

LOCALNEWS

Falls EDA joins state networking organization

BY SPENSER BICKETT  
Staff Writer

The International Falls Economic Development Authority Monday approved membership in a state marketing organization to better market International Falls as an location for potential new businesses.

EDA Director Shawn Mason said the Falls EDA can join the Minnesota Marketing Partnership for a cost of \$600, which covers membership for the rest of this year and the next year. The EDA will be able to pick and choose which events it wants to go to as part of the MMP, Mason said, depending on which events are most relevant.

“It really puts you in a position of visibility with those who are making decisions,” Mason said. “This might help us be more visible and network with people who are really making the decisions and making things happen.”

The motion passed on a 3-2 vote, with Bob Anderson and Pete Kalar voting no. Anderson said the \$600 membership fee was the tip of the iceberg, as the EDA would also have to account for travel costs to get to the events. He also questioned joining another marketing group, when the EDA had

recently joined two other groups, the Community Venture Network and the Mid-America Economic Development Council.

“Maybe we ought to see what develops out of those other activities before we take on another one,” Anderson said.

Kalar said he agreed with Anderson, and that while more might be better when it comes to membership in these organizations, the EDA should see what comes of the membership in the other organizations first before spending money joining another one.

“I realize that’s part of the game, but we always seem to be joining or suggesting to join an organization,” Kalar said.

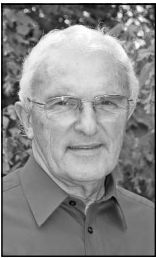
EDA President Gail Rognerud said the group will be selective in the events it attends, and that the events attended must be relevant to International Falls.

“It seems like the more you’re out there, the better your chances of hitting a homerun,” Rognerud said.

Mason said she sought the input of Heather Rand on whether the EDA should join the organization, and presented Rand’s email response to the EDA. Rand, from the Business and Community Development division of the Minnesota



Shawn Mason



Bob Anderson



Gail Rognerud

Department of Employment and Economic Development, works in the northeast region of the state.

In her email, Rand recommended joining the organization for a year and fully participating, and then evaluating whether to continue membership after that.

Rognerud said she works with Rand as part of an economic response team committee, and is impressed with her knowledge.

“The fact that she would recommend this would rate pretty high with me,” Rognerud said. “She seems very knowledgeable about what’s going on and she’s very helpful.”

Anderson said he questioned the recommendation from Rand, as Rand is an employee of DEED, and the MMP is a DEED program.

“It’s a loaded question, I don’t think she could speak against it,” Anderson said.

Paul Eklund said he didn’t know how the EDA could

do too much, considering the situation the city is in currently.

“Our community’s in crisis, we need jobs,” Eklund said. “I just don’t understand

how we can be doing too much, we’ve got to keep trying, and trying as hard as we can.”

Cynthia Jaksa said the community needs to “bear down” on marketing itself to site selectors, and budgeting for and emphasizing marketing may have been the missing piece towards economic prosperity.

“We haven’t really been out there pitching at these various meetings where you can network with site selectors,” Jaksa said. “That is a key element of having anything happen, is being connected to site selectors.”

In other business, the EDA discussed using tax increment financing and tax abatement as tools for economic development, and having policies on the use of those tools.

Mason said she has been approached recently by a local businessperson looking to expand their business, and was asking about TIF

and tax abatement as an economic development tool. She said as they don’t use them often, they don’t have policies on using them, unlike other communities.

“It would be nice to be able to say, ‘these are our TIF and tax abatement policies,’” Mason said.

Mason presented the EDA with information on TIF and tax abatement to work as a conversation starter, and something the EDA could use to craft policies on those tools. The EDA would move the information on to the International Falls City Council, she said, which would be the government body administering the tools.

Cities like Bemidji, Duluth, Hermantown, Alexandria, and Hibbing use TIF, Jaksa said, and to compete with other cities in the region, the city should have policies in place on using them.

“We should have every possible tool to use to create economic development,” Jaksa said.

International Falls has used TIF in the past, Anderson said, specifically when the local paper mill expanded. Those TIF funds then went towards building a water treatment plant, he said, but the TIF district also took funding away

from the school district and Koochiching County to pay for the expansion.

“I certainly question the use of tax increment financing as a tool,” Anderson said. “It’s harmful to the other subdivisions of government.”

Jaksa said ultimately all the taxing districts benefit from growth of the tax base, and if TIF isn’t used, the entire tax burden falls on the city taxpayers.

Mason emphasized TIF is only used in “but for” cases, meaning the project could only happen but for TIF. All other avenues for financing have to be exhausted before TIF is used, she said.

Eklund recommended moving the issue to the budget and finance committee, and discussing it on that level before making a final decision at the city council level.

A motion to move the issue to the budget and finance committee was questioned by Anderson. He said he didn’t think the EDA had the authority to send an issue to a city council committee, but that the city council could refer something to a committee.

The motion was removed, and Eklund said the issue could just be put on the city council agenda for discussion.

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