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Concerned citizens speak out on proposed OHV trail in Houston

By Jordan Gerard
Editor, The Caledonia Argus

In a show of opposition and caution to the proposed Off-Highway Vehicle trail in Houston, about 50 residents attended the regular council meeting on April 12.

Some residents sported large, white buttons that had a red circle and line through the words "Houston OHV Park," while others voiced concerns to the council about a trail that has been in the works for 12 years, due to its grant-in-aid status. Several people mentioned they'd like to see the trail, but not at its currently proposed location on the South Park bluffs.

Concerns like noise and environmental impacts of installing a trail on a bluffside close to town were raised once more, but new concerns were voiced too. Perhaps the biggest of all was an accusation that came against council member Tony Schultz for having a conflict of interest while serving on the council and OHV advisory committee. Resident Anna Benda cited

MN State Statutes 43A.38, subdivision 5, paragraph 1 and 10A.07, subdivision 2. The first details conflicts of interests with employees of the executive branch and paragraph one states, "use or attempted use of the employee's official position to secure benefits, privileges, exemptions or advantages for the employee or the employee's immediate family or an organization with which the employee is associated which are different from those available to the general public..."

The second statute appears to refer to public officials and gives guidelines on how to assign conflicts of interest to other employees. However, council members are elected, not hired. Chapter 43A also refers to state employment.

The League of Minnesota Cities cites in its publication, "Elected Officials and Council Structure and Role," that "Public officers are generally prohibited from having a personal, financial interest in any sale, lease or contract they are authorized to make in their official capacity."

It refers to state statute 471.87 that states, "a public officer who is authorized to take part in any manner in making any sale, lease, or contract in official capacity shall not voluntarily have a personal financial interest in that sale, lease, or contract or personally benefit financially therefrom..." That statute does refer to local government officials.

Schultz's mother, Marlene, granted access to a perpetual easement over her land in order to allow the city to "develop, operate, and maintain a parking area and trail access," according to Houston County property records. There was not a price tag attached to the easement document nor stated in the council minutes on April 10, 2017, when the easement was granted.

City Administrator Michelle Quinn clarified the process began in November 2016, and Schultz did abstain from action related to the easement. When it was approved on April 10, 2017, **HOUSTON OHV**

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Turkey season opens with a prize Tom Turkey!

Submitted by Carrie Meiners

Carrie Meiners bagged this 27 lbs. tom turkey in Houston County on a beautiful opening morning of turkey season, April 14, at 7:12 a.m.

Send us your turkey photos! Email jordan.gerard@apgecm.com.



Caledonia council sets wheels in motion for wastewater plant

By Craig Moorhead
The Caledonia Argus

Eric Lynne of Donohue & Associates (St. Louis Park) gave the Caledonia City Council and the public a look at plans and bid specifications for the city's new wastewater treatment facility during an April 12 public hearing on the project.

The plant will re-use some items (such as large holding tanks) that the current facility has, but will also inhabit approximately 3.5 acres of nearby land which the city recently bought as part of an 18 acre parcel.

Council members were asked whether they wanted to "beautify" the cold storage building at the new plant, adding siding and block to dress up the exterior. But they decided by consensus to stick to a basic (less expensive) exterior look for the large shed.

Lynne reported the estimated total project cost now stands at \$17,164,765. A direct appropriation grant from the State of Minnesota will pay \$7 million towards that amount, however.

"Bid-ready" plans are slated to be delivered to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency for certification later this month. Bidding is expected to take

place in May and June, and the project should be awarded in July. Construction could begin in a matter of weeks after that, with an initial start-up of the new systems tentatively set for the fall of 2022. The end date for all construction is expected to be May of 2023.

The council voted to approve the project manual (plans) and the bid specs for the new wastewater treatment plant. Another vote (part of the consent agenda) approved a proposal from Braun Intersect to provide "pre-demolition inspection services" for hazardous materials at the old wastewater plant. The cost for that work was \$2,711.

The council also approved a resolution authorizing the City of Caledonia to apply for a Minnesota Public Facilities Authority loan of \$950,070 to construct well house No. 8, bringing the well that was drilled last year into production. "The ultimate loan amount will depend on what the bids come in at," city clerk/administrator Adam Swann reported.

In other news, members approved an agreement with Caledonia Township which will rebuild the portion of Green Acres drive which lies within the city limits. That part of the roadway is about 308 feet in length, according to a

project quote. The city and township will each pay 50% of the cost to rebuild the roadway in 2021, and double chip seal the project in 2022. A third coat of chip seal will cover a snowmobile crossing over the road. A Griffin Construction quote to perform the 2021 work for \$16,133 was accepted on the same vote.

The City of Caledonia and the Rural Fire District will split the \$33,573 cost of a battery-powered "jaws of life" unit for the Caledonia Fire Department. A Caledonia Fire Department Relief

CALEDONIA COUNCIL
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A FIGHTING FORCE ON COVID-19



Jordan Gerard/The Caledonia Argus

Pictured here are staff of Houston County Public Health and volunteers who have been running vaccination clinics consistently throughout the winter and spring. Almost every week, you can find this group of hard workers at the Four Seasons Community Center, helping people to sign in, answer questions and get vaccinated.

"Our goal is to reach a level that can be considered herd immunity. Because at a level of herd immunity, then those who can't get a vaccine are protected as well. You really kind of choke off the virus at that point," Public Health Director John Pugleasa told county commissioners last week. "We are not there. We continue to have a high rate of vaccination, we've consistently been in the top 10 (Minnesota counties), and also we're very encouraged that we have a very high rate of people who are over 65 who are vaccinated. I think yesterday it was at 93% of that population..."

8,877

Residents with at least one dose

3,087

First dose given by Public Health

6,428

Residents with series completed

2,094

Series completed by Public Health

COUNTY BOARD

See page 2

Community School board

Houston chooses new superintendent

See page 3

County Board

County board prepares for highway shop construction

See page 2

Sports

Take me out to the ball game

Softball, baseball teams ready

See pages 8-10

Track, golf

Athletes excited after missing 2020 season

See pages 8-10

Obits

Willard Louis "Willie" Meyer
Marsha Josephine (Colsch) Kotten
Gary Edward Lauden
Walter Robert Hammell

See page 5

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HOUSTON OHV

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he was not a council member. As for looking into the accusations, Mayor Dave Olson said that would be "what the council will have to do next." The council was also asked to improve communications by perhaps putting information on the city's water/sewer bills. However, it would have to be brief because the character count on the document is limited, Quinn mentioned. She also said she was not sure of what type of information would be beneficial to disseminate in this manner, as there is much to read through and consider. There's also liability concerns depending on the type of information.

Audience members also called on council members to make a vote at the meeting regarding the future of the trail or any further actions on it, but since a vote was not posted on the agenda, they could not make that vote since it would violate the Open Meeting Law.

International Owl Center Executive Director Karla Bloem thanked the council for scheduling another noise study this spring, and said the methodology of the study is really important.

The council granted her or "someone with an alternative interest" permission to be present at the noise study by OHV Acoustics LLC to ensure methodology would be followed.

She also asked if the public could be notified when the noise study would take place because there was a lot of speculation about the noise. OHV Acoustics LLC will use a minimum of eight OHVs on the trail at one time to measure the noise. The OHVs used for testing must

pass the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' J1287 test before it is considered a test vehicle. Every OHV must pass that test before it is allowed on a trail.

Schultz asked if that would be a true measure of noise, because people would be deliberately listening for the noise.

"Is it really a truthful subject if you are listening for what you want to hear versus what you actually hear?" he asked. The council did not say aye or nay to that request.

The council also granted Bloem permission to conduct an acoustic monitoring study that will determine how much wildlife will be impacted. She will put out sound monitors near the trail area before, during and after the noise study.

Bloem also reminded the council of how much the International Owl Center impacted the city. In 2019, the center had 12,619 in-person visitors and a gross income over \$325,000. During the pandemic, the center had 6,673 in-person visitors and a gross income over \$320,000. Funds are split into wages (all employees live in Houston), \$170,000 to purchase two properties, \$21,086 in rent and utilities and \$6,920 in property taxes.

Furthermore, Barista's Coffee House has an extra staff person working when the center is open, visitors frequent JT's for lunch and Loken's Sawmill Inn and most of the Rushford Inn are full during the International Festival of Owls, with some visitors staying there during Owl Prowl evenings.

Bloem also mentioned Houston is situated in a natural ampli-

theater, resulting in sounds from the hillside are projected across town. She added she could hear a chainsaw near the area while she was at the Owl Center on Main Street.

She also expressed concern for the timber rattlesnake habitat on the hillside. With more activity on the hillside, the snakes are likely to come into town, she said and cited three experts. The way to keep the snakes on the bluff was to maintain their habitat.

Winona State University professor Russ Smith, who teaches marketing and tourism, said economic impact on small communities with ideas for an event or an attraction does not happen the way they would like because the community does not have businesses or facilities to capture that money.

An economic impact study for the trail has not been done to Quinn's knowledge. Previous studies have been done related to the "Economic Impact of Various Types of Recreational Trails Across Minnesota," but not specific to Houston.

"The community has to have developed the businesses and infrastructure that absorbs that money," he said. "By far, the biggest problem with community development and tourism and economic development is a community that is not on the same page."

He added the community as a whole has to be supportive, businesses have to be there to capture the money and the municipality should be providing incentives for entrepreneurs to absorb the money.

"The biggest economic impact is when the community

gets tourists who are compatible," he said. "If you have two different groups who don't get along with each other, you lose both."

In total, about 20 residents spoke up at the meeting. The council listened carefully and responded when necessary. Schultz addressed other concerns and said the city and its taxpayers will not pay anything to the trail, as the funds come from Minnesota's gas tax and are then turned over to the city. The advisory committee meetings have also ceased due to waiting for the government to catch up. He also said the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has been present at the advisory meetings.

Council member Cheryl Sanden said she appreciates people coming and addressing concerns. Cody Mathers said everyone wants what they view as best for Houston and that the council was well-intentioned. Emily Krage thanked everyone for coming and she appreciated the phone calls she received on the topic.

Public information documents are still available on the DNR's website at <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/input/mgmt-plans/ohv/plans/houston-ohv-trail.html>. Previous stories on this topic by the *Argus* are available on our website at www.hometownargus.com. Alternatively, paper copies may be requested by contacting our office at 507-724-3475.

Editor's note: This story is part three of a longer series on the proposed Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) trail in Houston. Stay tuned for more information.

This Earth Day, we are grateful for our region's natural resources

By Bob Scanlan
Root River SWCD

Every Earth Day, we at the Root River Soil and Water Conservation District reflect on the wonderful natural resources we get to enjoy in Houston County.

Our District is grateful for the opportunity to work with members of the community to facilitate voluntary initiatives to conserve land, water, forests and wildlife in our area.

We are one of 88 Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) across the state – and nearly 3,000 across the nation – that provide a neighborly presence to help preserve and protect the natural resources that we all love.

The Root River SWCD has been around for more than 82 years, and recent highlights of our work include many of the erosion reduction projects that local land managers implement including grassed waterways and grade stabilization structures.

More recently, Root River SWCD has expanded its offerings to include technical and financial assistance for soil health projects including cover crops and no till crop production. In addition, the SWCD offers programs for tree planting, brush management, buffer implementation, and others.

SWCDs are local units of government that carry out natural resource management programs at the local level. We provide voluntary, incentive-driven approaches

to landowners for better soil and cleaner water in the State of Minnesota.

Private landowners – using financial and technical assistance from local SWCDs – are implementing a wide variety of conservation practices including preventing soil erosion, planting shelterbelts and buffers, and restoring wetlands.

Born in the wake of the Dust Bowl, SWCDs have been involved in delivering conservation across America for more than 70 years.

Because Minnesota has a wide variety of landscapes and conservation needs, each district operates at the direction of locally elected board supervisors. This local perspective allows SWCDs to manage the resources and serve the needs of the citizens in their district.

Soil and Water Conservation District staff and supervisors build partnerships with public and private, local, state and federal entities in an effort to develop locally-driven solutions to natural resource concerns. We work with landowners every step of the way from planning to implementation.

Our work results in cleaner water, healthier wildlife habitat, better soil, and a collaborative relationship with the community. What a great thing to celebrate this Earth Day.

To learn more about how your SWCD can help you, visit our website at <https://www.co.houston.mn.us/departments/soil-and-water/>.

Cottage Food Producer Food Safety Training Webinar and Online Course Available

Do you get rave reviews on your homemade breads, cakes and cookies? Are family and friends asking to buy your yummy home canned salsa and pickles? Have you considered starting a food business out of your home but are at a loss where to start?

Join University of Minnesota Extension Food Safety Educators, Kathy Brandt and Suzanne Driessen at a Cottage Food Producer Food Safety Training webinar or take the online course.

Both the webinar and online course meet the Minnesota Department of Agriculture food safety training requirements to register as a Minnesota Cottage Food Producer.

Once registered, you'll be able to make and sell homemade non-potentially hazardous foods including baked goods, candy, home-canned peaches, pickles, salsa, jams, jellies and more.

The specific conditions that must be met to qualify as an allow-

able Minnesota cottage food will be thoroughly covered.

The training focus is on food safety practices for all processes covered under the Minnesota Cottage Food Law (CFL) including drying, baking, confections, jams and jellies, acid and acidified fruit and vegetables, and fermentation.

Participants learn how to produce, package, label, store, and transport a safe food product. Many details of the CFL will be covered including who needs to register, where allowed cottage food can be sold, and the maximum gross yearly sales allowed.

Registration and \$50/person fee are required. To register for the upcoming webinar on Saturday, April 24, 2021, or for the online course, go to <https://extension.umn.edu/courses-and-events/cottage-food-producer-food-safety-training>. For more information contact Suzanne at 320-203-6057 or driessen@umn.edu.

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