

PIECES

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at the resort they’ve owned for nine years. “We’ll get through this and we will rebuild. We have it.”

Early struggles

The family admits coming to grips with the tragedy has been difficult – especially at this time of year. January and February are typically busy for northern Minnesota resorts that thrive from winter recreation.

On top of entertaining hundreds of customers, the Hrabans would usually be spending the first two months of the year cleaning cabins, restocking inventory and enjoying the hustle and bustle of the winter business.

Instead, the family has spent the last seven weeks working with their insurance company, making lists of everything lost in the fire and waiting on St. Louis County officials to tell them when and where they can rebuild.

“That lodge was the face of Ash Ka Nam,” Lynette said. “We put so much into it.”

Up in flames

The morning of Jan. 6 started like any other Tuesday. Around 6:30 a.m., Mark made the way from his house about a mile from Ash Ka Nam to Mindy’s home adjacent to the resort property to pick up her two youngest daughters for school.

“I actually took my time that morning,” Mark recalled. “The wind was blow-

ing away from the resort, so I didn’t see smoke until I got right up there. As soon as I saw the fire, I was in shock.”

Everyone else was, too.

While trying to make sense of what was happening, a distraught Mindy had a hard time convincing Lynette the family’s livelihood was going up in flames.

“I didn’t believe her,” Lynette said. “I really thought she was messing with me.”

That wasn’t the case.

As the Kabetogama Fire Department arrived, the family could only watch nine years of memories turn to ash.

“The weekend before (the fire) was New Years,” Lynette said. “That is one of our busiest weekends. We had just reopened for the winter. All of our charges were in there, all of the cash, our tips. Everything.”

Although the state fire marshal is unsure of exactly what caused the fire, the Hrabans said they were told the culprit was likely something electrical behind the bar. It could have been an Apple iPhone charger, they said.

“We were told those are a leading cause of fires,” Mindy said. “That’s what they think may have started it.”

For several days after the fire, hot spots would send flames shooting up from the rubble, reminding the family of the devastation.

“We cry, a lot,” Lynette said with a half smile. “We had just been in there the day before. We were so excit-

ed to finally be back to work after closing in October. We’d been working so hard.”

Breaking the news

The owners were forced to call their customers with the news, and they said about 90 percent of the reservations were canceled.

“We still have our close family customers coming,” Mindy said. “But a lot of people canceled.”

What makes the reality even more difficult is watching those customers fulfill their winter vacation plans by staying at other resorts in the area.

“I don’t want to lose our regular winter customers over this,” Lynette said. “Seeing them other places is hard, but we want them to enjoy themselves, so we do expect them to go elsewhere. We just miss them.”

Just as hard

Several of those customers are also struggling with loss, the Hrabans said.

Last week, Mark said he was heading toward the area where the lodge once stood when he noticed a car parked in front of it. Inside was an 88-year-old woman from Kabetogama who celebrates her birthday every year at Ash Ka Nam.

“She told me she wanted to come for one more birthday,” he said. “She had tears just rolling down her face. It was hard.”

From her front window, Mindy has watched large groups of snowmobilers stop and stare at the vacant lot on the river, she said.

“It’s sad to watch them take this so hard,” she said. “It makes it worse.”

Strong support

The support the family has received from their customers, family, friends and International Falls businesses has only encouraged them to pick up the pieces and trudge forward.

“We sent the permit into county and (commissioners) meet March 12 and will tell us what we can and can’t do,” Mark said. “As soon as we get the OK, we’ll start.”

There will, however, be challenges with the rebuild. According to the Hrabans, several aspects of the former lodge were against current codes.

“We were grandfathered in on a lot of things,” Lynette said.

Features like the bathroom not being handicap accessible and the proper storage will all need to fit into what once was a 40-foot by 50-foot building.

“It was small,” Lynette said of the lodge. “Now everything we need to rebuild has to be twice the size, but our building has to be the same.”

But, like the fire, it won’t stop them.

“We’ll have something for our guests this summer for sure,” Lynette said, adding there is the option to renovate the resort’s banquet hall into the bar and restaurant area.

“If we do that, it’ll give us more room to dance,” she said.

EDA

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“You either have two seats that you’d like to fill, but you could, per our bylaws, actually fill three,” Mason said.

EDA member Bob Anderson first nominated Hnatiuk for one open position, and his motion was seconded by EDA member Brian Briggs. EDA member Harley Droba said he reviewed the candidate applications on his own, and he determined Hnatiuk was one of the top candidates.

“I broke all of the candidates down, every one that had applied, went through each one of them,” Droba said. “He was one of the top three people that I pulled out.”

EDA member Cynthia Jaksa said she had a problem with Hnatiuk, as she said she believes he’s unemployed, and also doesn’t live in the city of International Falls. Hnatiuk is the owner and founder of Analog Design Consultants, an engineering design consulting company, and is still involved with the company.

Jaksa mentioned Mike Holden, Doug Franchot, Johnson and Hackenmueller as viable candidates, as they live in the city and are engaged in the community.

“I have a problem with Mr. George Hnatiuk, in that I don’t believe he’s currently employed,” Jaksa said. “I think we should give preference to city residents.”

Mason said two of the 10 current advisory board members live outside the city limits. EDA member Pete Kalar said in previously appointing members to the advisory board, the EDA has discussed residence as a factor in determining who should serve on the advisory board.

“We’ve moved on to, you don’t have to be a citizen of International Falls to be on the board,” Kalar said. “We don’t want to pass up qualified people just because they don’t live in the city.”

The motion to approve Hnatiuk passed on a 3-2 vote, with Kalar and Jaksa voting against the motion.

Droba then nominated Johnson to fill the second opening, which was seconded by Briggs. Droba said Johnson is a local business owner, has been involved with the Voyage Forward movement and previously ran for public office in 2014. The motion to approve Johnson passed unanimously.

Jaksa then nominated Franchot to fill the last opening, but did not receive a second. Anderson made a motion to nominate Hackenmueller, which was seconded by Briggs. Briggs said Hackenmueller has been active already on the advisory board, having attended meetings, and brings a youth perspective to the board. The motion to approve Hackenmueller passed unanimously.

“I agree, I think Alysa’s an excellent candidate, I have no problem with that, lacking a second for Doug,” Jaksa said.

Housing committee

In other business, the board approved a motion to form a housing and building exploratory committee, which will evaluate the possibility of creating a permanent housing and building committee.

“I think everyone who’s sitting on the council is well aware of the condition that some people in this community live in,” Jaksa said. “It’s hard to call yourself a leader here when you allow it to continue.”

In a November meeting, the EDA approved publishing a public notice advertising for the opportunity to serve on the exploratory committee. The notice was published Dec. 27, and one response, from landlord John Vinar, was received.

Jaksa said she then went to community members with experience in the housing sector, to see if they would be interested in serving on the exploratory committee. Those members are:

- Joe Schwartz
- LeeAnn Meer
- Jordan Pearson
- Marty Goulet
- Eric Johnson
- Terry Murray
- Ward Merrill
- Elizabeth Forsythe

- Mary Deneffe
- Jerry Jensen
- Gary Davison
- John Vinar

Jaksa said everyone she approached said they would like to serve on the exploratory committee.

Anderson said the city’s Housing Redevelopment Authority might already do some of the work Jaksa is interested in, and could be contacted first before creating the exploratory committee.

Anderson said members of the HRA, including Gary Davison, were unaware Jaksa was trying to put together an exploratory committee. Jaksa responded Davison was aware of the exploratory committee.

“I just wonder if we’re usurping their area,” Anderson said.

The HRA’s priority has been to maintain the Woodland Park apartment complex, Jaksa said, and doesn’t do anything outside of that. Briggs responded the HRA charter may give them authority to do the work Jaksa is interested in, but they aren’t doing it.

“What are their bylaws, and what are they charged with?” Briggs said. “I would want to know that before I try and set up another committee.”

The exploratory committee would be able to look into that, Jaksa said, and may discover the HRA is already charged with doing things a permanent committee would be doing as well.

Kalar said the people involved with the exploratory committee are all willing to give their time and effort to the topic, and the exploratory committee wouldn’t be permanent. Droba said he was concerned only one person sent in an application, and the rest appear to be “handpicked.”

Briggs made and withdrew a motion to present the list of names and information brought by Jaksa to the HRA to see if its board could look into the issue. Anderson said the HRA has narrowed its focus over the years, but that’s not an exclusive viewpoint, and cited the city’s lack of a com-

prehensive plan.

“That’s true of this whole community,” Anderson said. “It’s been five decades since we’ve had a comprehensive plan for this city.”

Officers

The EDA also elected officers Tuesday, as it was its first meeting of 2015. Anderson nominated Droba for EDA president, which was seconded by Kalar. Jaksa nominated Kalar for EDA president, but did not receive a second. Droba was approved as EDA president by a unanimous vote. Kalar, however, was approved as EDA vice president by a unanimous vote.

The secretary and treasurer were combined into one position last year, Mason said, and the board approved a motion to combine the roles for 2015. Jaksa said she’s fulfilled the role of secretary/treasurer for the past few years, and cited the hours she’s spent in that role.

“I intimately am acquainted with the accounts of the EDA,” Jaksa said. “So I would gladly accept a nomination, I think it would behoove this board to nominate me.”

Anderson responded by making a motion to nominate Briggs as secretary/treasurer, was seconded by Droba, and met with a shocked look by Jaksa. The motion was approved on a 3-2 vote, with Kalar and Jaksa voting against the motion.

Financial reports

During the discussion of the EDA year-end report presented by Mason, Anderson inquired why the EDA pays for the cost of Mason’s cell phone. He said the city of International Falls only pays for the cell phones of department heads in emergency positions, like the fire chief, police chief and street commissioner.

Jaksa responded Mason uses her cell phone frequently for EDA business, and can’t do her job effectively without one.

“I’m not voting to take away a cell phone unless I understand the implications of that,” Jaksa said.

No action was taken.

dition to the city,” said Sherman. “There’s no harm in asking.”

Councilor Cynthia Jaksa said a forward-looking council would already have a plan for annexation that would show the benefits of annexation into the city.

Jaksa said she supported annexation by ordinance of the two city-owned properties.

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COUNCIL

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The motion came following discussion about how to proceed with annexing the multimodal property, with city Attorney Steve Sherman outlining two options: Continue with negotiations with the Koochiching County Board on a joint annexa-

tion resolution or bypass the county and annex by ordinance with the state considering the proposal.

Discussion continued about whether to add a city-owned parcel as well as property owned by Wagner Construction, earlier approved for annexation but never completed by the council, to the negotiations with the county board.

After Sherman provided the council with a map of the area and pointed out the city’s property, Councilor Brian Briggs wondered whether the owners of the other adjacent properties would be interested in annexation. He said he did not want to force anyone to be annexed who does not favor it.

“From the city’s standpoint, it would be a nice ad-