



# GOOD LUCK ANGLERS!



# The Journal



Saturday,  
May 10, 2014

International Falls, Minnesota      www.ifallsjournal.com      \$1

## INTO THE MIST



Trees on a Rainy Lake point east of International Falls reflect on the water in a bay while fog sets in Thursday on what appears to be white ice beyond. Anglers seeking walleye today on the Minnesota fishing opener could see large portions of Rainy Lake still covered in ice.

STAFF PHOTO BY LAUREL BEAGER

## Littlefork Medical Center closer to upgrades

BY SPENSER BICKETT  
Staff Writer

**LITTLEFORK-** The Littlefork Medical Center is seeking a \$1 million loan from Koochiching County for what has been deemed critical upgrades the facility needs to remain viable.

The Koochiching County Board Tuesday held a public hearing in Littlefork to take input on a proposed subordinate service taxing district that would allow the city to pay back the loan.

The county board, along with Littlefork Mayor Mike Fort, county Administration Director Teresa Briggs, and Littlefork Medical Center Chief Operating Officer Mike Anderson listened to community concerns about creating the new taxing district.

The taxing district would be created to pay back a \$1 million loan from the county for what county and city officials say are critical improvements needed at the LMC. The taxing district would encompass all of Independent School District 362. The zero-interest loan would be paid back in \$100,000 annual installments over the next 10 years.

The loan would pay for the most crucial improvements LMC needs including a new boiler, new roof and new information technology system. Most of the roof is original, Fort said, as is the boiler, which has become obsolete. The IT system needs to be upgraded to comply with federal requirements for electronic medical records, he added.

The new taxing district would create a cost for the taxpayers, Fort said, but that cost is little compared to the costs the city would incur if the facility closed. The cost of closing the facility, along with unemployment costs, would be devastating, he said.

“If that were to happen, it would bankrupt the city,” Fort said. “The taxpayers would be liable for most of that...and we would lose 100 good-paying jobs.”

### District creation

In order to levy a tax for 2015, the taxing district has to be created by July 1, Briggs said. If county commissioners pass a resolution creating the district, there is a

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## Report intended to improve visitor experience

BY LAUREL BEAGER  
Editor

An assessment of the tourism offerings of Voyageurs National Park’s gateway communities shows a lot of good things are happening already, but there’s room for improvement.

John Bennett, University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality, met Tuesday with about 25 people, many involved in the local tourism industry, to discuss the results of the assessment.

Bennett said the 18-month program began about one year ago and was prompted by Destination Voyageurs National Park, which has been charged with marketing the park.

DVNP President Joe Mershon opened the meeting by discussing the importance and value of the local tourism industry, which he said appears to be

growing. In the last few years, tourism in Koochiching County, where a just small portion of VNP is located, has grown from contributing about \$24 million to the local economy to about \$28 million, he said.

VNP gateway communities are International Falls, Ranier, Kabetogama, Ash River, Crane Lake and Orr.

The 50-page assessment provides the “positives” found by “secret shoppers” from other communities who visited the area and provided first-impression rankings in several categories. It also contains observations and recommendations from experts in the tourism industry who also visited the gateway communities.

The report is intended to be used as a tool by the communities to provide the most valuable

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STAFF PHOTO BY LAUREL BEAGER

John Bennett, University of Minnesota Center for Community Vitality, Tuesday discusses a tourism assessment of the communities that serve as the gateway to Voyageurs National Park.

## Senate advances medical marijuana bill

### Local lawmakers, leaders divided on perspective of bill

BY EMILY GEDDE  
Staff Writer

The use of marijuana for medical purposes took a step closer to legalization this week.

Minnesota senators on Tuesday advanced a bill that would make physician-prescribed medi-

cal marijuana legal for a broad range of patient suffering. Marijuana would come in the form of pills, oil and vapor to ease certain symptoms, but would prohibit patients from smoking the drug.

Senators, including Senate Majority Leader Tom Bakk, voted 48-18 to approve the bill, which received bipartisan support in the Democratic-controlled Senate. The bill differs from a state House of Representatives proposal to make medical marijuana available through a research study.

“I’ve supported the idea for a long time,” Bakk told The Journal Thursday, adding he voted for a similar bill in 2009, which was eventually veto by former Gov. Tim Pawlenty.

Bakk said this session he’s had the opportunity to interact with many people who would benefit from using the drug for medical reasons.

“I met with a lot of parents who brought their children in who are

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