

OPINION

“CONGRESS SHALL MAKE NO LAW... ABRIDGING THE FREEDOM OF SPEECH, OR OF THE PRESS;”

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution

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Editorial

The business of EMS

Tower Council takes key first step in getting ambulance service back on track

The Tower City Council took an important step forward when it approved the development of a business plan for the city-run ambulance service. It's critical information not just for the future financial success of the service, but to restore confidence among township officials in the department's leadership.

It's been a challenging period for the ambulance service as its expenses skyrocketed with the shift to paid on-call staffing. It appears last year's record number of runs helped the service post a modest profit margin in 2019 despite those higher costs, yet it's highly unlikely the service will achieve that number of runs this year. That was true even before the recent decision to halt non-emergency transfers for the time being. A decline in runs, in part related to the COVID-19 closures and stay-at-home orders, combined with the cost of paying for a new ambulance later this year, will almost certainly push the service's budget deeply into the red in 2020.

The business plan, which is expected to include a cost-of-service analysis, utilization rate analysis, a monthly profit and loss analysis, and a cash flow, should, for the first time, give city and ambulance officials a clear understanding of the financial status of the service as well as critical guidance for future decision-making. City officials, without question, should have demanded that kind of information before approving the shift to paid on-call staffing in 2017.

The financial impact of that change will certainly be a key component of the business planning effort. While we have not opposed the use of some paid on-call staffing, the approach adopted by the former ambulance

director was far more costly than necessary. Neighboring small ambulance services, like Cook and Orr, pay their paid on-call staff a modest stipend, around \$2-\$4 an hour, which is far less than Tower pays. The high wage paid by Tower is among the many reasons that the city would almost certainly lose a complaint under the Fair Labor Standards Act for failure to pay overtime.

The former city council approved the paid on-call staffing plan and pay scale based on promises made at the time that non-emergency transfers would easily cover the costs and generate even higher profits for the service than before. That never happened, largely because the non-emergency transfers proved to be not as lucrative as expected.

As a recent analysis by Tower Council Member Dave Setterberg revealed, those transfers generated about one-third the profits that had earlier been projected—and those profits disappear entirely once the depreciation cost on the ambulances is factored into the equation.

That's where business planning comes in. If private individuals want to risk their own money on ventures without doing the hard work of truly understanding their revenues and expenditures, that's their right to gamble. But when we're dealing with public funds and the future of a critical city service, there's no room for guesses or wild-eyed optimism.

The good news is, there is still time to turn things around, but only if the city starts making well-informed decisions about the future direction of the ambulance service. Developing a solid business plan is the first critical step down that path.



Letters from Readers

A solution for the Greenwood cameras

In a letter to the *Timberjay* on May 1 concerning the cameras at the Greenwood Township office, Treasurer Rodgers ends it with: "I question why the clerk have [sp?] a problem with the cameras—is she hiding something?" I suppose Rodgers will blame the *Timberjay* for the improper word usage. But she can't avoid the improper accusation against the clerk. It's ridiculous.

There are three cameras. One is outside of the office door and points down the sidewalk toward the highway. That's fine. Another is in the outer office, viewing the public computer, the outside entryway, and the door to the clerk-treasurer office. That's fine. The third is in the rectangular office that the clerk and treasurer share. It points at the clerk as she sits at her desk and covers the room including the backside of the treasurer as she sits at her desk at the opposite end of the office. That being described, I believe that there is a simple solution that will make everyone happy and still provide more than enough "security". I feel the same as Clerk Sue Drobac does, in that I wouldn't want to have a closeup camera constantly surveilling me

while I am working at my desk and possibly being transmitted to township supervisors' homes, as has been mentioned. I suggest that the office camera be re-focused to exclude viewing the clerk working at her desk. Most folks will agree with that. The camera can still view the rest of the office, including the treasurer if that's her preference.

Finally, if there is a true concern for the clerk and treasurer's security and physical well-being, include a provision in next year's budget to fund an alarm system which would include strategically placed alarm buttons that would immediately alert the County 911 system of an emergency situation taking place at the Town Hall. That would be more likely to save a life or prevent injury as opposed to recording the daily events.

Lee Peterson
Greenwood Twp

If the board has concerns they should express them openly

Surveillance cameras. That's what they are, contrary to the Greenwood Township Treasurer's description of them as security cameras. They are not

connected to a 24-hour manned remote monitoring site, and there is no panic button which could contact police should the clerk be attacked. The cameras simply record video which, at a later date, could assist in the apprehension of a criminal and that in itself defines a surveillance system.

The board's discussion on buying a camera system was focused on protecting the clerk/treasurer, but thinly veiled their intent borne out by their actions to surveil and intimidate the clerk. If the board thinks the clerk has something to hide, as Treasurer Rodgers suggests, then stop being mealy-mouthed and state the assertion openly.

Clerk Drobac was recently described by one of our township's citizens as being "Minnesota Nice". I think it will be a long time before we hear such an unsolicited description for any of the other board members, including the treasurer.

JoAnn Bassing
Greenwood Twp

Short and sweet

In response to last week's letter from Pam Rodgers... Really???

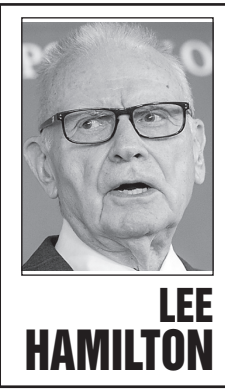
Sue Drobac
Elected Greenwood Township Clerk

COMMENTARY

Reasons for hope in a dark time

We are living in a difficult time. Our country and its communities are deeply polarized; many Americans distrust one another as well as the government and other institutions. The novel coronavirus has deepened our problems in a way none of us imagined.

The number of Americans who have contracted COVID-19 has surpassed a million. Tens of thousands have died, and record numbers have lost their jobs. No wonder, then, people are disheartened, even discouraged.



LEE HAMILTON

This is a stressful and challenging period, when we and our representative democracy are being tested.

But there are reasons to be hopeful. I think of a speech the Rev. Jesse Jackson gave with the theme of "keep hope alive," and that's what we must do. Hope is a precious commodity in human endeavors, including government and politics. We need it now as much as ever.

What gives us hope today? First, the United States remains the world's preeminent power.

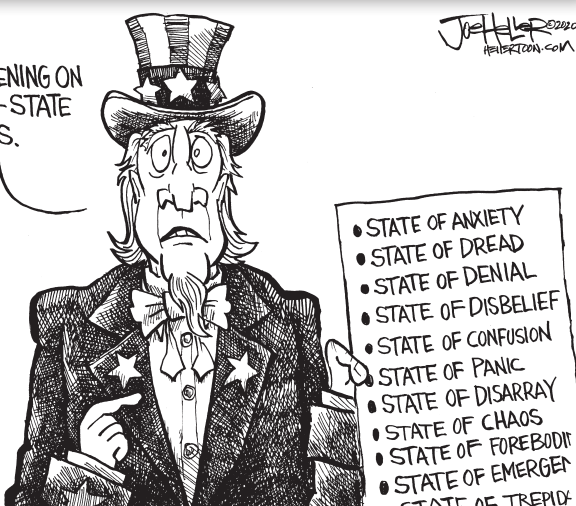
We may not stand astride the world as we once did, but we are still a global leader. People in other nations look to us for leadership. I've experienced this scores of times, in international meetings where delegates looked to see what the U.S. would do.

The fundamentals of the U.S. economy are strong. After recovering from the 2007-08 recession, we experienced a remarkable period of economic growth. The pandemic has brought a setback, of course, but there is strength and growing vitality in America.

Even with all our problems, a strong strain of optimism is part

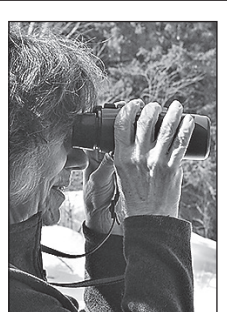
See HOPE...pg. 5

WE'RE REOPENING ON A STATE-BY-STATE BASIS.



Mining deep in the time of pandemic

One of the delightful benefits of the social lockdown is that I'm periodically having longer phone conversations with my children. This week I received a call from my older son. It came after a busy day in the garden. John and I had spent the last few days hauling cow manure and decomposing straw from my



KATHLEEN MCQUILLAN

neighbor's farm. We do this every year in a long-standing bartering arrangement that has proven to be a valuable part of the household budget — our home-grown food supply.

As may be the case for others, manure and straw are key components for keeping our gumbo clay soil rich and tillable for growing

things. After successfully getting our onions in the ground last weekend, our eyes were now on the prize — peas and spinach planted before the "forty days and forty nights" of rain, like those that have set us back the past two springs on our gardening timeline. It was a long day of spreading, tilling, tilling again, and tilling one more time to break down our homemade compost and thoroughly mix it in. Aah! The perfect seedbed, fertile and ready to deliver abundantly.

Around seven o'clock, after

indulging in a simple meal and straightening up the kitchen, I sat myself down for some quiet time checking Duffy for ticks. His hair has grown considerably these past four months and he's become a magnet for "phoo-phoos" — things like burrs, sticks and yes, ticks. An hour combing through his gnarly locks has become part of our nightly ritual. The phone's ring startled me. But what a joy to hear my son's voice. He phones less often now since being called back to work the afternoon shift. He brought

me up to date on family life in "old" Mountain Iron. They too have been preparing their little garden spot, a source of happiness and inspiration. According to Nick, "mostly Bobbi's thing." But believe me, it's much more than Bobbi's "thing". It's her work of art!

We went on to discuss the joys and challenges of homeschooling a 14-year-old, trying to decipher "virtual" lectures and assignments prepared by teach-

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