

MEDICAL

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30-day period when voters in the district can file a petition to have the resolution go to a referendum, she said. If 5 percent of the voters sign the petition, a referendum vote will occur in August, so the county wouldn't be able to levy for the district until 2016.

Because of the tight deadline for passing a resolution, the county board will consider the resolution at its meeting Tuesday. Big Falls resident Julie Lepisto suggested the county board hold a public hearing in Big Falls before approving the resolution, as it might not have the support commissioners think it has.

"It's not a foregone conclusion and I think if you don't understand that, you will if you come down for a public meeting," she said.

If the county board held another public meeting in Big Falls, that would push the resolution to the May 20 board meeting, board Chairman Rob Ecklund said. County Auditor/Treasurer Bob Peterson said that would tighten up the timeline for the July 1 deadline, and he would need to have ballots prepared by June 27, creating a three-day window for the referendum.

LMC background

The city of Littlefork owns the LMC, Briggs said, and was managed through an agreement with Bigfork Valley before Anderson was recently hired as CEO. When Bigfork Valley came on in spring 2012, she said administration identified \$3.6 million in upgrades the facility needed to bring it up to their standards. They didn't have an interest in taking over ownership of the facility, she said, but they did agree to provide the management services for the facility.

When Bigfork Valley took over management, a joint city-county committee was formed to try to find a way to get the facility back on track, Briggs said. The committee considered loans, grants, bonds, and community and private interests to determine if there was interest in a partnership or ownership of the facility. When the committee exhausted all those options, it decided on the current taxing district plan.

The committee identified the roof, boiler, and IT system as the most important needs, Briggs said, and decided it would cost \$1 million to upgrade those items. Committee members knew they couldn't make the \$3.6 million in improvements Bigfork Valley identified, she said, so they boiled it down to the most critical needs.

"We decided to break it down into phases," Briggs said.

Phase 1 focuses on the immediate needs of the facility, Briggs said. Phase 2 provides a longer timeline



STAFF PHOTO BY SPENSER BICKETT

Koochiching County Commissioner Wade Pavleck addresses 30 to 40 community members at a public hearing in Littlefork Tuesday.

for the LMC and the city of Littlefork to seek grants and other ways to fund the remaining needed upgrades.

At a loss

A handout provided at the hearing had financial reports and income statements for the LMC dating back to 2003. According to the report, the facility operated at a loss seven of the past 11 years.

The facility operated at a profit when losses were being offset by grants the facility received, Fort said. Without those grants, he continued, the facility would have been in the red.

"If you take away the grant money for those three years, there would be very little profit, and in some cases, loss," Fort said.

The total asset value of the facility has also depreciated since 2003, Anderson said. According to the report, the asset value in 2003 was \$3.1 million, and in 2013 it was \$2.2 million, equaling a loss of about \$900,000 in 11 years. The business axiom "if you're not growing, you're dying," has been the case at LMC, he said.

"Losing that much assets makes it nearly impossible to reinvest in the capital needs you've seen," Anderson said.

The city of Littlefork has also contributed funds to the LMC over the years, Fort said. According to a report, the city funded a \$20,000 window replacement project in June 2009, a replacement propane burner in the boiler for \$13,432 in December 2012, among other projects. The city has also been making a monthly payment of \$1,235 to the LMC since January 2011 as part of a Minnesota Department of Human Services reimbursement program.

Impact

In December, the University of Minnesota Extension compiled a report on the impact a closure of the LMC would have on the local economy. Briggs Tuesday highlighted the report, which determined the direct and indirect impact of the closure would result in the loss of 109 jobs, \$6.6 million in sales, and \$3.5 million in labor income.

The study didn't contain any information on the impact closure would have on the school districts, Briggs

said. The L-BF school district is one of the best in the state, Commissioner Brian McBride said, and closing the LMC would devastate the school.

"It would be devastating to that school district, with your students and to this community, and to 362," McBride said. "So you really need to be thinking about that, what the total loss would be."

The impact study did compile numbers on assisted living beds and the county's aging population, Briggs said. According to the report, there are 191 nursing home and assisted living beds in the county, with 73 of those at the LMC.

According to census data, 45 percent of the county's population was over 50 years old in 2012, with 779 residents over the age of 80. Those percentages and numbers will continue to grow, Briggs said, as will the need for assisted living and nursing home beds.

"If this facility went down and we lost those nursing home beds, there's a very good chance we wouldn't see any more beds added in Koochiching County," Ecklund said.

Current status

According to the financial report, in 2013, the first full year Bigfork Valley was managing the facility, it turned a profit of \$101,000. The team involved has done everything it can to turn the facility around, Fort said, and it did that in 2013. The team has been able to increase the profit, he said, but it's still not enough to pay for the capital needs for the facility.

The up-front loan for the critical improvements the facility needs can slingshot the facility into the future, Anderson said.

"We'll be able to feel comfortable moving forward focusing on our core business needs, to continue to grow and have a bright future," Anderson said.

Lending \$1 million makes him nervous, McBride said, but admitted the alternative situation worries him a lot more.

"As a county commissioner, does it make me nervous to loan \$1 million? It absolutely does," McBride said. "But not to do it makes me a lot more nervous."

VISITOR

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visitor experience, Bennett said. DVNP is expected to consider the recommendations and action steps it wants to implement, he said.

In the next six months, action steps for implementing the recommendations are expected to be taken. Future meetings will consider how the action steps are affecting tourism, he said.

The program, which is also being implemented in other communities in the state, encourages building tourism in a sustainable manner in the following areas: maintaining and

enhancing attractions and amenities; creating stronger regional collaboration and community bonds; bolstering community support of tourism; and marketing tourism.

Bennett said it appears work has already occurred in some of the four areas since the program began, noting the Heart of the Continent Partnership and its geotourism effort.

Meanwhile, several of the recommendations intended to improve a visitor experience in the gateway communities would also be a benefit to local residents, he said.

In answering questions following the presentation on the assessment, Bennett said another valuable step

for the local communities would involve identifying, in general, who is visiting Voyageurs National Park: where they are from, what they buy, what items they purchase, etc.

"Leadership has to start here," he said of the communities in implementing ways to boost tourism.

Shawn Mason, International Falls Economic Development Authority director, said boosting tourism can help the communities recover from the loss of 265 jobs at the local paper mill by supplementing the local economy. She said the assessment, which brought "a fresh set of eyes" to view the area, will be a valuable tool moving forward.

BILL

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suffering from a seizure disorder," he said.

He noted one child in particular he met from Hibbing was born healthy, but developed seizures around the age of 2.

"She has somewhere around 18 seizures per day," Bakk said. "Her parents are just devastated."

He continued the family has tried marijuana, which has reduced the toddler's seizures to about two per day.

"Imagine if you're a parent," he said. "They just want to relieve suffering their kids are having...I believe there is a therapeutic benefit to using the drug as a medication."

Bakk said the Senate's bill is tightly regulated and doesn't support any kind of recreational use.

"You can't smoke it," he said. "Minnesota would be the only state not allowed to smoke it for medial purposes."

There is hope, Bakk said, Gov. Mark Dayton may sign a bill. Dayton voiced his opposition to legalizing medical marijuana. But, in the same note, Bakk said there is still a long road ahead and time is running out to this session.

"I had a personal meeting with the governor on Tuesday afternoon," Bakk explained. "I think there's a chance we can get him to sign something."

First, however, the House, which is focusing on a similar bill, but with much different language, needs to come on board.

"I'm hopeful we can reach an agreement with the House that we can get the governor to sign," Bakk said.

One of the differences between the bills is how many treatment centers would grow, harvest, process and dispense marijuana beginning July 1, 2015. The Senate bill outlines 55 locations while the House bill only lists one.

"The governor thinks 55 is too many, I think

one is not enough," Bakk said. "The authors of each bill have been directed to hopefully work out a compromise that would hopefully happen as soon as this weekend."

Rep. David Dill, DFL-Crane Lake, said he has received "numerous emails" from Koochiching County residents asking him not to support such a bill.

"I am totally against any recreational use and against decriminalizing, home-grown marijuana," he said in a statement to The Journal.

The representative referred to the the bills introduced as "not remotely acceptable."

"The bills in the House and Senate that are traveling as amended are getting very close to the problem of providing relief to those who need it," he said. "I hope that constituents are patient as the bill advances knowing that I would never vote for a bill that would cause harm to a family, kids, or promote illegal activity. For that reason, I am unwilling to commit at this moment."

State law enforcement groups have said legalizing marijuana, even for medical reasons, would lead to wider distribution of the drug. In addition, law enforcement officials say they fear it would lead to more impaired driving incidents and wind up in the hands of children.

Locally, however, Koochiching County Sheriff Brian Jespersen said while he is not in favor of recreational marijuana use, he sees no problem in using the drug for medical reasons.

"If it helps get people through cancer, or other medical needs... I have no problem at all," he said. "It's like any other drug we give to help relieve pain. If this stuff actually works, it's a good thing."

Jespersen stressed the need to have the drug controlled by physician prescription.

"I don't want to see it where people can just pick it up at Kmart," he said. "I look at prescription drugs

and how they are abused. People just need to use common sense, and I think most people will."

According to Kelly Millerbernd, Rainy Lake Medical Center marketing and foundation coordinator, physicians at the hospital campus declined to comment on the bills.

Medical staff at the Rural Health Clinic said because they feel they aren't current on the situation, they also declined comment to the newspaper.

Calls from RLMC clinic campus were not returned in time for this story.

What do readers think?

The vote received both support and opposition from The Journal's Facebook followers Wednesday.

"Although it's a controversial issue, there are many people who can benefit from it for legitimate medical reasons," wrote Katherine Olson about legalizing medical marijuana. "I'm an oncology nurse and can see this being a very positive thing for many of my patients."

Ron Ohotto Jr. echoed Olson's comments in his post.

"My wife had to watch her very athletic and energetic 12-year-old suffer from the side effects of chemo," he wrote. "He fought cancer for several years and was in constant pain until the day he passed away. I am against drugs, but if (marijuana) carries little side effects and can give some comfort to those suffering...why not?"

Still, others weren't convinced.

"No need for it," Brad Skaro wrote. "Before it's legalized, (lawmakers) need to look at the mess it's created in other states. Before you know it, every pothead in the state will say they need script for it."

"I think Brad has a very valid point," Brenna Kelsch wrote. "It's not a pain reliever. I guess I just don't understand what it can help...I would like someone to tell me how it benefits sick people."

Staff writers Laurel Beager and Spenser Bickett contributed to this report.

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