

COUNTY

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“We will be better prepared for next time,” Ecklund said. “Whenever that may be.”

Sandbagging

The filling and transporting of sandbags played a key role in the relief efforts and Jespersen said should another flooding event occur, operations will be immediately set up at Kerry Park.

“It was a much better operation over there,” Jespersen said of the park. Originally, efforts were established at City Beach, which he said quickly became too congested for the project.

Ecklund chimed in he was surprised there were no accidents reported at City Beach.

“There just wasn’t a lot of room there,” he said. “It was much more functional at Kerry Park.”

And the men said moving the sandbagging machines and rearranging volunteers resulted in valuable time lost in production.

“Next time, we’ll just have the two smaller machines instead of the bigger octopus machine,” Jespersen said. “It took less people to operate the smaller machine and it filled just as many bags in the same amount of time as the larger one.”

Another reoccurring roadblock at City Beach was the lack of cell phone coverage. Luckily, Jespersen said emergency radios “worked beautifully” and were critical to have.

“Next time, we’ll designate a common channel for everyone who has a radio to tune in to,” he added.

Volunteers

Both Jespersen and Ecklund couldn’t stress enough the key role volunteers played in preventing the flood from causing more damage than it did.

“The effort the citizens gave was phenomenal,” the sheriff said of people who filled sangbags, built dykes, served food and more.

He added he was thankful volunteer efforts went as smoothly as they did because there were times the

help seemed overwhelming.

“We had so many calls coming in, it was tough to determine how many volunteers we would need,” he said. “We found jobs for everyone who came, but it was a challenge to see exactly how many people we’d need and where we needed them. There were only so many places to be on a given day.”

However, Jespersen said in the event a similar or completely separate natural disaster occurs, determining the number of volunteers will boil down to a play-by-ear effort.

“It’s just hard to say until you’re in the situation,” he said. “Luckily this time, we had just enough or too many. But like I said, anybody who showed up, we had something for them to do and we are grateful for them.”

Clean up

Several home and property owners have removed the fortresses of sandbags from their property, however, others are still enclosed by the white walls of sand.

Ecklund said county officials are working on getting a contract worded correctly so bids can be sought from contractors to remove sandbags.

“We have to make sure we jump through the proper hoops,” he said. “It will happen, we just have to be patient.”

Next time

The men joked they hope when and if the next event like this happens it’ll be long after they are out of office.

“We have everything documented that if this happens again, someone will just have to open an emergency management book and see how things were done in 2014,” Jespersen said.

Ecklund added while no emergencies can be predicted, he felt the county’s emergency management team was well-prepared and is now better equipped with tools and knowledge for next time.

“It wasn’t planned, it wasn’t fun, but I think it brought our community together,” he said. “And that is one of the biggest things that came out of all of this.”

BILL

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get caught in all kinds of cyclical activity relative to the economy,” Dill said. The districts were “on a roll” in the early to mid 2000s, but then came “the judgment day” in 2008 with the recession, he said.

Wood harvest in the state has dropped from 3.8 million cords in the early and mid-2000s to 2.7 million cords today, Dill said.

“Off of all the land — private, county, tribal and state — we have about 5.7 million cords per year that is sustainable,” he said.

As the chair of the House Environment and Natural Resources Committee, Dill said it’s crucial to find new opportunities to expand the timber industry. About 450,000 cords to 500,000 cords of standing wood between International Falls and Virginia will fall unharvested each year.

“We’ve been working real hard to find new projects, based on heating products, based on building products, based on energy products and there is quite a number of those different



Sen. Tom Bakk



Rep. David Dill

scenarios playing out right now (at various sites in the districts),” he said.

However, he said it’s important these projects not compete for wood, thereby driving up the cost, with other wood products industries.

Improvements in education, the addition of business investment credits and a rollback of business tax, and a “rainy day” reserve fund that is indexed to the size of government brought last session are helping to improve the business climate and to fill the needs of employers, Dill said.

“But all of this takes money,” he said. “These are things we’ve starved 10 of the last 12 years.”

Dill said the state’s economy is doing quite well, while the regional economy is not doing so well.

PROJECT

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much as possible, Moeller said, which is state policy.

County Commissioner Wayne Skoe expressed his concern that two route segment options were still on the maps provided to the board. One of the segments runs near Littlefork, and the other runs near Northome. The residents in those areas don’t want the line running near them, he said.

“Part of the reason they didn’t have anyone showing up at the last meetings was we were told (those options) aren’t in this anymore,” Skoe said. “But they keep popping up.”

Those options are alternative segments, Moeller said, which Minnesota Power doesn’t want to use, as they’d make the line much longer and more expensive.

They aren’t preferred, he said, but they need to be part of the consideration in case both of the better options are rejected.

“We brought them forward as alternative segments the commission could consider, but our preferred one is still the blue route,” Moeller said. “I can commit to say that we don’t want them, and our preference is still (the other options).”

It’s hard to say which route will get approved, but Moeller said he thinks the segment options won’t, as they don’t meet the criteria and aren’t feasible.

“From all the different commission factors, they don’t meet the standards, because they’re longer and there’s more impacts on landowners,” Moeller said.

The project schedule Moeller provided indicated the construction process is expected to begin in late 2016, with June 2020 as the

“That gives us a good target, a mission — and to work toward finding new opportunity,” he said.

Bakk, a member of the Senate Tax Committee, agreed the accomplishments of the last session came with costs, some of which, such as all-day kindergarten, were paid by a 2-percent income tax increase on the state’s top 2-percent of earners.

Bakk said 2013 brought a tax reform plan by Gov. Mark Dayton, which included a controversial tax on business-to-business services, which spurred meetings with business leaders, not lobbyists.

Those meetings showed Bakk the added costs of the proposed business service tax would force businesses to leave the state. That proposal was eventually rejected by the state.

But Bakk said those meetings also revealed an incredible business structure, which has led to Minnesota being ranked the third best state in which to do business. The ranking is also based on the state’s quality of life and its workforce, which will require an investment in human

capital to maintain.

Without having to manage the state’s budget from deficit crisis to deficit crisis, that investment should be possible, he said.

“We’re just never going to be cheapest, we’ve got to be the smartest if we’re going to continue to prosper in this state,” he said. “And that means we’ve got to invest in our people.”

Other accomplishments expected to support local economies include the elimination of sales tax on government purchases and an exemption on up-front sales tax on capital equipment for businesses that was rebated.

Bakk said 46 percent of the sales tax in the state is paid by businesses.

“No one talks about that, and those are tax reductions,” Bakk said. “They’re great public policy, it’s just sexier to talk about (added funding and improvements in) early childhood, higher education, all-day kindergarten and more funding for nursing homes. But these are tax policy the Legislature put in place that will help businesses... and hold down property taxes...”

required in-service date.

Minnesota Power would pay property taxes on the line, and payments would begin in 2018, Moeller said, with the full amount coming in 2021. The company is expecting to pay \$40,000-\$70,000 per mile annually on the line, he said.

In other business, the board approved a motion to award the low bid for a road construction project on County State Aid Highway 107, contingent on approval from the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

There were seven bids, county Engineer Joe Sutherland said, with the low bidder being Bowman Construction. That bid of \$1.851 million was only 9 percent higher than the engineer’s estimate of \$1.7 million. Bowman Construction was also the only bidder during the first bidding process.

Documentation must

now be submitted to MnDOT for approval, Sutherland said, which will let the county know if Bowman Construction is approved to work on the project.

This was the second bidding process for the project, Sutherland said, as the only bid in the first process was 23 percent higher than the engineer’s estimate. A rules states if the bid comes in more than 10 percent above the estimate, authorization from the county and state aid agencies is needed for approval. Instead of seeking that approval, new bids were sought for the project.

There will be intermediate work done on the road this fall, Sutherland said, with more construction being completed by October 2015.

“We’re hopeful that that contract will get some work done this year and the balance of it done next year,” Sutherland said.

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