories of time spent in Air Force

BY EMILY GEDDE
Staff Writer

This month marks 71 years since Ann (Museta) Reff joined the United States Air Force, and even though it's been more than seven decades, memories of the time are still clear in her mind.

Settled comfortably in her room at Paper Makers Place

just off Highway 71, Reff traced her finger along and hand-drawn route of places the air force took her and flipped through pictures while recalling her beloved past.

"Look how young I was?" Reff, now 92, said while holding a photo of herself at 24 years old. "Can you believe this was me? Look at my hair."

Reff's pride of her involvement in the service is clear

and she laughs about the friendships she made and the lovers who got away.

"I went with a fellow from Winona and I had my eye on him," Reff said. "He didn't want to get married, but after the war, I took an overnight train to see him. I stayed overnight at the train station and in the morning, he never showed up to pick me up. Why the dirty rat. But, we still cor-

respond."

Pride begins

The decision to enlist with the air force was an easy one, Reff said.

"I was one of 14 children, and I figured one of us better be in the service," Reff said. "So I pointed to me."

She was working as a welder in a Portland ship yard at the

Reff to A7 ►

ICEBOX DAYS

Running and reconnecting

BY SPENSER BICKETT
Staff Writer

How do you run 35 years' worth of Freeze Your Gizzard Blizzard Runs?

One step at a time.

Dick Ostroot has been taking those steps, ever since the run's inception in 1980. Originally from Hibbing, Ostroot lived in International Falls from 1968-1994, when he taught at the local high school and coached track and field.

In 1980, Ostroot was on the original race committee, but the idea for the race came from the chamber of commerce's director at the time, Darrell Gustafson. At the time, Ostroot said Gustafson had to sell him on the idea, as he wasn't so sure about it.

"I said, 'that idea's crazy,'" Ostroot said. "And he said, 'exactly, that's the appeal. Running in the winter in International Falls is insane, so it's bound to catch on.'"

After some deliberation, Ostroot said he saw what Gustafson was thinking, and realized it was a great idea.

The original event only offered a 10K distance, Ostroot said, with the 5K distance starting up about 10 years ago. Again, he said he originally wasn't a fan of adding the 5K distance, but now realizes it was a "wonderful idea."

"Numbers were dwindling up there, so they added a 5K, and it brought a lot of runners in," Ostroot said. "If you're in reasonable condition, you can run and walk and get a 5K done quickly."

The most memorable FYGBR for Ostroot was the second year of the event, when chamber officials had to shorten the 10K distance due to wind chills of 70 degrees below zero.

"I've seen videos of the race, and it looks like we're running on Neptune," Ostroot said. "There's wind and snow blowing across, and you see a figure come out of it, and you can't even see their face."

Despite dangerously low wind chills some years, Ostroot said he couldn't recall a time when a runner was injured due to the cold weather.

Icebox Days to A7 ►

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