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A 'Voyage Forward' kicks off with call to action

Next step is Oct. 8 community involvement meeting

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

A call to action Thursday was answered by about 150 Borderland residents who joined in a "forward-thinking discussion" about the community's future.

The meeting was convened by the Koochiching/International Falls Economic Response effort following the termination of 265 permanent jobs at the local paper mill in 2013, the shutdown of the

Resolute paper mill in Fort Frances and flooding this summer.

Organizers agreed the community responded well.

"It was great," Michael Wellcome, a member of the response team said. "It went fantastic."

"It was an opportunity for those 150 people to help get the message out and try to get all on the same page," team member Jay Bartkowski said.

Bartkowski also spoke during the meeting, following presentations by James Benson, a Bemidji Leads champion, and Mike Lundstrom, a steward for Advance Hermantown.

"This was a start, an invitation," Bartkowski said. "We're

trying to get people passionate about growing the area again. We have a long, long way to go but it kicks off the start of the process."

"The main goal is to get people interested, get them to participate and actively pursue creating our future," Wellcome said.

Wellcome and Bartkowski said the presentations from the two groups helped start a conversation about what this community wants to be in the future.

But they said that conversation isn't complete without community involvement.

"It's important to get everybody involved from Northome to the Canadian border, from Birchdale to Ash River," Wellcome said.

Thirty people volunteered to get involved and will meet at 5:30 p.m. Oct. 8 at Backus Community Center to take the next step, they said.

Wellcome extended an open invitation to the Oct. 8 meeting to people who didn't attend Thursday and to others that attended but didn't volunteer Thursday.

"We will define a strategy for the next six months and move forward to talk to citizens in the community and see what direction they would like to take our region," Wellcome said.

Bartkowski, too, said the Oct. 8 meeting represents an opportunity to get involved. While he said he considered 158 people a good

More information

To get involved, if you can't attend the 5:30 p.m. Oct. 8 meeting at Backus Community Center, contact Wellcome at 286-1357 and visit the website of Voyage Forward — Journey to Success at <http://voyageforward.org/>

turnout, he said those 150 people were from the many of thousands of people who live in Koochiching County.

"We hope to have people who agree with our perspective and

Meeting to A7 ►



STAFF PHOTOS BY SPENSER BICKETT

The Littlefork-Big Falls School marching band plays a ditty during the homecoming parade Friday.

They've got spirit, yes they do

JOURNAL STAFF REPORT

Littlefork-Big Falls High School celebrated the finale of homecoming week Friday with a pep fest and parade, before the football game against Northeast Range.

The pep fest featured games for the students as well as class cheers and multiple iterations of the school song.

Interim superintendent Chris Bachmeier traded his administrative clothes for orange-and-black-striped overalls to show his Viking pride, and joked and laughed with the students as he led the pep fest.

The parade allowed classes to show off their creative sides through class floats, with the class of 2015 decorating a boat with the names of senior students.

A relay race involving firefighter's gear was one of the highlights of the L-BF homecoming pep fest.



This tractor was the right speed for the L-BF homecoming parade Friday.



Falls council sets 2015 preliminary levy

On 3-1 vote, levy set at 2 percent over 2014

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

International Falls property owners may not see an increase in 2015 in taxes they pay with a 2 percent increase in the city levy over 2014.

The International Falls City Council in special session Tuesday on a 3-1 vote set the 2015 preliminary tax levy at \$2.15 million, an increase of \$42,188, or 2 percent, over the amount collected this year. It also scheduled a required levy hearing for 6 p.m. Dec. 1 in the council chambers at the Falls Municipal Building.

The action represents the first levy increase in three years, noted city Administrator Ken Anderson. He added local government aid to the city has been reduced from 2003 to 2010 by a total of \$1.1 million.

The final levy must be adopted and certified to the Koochiching County Auditor's Office by Dec. 29. The council may reduce the preliminary levy prior to adopting the final levy, but may not increase it.

Mayor Bob Anderson voted against the motion. Councilor Gail Rognerud was absent from the meeting.

Anderson said he would vote against motion because he believed a 2 percent increase to be too much, and said he felt a 1.5 percent increase, which would collect about \$31,000 more in 2015 than this year, was more appropriate.

But Councilor Cynthia Jaksa said a 2 percent increase was a compromise. She said she preferred a higher percent. She said the 2015 budget includes \$64,000 for police radios, a creation of a comprehensive land use plan and other items.

"I think this is a reasonable increase," she said. "Very reasonable. We are lowering the levy rate while increasing dollars. That's the magic of growth."

Jaksa argued property own-

ers won't likely see much increase under a 2 percent levy increase because the tax capacity of the city has increased by \$109,000, which should cause the levy to decrease. She said more research is needed to determine where the growth occurred in the city.

"If your property value stays the same, there will be a decrease," she said. However, she said if value has been added to a property, it will see a tax increase.

But Anderson argued the tax burden on property owners is heavy enough with a 5 percent increase in water and sewer rates that take effect in 2015 caused by council action three years ago.

"Taxpayers in the community pay more, overall," he said.

Jaksa said the 30 percent increase to water and sewer rates put in place three years ago was caused by a 33 percent increase in operating costs of the water and sewer services.

"Prior to that, we had a deficit in water and sewer," she said. Without a raise in rates, she said city water customers would be subsidizing the departments and customers who live outside the city and do not pay taxes to the city.

Councilors Pete Kalar and Paul Eklund said they preferred small increases in the levy, rather than no increases for a few years and then a large 10 to 20 percent increase.

Kalar acknowledged the 5 percent sewer and water rate increase, but said the preliminary levy should be set at 2 percent over 2014.

"No one wants to raise the levy," Kalar said. "It was a hard decision, but I think 2 percent is

Council to A7 ►



**Bob
Anderson**