

Levy would support plans for Prowlers

Residents ask questions at community forum

by April Scheinoha
 Reporter

Dr. Chris Mills, superintendent of the Thief River Falls School District, repeatedly used the word "transparent" while speaking Wednesday, Oct. 4. Mills spoke at a community forum about the upcoming levy referendum. He said he wanted district voters to make their decisions based on the cor-

rect information. Mills, who has been superintendent here since July, said the district had been told it hadn't been transparent the last time it sought a referendum. That referendum failed.

On Oct. 4, Mills spoke to a group of about 20 people at a community forum at Lincoln High School. The group was evenly split between staff and voters.

This fall, district voters will be asked three questions:

Question One: Seeks to authorize a new operating levy of \$750 per

pupil. Mills explained that kindergarteners through sixth graders are each counted as one per pupil unit. Seventh through 12th graders are considered to be 1.2 pupil units each. If approved, the levy would provide \$1,375,000 annually over a 10-year term and cost a \$150,000 home \$15.06 per month. Passage would create three to four years of financial stability for the District. It would invest in school security, mental health services, and career and technical programming.

Question Two: Seeks to authorize a capital

projects levy of \$800,000 per year for a seven-year term and cost a \$150,000 home \$4.66 per month. The capital projects levy would help alleviate financial pressure on the district's General Fund. It would also fund the District's 1:1 technology plan and make additional investments in building safety and security.

Question Three: Seeks to authorize an additional operating levy of \$407 per pupil. If approved, the levy would provide \$843,000 annually for a 10-year term and cost a \$150,000 home \$8.18 per month. This fund-

ing would support the same services as Question One by strengthening the district's General Fund to avoid deficit spending and create an additional two to three years of financial stability for the district's budget.

Questions 2 and 3 are contingent upon Question 1 passing.

In 2021, district voters turned down an operating levy referendum that would have raised over \$987 per pupil unit. That referendum failed by a vote of 681 to 1,793. As a result, the district is now one of 94 school districts without an operat-

ing referendum in the state. Of that number, according to Mills, about 35 don't have special funding to offset the lack of an operating referendum.

Since the 2017-18 school year, the district has cut nearly \$2.7 million from its budget. Without a new revenue source, it will face a \$2.4 million deficit by the end of 2025-26 school year.

Education funding has lagged behind the rate of inflation for 15+ years, Mills said. Some federal funds have enabled the district to offset some of its financial (Continued on Page 9)



Country music fun in TRF

Block and McVey entertain a crowd in TRF

Priscilla Block, a country singer-songwriter, entertained the crowd Thursday, Oct. 5 at Ralph Engelstad Arena in Thief River Falls. Block was the headliner during a concert presented by Aarestad Entertainment. Jake McVey also performed.

The crowd was excited to hear Priscilla Block. Block, a country singer-songwriter, wrote and sings "Thick Thighs."



What does it take to bring a show to TRF?

It was important to do it right

by David Hill
 Editor

What spectators experienced in Thief River Falls last week may very well be the start of a more frequent activity.

In conjunction with Woj's Finals Rodeo Oct. 5-7, Aarestad Entertainment presented a music concert featuring Academy of Country Music nominee and Mercury Recording artist Priscilla Block, along with Jake McVey. There may be

more events like this in the near future.

Jason Aarestad of Thief River Falls, who organized the entertainment last week, said he'd organized music events as a fundraiser for Annie Park in Thief River Falls - one in 2014 and kind of another in 2015, and kind of got bit by the entertainment business bug. He also organized a show for the Erskine Water Carnival and then a couple of other fundraisers. He then bought into a record label. Unfortunately, that happened right before the pandemic.

Aarestad said he'd always had in the back of his mind bringing shows to Thief River Falls.

Is the Ralph Engelstad Arena underutilized? Aarestad said yes and no. For hockey fans, it's not. It is, after all, a hockey arena, and used for such. For others, who don't see what happens behind the scenes or aren't hockey fans, it seems to sit empty.

Aarestad said that after Woj's Rodeo Finals in Thief River Falls last year he talked with owners of the rodeo, Keith and Dana Wojciechowski. After that discussion, he began working on bringing a music act to Thief River Falls.

A year in the making, about 2000 spectators were able to enjoy a performance by Priscilla Block and Jake

McVey last week. It was above what Aarestad anticipated, and there's room for growth.

What people didn't see, said Aarestad, was all the work that took place behind the scenes. He brought in a structural engineer, fire marshal, fire department representatives, and created a security team just to make sure it could be done. Even then, there were a thousand other minor and not-so-minor details to arrange. He's justifiably proud of what was accomplished.

Aarestad said he wanted to do it right. A good first impression is very important. He said it would serve as (Continued on Page 9)

File early for temporary liquor licenses

Don't run afoul of state notice requirements

by April Scheinoha
 Reporter

Don't wait until the last minute. That was the message from the Thief River Falls City Council to on-sale liquor license holders. At its meeting Tuesday, Oct. 3, the council again reminded them that permit applications for temporary on-sale liquor licenses need to be filed with the city far enough in advance.

The reminder stemmed from a request from American Legion Post 117, which sought a temporary on-sale liquor license one-day permit for an event at the Curling Club. The event is scheduled Saturday, Oct. 14. In the end, the council approved the request.

In a related, separate

motion, the council approved notifying on-sale liquor license holders that such permit applications need to be filed at least 45 days prior to the event.

Deputy City Clerk Renee Olson noted that she has to beg and plead with City Council and the state Alcohol and Gambling Enforcement Division to accept permits filed less than 30 days before the event. The state requires 30 days whereas the council needs to meet first and accept the permit application.

Olson received the Legion's application earlier that day. She said Legion Manager Wendy Mattson was notified late about the event and was also applying for insurance for the event that day. In order for the permit to be approved by the state, the Legion needs to have insurance for the event. Had Mattson waited (Continued on Page 9)

Concerns linger over water meter replacement project

by April Scheinoha
 Reporter

The City of Thief River Falls' water meter replacement project slowly continues, and concerns linger. At its meeting Tuesday, Oct. 3, the council again heard from Cheryl Snetting, manager of Challenger Manufactured Home Community.

The City of Thief River Falls, with a contractor and subcontractor, is replacing water meters first in manufactured home parks and at the homes of snowbirds. All residential and commercial water meters will be replaced in the city as part of the project.

Snetting reported some installs were going well at manufactured homes while others weren't going well. She encouraged the council to consider a deadline of Oct. 22 for the replacement of water meters at manufactured home parks. Otherwise, Snetting suggested postponing those replacements until after winter.

Besides making that request, Snetting said the city was violating its own water meter ordinance. She noted that city ordinance requires property owners to protect their water lines from freezing. However, by insisting the manufactured home owners remove skirting and unwrap heat tape from their water lines prior to meter replacement, Snetting said the city is in violation of the ordinance. City Attorney Delray Sparby planned to check into Snetting's statement.

The water meter replacement project was further broached at the Committee of the Whole meeting immediately after the council meeting.

Vanguard Utility Service Inc. is struggling with employees and the rollout is taking longer than planned. It has three installers here despite recently finishing a 9,000-meter project in West Fargo, N.D. "We're trying to get this done," said Water Systems Superintendent (Continued on Page 9)



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Community forum on referendum/Continued

(Continued from Page 1) issues, but those funds sunset this year.

Right now, the district has a \$24 million budget. Mills said 82% of the district budget is based on people. He said the district continues to be short-staffed in terms of cleaners and bus drivers. Mills expected those positions wouldn't be cut if the referendums failed.

However, Mills anticipated that the district may cut at least 12 other positions. At different points, he indicated that as many as 15 or 18 positions could be cut. Challenger Elementary School has the most students at about 800. Mills anticipated that the district would need to cut seven or eight staff members there. Such cuts would impact the number of sections offered in each grade. For example, Mills believed kindergarten class sizes would increase from about 20 students to 25 or 29 students.

Other district buildings would see cuts as well. Mills expected three or four positions would be cut at each of the other buildings. Administration was also mentioned in terms of cuts.

One attendee asked about cutting teacher salaries. Mills replied that the district's teacher salaries are average compared to other districts. He noted the district needs to remain competitive in terms of salaries. About seven years ago, a school district would have 100 applicants for a teaching job. Now, according to Mills, that number is two. Classes of cutting teaching salaries, he believed the district would instead utilize larger class sizes.

Failure would also lead to other potential impacts. Mills said the district would look at all areas. Examples included possibly decreasing the number of available programs offered in the district. Any potential cuts would go before a committee, which would then make a recommendation to the full school board.

Mills also cautioned that a reduction in educational investments may lead to increases in spending for social services and law enforcement. Even if one or more of the referendums passed, Mills said the district would continue to look

for efficiencies. Passage would lead to an impact on residents' property tax bills. The same attendee said it was outrageous that he would have a 25% increase in his school district taxes if the referendums passed. With those numbers, he believed no one would vote for the referendums. The man also thought the district should use a home with a higher estimated market value than \$150,000. He said a person would be living in a shack if their home were valued at \$150,000.

Mills replied that Pennington County provided the numbers and he realized that many homes are selling in the area for more than \$150,000. He said it was his job to provide the information to district voters. Mills added that he had seen increases between 16 and 20% for school district taxes if the referendums passed.

Another attendee asked about the number of district families choosing to send their children elsewhere. Mills replied that the district had about 234 district students choosing to attend school elsewhere, 28 are attending classes online. Mills said that number has decreased over the years. He added that a combination of reasons may lead parents to send their children elsewhere. Mills used the example of a family living on the other side of Seven Class Casino, Hotel and Water Park and choosing to send their children to the Red Lake County Central School District. Parents may also choose to send their children to the school district that they had attended.

Early voting began Friday, Sept. 22 and is available Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Pennington County Government Center. Election Day is Tuesday, Nov. 7. Voters may vote between 7 a.m. and 8 p.m. at Ralph Engelstad Arena in Thief River Falls.

For more information about the referendums or to use a tax calculator to determine the impact on your property, go to www.planforourprowlers.org.



Firefighter Scott Walker (left) and Fire Chief Rick Beier demonstrated the Jaws of Life to Kim Ellefson's kindergarten class during a tour of the Thief River Falls Fire Hall on Monday, Oct. 9. The fire department hosted tours of the Fire Hall for all of the Challenger Elementary School kindergarten classes as part of National Fire Prevention Week.

Concerns linger over water meters/Continued

(Continued from Page 1) Wayne Johnson.

Johnson assured the Committee of the Whole that water meters would continue to be replaced in manufactured home parks until the weather becomes miserable. If water meters still need to be replaced after that time, the appointments will be rescheduled for next year. In the meantime, Vanguard would work on replacing water meters at stick-built homes.

Amid the concerns about freezing water, Mayor Brian Holmer noted that the manufactured home owners schedule appointments with Vanguard. He added that the waterline would be exposed for a short time. Holmer anticipated that manufactured home owners would reinstall the heat tape and skirting either later that day or the next day.

Previously, Johnson indicated that it would take about 15 minutes to replace a water meter. It has been more than 30 years since the city water meters have been replaced. Core & Main plans to complete the \$1.4 million project on behalf of the city with help from subcontractor Vanguard. As part of the project, all city commercial and residential water meters are being replaced to be compatible with the Ad-

vanced Metering Infrastructure system. When the city converted to AMI in 2014, city leaders were under the impression that the new system would be able to read the city's water meters. The city retrofitted 3,500 water meters with new heads to accommodate the new AMI system. However, quite a few water meter bodies were left in place, and the city has been waiting years for nodes. As a result, someone has to manually read the water meters without nodes, defeating the purpose of the AMI.

In addition, Johnson previously estimated that more than 200 water meters need to be replaced at city mobile homes since the nodes stopped communicating data.

The new meters will be able to report water usage to a fraction of a gallon. Now, the water meters provide residential water readings to every 100 gallons. Commercial water readings are provided to every 1,000 gallons. The new meters will also enable homeowners to more easily recognize a water leak at their homes.

Letters are being sent to homeowners regarding the replacement of their water meters. At least three notices will be sent to homeowners who don't respond. After that time, a Vanguard

representative will knock on the homeowner's door to schedule the appointment. City Council approved hiring Franco Trudeau as the electrical systems manager, effective Monday, Oct. 16. Trudeau will be paid \$44.42 per hour. He succeeds Brian Jacobson, who was recently promoted to electric superintendent.

Trudeau, a Thief River Falls resident, previously worked at Arctic Cat and later for a firm installing conveyors at DigiKey.

Public Works Director Travis Giffen reminded residents about the proper placement of leaf piles for leaf pickup. Leaves are to be piled away from light poles and parked vehicles. Residents are also reminded to place the leaves in long skinny piles on their lawn within six feet of the curb. Leaves are picked up with a vacuum boom with limited reach.

Leaf vacuum operations will continue through Friday, Oct. 27. It typically starts in Ward 1 on Mondays and ends in Ward 5 on Fridays. For more information and/or to find your ward, go to www.citytrf.net.

The council approved the Toward Zero Deaths proposal for 2023-24. The Thief River Falls Police Department, Pennington County Sheriff's Office and

Marshall County Sheriff's Office recently received a \$27,700 TZD grant from the state. Each law enforcement agency will share equally in the grant that will be used toward overtime related to TZD enforcement, including distracted driving, seat belt and Move Over Law enforcement. The grant ends Sept. 30, 2024.

As part of its consent agenda, the council approved hiring three volunteer firefighters. They are Erik Brateng, Jonathan Larson and Keary Patsch. On behalf of Visit Thief River Falls Executive Director Amanda Hughes, council member J. Scott Pream thanked the Public Works Department for its help in cleaning up LaFave Beach. Visit Thief River Falls held a Clean Up the Beach Day in September.

Holmer thanked community members who helped with the effort.

The next council meeting is scheduled Tuesday, Oct. 17 at 5:30 p.m. at City Hall.

The council, Pennington County Board and Thief River Falls School Board will meet Monday, Oct. 30 at 5:30 p.m. at Ralph Engelstad Arena.

Aarestad Entertainment: It's important to do it right/Continued

(Continued from Page 1) proof that it could be done in Thief River Falls, and from a business perspective, it was important to do it well.

Aarestad said he has had a relationship with R.J. Rouss, an entrepreneur, industry veteran, attorney and entrepreneur. Aarestad said Rouss said the security detail at the event was the best he'd seen.

Aarestad said his team included eight students from Northland Community and Technical College's criminal justice program, and two licensed officers. He thought it was great experience for

the students, and they did a great job.

David Lovly, criminal justice law enforcement coordinator at Northland in Thief River Falls, said he thought it was a great experience for the students who volunteered to participate as part of the security team. It was not part of the curriculum for the students. Each of the students who volunteered were second year students in the skills training portion of their training. Law enforcement students must have the skills training to be licensed peace officers.

From Lovly's perspective

it was a great experience because it provided students with interpersonal skills experience. He said the students told him that from their perspective it was a great opportunity and one they'd do again.

Lovly said the only issues student encountered were addressing fans in front of the stage who were on top of the shoulders of other fans. A couple of other students were involved in checking bags carried in by fans.

Ticket sales were managed through VenuWorks and Ticketmaster. Aarestad said sales seemed to go well.

From Aarestad's perspective, a show like this doesn't have a lot to do with him; rather, it's all about the community.

Such shows are great for business. Aarestad said he heard from one businessman who said the day of the show was one of the best days he's had.

Letters are being sent to Aarestad said spectators came from throughout the region, some even from the Twin Cities. These spectators purchase food, fuel and stay at local motels.

Aarestad is excited about the potential for the community. He said he's already working on bringing another show to Thief River Falls on Jan. 18. Watch for details soon, Aarestad said.

Liquor license requests/Continued

(Continued from Page 1) a letter to seek the permit from the city. Olson said the council may have needed to call a special council meeting.

Mayor Brian Holmer said he wasn't opposed to providing the permit to the Legion, but he sought council support for sending a letter listing a 45-day requirement.

The council has encountered similar problems in the past with other organizations hosting events.

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Positive Thoughts ... You have a unique voice, and are great just the way you are



by Dan Bartsch

This week, I have to ask my readers which group or gang they favor. If you are living under a rock, as most of us usually are, the two gangs I am talking about are the fans of singer Taylor Swift or the "Swifties," and the fans of Beyonce Knowles or the "Bees," who gather at the beehive.

It seems that at one time or another everyone wants to be in a group or gang and feel that they are part of a group of friends who enjoy a person, item, religion, or a season. Today, we are all basically in the middle of two very talented singers, Taylor Swift and Beyonce Knowles. These two ladies do something like go out for lunch, record a new song, or attend a boyfriend's football game

and millions of fans will know about it. Those fans will shout it out the old fashioned way or post it on social media. They'll even shout when they see the queen Bee drink an orange juice or Swift a pineapple and orange juice. So there.

The point/counterpoint that these two groups like to do is a lot like what happened 60 years ago when "West Side Story" was nominated for six Tony Awards, and won 10 Academy Awards. This is the story of two street gangs The Jets and the Sharks. But, these gangs are different from street gangs today because gangs in the 1960s had choreographers. I mean if one gang member does a 360 degree jump then goes into a turn, turn, kick, turn, well you just got served, and you better hide your head in shame.

There was another gang movie that is a little more close to reality - "The Warriors". In the 1979 movie

about a gang called the Warriors, which was blamed for the killing of the head of another gang, all the gangs in the Bronx were out to get them. The Warriors were just trying to get back to their home base in Coney Island. And New York wondered why tourism was down after this movie came out. Makes living in Thief River Falls where the neighbors' dogs gather together for choral rehearsal pretty sweet.

I didn't even talk about the ultimate gang battle in this country today - Coca Cola vs. Pepsi. And yes, yes I hear some of you say you drink Dr. Pepper, but on top of a positive thoughts column, and I don't want lines being drawn across town. No one can be safe in a cola war. Just know that you are an awesome person, have a unique voice and are great just the way you are. I hope you have a wonderful day, and as always, God bless.

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Aarestad is excited about the potential for the community. He said he's already working on bringing another show to Thief River Falls on Jan. 18. Watch for details soon, Aarestad said.