

# HOSPITAL

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Essential Health-International Falls Clinic became know as Rainy Lake Medical Center, with hospital and clinic campuses. Half of the RLMC Board are appointed by Essentia, a majority of whom live in the Falls area. The other half are appointed by the prior Falls Memorial Board, which is self perpetuating, meaning board members may continue to appoint themselves for subsequent terms or can name their replacements. These members refer to themselves as Falls Memorial trustees.

Nikceovich said he was disappointed on three levels that the affiliation negotiations had ended.

“I feel strongly that our model of full integration with the hospital and clinic brings the greatest value to the patients we serve,” he said. “I am a practicing physician, an oncologist... I take care of a lot of patients

of the I Falls community. Second, in the role I serve at Essentia, the East Region, and third, as a member of the I Falls community. I own a cabin there. On all those levels are disappointment... whether it’s in my role as a physician, president, or in my role as a patient.”

Nikceovich said the agreements that were to move toward full agreement were undertaken with the goal to provide health care to the Falls community in the best way possible — to deliver patients the highest quality care as much as possible and as much care delivered as close to the Falls as possible.

In January 2012, the board hired a consultant to consider whether there was enough debt capacity to build a new hospital, which had been identified as a priority given the condition and age of the hospital. He said the consultant reported full integration with Essentia was the only feasible way to build a new hospital.

Essentia was asked to provide a proposal to do that, he

said. A proposal was made in June 2012, with a more detailed proposal offered in April of this year. The Falls Memorial trustees developed a revised agreement in June 2013, which Nikceovich said was very different than the one put forth by Essentia at the end of April. It was then that the Falls Memorial trustees gave Essentia formal notice they were terminating the professional and management services agreements with Essentia.

Provisions of the original agreement include an automatic renewal for five years if neither party gave notice of termination of the affiliation or an intent to separate, which Essentia did Monday to avoid renewal.

“Despite that, Essentia is completely committed to I Falls,” he said. “We will be there, we will have a presence, as we have had in the past and will continue do to in the future.”

That presence, he said, will continue at the clinic in the form of physicians, nurse practitioners and

physicians assistants and by delivering outreach by physicians who travel to International Falls.

The statement by the RLMC Board said Essentia proposed to completely integrate with RLMC and acquire substantially all of the assets of the hospital, “a move that would have ended local control of the hospital and positioned RLMC as an affiliate of Essentia’s St. Mary’s Medical Center in Duluth. The RLMC Board advanced a counter-proposal to Essentia in June, but ultimately, the organizations have decided not to pursue further negotiations.”

Nikceovich said Essentia believed its proposal to be very attractive and included a promise to build a new hospital; an employment guarantee for all jobs for two years; a promise to contribute \$2 million to the hospital foundation; and an Essentia health benefit to employees which significantly reduced health insurance premiums and along with other ben-

efits in respect to the cost of supplies and other materials because of Essentia’s purchasing power.

“We believed the sum total of all that to be actually very attractive, but it is not a shared vision,” he said.

“International Falls members of the hospital Board place high priority on preserving essential services in the community and maintaining a strong local workforce,” said Jay Knaak, a physician, in the RLMC Board’s statement. “We are pleased to move forward with clarity about the future – and with renewed energy for the hospital’s growth and continued success.”

The RLMC Board statement said the two organizations will work to end their existing agreements prior to June 30, 2014. Though the governance structure of the hospital will change and become more locally-focused over the next year, hospital and clinic operations will continue as usual and it is unlikely the community will notice any sign of the transi-

tion, said the statement. “We appreciate Essentia’s interest in our hospital, and we are grateful for the support and patience the International Falls community has shared over the last year,” said Congrave. “We look forward to an increased level of communication and transparency as we move forward – and to many future years of success for our community hospital.”

Nikceovich noted a separate contract to install electronic medical records at the clinic will continue, because it’s not linked to integration.

Nikceovich said Essentia respects the choices made and believe everyone involved has a common desire to do what’s best for the patients served in International Falls.

“People have different ways to achieve that and the timing in not right for integration,” he said. “And if there is the opportunity to come together to talk again in the future, Essentia will be there to listen.”

# TREE

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The group gathered for speeches and photographs before the planting of 3,000 spruce trees purchased through an \$18,000 donation by Nature Valley through its Preserve the Parks campaign in a partnership with the National Parks Conservation Association. The program is intended to benefit national parks. NPCA is an advocacy group for national parks across the nation.

The effort came to Borderland when NPCA staff sought input from Voyageurs National Park Superintendent Mike Ward, who suggested the reforestation project in cooperation with the the Rainy Lake Sportfishing Club, a local resource advocacy group.

Ward assisted in Saturday’s planting of the spruce trees, a native plant expected to live longer along the river bank than the faster-growing, short-lived softwoods that have fallen into the river creating log jams that have slowed river flow, added sediment to traditional walleye spawning habitat and blocked walleye spawning runs. Ward joked that walleye anglers are normally on the water on a Saturday morning, planting trees.

“Looking forward from the past,” is how Tom Worth, a veteran walleye angler and long-time board member of the Rainy Lake Sportfishing Club, described the work set out to restore the traditional walleye spawning run on the Rat Root River Saturday. He, too, was taking part in planting trees Saturday.

Joining in the planting was International Falls Mayor Bob Anderson, a member of the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council, which has provided significant money toward the larger project. The Legislature established the council with the responsibility of providing annual



STAFF PHOTO BY LAUREL BEAGER

Members of the Rainy Lake Sportfishing Club cut grass in preparation for the planting of spruce seedlings Saturday.

funding recommendations to the Legislature from the Outdoor Heritage Fund. The fund, one of four funds created by the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, receives one-third of the money raised by a tax increase approved by Minnesota voters.

McCollum, DFL-Minneapolis, who fished Rainy Lake Friday, talked about how the project represents an interconnectedness among the nation, Voyageurs, the local community, and the walleye that travel between the Rat Root River and park.

She said that interconnectedness was also shown in the variety of people at the tree planting who came together representing a local resource club, a national park and its advocacy groups, a granola company owned by a Minnesota corporation, General Mills, and a youth work crew.

McCollum joked she was excited to see something accomplished at the end of the day, in comparison to serving a day in Congress.

Christine Geopfert, NPCA, explained Saturday the partnership’s effort will benefit Voyageurs and the people who visit it by improving the walleye resource in the Rat Root River, which flows into the park.

Andrew Lainsbury of Nature Valley said he and other company representatives were excited to be involved in the project. “We want to make sure these special places are here for generations,” he said of the Preserve the Parks program, in its fourth year. “Today’s project will fit right in line with that mission.”

The company brought a film crew along to the tree planting to help showcase the efforts and results of the Preserve the Parks program.

Tim MacKay, former RLSC president, thanked all present for their assistance Saturday. MacKay said the club took on the spawning improvement effort as a 50-year project, noting the next generation will continue the work and see the results.

“It always seems like there is one pivotal element that brings everybody together,” he said. “There’s one central figure here I would like to thank very much. Superintendent Ward, were it not for you, we wouldn’t be here today. It’s easy to network in a small community. Mike Ward and Tom Worth are neighbors. So it was an across the fence kind of thing.”

Dillon McLeod, Conservation Corps crew leader, said the crew, made up of

crew members ages 15-18, had spent the previous day planting trees along the river. McLeod said Saturday’s gathering and recognition of the crew was unique to its regular work.

“Normally we’re in a backcountry campground and we don’t see anyone else for like two weeks at a time,” he said, adding that it was nice to be acknowledged for the work and the program. The corps is expected to provide a crew to also work to remove more log jams in the river, said MacKay.

Doug Franchot, chairman of the VNPA board, also joined in the planting. “I started coming up here from the cities over 20 years and to see the groups coming together, working together, agreeing on things — man, it gives you real faith in the future,” he said of the past, sometimes contentious relationships involved in Voyageurs National Park. “There are so many friends up here now. Seeing people from all over coming up to our park, it’s really something.”

He said he was pleased the youth crew was not only assisting in the effort, but experiencing Voyageurs. “Getting the next generation involved — this is how you do it,” Franchot said.

# ANNEXATION

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last September. “The things we were looking for...a buffer zone and rock blasting issue were two of the things we felt that the county needed to move forward. To date, there has been no motion...that that was ever adopted by the city council or Boise (Inc.), who was part of that discussion.”

Pavleck said a committee of involved parties was established and an agreement from Boise and city officials gave confirmation that official motions would be put in place.

“We need something for our records for the future,” he said. “There are three parties to protect here – the neighbors, the city of Ranier and the environment.”

International Falls City Attorney Steve Shermoen said once the city and the county both sign the contract of orderly annexation agreement, “it is actually binding. It’s in that document that all the things Commissioner Pavleck mentioned...would be addressed.”

“We’ve been told that shovel ready is the key,” Shermoen said, adding that getting to that point has been delayed for a number of reasons in the past. “One of the first steps in that would be the annexation.”

Pavleck said he recalled a time when land owners who own property adjacent to the buffer zone were willing to buy land to protect that property.

“Boise at the time said they were never going to sell that land,” he said.

The commissioner added that property owners turned to the county to make sure their “future was ensured.”

“If we can get that buffer zone established, as we agreed to, we think we can bring money in from outside sources to restore (Second Creek),” Pavleck continued. “To me, it is part of the annexation process is to have everyone on board. I would

like to see everyone get together and get something written up and agreed to.”

“Commissioner Pavleck is absolutely right,” said Koochiching County Land Commissioner Dennis Hummeltzsch. “The big issue here is water quality. I’m one of the neighbors who offered to buy that land...there is two erosion problems already. Once that land you’re annexing becomes clear...there’s going to be a tremendous surge of water coming into that watershed and possibly creating environmental issues.”

Falls Mayor Bob Anderson assured the board necessary meetings will be held to establish an agreement.

Commissioner Rob Ecklund stressed a meeting needed to happen sooner than later.

“It’s imperative to the city who needs to act on this,” he said of a timely meeting.

In other business Tuesday, the board took no action on providing financial assistance to the city of Ranier to replace a dock until the land the dock sits on is surveyed by the county.

Ranier City Clerk Kim Nuthak told commissioners that a dock located on County Road 21 is in poor condition and needs to be replaced to keep it open to the public.

“It also came to my attention that after the alley (on County Road 21) was vacated, it is located on Tony Cole and Terry Wood’s property,” Nuthak said. “It is on their shoreline so we are going to have to move (the dock) over a little bit.”

Pavleck said after the dock was built “several years ago” the county board decided that it was public property.

“We were under the assumption it was on county property,” he said. “Has that been surveyed?”

Nuthak had a plat sketch of the area, but not an official survey.

Commissioners agreed to have county surveyor Matt Gouin survey the property before any financial contribution is decided.



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