

LOCALNEWS

KOOCHICHING COUNTY BOARD

Quarry proposal sent back to commission

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

A request for a conditional use permit and rezoning that would allow for operation of a rock quarry will again be considered by the Koochiching County Planning and Zoning Commission.

The county board Tuesday voted to ask the commission to again review the application from Wagner Construction for a rock quarry near the end of County Road 144, also known as Moonlight Rock Road. The proposal calls for Wagner to purchase 40 acres from Meriwether Land and Timber LLC, contingent on approval of the quarry operation.

The board discussed a commission recommendation to deny the application based on a change of purpose of the quarry that was not reflected in the application, said Dale Olson, director of the county Environmental Services Department.

Olson said the application was submitted for use on a specific project, but the construction company did not get the contract for that project. The purpose of the quarry changed from being project specific to long-term use as needed, he said.

Several residents who live in the area near the proposed quarry spoke in opposition to granting the permit and rezoning the property Tuesday and Dennis Wagner, owner of Wagner Construction, discussed the proposal.

At issue for some, like Joe Prettyman, a member of the commission and a nearby resident, is whether trucks would be hauling rock on County Road 144 or a road owned by Boise Inc. that runs west to County Road 155. He said the change in ownership of the Falls paper mill may not guarantee use of the company's road, resulting in use of County Road 144. He encouraged Wagner to find a place for a quarry that would not require trucks to haul many loads each day past more than a dozen homes.

Terry Randolph also said he was concerned about the potential impact to County Road 144, which he said has blind corners, as well as the hours of blasting and crushing should the operation be approved.

"There are a lot of questions," he said.

Other area residents voiced concerns about blasting of rock and the potential

for damage to their property. But Wagner said incidents cited at the meeting were the responsibility of another construction company, not Wagner Construction.

Craig Halla, land manager for Meriwether Land and Timber LLC, urged the board to consider the economic development opportunity the quarry would provide, and noted the county's gravel sources are diminishing quickly.

Wagner said he was disappointed in the commission's recommendation. While he said he understands the concerns, he said they have no basis. He said county roads would not be used for hauling and the operation would be a long-term investment. He said pre-blasting surveys of nearby properties are conducted at his operations and the company reimburses property owners for damage caused by blasting.

Commissioners agreed a number of questions about the proposal were unanswered and encouraged the commission and Wagner to provide more information about the proposed operation and consider whether conditions could be set that would address concerns.

In other business Tuesday, the board agreed on a 4-1 vote to provide \$18,500 to hire a consultant to prepare a statement of need, which will list the equipment needed to move forward with implementation of the state's public safety radio system known as ARMER — Allied Radio Matrix for Emergency Response.

Commissioner Wayne Skoe voted against the motion.

Undersheriff Bruce Grotberg and Sheriff Brian Jerspersen met with the board Tuesday to discuss the funding request. They said the statement would allow them to seek additional grants, possibly up to \$300,000, that could be used toward the \$425,000 cost to begin implementation of the system. The total \$1.6 million cost to connect to the system would be spread over a period of time.

The county's VHF radio system is now 12 narrowband compliant, but loses coverage in about 15 percent in the most rural areas of the county. According to the sheriff's office, the Federal Communications Commission is at some point going to require VHF systems go to six narrowband. The county's VHF system is used by county law

enforcement and dispatch, International Falls police, and the county emergency responder agencies for fire protection, first responders and ambulance.

The ARMER system is a UHF system. The state has placed the required towers in the county for area-wide coverage so the areas that lack coverage with the county's VHF system would have coverage with the UHF system when the state installs two more towers — one by Bois Forte and another in International Falls on County Highway 155. In addition, county law enforcement will also have regional coverage and communications as well as communication where cell phone service is not available.

The board accepted a recommendation of Terry Murray, director of the Community Services Department, to renew a county participation agreement with UCare Minnesota.

In July, the board agreed to allow UCare, a nonprofit health plan providing health coverage and services to more than 300,000 members in Minnesota and western Wisconsin, to provide health care services to recipients of medical assistance in Koochiching County. As of Jan. 1, UCare is the only provider available to the county, which has frustrated commissioners and Murray.

But Murray said without renewal of the contract, the reimbursement of hundreds of thousands of dollars would not occur. Murray said UCare officials have said they are attempting to address concerns about delays in reimbursement of claims.

Commissioners said they would discuss the lack of providers available to county residents with state lawmakers representing Borderland. In addition, they said they have not received a response to a letter sent to the Minnesota Department of Human Services commission about the lack of providers.

Meanwhile, Lindsy Barnhart, health educator with the Health Department, made clear a \$25,000 grant to the department to promote health living and prevention of chronic disease is from the UCare Foundation.

Barnhart said interviews with county residents in July will be used to develop a program to encourage better nutrition, physical activity and chronic disease management for county residents.

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Power of the Purse aims to give back

BY EMILY GEDDE
Staff Writer

Power of the Purse — which organizers boast celebrates everything fun, fabulous and feminine — is Nov. 8, with the hope this year's event will be the biggest yet.

According to organizer Julie Ehrman, after last year's sold-out event, she is expecting another record crowd this year.

"We are so excited that the event continues to grow and draw an amazing group each year," she said.

Power of the Purse, 5:30 p.m. Nov. 8 at Lenards in the AmericInn, is United Way's biggest fundraiser of the year.

"This is our only fundraiser this year, so the pressure is on," organizer Jessica Crosby said.

Ehrman said last year's event generated \$18,253, and this year, she said, the goal is set at \$20,000.

"Proceeds benefit people in our own backyards," she reminded women interested in attending.

Both Ehrman and Crosby said the evening promises to be an enjoyable time for those who participate. A \$45 ticket includes dinner, wine and cheese tasting and a chance to win a Coach purse. A silent auction loaded with items including a two-night stay at Thunderbird Lodge, Vikings tickets and Fortune Bay Resort and Casino package will also be available.

As the International Falls community endures the effects of the local Boise Inc. paper mill laying off 265 people this month, the women say they are confident it won't hinder the support the community has given the event in the past.

"I would imagine (the layoffs) will impact (the event) somewhat, however, this is also when our community needs these donations," Crosby said. "United Way funds 16 local agencies, some of them are already experiencing larger-than-normal requests, for example the food bank, so we want to continue to fund

these organizations to help out the community."

Ehrman said she agreed.

"It is the focus of United Way to continue to build community support in order to rally for those who need it most," she said. "By supporting United Way of Northeastern Minnesota and Power of the Purse, we have a real opportunity to make a difference and provide a level of support to those who are struggling."

The organizers encouraged women who want to attend to get their tickets early. This year, they are available only at City Drug.

"This event focuses on celebrating women in our community," Ehrman said. "Together, we shape our world, make it kinder, softer and more compassionate... The women in attendance will guarantee to educate and inspire you. If you've never attended but have thought about it, get a ticket this year and take part in this fabulous experience. I guarantee you will not be disappointed."

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