

OPINION

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

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution

e-mail: editor@timberjay.com

Editorial

Ambulance solutions

As paid staff costs rise, new funding models are need for area services

Last week's healthy discussion by the Tower Ambulance Commission on possible changes in the funding model for the city's ambulance service was welcome and we hope that it leads to further analysis. Small town ambulance services are struggling everywhere, which suggests that the current funding model in place in much of the region is outdated.

It's been a long time since ambulance services in the area have been able to survive financially solely on the revenues generated from ambulance calls. Most now rely on a more diverse funding stream to finance operations and cover the cost of ambulance replacement. The rising costs of new vehicles, fuel, and supplies, suggest that the financial demands of operating such a system will only rise this year.

Last week, the ambulance commission discussed the possible creation of an ambulance district through a joint powers board. Others have raised the possibility of a larger district, that might encompass a number of neighboring services. It's not as if Tower's ambulance service is the only one in the area facing challenges, after all.

We recognize that the Tower service has baggage that continues to frustrate its efforts to move forward. Unwise financial decisions a few years ago, which have saddled the service with higher-than-typical staffing costs, continue to be a major drag. Concerns by Greenwood officials about indemnification language in the ambulance replacement fund contract, along with the city's failure to meet its obligations under the current ambulance replacement fund contract are certainly muddying the waters. However, these are not issues that should hamper the ability of reasonable local officials to find a path forward.

If residents in the Tower Ambulance service area wish to see a continuation of the existing service, or the upgrade of the existing service to advanced life support capabilities, it will require a different approach that could change the relationship between the service and the area townships. In a joint powers model, for example, all the parties would share responsibility and liability for the ambulance service they would oversee. A new funding model, which would likely include a modest tax levy,

could be designed to cover the cost of replacing ambulances as well as fund ALS service.

Greenwood officials ordered their own feasibility study of a regional service this week, but that's work that should be overseen by a broader entity, like the ambulance commission. A single township, without any authority over the existing ambulance service, is hardly in a position to implement any change. A regional proposal, with buy-in from multiple jurisdictions and stakeholders, is the approach that will ensure credibility.

While there is certainly interest in upgrading the Tower Ambulance Service to ALS capability, residents need to recognize that it wouldn't come for free. Revenue from ambulance calls barely covers the cost of basic life support service and can no longer fund ambulance replacement. Realistically, upgrading to full-time ALS, as some have advocated, would more than double the current staffing costs of the ambulance service. Paramedics are in high demand around the country and maintaining a reliable crew of them will entail full-time jobs with benefits. Communities could make that more financially viable by looking beyond emergency medical care. A regional emergency services system could entail both ambulance and fire, and possibly even police.

We've been fortunate in this area to have dedicated folks who have made it possible in the past to operate ambulance services in places like Tower without a significant levy. In other sparsely populated parts of the country, such services are heavily-supported by local taxes.

That shouldn't be a surprise. We don't expect fire protection and police to pay for itself. We used to get by when it came to ambulance services because insurance, whether public or private, provided a decent revenue stream and because we had volunteers willing to help when the call came. The transition to a paid staffing model—a reflection of the fact that volunteers are tough to find these days—has rendered that funding stream insufficient to cover costs. A new staffing model, whether it provides a BLS or ALS service, requires a new funding model. It appears members of the Ambulance Commission are recognizing that fact. Hopefully, they'll roll up their sleeves and start to explore the options.



Letters from Readers

I fell for the woodchuck story hook, line, and cheese grater

You had me cold for almost 24 hours. I read it Monday afternoon and truly believed it until my morning coffee on Tuesday, when I realized the publication date was April 1 - and read the final line, buried in the crease.

Truly top notch work.

Thank you.

Dave Porter
Minneapolis

Time to rethink Ely's community center

Recently there was a large crane in front of the Ely Community Center building being used for repairing the roof. This a reminder that the building has been vacated for about eight years. The center fits the definition of a white elephant, "A costly possession that its owner cannot dispose of and whose cost, particularly for maintenance, is expensive."

Demolishing the building is not a good alternative because the building has a steel interior frame, and its height requires special equipment and it cannot be done with a bulldozer. It was rumored to have cost \$654,000 to demolish the much smaller JFK building. In its present condition, the community center has no value, but by using the present structure for residential units for condominiums or rentals, the existing structure becomes a valuable component, with its preexisting foundation, outside walls, roof, and land, perhaps totaling as much as \$1.5 million to replicate. Add that amount to an estimated \$3.5 million needed to restore the outside walls and remodel the interior and you have an appraisal of about \$5 million which would provide the basis for a construction loan.

(U.S. Bank reportedly provided equity investors the construction loan for a restoration project.)

Nevertheless, by preserving the historical character of the building, bank financing combined with tax benefits and preservation grants can create sufficient financing.

Reconfiguring the interior to

take advantage of, and adopting to, its existing layout, an estimated 20 units consisting of studios, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom units along with amenities like a conference room, solarium, and a small library where the old library was with its Kasota stone fireplace.

Each residential unit would have an independent air conditioning and heating source. Water and electricity would be centralized. The roof is an ideal location for generating solar electricity including solar hot water. Solar would produce a meaningful and long-term reduction in utility costs. Solar installations and operating costs have significantly declined in recent years and solar has become more efficient.

There appear to be no components of the building that local personnel cannot do, except for the elevator and solar. Remember, approximately 70 percent of the total cost goes to labor which assuredly would benefit our local payrolls.

The restoration of the community center would generate a significant long-term (40 years?) stable tax base for Ely.

Gerry Snyder

Ely

Former Finance Officer for the New York State Urban Development Corporation and a consultant to The American Institute of Architects.

City of Tower is failing its ambulance service

Last week, the *Timberjay's* coverage of the TAAS Commission meeting stated that: "Greenwood resident Lee Peterson, a frequent ambulance service critic, then asked why the ambulance service had not presented a business plan to the commission, something it had planned to do last year. Peterson was told there was to be no public comment at the meeting, and at that point, both Peterson and Stoehr left."

First, I want to clarify that I have no problems with the ambulance service and the responders. Far from it. I understand their issues and dedication. My granddaughter is a responder in a township near Duluth. I am very proud of her.

Second, let's clarify that it is the city that is directed by the Ambulance Vehicle Replacement Aid Agreement to provide a busi-

ness plan to the commission for review. Exact wording from the agreement is: "By the 3rd quarterly meeting of the Ambulance Commission, the city shall present a draft business plan for the ambulance service." The city failed to provide this last July, and therefore, there isn't even an agreement for 2022. The 2021 agreement is obviously expired. The "business plan" is a tool for use by the commission basically to help decide if the entities served by the TAAS should make a voluntary per capita contribution to the Ambulance Vehicle Replacement Fund, and if so, how much.

Third, yes, I was told that there is "no public input at the meeting." That is unusual and unfortunate. "Public Input" is not even on the agenda of TAAS Commission meetings. Every other type of meeting in Tower has "Public Input" on their agendas. Strange. But not surprising to me.

The *Timberjay* article could've contained very relevant information, such as the fact that as of the end of March, the Ambulance Service Fund, which contains the money that the ambulances earn when they go out on calls, had a balance of only \$3,147. That's where all of the operations, including wages are paid from. It would also have been worth reporting that the fund is in arrears to the tune of \$3,789 for missed transfer mileage payments to the Ambulance Vehicle Replacement Fund. \$3,394 is leftover debt from 2021.

Yes, I have problems with how the city runs the Tower Area Ambulance Service.

Lee Peterson
Greenwood Twp

We welcome your letters

The *Timberjay* encourages letters to the editor. You can submit letters by mail at PO Box 636, Tower, MN 55790, or email letters to marshall@timberjay.com.

We ask that letters be limited to 300 words.

Letters are subject to editing, primarily for length and clarity.

Thoughts on my recent trip to Great Britain - Part I

On Friday, March 25, I was very fortunate to travel from Minneapolis to Great Britain with my Sudan friend and travel expert, Mary Batinich. Jill Wagoner, also from Sudan, joined in and the group happily grew from two to more with others joining us across the Atlantic. The purpose of the trip was simply to



SCARLET STONE

"nip" across the pond (Mary's expression) for leisure, but also for Mary and some of us members of the Lake Vermilion Cultural Center's (LVCC) Fundraising Committee to meet with a distinguished male vocal choir (Cor Meibion Rhos) from the mining village of Rhosllannerchrugog (Rhos) in northeast

Singing has always been part of the Welsh people's identity because it allowed them to escape the labor and danger of the mines through the joy of singing. Also, for centuries, their English supervisors would not allow the Welsh to use sophisticated musical instruments so their voices became their orchestras. To accompany their beautiful songs of six to eight-part harmony, they developed and used small harps.

Known as the "Land of Song", Welsh choral and folk singing took place in churches,

parties, schools and was prevalent in the pubs, too...as we witnessed!

The Rhos Choir was formed in 1891 and has been at the forefront of male vocal singing, winning numerous awards and accolades while touring extensively. Mary has arranged and managed three tours to the U.S. for the choir, with the last being over a decade ago when they performed on Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion*. Keillor later said the Rhos choir was one of the top ten acts in his twenty-five years. A year or so

ago, Keillor reached out to Mary saying he would love to sing with the choir once more. Mary then contacted the choir and asked if they would like to come to the U.S. again. They said "yes they would," but then COVID hit and plans were put on hold. Because the popular personality Keillor has had health issues, he may not be able to be part of an upcoming tour, projected to be in the summer of 2024, but he is one of choir's most enthusiastic

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