WELCOMING A NEW FACE

STAFF PHOTO BY EMILY GEDDE

Outgoing Koochiching County Veterans Service Officer Kathy Sikkila, left, introduces Candance Ritch, who is taking over the position, to the county board Tuesday. Sikkila says she is retiring from what she calls "her dream job she found at age 54" to travel with her husband. Sikkila thanked commissioners for the opportunity to work with the county's veterans and assured them Ritch is "the right person for the job."

Man fooled intruder into lowering gun

SANDSTONE, Minn. (AP) — A 75-year-old Sandstone man pretended to be blind and hard of hearing to fool an armed intruder into lowering his gun, court papers say. The intruder ended up dead and another suspect is facing prison time.

Charles Carlson told authorities he was sleeping on his porch when he awoke to noises in his farmhouse early Thursday. He went to his kitchen and ended up with a gun pointed at his head.

Carlson knew the man's gun was loaded, "as he could see the rounds in each chamber of the cylinder," according to charges filed Friday. So Carlson pretended to be blind and hard of hearing. The intruder lowered his weapon for a moment — long enough for Carlson to grab his own loaded handgun. Carlson shot Gypsy Wayne Watts, 23, twice during the ensuing confrontation, the charges say. Watts died at the scene.

"It was an unfortunate thing that happened," Carlson said.

Pine County authorities charged a 16-year-old alleged accomplice in juvenile court with three counts of first-degree burglary Friday. The charges allege that the intruders were after drugs and money.

Authorities contend that the 16-year-old was at a party when he told Watts about a man he knew only as "Carlson," who the teen believed would have cash and drugs. The pair, both wearing latex gloves, found Carlson's wallet in a bedroom and swiped a $100 bill before Carlson woke up.

Carlson told the newspaper he works with the 16-year-old's father and "treated the kid good all his life." He declined to talk in detail about what happened, saying his attorney had advised him against giving statements.

His voice softened as he added, "The whole deal is saddening."

Investigators will forward evidence to prosecutors to see if the shooting qualifies under a Minnesota law that allows a person to use deadly force in his or her home in some circumstances. Pine County Chief Deputy Steven Blackwell said Thursday that investigators had found no indications of wrongdoing on Carlson's part.

Watts, a Sandstone resident, had convictions in Pine County and North Dakota, Blackwell said. Watts was convicted in Minnesota of carrying a pistol without a permit, among other charges. In 2009, he pleaded guilty in North Dakota to robbery and burglary, records show.

SCHOOL

➤ continued from A1

Following the May 2 announcement by Boise Inc. that it would permanently terminate 265 workers at the local paper mill, Nelson said he predicted the district would see a 5-percent decrease in enrollment at the beginning of the school year.

"We were right on 5 percent," he said of September's student enrollment figures. "I don't think we've felt the real effects of (the layoffs) yet. It'll be eight to 10 months down the road until we'll see much more of a change in our student enrollment... The person stepping into this position will not have to address it so much when they first start, we'll have to deal with that this school year."

Monday night, Falls High School Principal Tim Everson reported the high school is down five students from last month and Falls and West End Elementary, combined, are down four students. The district has lost 67 students since the end of the 2012-2013 school year.

However, despite a loss of students, Don Zierke of Miller McDonald Inc., told board members during an audit report Monday the district is in good financial shape.

"Just because you're losing kids doesn't mean you can't be in good financial shape," he said.

Still, Nelson said the district will need to monitor its spending.

"It'll be an ongoing process," he said.

A special work session to consider where cost adjustments need to be made is scheduled for 5 p.m. Dec. 3.

Another issue a new superintendent could potentially face is settling a contract with the teacher's union Local 331.

The district's about 70 teachers are working under a 2011-2013 agreement that expired June 30.

Nelson is hopeful, however, to establish a contract prior to his departure.

"I look to see that an agreement will be in place before I leave," he said. "The future is going to continue to show change and it's best to have contracts and agreements settled...Once we put things in place, have it all settled and have agreements taken care of, then we're in a position to get ahead of and get ourselves ready for the next change."

A negotiation meeting between the board and union leaders is scheduled for 4 p.m. Monday at Falls High School.

OTHER BUSINESS

In other business Monday, Nelson said there are more than 60 district students who are not up-to-date on their immunizations.

"The district needs to follow the statutes that if immunizations are not in place, students cannot attend school," he said, adding the deadline was in September.

He said administration has been sending information home to parents and working with the school nurse and Rainy Lake Medical Center to make the deadline date for immunizations Dec. 1. The 2013-2014 school calendar includes a chart with what immunizations are required for certain grade levels.

"We're having a very difficult time getting everybody scheduled," Nelson added.

The superintendent said in the past, the district hasn't been strict on following immunization laws.

"It hasn't been addressed at all," he said.

On the same note, Nelson said legal exemptions are allowed — both for medical reasons and conscientiously held beliefs – however, parents are required to report that to the district.

Also Monday, Kelly Gordon of the Blue Ribbon Panel Committee, told board members a new sign will be placed on the north exterior wall of Falls High School.

"We're working on getting school pride back in the school," she said. "I think it'll be exciting for some team to come in and know they're at Falls High School and they're playing the Broncos."

The design, which will read FHS Broncos and include an illustration of the Bronco on the school's logo, came from the input of several community members, Gordon said.

"I have all the funding secured and the cutting will start this week," she said.

Gordon said several community members and businesses are involved with the project which is funded by TruStar Federal Credit Union. Labor to cut and hang the steel letters is expected to be donated by GreenTech Manufacturing Inc. and Up North Builders Inc., respectively.

Gordon added that a way to light up the sign is also being worked out.

CITY

➤ continued from A1

Falls International Airport. The airport is jointly owned by the city and Koochiching County.

Koochiching County is also seeking $12 million for the proposed Renewable Energy Clean Air Project.

Dill said the sewer project request sought $5.7 million last session, but was not included in a smaller bonding bill.

He said he believes the money for the sewer project will be included this year as it has broad support for protecting the waters around Minnesota's only national park.

Dill said new requests may be difficult to fund. He said 30 or 40 new projects have been proposed for funding just in District 3A, which he represents. And, he added, the project proponents all believe they should be at the front of the line for money.

Meanwhile, councilors thanked Dill, and his colleague Sen. Tom Bakk, DFL-Tower, for increasing the amount of local government aid to cities, including International Falls, in the 2013 session.

In turn, Dill thanked the council for proposing no levy increase for 2014 over this year's amount.

"Not everyone is doing that," he said of other cities. The LGA increase, he said, was intended to help provided tax relief for residents, noting some metro lawmakers do not favor LGA payments to cities.

"Your city has proven it can buy down property taxes," Dill said.

Meanwhile, Dill said he expects a proposal at the 2014 session to increase the gas tax. He suggested "a perfect trade" by also placing a tax on bicycles. "There are lots of them in the Twin Cities."

OTHER BUSINESS

In other business Monday, Anderson questioned, and voted against paying, a claim for $2,608 to carpet a basement office that will soon house the city's economic development authority director.

Anderson said he was surprised by the move and wondered why the office of the EDA director, a position held by Shawn Mason, was being moved from the third floor of the Municipal Building.

"There was nothing wrong with the office she had," he said.

Anderson said the expenditure sends the wrong message to residents, many of which he said are struggling to pay sewer and water bills, as well as house payments and taxes.

"But it's business as usual at city hall — spend, spend spend," he said. "We need to keep the best interests of the taxpayers in mind."

Members of the council assured Anderson no was was trying to sneak the office move through and said the change was approved, along with other remodeling plans for the Municipal Building, in the 2013 budget, which was adopted by the council in December 2012.

Interim City Administrator Betty Bergstrom agreed the carpeting of a basement office was included in the plans and said she saw no reason to provide information about each expenditure in the project when it was part of an approved budget. Bergstrom said no furniture is being purchased for the basement office, which would have been used to house an office for the EDA director or the housing official, Kelly Meyers.

Councilor Gail Rognerud, and other councilors, said the current room being used by Mason is inappropriate for use as an office because within it is the only restroom on the third floor, and the room has been considered an additional conference room and should continue to serve as such.

Anderson also questioned two other financial issues, which councilors and Bergstrom explained had been resolved from the 2012 budget.

Also Monday, the council on a 3-2 vote agreed to fund fireworks for the Icebox Days festival, Jan. 18. The estimated cost for the fireworks and additional insurance is estimated at $2,500.

Councilors Pete Kalar and Rognerud voted against the proposal. Rognerud said she was torn between spending the money in just a few minutes versus in improvements to buildings that would last 25 years or more.

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