

LOCALNEWS

Gateway improvements to start in summer

Open house planned for December

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

Area residents will have a chance to see some of the options for design elements that could be included in the International Falls Gateway Corridor Improvement Project when construction begins next summer.

An open house will present those design options in the first part of December, Bryan Anderson, Minnesota Department of Transportation District 1 planning director, said.

Anderson encouraged people to attend the open house to help select the designs. “We want people to help design what I Falls will look like,” he said of the opportunity.

The improvement project began after a group of area residents in 2006 attended a Gateway Community Train-

ing session in West Virginia. The training centered on improving the quality of life in communities that serve as the main entry points for federal recreational lands and facilities.

Based on that training session and on previous tourism efforts, the group identified a list of priority needs for the improvement of International Falls as a “Gateway Community.” The priority projects included the aesthetic improvement of the roadway connections between International Falls and Rainy Lake and Voyageurs National Park.

Andy Hubley, planner with Arrowhead Regional Development Commission, has been assisting in the project since it began.

“We’re hitting the home stretch for construction, which should start next summer,” Hubley said.

The project has \$800,000 to work with, with the bulk of the money awarded from federal funding through MnDOT, he said. The project’s delay, he said, is because the money was ini-

tially sought in 2009, and the program requires a four-year delay before construction can begin.

“Since then,” he said, “MnDOT has taken over the design of the project, which is very unusual. They took that on as it deals with MnDOT right-of-way, primarily.”

The gateway initiative mission was to create a visual connection between the lake, park and the city, Hubley said. “Now will this complete the task? We don’t know but it will help soften the view and make people feel more welcome.”

Anderson said the money will be given to Koochiching County, the sponsor of the project. He said MnDOT offered to assist in the design elements so the county would not need to spend money to hire consultants to perform those services.

“It sounds like a lot of money,” Anderson said. “But when you do construction, pre-engineering, engineering, it can get very expensive. We wanted to be able to make sure we could

give as many elements as possible without cutting into the money for engineering and any other needs like that.”

Hubley said in 2014, the Rainy Lake Trail along Highway 11 will be widened to 10 feet and resurfaced. The trail will be brought across the tracks and extended into the International Falls Chamber of Commerce parking lot, or possibly into the downtown sidewalk system.

Information kiosks will be built on the trail near the chamber. What the kiosks will include has not yet been determined, but Hubley said it’s likely the information will discuss the wood products industry and history of the area. He said a kiosk will also be added for vehicles near the paper mill’s wood yard.

Other aesthetic improvements will include pedestrian lighting, possibly a sidewalk extension on Highway 53 near the Chocolate Moose frontage road, “vest pocket parks — tiny little parks, with one bench, a tree

and maybe a planter or garbage can — on the Highway 53 corridor with the idea of softening the view and making it look more inviting,” Hubley said.

Hubley said the project will offer the opportunity to add sign improvements with some sort of visually pleasing sign design to show people where to go.

“Waysholing is what those signs are now called,” he said. “They’ll have arrows to the downtown business area, Rainy Lake, Voyageurs National Park, at key points on the corridor.”

Hubley said there may be enough money to do an entrance sign on Highway 11 East near the overhead pulp pipe to welcome people as they head toward the park and lake, and thank them for visiting as they head west.

MnDOT staff will provide the final design and costs, Hubley said.

“If the costs come up higher than expected, we will have to cut back on some things, and it hasn’t been determined what

those things are yet,” he said.

The first part of the project will involve the widening and resurfacing of the trail, he said.

“And then we’ll do everything else we can afford beyond that,” he said.

In addition, he said MnDOT will provide an initial design for reuse of the fire tower site on Highway 11 about 8 miles east of International Falls. That site is now owned by MnDOT and the tower is used for communications.

“We’re exploring ways to open the site to the public so it could be an asset to the tourism industry there,” Hubley said.

However, he said the funding already awarded may not be used for that project.

“MnDOT design is trying to make parking work there and this needs to be a community effort to implement use of the tower and possibly find alternatives for the communications devices and to ensure the safety of visitors,” Hubley said.

Littlefork City Council approves administrative hire

BY SPENSER BICKETT
Staff Writer

The Littlefork City Council Thursday approved the hiring of a new administrative assistant, as the previous assistant is now the city administrator.

Dana Larson was approved by the council as the new administrative assistant, and will began work Monday, City Administrator Sonja Pelland said. Larson holds a degree in business management, is well qualified, Pelland said, and is excited to start working.

Pelland was approved as the new city administrator at October’s city council meeting. The Littlefork Municipal Liquor Store manager position, formerly held by the administrator, is now its own position, Pel-

land said. Lorina Hauner was approved as liquor store manager during October’s meeting as well.

Pelland started as administrative assistant 10 years ago after an interest in city government drew her to the position, she said.

“I wanted a challenging position, and it proved to be that,” Pelland said. “After

10 years, I really like what I’ve been doing, and I hope I’m going to like the new position.”

As city administrator, Pelland will be responsible for overseeing all the things she did as administrative assistant, she said, but she’ll also be head of all the departments. She’ll be attending a lot more of the meetings, and have more

administrative duties and not just bookkeeping.

In other business, the council heard from Steve Howard, of Paul Bunyan Communications, who discussed the possibility of telephone, video and Internet services in the city and area in the future, Pelland said. Frontier Communications currently services the area, she said, and Paul

Bunyan Communications would come in and provide fiber optics to the area.

A petition requesting Paul Bunyan Communications come into the community and provide service in the area was received in June, Pelland said. Moving forward, the company will send out surveys to people in the area, and make a decision from there.

The council also approved renovations to the liquor store, which will start after Thanksgiving, Pelland said. The council initially talked about adding on to the current building, but decided not to go that route, she said. Instead, the council will take the full remodel process one step at a time, by starting with the restrooms.

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