

Veterans on the Lake plans major upgrade

by **Tom Coombe**

If all goes as planned, nearly \$900,000 in improvements will be made at Veterans on the Lake Resort.

A decision this week will allow the first phase of the project to get underway.

Tuesday, the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board granted \$125,000 to Lake County, which will serve as the fiscal agent as the local resort makes accessibility compliance site upgrades.

While the entire project calls for extensive upgrades to the cabins and lodge, energy improvement and heat plant infrastructure, the IRRRB grant will allow work to move forward on an initial phase: new pavement throughout the property.

“The main priority is the pavement,” said Neil Olson, who chairs the board of directors at the resort, located on Fall Lake in Fall Lake Township. “The pavement has been in such disrepair for two or three years. We’ve had wheel chairs turn over. That is our number one priority right now.”

Olson said plans call for the pavement work to be completed sometime in September, by Mesabi Bituminous, which is owned by Ely native Tom Nemanich.

According to a project narrative provided by the IRRRB, parking lots, pathways, docks and the roadway at the resort will be upgraded “to allow for barrier free access, including below grade work, paving and dock renovation.”

Once fully funded, the project will also involve upgrades to the cabin and lodge to include widening doorways, building new

accessibility ramps, adding grab bars, walk-in showers and bathtubs.

Other segments will involve upgrading flooring, closets, automatic doors/handles, accessible kitchens and a slew of energy improvements, such as windows, roofing, insulation and heat plant infrastructure.

The rest of the project calls for concentrating on sewer and water infrastructure, researching the possibility of installing solar modules to reduce operating costs, and razing and replacing some cabins.

While the project includes the IRRRB grant and \$100,000 award from St. Louis County, as well as smaller contributions from Veterans on the Lake (\$12,000) and Lake County (\$10,000), the bulk of the work hinges on an award of \$650,000 in state Legislative Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources funds.

That funding has been held up for now and Olson conceded “your guess is as good as mine” if that money will come to fruition.

The coronavirus pandemic has had an impact on the resort, with cancellations already costing the facility \$40,000 in revenue this year, according to Olson.

The report is open for business.

“We are open with special cleaning procedures and we’ve directed all employees to wipe things down,” said Olson.

Once a privately-owned resort, Veterans on the Lake was formed in the 1980s and primarily serves disabled veterans, veterans and groups with disabilities.

IRRRB funds COVID relief

by **Tom Coombe**

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and severe financial strain, both area businesses and local units of government will be able to turn to the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board for help.

Earlier this week, the IRRRB board made \$7 million available in loan and grant funding, for area businesses and communities that have been negatively impacted by pandemic associated by the virus also known as COVID-19.

The move came via a unanimous vote at the board’s Tuesday meeting, with funding set aside in the state agency’s fiscal year 2021 budget.

State legislators, who serve on the board that oversees the state agency, put \$5 million into a Taconite Area Business Relief Loan Program.

Iron Range businesses may borrow up to \$40,000 at two percent interest, to be used as working capital or any legal purposes.

“Our agency is committed to helping our region’s businesses navigate through the financial impacts of the public health crisis,” said IRRRB Commissioner Mark Phillips. “The Taconite Relief Loans are intended to supplement other state and federal relief programs as we move through the short- and long-term economic recovery phases.”

Terms of the loans include no repayment for the first six months, followed by 60 months of payments on principal and interest.

Eligible businesses must have been in operation for at

least one year and operating on March 1, and applicants must intend to re-open if currently closed due to the pandemic.

IRRRB officials say the program could help approximately 200 regional businesses.

Another \$2 million has been set aside in the Taconite Area Community Relief Grant Program.

Cities, townships or tribal units of government located within the IRRRB service area are eligible to apply for a grant that serves as a lending program to businesses within that community.

City economic development authorities, joint powers boards, community nonprofits and housing and redevelopment authorities are all eligible to serve as fiscal agents.

Grant applications will be competitively evaluated, and awards to communities could range from \$50,000 to \$400,000. Applications will be accepted until July 6.

“COVID-19 has created extraordinary challenges to businesses and communities in northeastern Minnesota. Their operations have been disrupted on a financial level, on a supply and demand level and on a workforce level due to the need for social distancing,” said Phillips. “The new community relief program enables businesses to work directly with their community to structure loans for small or larger amounts. Community lending programs help strengthen the business and neighborhood health within a designated municipality or tribal area.”



ELY FIRE DEPARTMENT members get a close look at the Starkovich house fire on June 4.



by **Tom Coombe**
Echo editor

When one of its own is in need, Ely rises up

For the majority of my half-century on this earth, and continuously since mid-1993, Ely has been home.

Both work and pleasure-related travel take me away often and there have been years with better than 35,000 miles spent on the road.

Few of the amenities that draw people here have any pull on me, and nights at a ballpark, arena, gymnasium and trips to Las Vegas or a vibrant, urban downtown trump anything resembling a trip to the lake or the woods.

Yet there’s something reassuring every time the Ely water tower comes into view on Highway 169. It’s home.

An event last week proved once again why that’s so.

It was around noon on the Echo’s deadline day last Thursday when Nick raced by my office and said something about a fire on West Chapman, which for 13 years was my neighborhood.

Curiosity called and the view once aside was both fascinating and horrific.

Heavy smoke billowed out of the top of the house owned by my former neighbor, Paul Starkovich. Soon, flames were shooting out and fire crews were on the scene.

News reports in this paper last weekend told much of the story.

Paul and his longtime friend and fishing buddy Lou Church of Omaha, Neb., were able to escape along with their dogs.

The house was a total loss, destroying the possessions inside of both Starkovich and his nephew Shane, who lived on the upper floor of one of the community’s oldest houses.

What happened next, heck what happened even as the blaze began, is all about Ely.

A grease fire in the rear of Starkovich’s home quickly ignited out of control, and Starkovich’s efforts to curb the blaze were unsuccessful.

“When I threw some water on the wall it ignited, and a piece of insulation dropped on my back and

started my T-shirt on fire,” Starkovich recalled Thursday.

The 1968 Ely High School graduate, still recovering from knee surgery just three months earlier, said he “went outside dove in the dirt and rolled in the dirt to get the fire off my back.”

Ely area resident Misty Merhar and others quickly helped Starkovich to a nearby yard.

“There were a ton of people outside within a minute,” he said.

Church escaped through another door with the dogs and soon an ambulance took Starkovich to Ely-Bloomenson Community Hospital, where he was treated for first and second-degree burns. Within hours, Starkovich walked out the emergency room doors to Church’s awaiting pickup.

But that’s just the beginning of the story. In a matter of hours, Merhar and others, including Starkovich’s niece Kathy Zupancich, went to work.

Supplies, clothes, groceries and even a temporary place to live - at Silver Rapids Lodge - were quickly secured by the end of the afternoon from a generous community, including individuals, businesses and churches..

“I think I have more clothes now than I’ve ever had in my life,” said Starkovich.

Heartened by the community’s response, Starkovich remained in pain from his “stop, drop and roll,” experience and would return to Ely-Bloomenson a few hours later.

“I tried to put weight on my leg and it just wasn’t right,” said Starkovich.

Another examination revealed a broken left hip and Starkovich was soon off to Duluth for surgery.

That went well and Starkovich was released within a few days. This week finds the former Baltimore Orioles and Kansas City Royals pitching prospect on the mend at the Hoyt Lakes home of his son, Paul Jr. Our old neighbor “Sparks,” as our boys called him so many years ago, is going to be OK.

“I’m walking, I feel great,” he said. “I’ve been through so much stuff. Nobody got killed and I’ve got a place to move in to and hopefully 2021 will be better than 2020.”

Within a few weeks, Starkovich will be back home, living in the main house on the corner lot that also included the structure that burned and will soon be demolished.

“I’ll be home as soon as I can,” said Starkovich, an avid outdoorsman. “I lost a lot of stuff and Shane lost everything, but we still have our toys. My boat’s fine. My vehicle’s fine. Shane had boats and a four-wheeler. We got all of the guns out. That’s pretty important to us.”

While both Starkovich and his nephew lost countless possessions and clothing, they’re benefiting from a community that rallied to their aid.

Donations of clothing have been augmented with groceries, supplies, gift cards and two accounts set up at the Ely Area Credit Union, one for both Starkovich and his nephew.

“This community has been unbelievable,” said Starkovich. “Ely is a special place. It’s why I live in Ely. The people have been fantastic. I’ve had people call me, even people I played ball with, I don’t know how they found out. It’s nice to know people care about you. It’s overwhelming.”

Overwhelming, yet not surprising.

Ely has its differences without a doubt. Politically, we’re as divided as the nation whether the issue is mining or the response to the coronavirus.

Yet time after time, instance after instance, when one of our own is in need this community comes together.

Whether it’s helping someone displaced by fire, or raising thousands of dollars to cover medical expenses, or comforting those when they’ve lost loved ones, Ely rises to the occasion - be it individuals, families, businesses or community organizations.

That’s why, despite the pull of larger communities, greener pastures and even frequent trips, the water tower is always a welcome sight.

There really is no place like home.



A HYDRANT by Brittons was used by the Ely fire department for the Starkovich fire. Photos by Nick Wognum.