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Mille Lacs County sees budget shortfall

T.A. LEBRUN
For the Union-Times

Mille Lacs County met for their regular meeting on July 5. One of the agenda items discussed was the budget shortfall of \$4.8 million – the largest shortfall in a number of years.

The shortfall comes after a long year of heightened attorney fees due to the lawsuit against the County, sheriff and county attorney filed by the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe over policing and the reservation boundaries. The County has spent in total over \$6 million in attorney costs to defend themselves. Boarding revenue is also down due to the jail taking less inmates due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Commissioner Tim Wilhelm noted, “I see that the six million we spent on the lawsuit is coming out but not getting re-

placed. We should live within our means.”

Mille Lacs County administrative financial specialist, Justice Voss, presented the budget in the absence of a county coordinator or county auditor as former county administrator, Pat Oman, abruptly resigned on Jan. 31, 2021 and former county auditor-treasurer, Eric Bartusch, resigned on June 25, 2021. Interim County Coordinator Lisa Herges was not present at the meeting as she is the current Renville County Administrator and only filling in short term. The County has not yet hired a permanent replacement for Oman or Bartusch.

Voss said, “Last year, we spent the majority of our time in the red. When we got the CARES Act money, that brought us above being negative. But then we went back down again due to the spending requirements of the CARES Act funds.”

Comparatively, Voss said the budget

shortfall year-to-date in 2020 was \$2.8 million, year-to-date in 2019 was \$2.3 million, and year-to-date in 2018 was \$698,884.

Commissioner Phil Peterson noted that employees have received on average 5% COLA (cost of living adjustments) but that the County has not raised the levy, and that it has not been raised proportionately. He added that preventing overtime in the jail could also help.

“This goes back to our past years of not raising the levy,” said Peterson. “It’s a result of not raising the levy. There should have been a two to three percent increase because operating costs were going up.”

Commissioner Wilhelm added, “I’ve never heard anyone say that we are in the red as long as I’ve been here. We’ve got a serious problem with the reserve fund.”

Commissioner and chair of the board, Dave Oslin, said, “It evaporated on us. We, the board, weren’t informed on this end of

it... but since we’ve gone to a coordinator form of government, we’re going to see more of this. We have some budget woes, and we need to address them.”

Oslin added, however, that he believes that the County will not be in as bad of shape as they think by the end of the year. Voss noted that being only halfway into the year, there is still expected revenue coming in and that some things have been paid for earlier in the year. She added that in past years, the County hasn’t budgeted enough for attorney fees.

The County should be seeing another round of COVID-relief money from the federal government which should help offset some of the shortfall.

“We’ve got some homework now,” said Oslin. “It’s good that the board is in tune with this. In the past, someone else took care of this for us.”



JEFFREY HAGE
Union-Times

An Ohio woman’s music career will come full circle when she returns to her roots to play with her band Friday and Saturday during RecFest.

Linda Hjort Tatarian grew to love bluegrass music while listening to the radio while milking cows on the family farm.

Tatarian has enjoyed a music career that began in the 1960s and paid homage to her hometown when she formed her latest band, Rum River Blend, after moving to Ohio in the 2000s.

Featuring her husband, Chris, the band takes its name from the Rum River that flows through Milaca’s Recreation Park, which is home to RecFest, Milaca’s annual bluegrass festival.

“He’s a California boy, and I’m a Minnesota girl. That’s where we get the blend,” she said.

For Linda Tatarian, playing RecFest is a dream come true.

“I make it home every summer, but I have never made it to RecFest,” Tatarian said.

“I’ve seen the crowd from the top of the hill (Fourth Avenue NW) but have never gone,” Tatarian said. “But I’ve wanted to for years.”

This year, not only is Linda Tatarian attending RecFest with Chris, they will be performing as Rum River Blend. They will also have some musician friends on stage with them — fellow musicians they have befriended during their nearly 30 years together on stage.

Growing up on a Milaca dairy farm, Linda Hjort Tatarian didn’t get to experience many of the joys associated with music.

“I grew up in a family that wasn’t very musical,” said Tatarian, the daughter of Hjort Excavating founder Russell Hjort and Violet Hjort.

But that doesn’t mean she didn’t love music.

Instead of sharing music with her family, she shared music with the cows.

“We had cows, and I milked every day, she said.

And while Tatarian milked the cows, she had the radio tuned in. It was through that radio she came to love bluegrass music.

The sounds of Flatt & Scruggs — with Earl Scruggs on the banjo — opened the young girl to a whole new world.



RecFest is Thursday-Sunday in Milaca's Rec Park. Day and weekend passes will be sold at the gate.



Photo: Linda Tatarian

Chris and Linda Tatarian are pictured at Country Meadows in Milaca where they performed before residents the week July 11. The duo also performed Sunday, July 18 at Zion Lutheran Church's service in the park and make their RecFest debut Friday and Saturday.

So did Bill Monroe, the singer-songwriter credited with founding the bluegrass genre. On the television in the Hjort home, it was Roy Clark on Hee Haw who was catching her attention with his banjo pickin’.

“The banjo (has) made me so happy,” Linda Tatarian said.

Maybe that’s because the piano made her sad.

“We had a piano that both my sisters played,” Tatarian recalled.

But her father sold the piano before she could learn to play.

“I still remember when they pulled it out of the driveway,” she said.

Tatarian remembers the day she told her father she wanted to play.

Rum River Blend / See page 3

New archery range to open in Milaca

The city-owned range will be free to use

CONNOR CUMMISKEY
Union-Times

A new range may draw more archers to Milaca come September.

Located just north of the Milaca Municipal Airport, on 110th Avenue near the intersection with 155th Street, the archery range will provide a free opportunity for residents to practice their skills with a bow and arrow.

“I think this will be the nicest archery course for sure in central Minnesota, if not the state,” Public Works Supervisor Gary Kirkeby said.

Archers will be able to line up on 18 shaded concrete pads to shoot at targets ranging from 15-75 yards away. An elevated platform will serve as an additional station to simulate hunting. Beneath it will be a handicap accessible station for archers, according to Kirkeby.

Large square sandbags suspended from a wooden square serve as targets for archers on the range. On the north side is a trail into the woods where archers will be able to practice shooting at 3D models of animals, according to Kirkeby.

“It’d be similar to a disc-golf course,” Kirkeby said.

Archers follow the wooded path off to one side of the range, where they can pick up a scorecard to keep track of the points they earn with each shot. The first station will be an elevated platform, from which four targets can be shot at. There are 10 stations on the trail in total, though only the first will have an elevated platform to shoot from.

To help encourage safety, the rules of the range will be posted and no one under 15 years old is allowed without an accompanying adult. The 3D range is designed so each set of targets is angled away from each other, so an archer shouldn’t have to worry about other groups while retrieving arrows.

In total the range cost \$35,000, though all of that cost was covered by donations to the city. The range will be free for the public to use, though a donation box will be set out to receive cash to help pay for maintaining and replacing targets, ac-

Archery / See page 3

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PUBLIC NOTICES

Greenbush Township rescheduled its July board meeting to 7:30 p.m. Monday, July 26 in the Township hall. Pages 15



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