

# Ms. Vicky's

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margins slide.

The population of Sunburg presents challenges for business owners, more sustainable during warm months when the nearby lakes welcome a seasonal deluge of vacationers.

But in the winter, many of the cafe regulars go south. Vacationers are scarce. In the town of a little over 100, a downtown of few storefronts generates a limited commercial radiance.

In the city, takeout floated many restaurants, but the cafe culture that sustained Vicky's had in-person dining as its primary predicate, often retirees congregating at single, long tables for coffee, news and society for hours in the morning.

Tight margins hem the restaurant industry here. Because of the low population, days occur when nobody comes. Sundays, a day of high church participation in Sunburg, were moneymakers--as were summers. But the time came when the productive summers were no longer papering over the economic destitution of the winters.

"It took me all through the summer of 2021 to recover from the COVID shutdown, and then fall came and I realized I wasn't pulling in enough to keep it going. It would have taken me another summer to recover, and I was very afraid of debt," Daniels said.

Daniels said she perhaps should not have ordered food through a corporation but the shortage of nearby grocery stores forced her hand in this regard.

Trips to the nearest grocery store took too much time, time she did not have, especially not in the last few months when she could afford to keep only a short staff,

when she has had to do most everything herself.

Reducing one's staff to a skeleton crew has been commonplace.

A single other restaurant dots the area, west of Sunburg, Brink's 104 Club, a nearby diner with, consequently, a liquor license, proved a more popular take-out option. Perhaps this was because it was open from 4:00 p.m. to midnight before the pandemic, with the majority of people electing to go for takeout as a dinner option.

But cooperation with the two eateries in the sparse community had always been in place, an acknowledgement unspoken that one would not compete with the other.

Restaurants are a difficult business, and most owners strive to make at least 30 percent of their profit on alcohol sales alone. Restaurants on average depend on a substantial portion of their income from alcohol, with studies showing those without liquor licenses were more prone to closure during the pandemic, falling in droves.

Spurring profit, alcohol connotes low cost labor for restaurants and its longevity of shelf life is an additional advantage. The abiding opinion amongst restaurant owners is that they credit alcohol sales with giving them buoyancy during the pandemic. A study by the National Restaurant Association found 56 percent of consumers 21+

said they were likely to purchase an alcoholic beverage. In another example of the Sunburg eatery's unique situation, several of Daniels' input costs were kept moderate by the city council's ownership of the building and therefore their willingness to pay for cooking equipment and so, by and large, all the supplies



Happy days... Vicky Daniels drove her crew around the parade route in Sunburg's annual Syttende Mai

celebration. But the cafe is closed once again, a victim of the pandemic and lack of business.

a restaurant owner would require with the exception of the food.

In the end, she, in spite of the outpouring of support from the city and her patrons, recognized she would have to close the restaurant. She spoke with her accountant

and made a decision, largely considering her own financial safety.

The decision to close was far from simple. It was one she meditated on for three months. And she, among others when she considers it, knows she had a good run.

The cafe made her Sunburg homecoming special, she said.

"I'm grateful for everything. I'm thankful for the help of the city and for my loyal customers. I've gotten to renew many old friendships," Daniels said.

What's next? For Daniels it's 'on the road again' as she plans to buy an RV and trek back to Alaska, a familiar territory.

## Town board service: "only way off is in a pine box"

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agricultural character, though not exclusively. Elections recur in three year cycles but are rarely contentious, competitive affairs for which those in the running contrive to establish campaign finances to best position themselves to win.

Township merging and dissolution have broadened and shrunk boundaries, altering the original 36-square-mile divisions. State statutes direct the initiatives and standard practices of board supervisors.

"Our township meets the second monday of each month. We hope nothing much comes up, because that means nothing has gone wrong," said Benson. "When we get complaints, we really try to help

them out, especially if it is menacing."

The supposition that voter apathy characterizes local township elections may be discarded, at least in the case of Kerkhoven Township: 80% of residents participate in elections, casting mail-in ballots in the pandemic epoch.

Likewise for Pillsbury; pairing with the the City of Kerkhoven within the walls of the civic center in the elections hosted, scores turnout that transcend participation in national elections: 98% vote, according to Broberg.

Kerkhoven Town Hall, which crucially is heated in the winter and offers an unadorned no-nonsense inte-

rior of austerity, was paid for by members who refused to merge with other townships, a common practice. Official township ledgerwork is fireproof within cabinets. When voting used to be here, township officers would separate one voting booth from the next by draping sheets for privacy.

The Kerkhoven Township Board of Supervisors worked to modernize roadways, in one instance marshaling for contemporary signage on various mileposts to assist first responders in pinpointing with precision the areas of accidents.

"We've had some change, but change is always progress, if you know what I mean,"

Benson said.

One such change is that, in defiance of a tradition dating back years, the Kerkhoven Township Board of Supervisors, moved the date of elections from its traditional date, March 8th, to December.

Indicative of the kind of service offered by a town board, several years ago the Kerkhoven town board had to a road-wrecking culvert washout which had sowed a month-long forced closure which mandated the hiring of a contractor to reset the pipes. However, if they can remedy an issue themselves, they will handle it themselves.

As townships in this area go, Kerkhoven has a relatively

high population. "We have a lot of people living in our township. Instead of buying a lake home, they save money on taxes and buy a farm or a country house. We try to take care of the area," said Benson.

Two levy tax settlements a year, in June and November, as well as state funding which acknowledges rural townships have expenses -- although not to the degree that metro townships do -- replenish the budget of the board.

"We spend the money as shrewdly as possible. For the most part, we plod along," Benson said.

The amount of funding townships receive is based on population and serviceable

miles of road. The roads most frequently traveled are bladed with a greater regularity.

On much-traveled gravel roads washboard spots are formed--created by roadwear from tires.

"I might say that all of us really enjoy being on the board. You don't get rich by being a township officer," Benson said.

"People who are on it tend to stay on it. You learn a lot, and it goes pretty standard from year to year."

"It's a great way to serve the community," Broberg said.

## Kerkhoven City Council works financing for new ambulance

by Kari Jo Almen

The Kerkhoven City Council met Monday evening, the majority of the session spent with Jeffrey VanBuren, Community Programs State Specialist with the USDA, who went through a letter of conditions for federal dollars to be used for the purchase of an ambulance.

Of the \$241,616.00 purchase price of the ambulance, \$35,308.00 will come from the City of Kerkhoven, \$35,308.00 will be paid by townships contracted with the city for ambulance service, \$100,000.00 will be contributed by Swift County, \$21,000.00 will be in the form of a USDA Community Facility Loan, and \$50,000.00 will

be from a USDA Community Facility Grant.

The loan, at 2.125% interest, will be for 10 years with annual payments of \$2,354.00.

VanBuren noted that if the ambulance was sold in less than 10 years ("its useful life") it would be subject to the interest of the United States government in the market value in proportion to its participation in the project.

VanBuren said that the city could sign the resolution at Monday's meeting or it could be done at a later date. The council decided to wait so that it could be certain the townships contracted with the city for ambulance service were in agreement.

In other business:

- Received contracts for

ambulance service with Kildare, Hayes and Pillsbury Townships.

- Received contracts for fire service with Pillsbury and Hayes Townships.

- Heard that maintenance supervisor Woody Nelson will be working on well head protection, as requested by the Health Department.

- Heard that in preparation for spring a replacement of the main broom on the city's street sweeper had been ordered. This is considered a maintenance expense.

- Heard that a recent EDA meeting on a housing project was well attended and that council members were hopeful that progress in developing housing in Kerkhoven would be made.

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