EDA

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is a long-time resident whose father served as the International Falls city attorney and later as a district judge in the very room the discussion about his son was taking place.

Following the failed motion to table the action, Anderson left the meeting.

Anderson later told The Journal he left the meeting because he was "upset with way people were being handled and the overall conduct of the authority and the advisory board."

In February, the EDA agreed on a 3-2 vote to expand the eight-member, uncompensated EDA Advisory Board to 10 and advertise for members without limiting where they reside or pay taxes. Anderson and Kalar voted against the motion, indicating that eight members were enough to advise the EDA. In March, Jenell Feller and Ward Merrill were included on the advisory board for four-year terms. The EDA in April agreed on a 4-1 vote to advertise for two more members to serve on the EDA Advisory Board for a total of 12 members. Anderson voted no, again indicating no need to increase the number of members.

Hnatiuk said he sought membership on the board after the city residency requirements were lifted. "I felt that I could make a contribution toward improving the economic conditions in this community in the capacity of an adviser," he told the EDA. He cited his high-tech business experiences others in the community do not have, contacts, sources of funding, and an understanding of what it takes to start and grow a successful business.

Hnatiuk denied having "sour grapes" for not being selected, but said in a very detailed presentation to the council that it appears Johnson, who indicated interest in the position in a one-sentence email on the day letters of interest were due, and Haller, who admits in his letter submitted Feb. 27 that he only resides in the community for two months of the year, were preselected for the board. Hnatiuk submitted five pages, including a letter of interest, resume and references.

He said members of the city council, EDA and EDA Advisory Board "lack professionalism, integrity and genuinely conduct themselves in a manner unbecoming of the public trust." In addition, he said the EDA lacks transparency.

Shawn Mason, EDA director, denied Hnatiuk's charges, but agreed that a more formal process should be in place for soliciting people to serve.

"Maybe 12 is not enough," she said Tuesday.

At the end of Tuesday's meeting, city Administrator Ken Anderson suggested he develop a policy and a standard form for the EDA and the city council to make appointments to boards and commissions. In addition, he told the EDA it is more appropriate for its members to consider and select candidates to serve on boards and commissions, instead of asking the EDA Advisory Board to make a recommendation on its own members.

Hnatiuk proposed the city pay him in an escrow account the same amount it pays Mason and, if during a two- to four-year period, Hnatiuk attains 90 percent of the goals set and improves the economic conditions in the community, he keeps the money. If he does not, the money goes back to the city. He suggested Mason consider resigning and the board dissolving to avoid the city paying more than it has budgeted.

Mike Katrin, advisory board chairman, said Hnatiuk made some good points, but he was offended by others. He apologized for some of the process flaws, including that Haller was seated at the advisory board table during the meeting the board considered the applicants. Johnson did not attend the meeting; Haller and Hnatiuk were asked to leave the room while the board considered the letters of interest.

"The mechanism could have been done differently," Katrin said. "I take responsibility."

Mason also said Hnatiuk raised valuable questions about the process, but said she was offended and disappointed by other comments he made. She, too, apologized after hearing Hnatiuk was mistakenly provided by city staff an application form for membership on the North Koochiching Area Sanitary Sewer District board, which requires a resume. Only a letter of interest was needed for the advisory board positions, she noted.

Jaksa said people are often selected for boards and commissions based on their reputations in the community. She said community members can give input without serving on boards or commissions.

But Hnatiuk said advisory board members should have conducted interviews during the meeting in an attempt to get to know the candidates.

Meanwhile, Jaksa attempted to explain the challenges in improving the local economy, saying Boise Paper, a Packaging Corporation of America company, has "economic control" determining "who comes in and who does not."

Kalar took issue with the criticism saying the mill and its owner are "very valuable, they add a lot, they're the centerpiece and we need that. I hope we get some off spring (jobs). I am glad they are here and doing what they are doing with the community."

PROUD GRADS

STAFF PHOTO BY EMILY GEDDE

The class of 2026 admires — and plays with — their diplomas Thursday at the Falls Elementary kindergarten graduation.

DILL

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In addition, he said he supported a bill that puts in place a formula for future bienniums that calls for a percentage of any surplus to first be added to the reserve.

Dill said the state's bonding bill will bring millions of dollars to Borderland for the Voyageurs National Park Clean Water Project, the Falls International Airport terminal renovation and a nursing lab remodel at Rainy River Community College. The bonding money will be combined with money from other sources for the projects which will create local construction jobs as well as prepare the area for the future.

"We did very, very well with bonding," he said. "I am very happy."

A bonding bill requires approval by a super majority of the Legislature, which requires DFL and Republican lawmakers to come together, he said.

"Working with Republicans is in my wheelhouse," said Dill, noting the 12-year relationship he's developed he said has allowed him to accomplish things others cannot.

He also credited Bakk for his ability to work with Republicans in both the House and Senate.

"At the end of the day, our job is to take the ideas of the people in the north to the state Capitol and advocate for them," he said. He noted other places in northern Minnesota also fared well in the bonding bill.

However, Dill said there is still division on labor issues, this session focusing on an increase in the minimum wage, which Dill supported and was approved.

Dill said discussions about the minimum wage prompted him to ask himself why he is a Democrat; he said he often sides with Republicans on life and outdoors issues. He voted to increase the minimum wage after talking to a woman from Ray who told him she has worked in a retail store in International Falls for 10 years and still did not earn $8.50 per hour.

"I don't think people working full-time should be in poverty and qualify for multiple assistance programs," he said. "And then throw in a child. I just don't think people who put in 40 hours a week should live under the poverty line."

He said a proposal for a tip credit, which was not approved, needs more work and he would consider it.

Meanwhile, Dill said taxes have dropped for the first time for many in the state because of programs that impacted more than 2 million Minnesotans. Corporate off-shore tax loopholes were closed, creating about $400 million to invest in job creation and education, he said. He said income taxes for the richest 2-percent of Minnesotans were increased "to pay their fair share."

Dill said the income tax increase, which affects about 70,000 people statewide and 19 in Koochiching County, calls for increasing taxes on people with an average annual income of $617,000. He said that means single filers pay the additional tax on the first dollar over $150,000; couples pay the increase starting on the first dollar over $250,000.

That money has helped the state to reinstate funding for the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, and add money to payments in lieu of taxes to Koochiching County and local government aid to International Falls, which should help offset local property taxes, he said.

Dill also discussed grants established this session to expand public trap shooting facilities to accommodate the 6,000 kids statewide who took part in the Minnesota High School League's sanctioned lettering sport, which the Legislature created two years ago.

The grants will help places like Moonlight Rock to seek cost-share grants for upgrades.

Little things add up, he said, including an increase in funding for county recycling programs. Koochiching, he said, is doing a good job, but unable to meet state goals, which he said may be unattainable in some places far from markets. The added funding will allow the county's program to run at less of a deficit.

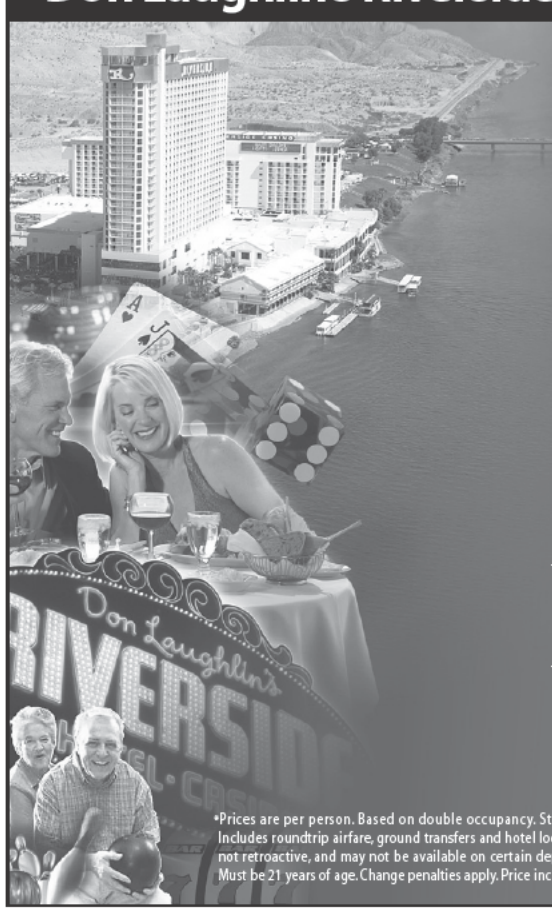
Changes to the state's wolf season were made that he could support, while other proposals died, he said.

The first change calls for all wolf kills, by vehicle collisions, depredation or anything other than actual season activity, reported to a conservation officer to be reported on the Department of Natural Resources website to give a more accurate accounting of the number of wolves killed in the state.

The second change involves a doubling of restitution paid for illegally taking a wolf on a second conviction.

"We don't condone illegal actions regarding any wildlife," he said. "But because of the sensitivity of this situation I accepted it. There is not another animal that has double restitution after the first conviction."

Don Laughlin's Riverside Resort Hotel & Casino



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