

Crescent allocates assistance to PFAS-affected family

Rebecca Hinterberg, town chair Knutson take local government to task over its response on water contamination

By Kelly Holm
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

Last month, Crescent resident Rebecca Hinterberg went before the Rhinelander City Council demanding answers about PFAS (perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substance) contamination in her family's potable wells, and action on the provision of clean drinking water from local government entities in light of the issue.

The man-made so-called "forever chemicals" are correlated with a variety of health issues — including cancer, asthma and liver damage — and were first significantly detected locally in 2013.

In January, her family — consisting of two households located in close proximity to a pair of Rhinelander city wells that were shut down three years ago for excessive PFAS levels — was notified by the DNR-designated "responsible party group" that its potable private wells should be tested for PFAS contamination.

The responsible party group, named in 2019, consists of the City of Rhinelander, Oneida County and the Rhinelander-Oneida County Airport. Crescent town chair Joel Knutson, in speaking to *The Lakeland Times* June 9, cited the past use of firefighting foam and the disposal of manufacturing-based sludge as potential root causes of local PFAS contamination.

On March 15, the engineering contractor AECOM sampled Hinterberg's family's potable wells and — though she was assured that results would be available in 30 days and that the responsible party group was tasked with providing bottled water to impacted households within 10 days — she still had not seen results by the end of May.

The only water delivery she'd received came April 15, with an attached note stating that "high levels" of PFAS compounds had been detected in the wells, according to preliminary assessments. The note stated that the responsible party group would provide more information, and that the Oneida County health department could answer questions.

But, with the exception of airport director Matthew Leitner, Hinterberg described getting the runaround from these entities and only receiving minimal responses to her inquiries.

Finally, on June 3, after weeks of saving receipts from hundreds of gallons worth of water purchases, Hinterberg's family received their test results. PFAS contamination levels were 350 parts per trillion (ppt) in one well and 1,000 ppt in the other. Currently, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)'s health advisory on PFAS levels is 70 ppt.

"We can bathe in (the well water), we can wash dishes, we can wash clothing. I've seen discrepancies on whether or not you can brush your teeth with it, but I'm choosing not to," Hinterberg told the Crescent town board June 8. "We've got three big Labradors. They go through 80 gallons of water a week, especially in the summer heat."

Knutson expressed his own frustrations at being left out of the conversation on the PFAS issue, especially as the chair of a town government compared to numerous higher entities.

"As a town government — on this issue, nothing is going to be given to us. We really have to kick the door down to demand a seat," he said. "There is a really big clog in the pipe ... (and) that clog is institutional dysfunction and finger-pointing between actors in local government with respect to focusing on causes of the contamination, and shifting responsibilities to one another over who is going to undertake the simplest task of seeing to it that our impacted families have water."

Within the past year, Knutson said he'd learned of several PFAS-related developments —

such as Senator Tammy Baldwin's summer 2021 visit to Rhinelander and Hinterberg's May address to the city council — only after reading about them in the *Northwoods River News*.

Though the Crescent Spring, located on River Road, had been identified more than two years ago as having elevated PFAS levels, Knutson described being rebuffed by the county and its counsel after offering to assist AECOM in the process of contacting town residents about well sampling. He'd filed a public records request to get relevant documents from the city — "so I could explain it to people who were asking me" — but it was denied.

"If you're not considered a responsible party, then you don't have responsibility for creating a remediation, but that also takes away a seat at the table," he said.

Knutson said that Hinterberg and her family were victims of a slow-moving tornado — that through no fault of their own, they'd fallen prey to a disaster whose impact appeared smaller than its actual size only due to its graduality.

He pledged to draft letters to the attorneys representing each responsible party, and the town board committed \$1,000 in assistance to the family from its reserve funds. Starting June 15, the sum will be spent on a water provision service which will cost \$128 per month.

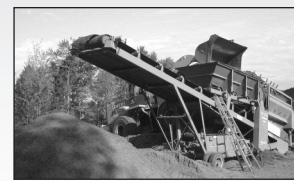
"Long-term solutions are yet to be defined, but in the short term, we know what we need to do," he said. "I don't care what the jurisdictional boundaries are, everybody who's facing this issue needs a government that is laser-focused on getting them clean water."

Knutson told the *Times* June 9 that, although the Crescent town board had discussed PFAS issues in closed session before, a decision he said was influenced by the example set by other local government entities, he would never permit doing so again as chair.

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HWY. 47 AND COUNTY HWY. J COLLISION

BRIAN JOPEK/LAKELAND TIMES

One person was injured in a two-vehicle crash at the intersection of State Highway 47 and County Highway J in Woodruff on Tuesday, June 7. According to the state accident report, the driver of the 2006 Buick Lucerne sedan, John Torke, 95, Washington, Wis., was westbound on State Highway 47 and attempted a left turn onto County Highway J. His vehicle struck an eastbound 2013 GMC Sierra 2500 pickup truck driven by Marshall Guthrie, 64, Racine. The report states Guthrie had a green light and the right-of-way. He and two other people in the truck were uninjured. Torke was taken by ambulance to Howard Young Medical Center and later transferred to another hospital.

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