



# Outdoors

Our lives in the Northwoods

## ENVIRONMENT AND RECREATION

### LCCMR funds threatened by legislative impasse

Many environmental and recreational projects in the region could be left unfunded without a resolution

by MARSHALL HELMBERGER  
Managing Editor

REGIONAL — A dispute over the use of tax dollars dedicated to outdoor and environmental projects in Minnesota is putting more than \$61 million in funding for a wide range of outdoor recreation and environmental projects at risk, including

millions of dollars earmarked for projects here in the North Country.

The funds in question come from the Legislative-Citizens Commission on Minnesota Resources, which failed to pass a funding recommendation over the disagreement. The package of funding that the LCCMR board had expected to approve

includes \$3.1 million for the Crane Lake-Voyageurs National Park campground and visitors center, \$1 million for further development of the Mesabi Trail, and \$575,000 for wolf research at Voyageurs. It also includes \$440,000 for a University of Minnesota researcher working to develop a biological control for the fungus

that causes white-nose syndrome in bats and \$198,000 for Grand Rapids-based Northern Community Radio

See LCCMR...pg. 5B



Right: Funding to help complete the popular Mesabi Trail is currently threatened by a dispute between lawmakers.



## RECREATION

### Ancient cedar trail planned

Remarkable forest stand will showcase “forest primeval” within Tower city limits

by MARSHALL HELMBERGER  
Managing Editor

TOWER—The ribbons are being hung as part of the plan to build a long-anticipated trail here later this summer through a large and spectacular stand of old growth upland white cedar that dates back to about 1880.

To be known as the Ancient Cedar Forest Trail, the initial 1.5-mile long loop will traverse this remarkable site, which forest ecologists from the Department of Natural Resources believe most likely originated following a fire a few years prior to the opening of the Soudan Mine and several years before the founding of the city of Tower. The ecologists believe the site has never been logged, making it unusual, particularly for land located within the incorporated limits of a city.

The Wagoner Trails Club, the non-profit Friends of Vermilion Country School, and the Tower Economic Development Authority are teaming up on the project both as a recreational option for local residents as well as a destination for visitors.

“This project has a number of benefits,” noted Jodi Summit, who heads Friends of Vermilion Country School. “It’s economic development, it’s environmental education, and it’s great recreation.” The most recent Tower-Breitung Comprehensive Plan listed a community desire for more recreational opportunities, particularly trails, so the project is consistent with that community vision, notes Summit.

While white cedar aren’t uncommon



Top: Wagoner Trails Club President Mary Shedd hangs flagging along the expected route of the trail.

Above: A view through a stand of cedar.

Right: A view of Lake Vermilion from a trail overlook.



photos/M. HelMBERGER

See TRAIL...pg. 5B

## Wildflower Watch

This week’s featured flower  
ROUND-LOBED HEPATICA



The Round-lobed Hepatica, *Anemone americana*, is one of the earliest wildflowers every spring, and can often be found appearing with a little snow still on the ground. You’ll need to pay attention to find these diminutive blossoms, which can range in color from white to violet. They stand typically no more than 1-3 inches above the forest floor.

While they can be found in almost any forest setting in the North Country, I most often spot them in rocky areas, most often under pine.

They’re a member of the Buttercup family.  
photo courtesy V. Ranua

## Outdoors in brief

### Fire restrictions in effect within Superior National Forest

REGIONAL — Spring season has arrived and with it, warm and dry sunny days. With the snow now mostly melted across the North Country, and with the recent string of dry days and relatively low humidity, the dead grass and leaves left behind can pose a dramatic fire risk, which is why fire officials on the Superior National Forest are asking the public to take special care right now to prevent wildfires. Forty percent of the wildfires in Minnesota result from debris burning, and campfires contribute to many additional fires this time of year.

The Superior National Forest enacted fire restrictions in mid-April, which prohibit campfires, and even charcoal grills or gas camp stoves until further notice. The Minnesota DNR has also restricted open burning in all northern Minnesota counties in and surrounding the Superior National Forest. The state will not issue burning permits for brush or yard waste in these counties until restrictions are lifted.

According to a Forest Service release, these burning and campfire restrictions will reduce demands on limited wildfire response resources at this critical time, helping to ensure that wildland firefighters can respond effectively to those wildfires that do occur.

**TRAIL...**Continued from page 4B

in Minnesota, they often grow in wet areas, making them less accessible to the general public. But Tower's cedars grow in an upland area, making it easy to walk through the extensive grove, which covers more than 100 acres. The dense canopy created by the cedars gives a primeval feel to the stand, which is primarily open underneath since most underbrush doesn't grow well in the deep shade.

While the trees are old, they aren't as large as one might expect given their age. Cedar are slow-growing, long-lived trees, known to live up to 800 years. And in this relatively dry, rocky upland site near Tower, they're even slower to grow. In this case, it's the density of the cedars that is the most impressive characteristic of the site.

Wagoner Trails Club President Mary Shedd said she's looking forward to the convenience of having such a resource right in town.

"Across the area, we have a lot of great hiking trails, but what's so amazing about this is how close it is to town. It's literally right out our back door and it's such a unique and special place. You don't even have to get in your car for that kind of experience."

The wilderness-type trail won't cost much to build or maintain, since it will be little more than a narrow footpath along most of the route. But the first few hundred feet of the trail is consistently wet, so the trail developers plan to build about 500 feet of boardwalk through the wet area. Lake Country

Power's Operation Round-Up donated \$2,000 toward the project in late February and the organizers are seeking about \$4,400 more from the North St. Louis County Trails Task Force to help pay for the remaining materials to build the boardwalk. The request also includes funding for some interpretive and directional signage so people understand the significance of the site and how to find it. The task force committee will decide on the funding request later this month. The project would get underway most likely in July, with volunteers set to build and maintain the boardwalk as well as the rest of the trail.

The trailhead is tentatively set to be located about 300 feet south of the junction of the Mesabi Trail and the Iron Ore snowmobile trail. That's about three blocks from the city's historic train depot.

While much of the trail is relatively flat, a portion of the trail will run along a rocky ridge that offers scenic views of portions of the city of Tower and Lake Vermilion. The initial loop trail will eventually include spur trails and additional loops to scenic overlooks and other interesting features.

While many people will likely explore the trail in summer, Shedd said she thinks the site is even more spectacular in winter and she expects it will get plenty of use from snowshoers.

"When you see the snow draped on the trees and the cliffs, you know you're in a pretty fantastic place," she said.

**LAKE COUNTRY FORECAST**

from NOAA weather

Friday					Saturday					Sunday					Monday					Tuesday				
66 43					64 34					55 28					56 29					55 28				
Ely	Hi	Lo	Prec.	Sn.	Emb.	Hi	Lo	Prec.	Sn.	Cook	Hi	Lo	Prec.	Sn.	Orr	Hi	Lo	Prec.	Sn.	Tower	Hi	Lo	Prec.	Sn.
04/20	40	26	0.00		04/20	40	24	0.00		04/20	40	23	0.00		04/20	41	25	0.00		04/20	40	25	0.00	
04/21	43	18	0.01		04/21	43	17	0.00		04/21	42	18	0.02	0.3"	04/21	37	18	0.01		04/21	43	18	0.00	
04/22	39	19	0.00		04/22	39	17	0.00		04/22	38	18	0.00		04/22	46	30	0.00		04/22	38	19	0.00	
04/23	40	25	0.00		04/23	42	24	0.00		04/23	41	25	0.01	0.2"	04/23	59	27	0.00		04/23	38	23	0.00	
04/24	56	27	0.00		04/24	57	27	0.00		04/24	57	26	0.00		04/24	63	28	0.00		04/24	57	25	0.00	
04/25	64	28	0.00		04/25	63	23	0.00		04/25	63	27	0.00		04/25	63	27	0.00		04/25	62	25	0.00	
04/26	62	27	0.00		04/26	62	27	0.00		04/26	63	27	0.00		04/26	63	27	0.00		04/26	61	26	0.00	
Total 1.99 94.7"					YTD Total 2.50 65.4"					YTD Total 3.00 77.1"					YTD Total NA NA									

**LCCMR...**Continued from page 4B

to engage more Minnesotans in phenology.

The legislation that includes these funds was also supposed to extend \$600,000 in funding for the second phase of trail work around the city of Tower's harbor, as well as a technical change to allow the city to modify the project from the original proposal. LCCMR Director Becca Nash said she's hopeful that legislation to extend the deadline for all remaining projects by a year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, will be approved by the Legislature this session, but that legislation likely won't include the technical change that Tower needs. "So Tower may get an extension but they couldn't spend it on what they need to spend it on," said Nash.

The dispute over \$1.5 million in funds for wastewater treatment would seem to be a small sum in a total package worth over \$61 million. Sen. Tom Bakk, DFL-Cook, called the dispute "silly" and voiced sympathy for the Senate lead on the LCCMR, Bill Ingebrigtsen, GOP-Alexandria, who had pushed for the inclusion of wastewater funding. According to Bakk, the provision that established the funding stream overseen by the LCCMR allows up to five percent of the funds to go for wastewater infrastructure. "Frankly, I think we probably should do that," said Bakk.

The situation, however, appears to be a bit more complicated. For thirty years, a state statute prevented any of the LCCMR funding from going to municipal wastewater treatment projects. But when voters

approved a constitutional amendment to dedicate lottery proceeds to natural resource projects, the amendment allowed for up to five percent of the proceeds to go toward loans for wastewater treatment projects. Then, two years ago, the Legislature passed a new law, allowing for use of LCCMR funds for wastewater grants.

The inconsistency has generated the dispute, with one camp arguing that the state's constitutional provision that limits LCCMR funds to loans, rather than grants, supersedes any statute. The other camp argues that the statute is controlling.

"It's tricky," says Nash. To date, those who oppose funding wastewater projects have held sway, but now the other camp is making its point by holding all the LCCMR projects in limbo. In a recent letter to his House counterpart, Rick Hansen, DFL-South St. Paul, Ingebrigtsen upped the ante on the dispute by informing Hansen that the Senate won't pass any LCCMR appropriations this year.

**Grantees concerned**

That prospect has alarmed many project organizers and researchers who rely on the LCCMR funding. In a letter to Ingebrigtsen, University of Minnesota Associate Professor Joseph Bump, who heads a research project on gray wolves in Voyageurs National Park, said the research project, and those it supports financially, would be in jeopardy if the funds are not approved this year. "With LCCMR support we employ college students,

hire technicians, rent boats and trucks, purchase equipment, gas, and lodging— within Minnesota and mostly in rural Minnesota," wrote Bump in his April 23 letter to the senator.

The impasse also threatens further delay in completing an already delayed section of the Mesabi Trail between McKinley and Biwabik. "Everyone keeps asking when we're going to get that one built," said trail director Bob Manzoline. The LCCMR was to contribute \$1 million toward that effort, and failure to approve the funds will delay that project at least another year. "That would not be a good thing," said Manzoline.

That's a view that's widely shared by other potential grantees. LCCMR director Becca Nash said she's been inundated with emails expressing concern.

**Compromise?**

While the situation is upsetting organizations and researchers who rely on the LCCMR funds, Bakk thinks a solution is likely to be found. While Ingebrigtsen's letter implies he'd prefer to grab the LCCMR dollars for the state's general fund, Bakk said that's not really the intent. "I think in the end they'll broker a deal," predicts Bakk.

"There's just too much time left in the session. People generally don't cut bait until the very end and I think both will have to give something, but it will get done."

Nash is less certain given the bigger issues that both sides feel are at stake. "There's even a lawsuit over this," she said.

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