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# the Tower-Soudan TIMBERJAY



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## SULFIDE MINING

# New legal challenge in mineral lease battle

by MARSHALL HELMBERGER  
Managing Editor

## Trump reinstatement critical to Twin Metals project

REGIONAL— A coalition of Minnesota business owners and environmental groups has filed a new legal challenge to the Trump administration's decision to reinstate two federal mineral leases critical to the proposed Twin Metals copper-nickel mine

near Ely. It's the second legal challenge mounted by the same group of plaintiffs against the 2018 decision by the Trump administration to reinstate mineral leases that had been canceled in waning days of the Obama

administration. "Nothing about the Twin Metals lease renewal process has been normal," said Tom Landwehr, former Minnesota DNR Commissioner, who now serves as the executive director of the Campaign to Save the

Boundary Waters. "And the environmental review of the lease renewal is no exception." According to Landwehr, "the federal agencies conducted the most superficial of reviews and, by their own admission, did not even consider the impacts of

mining in renewing the leases. Such shoddy analyses on a proposal as devastating as allowing sulfide-ore copper mining on the edge of the Boundary Waters is unconscionable."

The four-count lawsuit specifically alleges that the U.S. Forest Service acted in an

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## HER SPECIAL DAY

# Mother's Day will prevail

Families, facilities find alternatives to celebrate in the age of COVID-19

by DAVID COLBURN  
Cook/Orr Editor

REGIONAL- Mother's Day is traditionally that one day of the year when every mom can expect a little TLC. Hugs and kisses from their kids, fresh flowers, and a visit to their favorite restaurant. Yet, in the age of coronavirus restrictions, that tradition has been turned upside down.

Nowhere is that more keenly felt than in the area's assisted living facilities and nursing homes, where residents have essentially been quarantined from contact with all but their care providers since early March.

On a day when mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers would normally be picked up by family members to wait in line for a special meal out to celebrate the day, the closest they'll come to a loving touch will be by pressing hands up against a closed window that keeps them separated from family on the other side but safe from possible exposure to

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With cupcakes and cell phone in hand, Elsie Dahl looks out the window at Edgewood Vista in Virginia as family and friends outside sang "Happy Birthday" to mark her 91st birthday on April 23. submitted photos



## LAW ENFORCEMENT

# Chad Houde set to lead Ely Police Department

by KEITH VANDERVORT  
Ely Editor

ELY – After six hours of interviews and deliberations and six rounds of voting, Ely City Council members selected Sgt. Chad Houde, a 15-year veteran of the city's police department, as the city's new police chief, pending a contract agreement.

He would replace John Lahtonen, who is turning in his badge after a 26-year career with the EPD.

Houde was picked over fellow Ely patrol officer Adam Borchert in the sixth round of voting on a 4-3 vote by council members. Ely police sergeant George Burger led after the first round of voting with three votes but failed to gain a majority in subsequent voting and was eliminated after the fifth round.

Virginia police lieutenant John Swenson was eliminated after the second round.

Council members Angela Campbell, Al Forsman, Paul Kess, and Heidi Omerza ultimately voted for Houde. Borchert was supported by members Ryan Callen, Jerome Debeltz and Mayor Chuck Novak.

Houde was hired as an officer at the department in 2005 and was promoted to sergeant

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Chad Houde

## CITY OF TOWER

# City Attorney: Rose RV Park project can move forward

by MARSHALL HELMBERGER  
Managing Editor

TOWER— For five years, prospective recreational vehicle park developer Dave Rose has fought against city officials here who refused to issue him a conditional use permit for his

plan to construct a 30-35-unit seasonal RV campground along the East Two River.

Now, according to City Attorney Mitch Brunfelt, Rose has actually had his conditional use permit, by law, since at least 2015, even though some now-former city officials argued

otherwise.

But even as Rose now intends to move forward with his plan, it's apparent he doesn't yet have everything in place to begin construction — and he could still face additional hurdles.

The turnabout led to a lengthy discussion at the city's

planning and zoning commission, where commission chair Steve Altenburg continued to insist that Rose had to complete a long list of tasks before he could actually receive a conditional use permit from the city.

Yet it was the conclusion of the city attorney that held sway

with the commission.

In an April 28 letter addressed to Rose, Brunfelt informs the New London RV park developer that he has had his conditional use permit, or CUP, since shortly after he applied in

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# School on track for facility referendum

by KEITH VANDERVORT  
Ely Editor

ELY – A \$20 million bonding referendum for the Ely School District building renovation project appears to be on track for later this summer despite questions over safe election procedures and when students and teachers will be allowed back into classrooms.

ISD 696 school board members appear to be set to adopt a resolution to move forward at their regular board meeting on Monday. A public hearing will be required prior to taxpayers voting on the measure on Tuesday, Aug. 11.

With a \$7 million commitment from Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation and another half-million-dollar state grant, school board members also considered the state of the economy during a recent study session.

Superintendent Erik Erie highlighted a review and comment application that was to be submitted to the Department of Education last Friday.

“This is an extensive

document and there is a lot that goes into it, including an executive summary, facility deficiency list, detailed financing sources, project description, district obligations, enrollment studies and more,” he said.

Gary Cerkvenik, principal member of the Costin Group, the district’s lobbyist, was asked by board chair Ray Marsnik to comment on the fact that some state school districts are postponing bonding referendum votes because of uncertainties surrounding the coronavirus pandemic.

“I think the difference in Ely that you have, over the other places that may be postponing or even canceling their referendums, is that you have \$7 million (from IRRR), and no one else in the state has that. You have something very unique to present to voters,” he said.

He noted that the district has until the end of the year to conduct a bonding referendum and still qualify for the IRRR grant.

“The only other date to have a vote would be on the Nov. 3 general election,”

he said. He noted that the risk of taconite plants shutting down across the Iron Range due to the slowing economy could mean a long-term decrease in taconite production taxes that fund IRRR programs.

“The longer the downturn exists, the less money that flows into their various funds,” Cerkvenik said, and ISD 696 could lose the \$7 million grant.

“My sense is, you should probably stick to your present course. You should weigh that the situation could get worse than you see today going into the fall or next spring,” he said.

Marsnik agreed.

“I am in favor of moving forward with our timeline,” he said.

Costin Group member and Ely alum Jeff Anderson added that last month in Wisconsin, 54 of 57 school bond referendums were passed for just under \$2 billion of taxpayer funding.

“In Minnesota, on April 14, there were two referendums voted on and one passed and one failed,” he said. “In the middle of this pandemic situation there still appears to be an

appetite by voters to pass these.”

Anderson also noted that a major construction project for Ely could be an economic advantage for the area.

“It would bring business to motels and restaurants, hardware stores, convenience stores and more businesses as this project commences. I think we have plenty of time to educate voters. At the end of the day, if they say yes, we have \$7 million for this project. That’s a ‘for sure’ if voters pass this in August,” he said.

Property tax impact scenarios have shown that a \$10 million bond would result in a tax increase of about \$60 per year, for the next 20 years, for a residential property appraised at \$100,000 in the Ely school district. Commercial properties would face a larger property tax impact.

A referendum defeat in August could still leave time for the district to ask voters to reconsider the question, with modifications to the dollar amount or project scope, in November, according to Erie.

## Teacher contract

In a special meeting following the April 27 study session, the board ratified a contract renewal with the Ely Education Association through the 2020-2021 school year on a 5-1 vote.

Board member James Pointer, who was on the board’s negotiating committee, voted against the agreement.

“I know our teachers do a lot and it would be nice if we could pay them what movie stars and athletes make, but unfortunately we can’t,” he said. “As a member of the negotiating committee there were a number of things I did not necessarily agree with and I still don’t agree with them.”

Pointer declined to go into detail.

“Two years ago when we negotiated a contract, we gave up a lot of money to get something and now we’re giving it right back to them, and that made (negotiations) very frustrating.”

He referenced a recent finance committee meeting.

“We are going into deficit spending for the

year with a lot more deficit coming based on other potential expenses. There is a lot of uncertainty out there right now with everything going on. I had a hard time with this contract,” Pointer said.

According to a negotiations summary, the master agreement with the EEA calls for a two-percent salary increase in 2019-2020 and a 2.5 percent increase in 2020-2021. The cost increase to the district over the two-year term is just under \$400,000.

“I’m not disputing James’s concern,” said board member Rochelle Sjoberg “From a budget perspective, I don’t think anything approved by the negotiating team put the district in jeopardy. At the end of the day, it brought the morale and some peace back over concerns from the last contract.”

In other business, the school board accepted the retirement of long-time science teacher Bo DeRemee, effective Aug. 28.

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the virus.

As RN regional operations manager for Carefree Living facilities in Cook, Orr, Babbitt, Silver Bay, and Ely, where she also has been helping out as an RN, Kasey Kiefler oversees services for about 150 residents as she attempts to strike a tenuous balance between remaining upbeat and weathering the strain felt by residents, staff, and families alike from nine weeks of lockdown.

“We’re doing the best we can to make things normal, but it’s not normal,” Kiefler said. “People are struggling. The only way we can have family members in our facility is if someone is actively dying. It leaves me in tears every day because I don’t want to see these people struggling.”

Staff have been doing what they can, often even when they’re off duty, to keep residents connected with their loved ones, Kiefler said.

“We’re all using our personal phones to do Facetime,” she said. “I did buy a tablet. Does it replace hugging your loved one? Absolutely not. But it does help.”

Like many of her staff, Kiefler is a mother, too, now sharing the challenge of homeschooling her two children with her husband, who works full-time. The exhaustion from work means weekends are devoted to catching up on school assignments rather than catching some needed down time.

“It’s almost impossible to do,” Kiefler said. “It gets to a point where burnout is a real thing.”

Still, Sunday is Mother’s Day, and Kiefler said she and the Ely staff are “doing as much as we can to make the weekend joyful” for residents.

Activities director Carolyn Schiltz has arranged silk corsages for all of the mothers, gift bags, and a special treat of strawberries dipped in white chocolate, and mimosas. Kiefler is adding her own personal touch.

“I make cupcakes on

the side,” she said, “so I’ll be making about 75 cupcakes.”

And to celebrate her own motherhood?

“A little peace and quiet would be nice,” Kiefler said.

## Being present

Foreshadowing what will undoubtedly be a common and emotional scene this weekend, brothers Allen and Rick Dahl brought together about a dozen family and friends on April. 23 to fete their mother, Elsie, on her 91st birthday outside of Edgewood Vista in Virginia.

Elsie stood inside at a window, holding a cell phone and cupcakes Allen had brought, as the crew outside waved decorative posters and flags, singing “Happy Birthday.” Family friend Mary Shedd had her own cell phone on speaker to facilitate communication with Elsie.

“It’s tough when you can’t hug your mother on her 91st birthday,” Allen said.

He recommended that families who want to do something similar for Mother’s Day should let staff know ahead of time and affirmed that such visits are well worth the effort.

“It may be that a lot of people are doing it, so set it up in advance,” Allen said. “They’re happy to see you even if you can’t give them a hug. She talked about that for days afterward.”

Orr Carefree Living resident Syvilla Shermer hasn’t lacked for family contact during the quarantine. The 96-year-old matriarch of the Shermer clan has nine children, most of whom live in the area with their families, daughter Kay Cornelius said.

“One of my sisters probably goes up daily,” she said. “I’ll try to go three to four times a week and do window visits. We call her ahead of time so she doesn’t need to rush.”

For someone who normally has an active social life in the community, being cooped up has put

a big crimp in Syvilla’s routine.

“Mom likes to go out,” Cornelius said. “She has a better social life than I do. We usually take drives in the spring. We just travel around looking at old bridges, waterfalls, places where Mom and Dad had farms. She really misses that.”

Still, Cornelius said her mother’s strong Christian faith has helped her to keep a positive attitude throughout confinement.

“She said, ‘I survived World War II and everything in between; I’ll survive this,’” Cornelius laughed.

Past Mother’s Days have been celebrated at Syvilla’s home in what Cornelius termed “open house” fashion, with family dropping in throughout the day. She envisions a similar scenario on Sunday, albeit outside at Carefree Living.

Cornelius said Syvilla is glad that she lives at the facility in part because with the state-imposed visitation restrictions she doesn’t have to say no to family visits herself to protect her health.

“I think it’s good she doesn’t have to feel that pressure,” Cornelius said. “She always finds a positive.”

## Flowers and food

Flowers and Mother’s Day go hand-in-hand, and Sandy Lakner, owner of Bloomer’s Floral and Gift in Ely, has been gearing up to spread a lot of floral joy.

“Because they can’t get together with their moms this weekend, I am

anticipating a very busy week and weekend,” she said. “They’re going to want to acknowledge them in some way and flowers is a wonderful way to do that.”

Lakner said that this week she has decided to go beyond the delivery service she has been offering to open the store for shoppers from Wednesday through Sunday, limiting the number of people who can be inside for social distancing.

“The governor has deemed us essential, I believe, for mental health,” she said. “A large majority of my business on holidays like Mother’s Day is walk in and see. So I’m opting to open the doors.”

Lakner got emotional as she talked about the help she’s receiving.

“My employees that have been laid off have volunteered to come in and help me just so we can keep the doors open,” she said.

Lakner has two delivery drivers enlisted full-time for the weekend to shuttle flowers, greenhouse plants, blooming plants, and balloons around the area, including to Babbitt and Tower. She said she has a good variety of options.

“It’s looking pretty good,” she said. “Certain colors of flowers are not available. We’re getting a lot of flower orders.”

Meanwhile, whether quarantined in a facility or living under stay-at-home orders, moms and families won’t be invading food establishments this Sunday, but several restaurant owners are making

plans for offerings to make Mother’s Day special.

Among them is Bobbi Malecha, co-owner of The Dam Supper Club and Restaurant south of Orr. She’s been serving take-out on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, and recently added Wednesdays as well.

Her upscale Mother’s Day special will be steak and shrimp kabobs with rosemary potatoes, salad, and a dessert. She said she’s considering offering it as a meal to cook at home or to have prepared by the

restaurant.


Malecha said she’s looking at how her previous specials have sold to gauge how much food to order for Mother’s Day. This week’s family-size lasagna special on Wednesday could be a sign demand will be brisk – it sold out on Tuesday through pre-orders.

“It’ll go, it’ll be busy,” Malecha said. “We’re trying to keep people interested in what we’re doing.”

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