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Changes coming to Veterans Affairs system



Rob Ecklund

BY SPENSER BICKETT
Staff Writer

With the House and Senate both passing the Veteran's Access to Care Act last week, all the bill required to become law was President Barack Obama's signature, which it received today.

The \$17 billion bill includes a \$10 billion provision for veterans to seek government-subsidized care from pri-

vate health care providers, if they live more than 40 miles from a Veteran's Affairs center, or can't get help from a VA clinic in a timely manner.

Obama signed the bill into law today at Fort Belvoir in Virginia, according to White House press secretary Josh Earnest. The House on June 30 approved the bill by a vote of 420-5, while the Senate on June 31 approved the bill by a vote of 91-3.

Koochiching County Board Chairman Rob Ecklund served in the Marine Corps from 1976-1979, and he said while he hasn't had to go to a VA medical center for care, the VA has helped him out in other ways since the end of his service.

"The first home I bought, the home loan was through the VA," Ecklund said. "Some of the details they were able to work out to my benefit, and they were outstanding in helping me out."

With the closest VA hospital in Minneapolis a 300-mile drive away, Ecklund said the bill's provision for veterans more than 40 miles from a VA center to see their local doctor is critical.

"Anything to provide veterans access to rural health care is a benefit in the long run," Ecklund said.

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STAFF PHOTOS BY EMILY GEDDE

From left, Nigel Amidon, Tess Amidon, Tyson West and Nick Gazelka participate in the summer's last Sing and Play lesson at Ranier Park Wednesday.

LITTLE MUSIC MAKERS

The sounds of singing and rattling on instruments during Sing and Play filled the air at Ranier Park for the last time this summer as the newly-introduced program wrapped up Wednesday.

Taught by Erin Gregorcich and sponsored by the Ranier Recreation Club, the program, organizers say, delivered free music instruction to more than 70 children this summer.

While only seven children were in attendance for the last lesson this week, Gregorcich said an average of about 25 children joined her each week to sing songs, play instruments and have a good time.

Free fall music classes taught by Gregorcich are expected to begin Oct. 6. As the date draws near, more details will be available.



Gwen Amidon takes a turn making music.



Four-year-old Aubrey Johnson seemed to enjoy a song about rainbows, especially because she got to twirl around with colorful scarves.

**INTERNATIONAL FALLS
CITY COUNCIL**

Airport project bids come in high

Commission expected to consider next step next week

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

More will be known next week about whether a renovation and expansion of the Falls International Airport terminal will move forward now or in the future.

Bids for the project came in much higher than officials anticipated, reported International Falls Mayor Bob Anderson, who also serves as the chairman of the local airport commission.

Anderson said this week two bids of \$13.9 million and \$12.9 million were much higher than the \$9.9 million engineer's estimate. The airport is jointly owned by the city and Koochiching County and governed by a commission made up of the city council and county board.

The total anticipated costs of the project are \$15 million, and \$8.9 million of funding is available now, he said.

The project involves renovating the administration building at the airport to accommodate larger groups in a secure area, adding bathrooms to the area and expanding it for official inspections. Construction on the project had been expected to begin this fall.

The International Falls-Koochiching County Airport Commission is scheduled to meet next week when it is expected to find out if other funds from the Federal Aviation Administration will be awarded to the project and to consider whether to reject the bids and seek new ones.

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Bob Anderson

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