

## TREE PICKUP: Dispose of your tree properly P12



## City temporarily extends Fire Service contract with Township

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The Sandstone City Council made the decision to extend the Fire Service contract with Sandstone Township until January 20, 2022.

At a special meeting on Wednesday, Dec. 29, the council met to discuss the repercussions of the Township not having a Fire Service contract. City Administrator Kathy George told the council she had spoken with the League of Minnesota

Cities Insurance Trust, the Pine County Sheriff's Dispatch and the city's attorney.

In a letter to Sandstone Township, George explained that during these conversations many

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## Pine County rehab opportunities

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Pine County and Lakes and Pines are collaborating to help county homeowners, business owners and rental properties to spruce up their space.

Pine County received \$5.7 million from the American Rescue Plan Act and allocated \$850,000 towards the rehabilitation of properties throughout the county to help alleviate the negative economic impact that the pandemic has had on residents. The repairs help make the homes, businesses and rental properties safer as well as possibly improve the value of the property.

"It's a great way to spruce up the community," Economic Development Coordinator Lezlie Sauter said. "It's good for the economy as homeowners hire local contractors and get a nicer place and we get stabilized property values."

The program is modeled after the Small Cities Development program.

Lakes and Pines has helped about 50 homeowners to rehab their homes through the Small Cities Development

program in the last five years, said Nicole Klosner, Lakes and Pines Rehabilitation Director. She said the most common repairs homeowners ask for are roofs, senior/ada compliant bathrooms and ramps.

"A lot of people are nervous and think it's too good to be true," Klosner said. "We're here to help. People call and thank us because they can stay in their homes and not go into assisted living."

Property owners need to meet several criteria, including income and being impacted by the pandemic such as job loss. For a homeowner, the home must be located in Pine County, homesteaded and must be the applicant's primary residence. The applicant must own the house, have been negatively impacted by the pandemic, be current on property taxes and have proof of homeowners insurance. An example of being impacted by COVID-19 is temporary closure of schools, closure of bars, restaurants, directing Minnesotans to stay at home, extending stay at home order and more. See the application on the

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Before photo of a home that qualified for Lakes and Pines Small Cities Development program. See page 2 for after photo.

## Northern Lights Express project gaining steam

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The Northern Lights Express (NLX), a proposed higher speed passenger rail project that would provide rail service between Minneapolis and Duluth and operate on approximately 152 miles of existing BNSF rail corridor, may be gaining steam according to officials within the organization.

The NLX Technical Advisory Committee, along with other interested parties, met on Dec. 13 and announced a couple new developments: MnDOT is in the process of appointing a representative to the NLX after taking a two year hiatus and some local entities have renewed their support for the project.

Jill Brown, NLX public relations director, said at the meeting that there have been recent successes with some chambers, including Duluth and Anoka, renewing their support and that they are now trying to re-engage county commissioners and other stakeholders along the corridor.

Financially speaking, the group is hoping to gain access to some of the \$66 billion designated for "rail" funding as part of the federal infrastructure bill. Specifically, NLX could apply for part of the \$12 billion designated for Amtrak/State partnerships. "Shovel ready" projects are expected to get priority, and the NLX project has jumped through a number of hoops, not least of which have been the environmental assessments which have given the project a stamp of approval by MnDOT.

John Ongaro, St. Louis County inter-governmental relations director, said, "Downtown Minneapolis needs a shot in the arm right now. They have a perception problem with public safety. We are hoping to approach the Minneapolis chamber to sign an OpEd."

Brown added that the Pine City Chamber had endorsed them in the past but are currently not taking a position and would like to see the organization engage county commissioners and elected officials in the area first. "One

county commissioner comes to all the meetings," noted Brown.

Jeff Anderson, of Costin Group, a government and public affairs consultant, noted that Minnesota is in a good place financially with a surplus, and there will likely be more cash for the legislature to spend. He added, "January will be a key month for us as we ramp up for the legislative session in engaging with some of the elected leaders."

Brown said that she felt the opportunity with federal money is very refreshing and they are hearing from constituents, from college students and from traveling nurses who go back and forth on the corridor and that people are interested in the project.

Frank Loetterle, MnDOT freight and rail planning supervisor, said of the project status that MnDOT supports the project and has completed the preliminary engineering and other studies and has received environmental clearance from the Federal Railroad Administration.

However, funding has been an ongoing issue and efforts, primarily through legislative allocation of money in order to apply for federal funding, is ongoing.

If or when full funding for the NLX project has been secured, Loetterle said the next step would be reaching an agreement with both BNSF Railway and Amtrak; at that point, the final design for the passenger rail would be completed.

"From the time a full funding plan has been completed, it will take about two and a half years to begin operations," said Loetterle. "MnDOT is excited about the prospect of additional funding for NLX and looks forward to helping make the project a reality."

Ken Buehler, Technical Advisory Committee chairman, said, "This is the most active engagement, with dollars behind it. I think we're in a very, very good place right now, but it won't be easy. There is a huge surplus, but when you have a surplus, the fighting can go on forever."

