

VETERANS AFFAIRS

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“We’re hoping it’s encompassing enough where they don’t have to go all the way to the VA in Minneapolis.”

Ecklund said he’s heard from local veterans the minimum nine-hour round trip to the Minneapolis VA is a hardship which takes them away from their homes and families.

“They get good service once they’re there, but it’s the hardship of having to deal with travel,” Ecklund said. “Some also have physical limitations that are tough to deal with along the way.”

Brian Briggs served in the Air Force for 32 years, and retired in 2009. He said he’s visited a VA facility for health care twice, and hasn’t had a problem with it.

“Anything to provide veterans access to rural healthcare is a benefit in the long run. We’re hoping it’s encompassing enough where they don’t have to go all the way to the VA in Minneapolis.”

**Rob Ecklund**  
Koochiching County Board chairman and veteran

The new bill providing funding for rural veterans to see their own doctor is a step in the right direction, he said.

“It’s a great start, putting money up so vets can get taken care of at their local doctor,” Briggs said. “It’s also supposed to shore up some of the inefficiencies and backlogs with people waiting for months to get in.”

In the long run, Briggs said he thinks it would be cheaper for the government to reimburse for local health care for veterans, instead of having to pay

mileage for veterans traveling long distances to a VA for care. A 15-minute visit to the VA in Minneapolis meant a mileage reimbursement of around \$260, he said.

“Tack that onto the bill, and you would think it would be better to have it taken care of here,” Briggs said.

Sen. Al Franken in a release said the bipartisan-supported bill addresses the issue of caring for veterans once they return home.

“The scandal at the VA left many veterans throughout the

country without the care they need in a timely fashion, and that was totally inexcusable,” Franken said in a statement. “Our veterans put everything on the line for us, and the problems we saw earlier this year were totally unacceptable.”

The bill also appropriates \$1.5 billion for the VA to lease 27 medical facilities in 18 states and Puerto Rico, and also provides \$5 billion for the VA to hire more doctors and nurses and improve facilities.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar addressed in a statement the issue

of veterans receiving quality care upon their return home.

“Today’s strong, bipartisan vote is a critical step toward restoring trust at the VA and ensuring that our veterans have access to the timely, quality care that they deserve,” Klobuchar said in a release. “There wasn’t a waiting line when these men and women signed up to serve our country, and there shouldn’t be a waiting line when they come home and need our support. We still have more work to do, and I will keep pushing to ensure that our veterans have access to high-quality care and support that is worthy of their service.”

Only veterans enrolled in the VA healthcare system by Aug. 1 would be eligible for federally funded care from private providers. The VA currently cares for nearly 9 million enrolled veterans.

AIRPORT

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Funding available includes \$3.2 million of FAA entitlement funds accumulated from 2011 to this year, Anderson said. However, he noted airports may accumulate funding for just three years and since this year serves as the fourth year, \$221,726 awarded in 2011 and not used now will be returned to the the FAA.

Other funding available for the project includes: \$1 million in FAA entitlement funds for 2015, \$2.2 million state bonding money; \$1.5 million Minnesota Department of Transportation Aeronautics Division funding; and \$1 million local contribution by the city and county.

Anderson said more bids were expected, but other contractors were very busy when bids were sought.

No one has suggested at this time a larger local contribution from the city or county, he said.

In related business, city Attorney Steve Shermoen reported that discussions with county officials about the interpretation of a state law that may apply to how Koochiching County levies for operation of the airport have been ongoing.

Shermoen reported county officials interpret the law differently than city officials.

“We need to make a compromise,” he said.

He said the airport agreement and commission does not specify the appropriate path should there be disagreement on issues.

“We hope to find consensus, we just haven’t had the time to do that,” he said.

Councilor Gail Rognerud, who with Anderson represents the city on the commission, said both the county board and city council begin their budget processes in August and having information about how to fund the airport prior to that process would be helpful.

Meanwhile, a proposal to

consider taking a sale tax proposal to the voters in November was withdrawn from Monday’s agenda by Councilor Cynthia Jaksa. An Aug. 6 deadline for items on the ballot could not be met, she said, adding she would revisit the issue in time for the November 2016 ballot.

The proposal called for a local sales tax to pay for the airport terminal project and city infrastructure.

In the meantime, she said information about the infrastructure needs of the city would be determined and provided to voters to help them better understand the motivation for sale tax proposal.

Jaksa outlined her reasons for the tax and withdrawing it from the agenda in Wednesday’s edition of The Journal. She said the sales tax would expand the tax base of the city without adding extra burden to city property owners.

Anderson said he was bothered by a letter authored to the International Falls Area Chamber of Commerce and to the newspaper. He said it used the pronoun “we,” indicating whole council support.

Anderson said he voted in committee against bringing the proposal to the council table.

In addition, he said Councilor Pete Kalar was absent because of work responsibilities from the committee meeting, so his position was unknown.

Instead, Anderson suggested the council consider what it could “wring out” of the budget, noting funding for a number of items were removed last year from the 2014 budget that can now be used for capital improvements.

Anderson also said the impact to families and businesses of sales tax has not been fully explored.

But Jaksa said in a democracy, a majority vote allows her to use “we” in indicating support of the proposal and she reiterated her reason for support of a local sales tax.


SUMMER’S SWAN SONG



STAFF PHOTO BY EMILY GEDDE

Tyson West, 2, held on tightly to a pair of maracas Wednesday in the summer’s last Sing and Play lesson at Ranier Park.

Happy 8<sup>th</sup> Birthday  
Jackson



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