

Resident's letter alleges unethical conduct

Town chairman accuser also running for same position in Kinnickinnic's election

BY JILLIAN DEXHEIMER
jadexheimer@gmail.com

A Dec. 2 letter addressed to town attorney Bob Loberg and Kinnickinnic board members from town resident Gordon Awsumb, 1207 River Drive, was discussed at last week's meeting.

Awsumb's letter outlined alleged ethics violations by Town Board Chairman Roger VanBeek. Awsumb and VanBeek are running against each other for the town chair position this spring.

The letter detailed VanBeek's role on the Road Committee and why his participation violated ethics laws.

This is not the first time VanBeek's participation with the Road Committee has been a matter of inquiry. Elaine Ray, 471 90th St., has also questioned the situation.

At that time Loberg said there were no violations because specific proce-

dures were put in place to eliminate such conflict.

At the November special electors meeting when the ethics issue was discussed, VanBeek said: "I have spoken with both the St. Croix County District Attorney and the Rural Towns Association about the potential for a conflict of interest."

At that same meeting Town Clerk Lola Higgins pointed out that "...the bidding (on roadwork) is closed and Roger does not sit on the board at the time contract voting is done."

Awsumb still claims there's a conflict with VanBeek being employed by Asphalt Associates, a road construction and paving company, and also being on the town's Road Committee.

About three years ago the Road Committee decided that the roadwork bidding should be opened to private companies.

In his letter to Loberg, Awsumb noted that since this change in policy, VanBeek's employer has benefited by securing roadwork contracts with the town. He has asked Loberg to take this matter to the Wisconsin Ethics Board.

Awsumb did not attend the meet-

ing where his letter was discussed.

When the item came up on the agenda, VanBeek recused himself and joined the audience.

VanBeek made a statement in his own defense: "I urge the board to take immediate action. These are serious allegations. I am not guilty and am more than willing to take a deposition."

"I would like Loberg to present meeting minutes as evidence to the Ethics Board. I would also like clarification if he (Awsumb) is in violation of ethics since he is running for chair. Is there a conflict?"

After giving his statement, VanBeek left the building so the Town Board could discuss the matter freely and decide what action to take.

Supervisor Mary Murphy felt it would be "...poor of them to just walk away from the allegations. It's important to respond."

Supervisor Milo Opegard added, "Loberg should do the investigation. It would be good for the town."

Said Supervisor John Humphrey: "I have not witnessed any of these allegations. But there is still a question out there, a good question, one

that should be checked."

Humphrey also considered VanBeek's question of Awsumb's ethics, saying, "It's not the same context. Look at the way political campaigns at the national level are done."

Taking into account who would pay for the investigation expense, Murphy felt pretty sure insurance would cover the costs and that taxpayers would not be stuck paying.

Supervisor Bill Gnatzig concurred with his fellow board members: "There should be a review of the facts," he added.

The board voted to allow Loberg to respond to the letter from Awsumb.

Questions regarding a special charge added to Daniel Gedatus', 332 County Road JJ, tax bill were discussed. Rural Fire Association Representative, Kerry Licht outlined the current situation.

Gedatus was having payments for his fire bill taken out of his account automatically, through LifeQuest. On Nov. 1, the fire department stopped using LifeQuest to bill fire calls. When the switch happened money was still being taken out of Gedatus' account.

At the time the special assess-

ments were put on the tax bill, the amount owed was \$375. An audit was done on the account.

After the audit it was determined that the amount owed was \$226. Since the \$375 on the tax bill has to be paid to St. Croix County, a solution was needed so Gedatus was not over paying.

Town Treasure Brenda LaValley stated, "The \$375 is going to come out of someone's pocket, either his or the town's."

VanBeek noted that because they are no longer dealing with LifeQuest, this won't happen again.

Higgins said, "I don't feel totally confident that \$226 is correct either."

The board decided that Gedatus would be responsible for \$226 and the town would cover the remaining \$149. If Gedatus is able to prove he paid more than that, the town will cover more.

Loberg sent a copy of the Fire Fee Recovery Ordinance that he prepared for the town of River Falls. The town of Kinnickinnic is going to use this draft with some changes. The changes will be sent to Loberg and the law will be voted on at a later date.

Mystified farm couple questions fire call

It was only a steam cloud; eventually, all ends well

BY JILLIAN DEXHEIMER
jadexheimer@gmail.com

A simple misunderstanding led to a town of River Falls household getting a visit by the fire department. More misunderstandings followed, but the ending was a happy one.

Roger and Beverly Peterson, W10322 Hwy. 29, the family who hosted last summer's Farm Technology Days, were drying their soybean crop on Monday afternoon, Dec. 27, when River Falls firefighters showed up.

Due to the cold, a steam cloud hovered above their beans.

Since there was no blaze, Fire Chief Scott Nelson initially waived the fire-call fee.

Bev Peterson said that after the "fire" was reported in the River Falls Journal, Nelson decided that he

would send the Petersons a fire call bill.

Bev Peterson asked the Town Board at its Jan. 3 regular meeting if it could help her or give any advice on how to deal with the problem.

Since the fire fee was reinstated, Peterson said she did some investigating of her own.

According to what she found, "It was the Prescott Fire Department who called the River Falls Fire Department. It never went through (county) dispatch."

Prescott firefighters were in the area assisting River Falls with a residential garage blaze at N8290 1015th St. in the nearby Birch Cliff subdivision. There was also a fire alarm going off at the River Falls High School.

As Prescott's crew drove off, it spotted the so-called fire at the Petersons' farm and notified River Falls firefighters.

Town Board Supervisor Siri Smith commented: "The person who called it in should have had the knowledge

to know if this was a fire. This is a farming community. Farmers are going to create steam clouds in the winter. Somebody could have checked it out."

Peterson pointed out that she "...always calls dispatch when she is going to be burning something. Since we were cooking, we didn't think we needed to."

The Town Board agreed it would be ridiculous to notify the Pierce County Sheriff's dispatcher of steam clouds.

"They probably wouldn't want all the extra phone calls," added Town Chairwoman Diana Smith. "If they had done just a little bit of extra checking, they would have seen that this was not a fire."

Zoning Administrator Jerome Rodewald mentioned that he also saw the steam cloud.

"I pulled over and checked. I could see the semi trailers and dryers, so I knew they were doing something with their crop."

At the time of the false alarm, the Petersons were told that the fire chief was going to waive the fire call fee. After the fire made the news he reinstated the fee.

Siri Smith asked: "What does it matter if it is in the Journal?"

The Town Board felt because the fire call didn't go through proper channels and the fee was initially waived, that the Petersons should fight the bill.

Diana Smith suggested Peterson call the fire chief and LeRoy Peterson, the Rural Fire representative from Clifton, and try to work it out.

Town Board members said they were totally behind the Petersons, but there was not much they can do other than to offer their support.

FIRE CHIEF EXPLAINS

Reached after the Town Board meeting, River Falls Fire Chief Scott Nelson said this: "The Journal article had nothing to do with the decision to charge them. They were charged

because at the time it was assumed that the fire call came through dispatch. With three fire situations going on at one time, it was a bit chaotic."

Also following the town meeting, Assistant Fire Chief Mike Moody looked into the incident more closely. The Fire Department records confirmed the "fire call" never was routed through the county dispatcher.

"We made a mistake because it did didn't go through dispatch," Nelson said.

As a result, the chief said the Petersons will not be charged for the Dec. 27 fire call to their farm.

HANDLING ANIMALS

The River Falls Town Board was also notified that the contract between the town and the Woodbury (Minn.) Humane Society will end this spring. That leaves the town without a place to take stray or missing animals.

Options will need to be found for finding a suitable replacement facility.

Reversal of fortunes; resident's fire bill returns

New information contradicts old

BY SARAH YOUNG
Staff Correspondent

Richard Lee, W11391 County Road M, was not pleased when the Clifton Town Board last Tuesday rescinded last month's decision that had expunged his \$700 fire call that resulted from a blaze he reported on March 17, 2010.

The board had voted last month to have the town pay the cost of that fire bill.

However, Town Board Chairman LeRoy Peterson said at last week's meeting that after

checking with the Wisconsin Towns Association, the board acted improperly because the fire bill wasn't on the agenda but brought up during the public comment portion of the meeting.

Peterson also said the decision should be rescinded because the board later received updated, official information about the blaze by the fire department.

That information seemed to contradict what Lee told the board.

At last month's meeting, Lee objected to being stuck with the \$700 fire call bill, claimed the flames were barely touching his property.

Lee said the blaze started in

the road ditch, that he was unable to put it out alone, so he called for help.

Lee also said the fire chief at the time had told him that the blaze was likely caused by someone throwing a cigarette out a vehicle window.

The board then voted for the town to pay for the \$700 fire call, saying Lee shouldn't be punished for reporting a fire that could have spread and caused damage to other properties.

But a few days after the Town Board's decision, Peterson was given more details concerning the fire call from Assistant Fire Chief Chris Cernohous.

Peterson said Cernohous

wrote in an incident report that Lee had told firefighters the fire may have been caused by the go-cart his granddaughter was riding. The report makes no mention of a cigarette starting the fire.

Peterson said the Pierce County dispatcher's report also states that when Lee called about the fire, he said the cause was from the go-cart.

Lee denied making such a statement. He said he asked the dispatcher if the fire could be caused by a go-cart.

Lee was adamant that the blaze was at least 40 feet from the go-cart path and added that there are two fences placed between the go-cart path and the road ditch.

Town Supervisor John Rohl said it's next to impossible to establish the cause of the fire, since the go-cart could have backfired or it could have been a cigarette.

The board took no additional action on the matter, which apparently means the fire bill will once again be Lee's to pay.

In the caucus held before the Town Board meeting, led by Clifton resident Joe Rohl, W11794 County Road MM, the following nominations were decided: Leroy Peterson for Chair; John Rohl for Supervisor One; Greg Eggers for Supervisor Two; and Judy Clement-Lee for Clerk/Treasurer.

A building permit was granted to John Rohl, Jr., W11269 County Road MM, for a storage shed.

The board voted to formally make the building permit renewal fee half the cost of the original building permit. A building permit expires after one year.

The board approved election inspectors Delores Pechacek, W11436 County Road FF; Kathy Beck, N6357 1323rd St.; Susan Goode, N81160 County Road F; Betty Merriman, N8793 1060th St.; Deb Branigan, W1151 840th Ave.; and Caroline Wisniewski, N6370 1323rd St.

Trash bins need space

BY DEBBIE GRIFFIN
dgriffin@rivertowns.net

Council Member Randy Kusilek reacted at Tuesday night's City Council meeting about garbage confusion following the city's carrier change to Veolia from Waste Management Jan. 1.

He said that for new-carrier Veolia to work efficiently, the trash and recycling bins should be placed so they have at least four feet of space between them. He said he thought Waste Management had done it by hand and now Veolia would be doing it with an automatic arm.

Council Member Jim Nordgren said he'd seen WM use one of the arms in his neighborhood but thought the old company had picked up recycling by hand.

COUNCIL VOTES YES

ON THESE ITEMS

■ Buying two new Crown Victoria police squad cars for \$47,400 from winning bidder Hudson Ford-Mercury, Inc.

Council Member Bob Hughes asked the age of the cars being replaced, and Police Chief Roger Leque thinks they are 2007. Leque explained that usually the city buys a new squad car each year and rotates out the oldest one, which is usually three years old.

River Falls did not buy a squad car last year and seeks to replace two cars the chief said had 130,000-plus hard miles on them.

■ Granting Our Neighbors' Place a special permit to use four apartments at 215 W. Cedar St. as an emergency shelter for the homeless and to loaning ONP \$120,000 it will repay at \$40,000 per year for three years and will use to buy the fourplex.

■ Making it official that the council member appointed to the Ambulance Commission is a voting member.

■ Emerged from a closed session having agreed to a labor agreement with the Police Employees' Association.

Help, Salvation Army is 'feeling down'

BY PHIL PFUEHLER
rpfuehler@rivertowns.net



Ed Paulson

Saturday blizzard, kept shoppers away on key days.

Without those shoppers, Pierce County Salvation Army's Christmas fundraiser tanked.

"It was just bad timing," Chairman Ed Paulson said last week. "That heavy, blowing snowfall hurt us a lot on several evenings and two Saturdays when people couldn't get out, could hardly drive anywhere."

How bad was the hit? In 2009 area Salvation Army bell ringers in River Falls, Ellsworth and Spring Valley took in over \$38,000.

So Paulson, optimistically and because of the sour economy, set \$40,000 as the 2010

goal. "We actually ended up with about \$24,000 instead," Paulson said. "We didn't do near as well as we had hoped. That's as low as we've been in many years."

In River Falls bell ringers were posted at ShopKo, EconoFoods and Dick's Fresh Market.

Paulson said the repercussions are that the Salvation Army must limit its aide for 2011. The organization helps jobless and low-income folks who struggle to pay rent, utility, grocery, transportation and medical bills.

"We may not be able to help as many people or as much as did before," Paulson said. "We'll need to be careful how we allocate the money we have."

Paulson said rent and utilities are the biggest drain on Pierce County Salvation Army coffers. He said winter sees a spike in demand for relief

from big heating bills.

With the Christmas fundraiser over, can anything be done?

"I'll tell you, the need isn't going away, and we are certainly still accepting checks from those who have it in their hearts to give," Paulson said.

Tax-deductible check donations can be mailed to Paulson's home address: 627 N. Grove St./River Falls, WI 54022. Paulson also welcomes calls at 715-425-0250 to explain the Salvation Army's mission and to answer any questions.

While the giving dropped dramatically for Christmas, Paulson said the volume and dedication of Salvation Army bell ringers was phenomenal.

"We had nearly 400 volunteers, and I would like to send a big thank you to each of them," Paulson said.

Those bell ringers ranged from various high school and

church groups to charitable clubs like the Ellsworth Lions, along with Scouts, and parents and their children.

Paulson said snowstorms smothered the entire state's fundraising drive.

"Our divisional office in Milwaukee said that, overall, we were down 5-6%," Paulson said. "The southern half of the state where the weather wasn't as severe actually did very well."

The scores of statewide Salvation Army fundraisers are thrown into one pot. Paulson said this allows for the Pierce County area to tap into that account — on a need-by-need basis.

"It gives us some leverage, if the demand is there, to have our expenses exceed what we actually raised," he said. "And then we would hopefully pick up and have a better year next December to make up for what we couldn't cover on our own."

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Amery, WI

Hope you can join us - please, no gifts

Janet (79) and Byron (80) Dopkins