

COUNTY BOARD MEETING

December 21, 2021

Board sets FY22 levy at 1.7%

By Tara Brandl
Lyon County Reporter

Budgets, fees and wages were all covered at the Lyon County Board of Commissioners meeting Tuesday. The board set the levy at 1.7 percent for FY22. The new budget took into account changes the commissioners asked Lyon County Administrator Loren Stomberg to make at the Truth in Taxation meeting on Dec. 9 and adds approximately \$98,000 to the contingency for the county. "I feel confident with this budget," Stomberg said. "I think it will provide enough for operating expenses and our financial position, we're in a good spot. I would recommend the 1.7 percent."

The board agreed with Stomberg.

"I think that 1.7 percent is doable," Board Chair Steve Ritter said. "Taxpayers are getting a deal and we're still able to provide the services."

In addition to setting the levy, the board approved the non-union pay range schedule for 2022 which included a 2.5 percent increase to the range over 2021.

After some discussion, the board also approved a salary increase of 2.5 percent for the county commissioners to \$21,120 for 2022. However, per diem of \$75 per meeting or \$140 for two meetings a day and chairman allowance of \$250 per month will remain the same. The board approved

the resolution 4-1 with Commissioner Charlie Sanow casting the lone dissenting vote.

"Last year we did a 2 percent increase, it amounted to a one dollar a day raise for commissioners that spend a lot of their time keeping taxes as low as possible, and I have never been chewed out so many times in my life," Sanow said. "I'd rather not have the dollar than have people criticize me for having a \$1 a day annual raise. I think it's kind of pathetic. In all reality, it's pretty sad. I sat at a restaurant trying to have supper with my wife one night and had a guy come over and jump all over me over one dollar a day. For that, I'd rather go the next three years without a raise, and then you can find someone else to do the job when I'm done with my term."

"As we sat here last year and talked about this and looked at all the surrounding counties in our district, we're the largest population county, last year we would have had to have a 5 percent raise just to come up to average for the surrounding counties," Commissioner Gary Crowley said.

"And we're the largest populated county. In the midst of things and the way the economy was, we just went with the 2 percent. I also use my personal cell phone for a lot of county business, and that is another cost that comes out of our pockets that is not reflected. If we're doing 2.5% for the employees, I'm fine with that."

Along with the wages, the board also approved a new 2022 fee schedule. The new schedule included changes to the camping fees (the removal of the septic use fee of \$5 and an increase for firewood to \$5 for four pieces) as well as winter storage rent for boats, cars, campers and watercraft (all fees will double for 2022 agreements). The hunting permit for deer or turkey hunting was eliminated for 2022.

There are also changes to the landfill solid waste fee, e-waste and mattress recycling fees. In the planning and zoning department, the fee for approved trapping of beaver affecting the county was increased to \$100 per beaver to reflect a motion from April 2021. The sheriff's office fees were also updated to reflect changes made at previous meetings.

The board heard a presentation from Jessica Welu from the SRDC concerning a grant the SRDC has applied for from the Federal EDA Travel, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation Program. The grant is to develop a regional trails plan for the nine counties in southwest Minnesota.

"The grant is to prioritize a trail project at a regional level and help get funding for those projects," Welu said. "Currently, southwest Minnesota does not have a connected trail system. This grant would increase cooperation and coordination of the trails groups, gathering those groups on a quarterly

basis and develop a connected trail system. A regional trails plan makes local projects more competitive for grant money."

The hope is more regional trails would increase tourism and attract more people to the area. The EDA requested a \$209,000 project that requires a 25 percent match. The SRDC Commission has committed to providing \$14,800 toward the match and are asking each of the nine counties to commit \$3,000 to the match. Lyon County approved the \$3,000 for the grant match.

The board also heard from Brian Gniffke, a farmer near Cottonwood who brought to the board a discussion on paying damages to crops due to ditch repair. Repairs were made to JD 10 in May. The repairs were originally slated for fall of 2020 but were not completed. Gniffke told the board that he was told by a former Lyon County employee that he would be reimbursed for crop damages that were the result of the repairs being done, which amounted to about a half-acre of land.

John Biren told the board that it is not the county's policy to pay for crop damages and that the employee, if he did tell Gniffke that his crops would be reimbursed, did not have the authority to do so. In addition, this is a joint ditch and therefore has a joint ditch committee on which Lyon County has only one member.

"I make my living farming,"

Gniffke told the board. "The project could have waited until the fall. They wrecked a half-acre of good corn. Do I not have a right to get paid?"

While Gniffke acknowledged the employee may not have had authority to say his crops would be covered, he questioned the board as to why they are not responsible for their employees. After heated discussion, Gniffke accepted the apology from Biren that information was incorrectly relayed to him.

"I'll forgive you guys, I'll write it off," Gniffke said. "But make it known that's not the standards of America. We need to stand behind your word. We're all accountable."

In other board news:

- The board approved the listing of expenditures made during 2021 to be paid from the Recorder's compliance fund monies, for an expenditure total as of 12/13/21 of \$85,773.59.

- The board approved the closing of the jail bond debt services fund by transferring the remaining monies of \$545,884.16 to the General Fund. The board then awarded Cornerstone Detention Products, Inc. the bid for the new jail security project in the amount of \$698,450. The money from the jail debt services will be used for the project as well as the money from the contingency and reserves.

- The board approved a fac-

tory extended warranty on the Detroit Diesel engine and additional components for the new Western Star Truck Chassis approved at the Dec. 9 meeting in the amount of \$7,965. The county will keep the truck that the new Western Star Truck is replacing through this winter in case it is needed as a backup in the county. Currently the county has 10 plow routes and 11 trucks. The International Plow truck that is being replaced will be used if a truck breaks down this winter.

- The board approved an engagement letter with CliftonLarsonAllen (CLA) for an audit of 2021.

- The board approved the annual renewal for on/off sale of 3.1 percent for Saratoga Archery.

- The board heard an update from Appex Clean Energy on plans for wind energy in the southern edge of the county. The project is in the early planning stages.

- The board approved the hiring of Aaron Bakkelund as an on-call dispatcher with a starting rate of \$20.41 per hour.

- The board approved a resolution setting the first and third Tuesday of each month as a regularly-scheduled board meeting date, except in December, when the first meeting will be held on Dec. 8, with Truth in Taxation at 6:30 p.m. that day.



Off and running

A deer speeds along a snow-covered field in the area recently. The high winds we are experiencing lately are hard on the deer as it steals their body heat. In that case, they will gather in stands of evergreens that block wind and trap a little heat with their ceilings of branches. Swamps and marshes, which are on bottoms, also offer wind breaks for the deer.

Mascot photo by
Brian Jeremiason



Casey McCoy and his girlfriend, Lacie Packard, attend the wedding reception of their friend Tyler Grinder and his new bride. Contributed photo

McCoy

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"I have spent all these days in the most unsanitary conditions with a liter of water a day and not much food provided."

After a lengthy discussion with Lacie, McCoy was able to convince her to return to the States.

"She argued with me in the airport because she wanted to stay with me," he said. "I told her she needed to go home when she could. We cried saying goodbye, but she needed to go. It was best for our family. I feel for her. She's put her life and our lives on hold to make calls and fight for me."

McCoy's parents, Lois and Vernon Heald of Minnesota, along with Lacie, have been able to make connections of Casey's plight with the proper authorities who made the U.S. Embassy in West Africa aware of the situation. Members of the U.S. Embassy personnel visited with McCoy last week to gauge the situation, but were not allowed past the lobby.

"When the personnel from the U.S. Embassy came to speak with me, the workers here refused to let them past the lobby and made me come down and meet them there," McCoy explained. "The lobby is a five-star. Based off the lobby, I would pay to stay here, but they wouldn't let the U.S. Embassy personnel come up to see the room I was in."

The room McCoy is quarantined in is similar to a hotel and has windows, but is run down and unsanitary with mold, mil-



This is the room Casey has been quarantined in for nearly two weeks. Contributed photo

dew, odors and bugs, although the lobby is clean and sanitary. "(U.S. Embassy personnel) informed me that due to not having a treaty with Togo, they can't do a lot, but could do some things. I was never sick. After spending all these days here in mold-infested conditions and having allergies/asthma, I have had some medical issues."

McCoy revealed that workers at the place he is quarantined have gained entrance into his locked room and demanded his passport. He also noted that the workers have pushed him around.

"They want my passport so I will end up staying here longer so they can get more money from wherever they are getting it," McCoy said. "We're not sure if the U.S. Embassy is giving them money or what exactly is going on, but it seems like the longer they can keep me here,

the more money they can get."

McCoy gave his passport to Grinder to hold for him so the guards can't take it from him.

One thing that has helped McCoy through this ordeal is the help of Grinder, who is staying a few miles from the building McCoy is quarantined in.

"Without him, I wouldn't have water daily, or the comfort foods he can bring me when they allow it," McCoy said. "He has to pay the guards each day to bring me things. They always want money for everything. One night, I got to eat pizza that Tyler brought from the 5-star hotel that I can see from my balcony. It was so good. I am lucky to have him as a friend, let alone have him here."

Every time McCoy feels there is good news on the horizon, it turned out to be false hope.

"I took a test on Dec. 29 and another on Dec. 30 and they said they were positive, but would provide me no proof," McCoy said. "I took another on Jan. 1 and was told it was for control purposes."

"They won't show me my results, they only tell them to me. To see them and to see my levels, it will cost me money. I have plenty of money, just not accessible money. They do not allow me access to an ATM machine, and if Tyler gives me money, they just take it before I can get it and use it for what I need."

McCoy was informed that the test he took on Saturday, Jan. 1 came back negative.

"I fulfilled their require-

ments of 10 days and a negative test," said McCoy on Sunday, Jan. 2. "Now they want to hold me until Tuesday (Jan. 4) and re-test me again. I'd get the results on Wednesday and then have to take another test and get the results within 24 hours to fly back to the States. Friday would be the earliest I can fly out, but that flight is all sold out, so it would be Saturday at the earliest."

Several political figures and national news organizations have become aware of the situation and are trying to do what they can to return McCoy to the United States.

For now, McCoy is trying to be patient, but it is admittedly wearing thin.

"This is a bunch of crap," he said. "I keep telling myself that Lacie and Ellie need me, my family needs me. Even if I can be a pain, they need me."

LATE UPDATE: Casey's latest test turned up positive. However, he will be released to quarantine at a place of his choosing because (a) the doctors have agreed that the extreme stress Casey had been under is impeding his healing process, and (b) Casey has agreed to meet with the second highest ranking official in Togolese government to provide a sworn statement on how the doctors and guards have made him pay them to test on Dec. 22 at the airport, above and beyond the normal cost. The second highest ranking official has been investigating corruption within their testing facilities and Casey's testimony will be an important step to controlling and stopping it.