

LOCALNEWS

Board offers early retirement incentives

District will save about \$420,000 next year

BY EMILY GEDDE
Staff Writer

The Falls School Board seized an opportunity Tuesday to save the district about \$420,000 next year by allowing five staff members to retire early.

Tuesday’s action granted early retirement, effective at the end of May, to Ardel Henrickson, special education teacher; Harmony Lennox, fourth-grade teacher; Liz Johnson, fourth-grade teacher; Brenda LeDuc, Title 1 teacher; and Gigie Harder, media generalist/librarian.

Falls Superintendent Nordy Nelson said while the early retirement incentives will cost the district about \$65,800, the overall cost-saving benefits are worth it.

“I appreciate the board’s willingness to (offer the incentives),” he said, adding the vacant positions will not be replaced. “It’ll go a long way in addressing cost adjustments for this year.”

The board is faced with offsetting about \$500,000 the district has lost as its enrollment declines. In April, it will decide what programs and/or staff positions it will need to cut to save money and recoup losses.

In addition to the five staff members who will retire this year, the board on a 3-2 vote granted early retirement to three other staff members for the middle and end of the 2014-15 school year.

Board members Willi Kostiuik and Dena Wenberg

voted against the motion.

The board approved for early retirement Mary Kay Hardwig, kindergarten teacher, and Onida Kocinski, social studies/history teacher, effective the last day for school of the 2014-15 school year. Early retirement for Jeff Veeder, maintenance director, was also approved, effective Nov. 30, 2015.

Kostiuk requested the board hold discussion on the motion after it successfully passed, however, was told it was too late.

Nelson told The Journal Thursday it is not uncommon for the board to approve early retirement requests more than a year in advance and that “it has happened before.”

“Sometimes a district is reluctant to step out into the future too far, but one year isn’t that bad,” he said.

In other action Tuesday, Falls High Principal Tim Everson said the school continues to work with area colleges to develop more concurrent enrollment — or college offerings in the high school — opportunities for next year.

“Right now, the response has really been overwhelming from staff at the high school as far as interest in teaching these (concurrent enrollment) classes,” he said.

Everson said 41 percent seniors and 19 percent of juniors are now enrolled full time in classes at Rainy River Community College through the Post Secondary Enrollment Option Program.

“This has adversely affected our school climate and our culture,” he said, “in addition to a loss of

hundreds of thousands of dollars (to the high school).”

The principal said the state is pressuring school officials to create a community college within the high school in order to retain the students.

“It’s been a trend across the state and we’re going to push hard to make that happen for our students,” he said.

The board also Tuesday heard from secondary social studies teachers and elementary teachers about the importance of technology in the classroom.

John Sandberg and Ryan Puncuchar said laptops are used almost daily in their classrooms and receive a positive response from students. Students are able to save assignments online and access them at home or from any computer after school. The teachers said it cuts down on the chance of lost notebooks and assignments.

“It also exposes them to technology,” Puncuchar said.

Elementary teachers Jill Katrin, Terry Mason, and Jill Morrison spoke about the importance of having iPads in the classroom and how the devices amp up excitement in youth learning.

“Students are more eager to learn with a technological approach,” Mason said.

Falls Elementary and West End Elementary Principal Melissa Tate said there is one iPad cart at Falls Elementary and another at West End. Each cart, she said, holds 30 iPads.

The teachers requested the board consider improving the schools’ WiFi access and purchase additional iPads for students to use.

Falls council supports power line

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

International Falls City Council will send a letter in support of the Minnesota Power Great Northern Transmission Line.

Falls Mayor Bob Anderson told the council Tuesday he attended a public meeting last week on the proposal, which drew just nine members of the public, with no opposition to the plan voiced.

Minnesota Power has proposed to construct a transmission line from the Manitoba-Minnesota border to a substation in Itasca County. Minnesota Power officials said the new transmission line will benefit Minnesota Power customers by providing a more stable energy system. The project would cut the company’s reliance on burning coal as a source of electricity to one-third, with one-third coming from renewable sources and the final third coming from natural gas.

One of the proposed routes brings about 60 miles of the line through Koochiching County. Minnesota Power would pay \$40,000-\$60,000 per mile in property tax on

the line.

Construction on the project is planned for 2016.

Anderson suggested the letter, and said the power line would mean additional revenue for Koochiching County and would help stabilize a system he said has provided great service to the community.

The council also accepted a recommendation from city Public Utilities Director Gary Skallman to end exploration of a solar power proposal by Silicon Energy MN. The company had proposed to install solar panels on city buildings that would require an installation cost and down payment but provide a 40-year payback.

Skallman reported to the council he had met with company staff, who prepared several options. He recommended the council not move further with the options and instead “keep looking at advancements in technology and monetary costs for possible



Bob Anderson

modifications five to 10 years into the future.”

The council heard from Shawn Mason, representing a group of local people interested in making a bid for Hockey Day in Minnesota 2016. She presented the council with a list of members of an exploratory committee, which includes former professional hockey players from the community, a Minnesota Wild goalie coach, local high school hockey coaches, and tourism groups.

The event is a partnership between the Minnesota Wild and Fox News and Mason said hosting it would provide favorable exposure for the community.

Falls Councilor Pete Kalar will be a member of the committee, she said.

The group is gathering information and is expected to meet the second week in March to consider whether to bid for the event. Should the community be rejected for 2016, she said it may be considered for 2017. Elk River will host the event this year, she said, and will share its files on bid preparation.

“It’s our turn,” she said.

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