



Gilman FFA Awards Banquet  
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BRIAN WILSON/THE STAR NEWS

Kristen Brandner of Medford was one of the more than 70 young people competing in the Northwoods Premiere Beef Show held Saturday at the Taylor County Fairgrounds in Medford. The event drew exhibitors from 25 different counties around the state. See page 12 for more pictures and results.

## Miller Dam sluice repairs delayed again

### County OKs extension until July 31 to allow water levels to decrease

BY BRIAN WILSON  
NEWS EDITOR

Long-awaited repairs to the sluice gate at Miller Dam will be done by July 31, nine months after the original deadline.

On Friday, members of the Taylor County Forestry and Recreation Committee approved a contract change with Nordic Group of Carlson, Minn.

granting an extension until the end of July. In April 2021, the county entered into a contract with Nordic Group to replace the sluice gate. The initial contract called for the work to be done by November 1, 2021. Delays in the manufacture and delivery of the new cast iron gate resulted in adding 212 days to the contract with the completion by June 1. Now however, with the water levels still high from spring runoff, they are asking for the additional extension.

The sluice gate rafter project is projected to have a final cost of \$113,993, with the bulk of it being an \$83,000 payment to Nordic Group which will not be paid until the project is completed.

The work will be done by divers and

require no drawdown to the flowage. According to forest administrator Jake Walcisak, the big hold up was a piece that would have had a six week turnaround becoming a three month turnaround. He said the company was very confident that they would have the new gate installed by the end of July.

Committee chairman Scott Mildbrand noted that Miller Dam was a big deal for the people of Taylor County as one of the region's biggest recreation areas.

"I am personally amazed at how long it has taken," said committee member Rollie Thums.

Walcisak said the county first learned of concerns with the sluice gate in June

See **COUNTY** on page 4

## Call for answers

### Veterans press county for answers about veterans office status

by Brian Wilson  
News Editor

An agenda item to bring in help from Rusk and Clark counties for the veterans service office opened the floodgates of input from veterans and supporters concerned about the county's long-range plans for the veterans service office.

On April 29, county veteran service officer (VSO) Shellie Shaw was placed on paid administrative leave. The agenda at Friday's meeting of the county's finance and personnel committee included approving covering the costs of having the VSOs from the neighboring counties to come to Medford for a day or two each week to assist benefit specialist Nikki Sherman with serving the needs of veterans here until the issue with Shaw is resolved.

"Where is our VSO?" asked local veteran Mike Haas, stating that there is something going on with the county and the veterans service office.

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Veterans called on the county's finance and personnel committee for answers about the veterans service officer.

Page 10: Medford spring band concert



SPORTS: Medford softball takes conference title



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# ★ Veterans question county committee about veterans office concerns

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“We are sitting here choosing sides against good people. I am a little perplexed about why it came to be this way,” Haas said.

“We cannot comment at this time,” said committee chairman Chuck Zenner, noting they have received strict orders from their attorneys to not discuss it.

“Most of us are here to support Shellie,” said Jeff Lang a veteran with the local Disabled American Veterans post. He noted that Shaw comes to veterans groups meetings and tells them what is going on, both the good and bad. He reminded committee members that veterans don’t fall in line the way the public would like them to. “We feel there are rumors that are not quite true in the public,” Lang said.

Committee member Lester Lewis addressed the concern that the county’s discussions about reining in compensatory time use was targeted to that office. “It had nothing to do with the veterans service office, it is so we can get a handle across the board and treat all employees equally,” Lewis said.

“The games need to stop. The power tripping needs to stop,” said Ben Greiner, county American Legion commander. “The decisions you are making are hurting veterans in this county.”

“The eyes of the world are on your personnel committee,” said Wood County VSO Rock Larson. Larson is the president of the state association of VSOs. He said the eyes of the veterans community and of people at state and federal levels are watching what is going on in Taylor County. “Please be diligent,” he said.

Other veterans and supporters spoke in support of Shaw, praising the work she has done in helping them secure benefits. John Willman raised concerns about the security camera that was installed that includes the doorway of the veterans service office. He raised concern about there being discrimination against the “crazed vets.”

He noted that as veterans get older their needs increase and that the office will be getting busier. In addition he said the younger veterans are coming out with higher levels of needs too. He said the veterans service office staff are making a positive impact. “I don’t want to see our vets left hanging,” he said.

“We are going to take care of the veterans,” said committee member Scott Mildbrand. “I assure you we are not going to abandon our veterans as long as I have anything to say about it.”

“This board supports veterans 150%,” Zenner said. However, he noted that their job is not just the veterans, but all the other taxpayers too.

Lewis noted his son is a disabled veteran and that he empathized with the veterans concerns.

Veterans remained skeptical. “There is something awful funny going on here,” said Arnold Koeppe an Army veteran from Westboro. “There is no reason to put these girls out,” he said referring to Shaw and Sherman.

Committee member Lorie Floyd clarified that there has been no discussion of cutting hours in the office. She noted that the veterans service committee has yet to meet to talk about anything. “There is a lot of rumor and a lot of innuendo, please give them some time,” Floyd said urging patience.

“This is an elephant in the room,” Koeppe said of the veterans’ concerns.

Zenner again emphasized that they cannot discuss anything regarding Shaw.

Lewis noted that it may never be discussed in public or go to the full county board. He said Shaw is entitled to privacy protections like anyone else is.

Other veterans urged a swift resolution to allow Shaw to get back to work helping them. They noted that the veterans administration moves slowly as it is and that every minute of delays at the county level translates into months and years in the federal bureaucracy. “The wheels of justice are slow, the wheels of government are slow. Please put some grease on it,” said a veteran at the meeting.

## Radio equipment

Taylor County will tap into federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) fund allocations to pay for radio upgrades for the sheriff’s department and area fire departments.

The county currently has about \$1 million left undesignated from the federal COVID-19 response funding. In addition, local municipalities each received their own allocations, although Lewis noted that many towns have spent theirs on road projects.

The radio equipment requests came from sheriff Larry Woebeking and from county fire departments.

According to Woebeking, the current portable radios reached “end of life” in 2019. What this means is that if

they fail the county will need to replace them rather than being able to repair them. That said, they have been able to scavenge replacement parts by taking them from inoperable units.

Woebeking compared it to going to the junk yard to get a part for a car to keep it running.

Committee member Scott Mildbrand asked if the county was making plans or setting aside funds to replace the radios. Woebeking said that there really is no way within their budget to save up \$200,000 and said that they have been replacing things one at a time as they can no longer be repaired.

Committee members approved spending \$295,000 for the new radio equipment.

There was a longer discussion when it came to using the federal grant funds to pay for fire department radio needs. Medford fire chief Mike Filas noted that his department’s radios are two to three models older than the sheriff’s department with other departments in the area having similar equipment.

Earlier this year, the Medford Area Fire Department had sought funding for the radios and was denied by the committee with the direction that they contact other departments and make a request for all of them together.

Filas said that he did that at a recent Taylor County Fire Association meeting and that the total need is \$287,150 — this includes the Thorp Fire Department. Thorp has taken over a portion of the Lublin fire department area. Taking out Thorp, the amount would be \$248,650. Lewis noted this also includes \$27,600 for a back-up dispatch radio for the county which would allow the dispatch center to be run out of the Medford Fire Department if the courthouse was not available. Lewis said that if the county wants to have that option, the county should pay for the cost of it.

“What would happen if there was no ARPA money,” Floyd asked. Filas said that they budget funds for personal protective equipment such as their turnout gear. He said the goal would be to have enough saved up in the next two years to replace the radios with the towns picking up the difference. He said Medford currently has about \$30,000 on hand for the replacement.

Floyd objected to what she saw as agencies having equipment but not having any plan in place on how to replace it.

“When the state says you can’t raise your levy, it makes it difficult to do that,” Zenner replied.

“These are important things to cover,” Zenner said. “When you have a fire you want people to respond.”

Committee member Rollie Thums said he objected to what he saw as mismanagement of the way it was handled. He said Rib Lake Fire Department is constantly working to upgrade its radios with the department getting eight new ones in the near future. He said that departments needed to start planning to replace these items. He objected to what he said he saw as them skipping a step in talking with the towns who received their own ARPA funds.

“I don’t see a misstep there,” Lewis said.

Committee member Ray Soper said there was nothing underhanded taking place. He said when Filas first came to the county law enforcement with the request a few months ago, committee members said they felt Rib Lake and Gilman would have the same problems and would need equipment upgrades. “It is a fairness issue,” he said.

In the end, committee members approved paying for 75% of the \$221,050 cost of radios for the county-based fire departments. It was noted that Clark County received more money than Taylor County did and that Thorp Fire Department could go there for funding.

## Comp Time

A proposed revision to the county’s personnel policies regarding accumulation and use of compensatory time will go to the full county board with the goal of clearing the balances over 20 hours. Even before then, county departments are being encouraged to use the accrued compensatory time.

Under the changes, hourly employees would be allowed to accrue up to 20 hours of comp time after which point they would be paid out at time and a half. “Even if they haven’t followed the handbook we have to pay them out,” Zenner said.

Board member Lynn Rosemeyer was at the meeting and is the one to call that the committee follow county code and bring the handbook changes to the full county board for a vote.

Mildbrand agreed with bringing it to the county board, but said that they should direct the department heads to begin enforcing the 20 hours now. The plan is to give employees six months from the time of the county board approval of the policy to use up the hours over 20 at which time the county would pay out those hours for

hourly non-exempt employees.

“There shouldn’t be any comp time for exempt employees,” Lewis said. “They are expected to do their job for the salary they are hired at,” he said.

Floyd said she felt the salaried employees should be taken care of too. “I don’t think that is necessarily fair to them,” she said of not allowing comp time for those positions.

Mildbrand noted that there have been times, such as during the pandemic, that the county has authorized extra pay for workers when they have had to take on additional duties for a period of time.

Human resources director Nicole Nagel asked for clarification as to if she should automatically be paying out time over 20 hours as it is turned in. “We should try to get this under control,” Mildbrand said.

In other business, committee members:

★ Approved spending about \$26,500 from federal ARPA funds to address ongoing drainage concerns at the Taylor County Fairgrounds. Highway Commissioner Ben Stanley had looked at the area and proposed his crew do additional ditching and installation of culverts to better manage water flow.

★ Approved a limited term employee for about two weeks to assist as a driver for the highway department during a paving project. This will allow the county to use a truck it owns rather than hiring out for a contractor for the project and result in about \$6,000 savings.

★ Approved allowing the treasurer’s office employees to work up to 40 hours per week for up to 12 weeks of the year to meet additional work demand. Mildbrand objected to the plan because he felt there should be a decrease in staff tied to the increase in hours. Lewis noted that the county took away a half-time position from the department that had worked 35 hours every two weeks. Mildbrand was concerned that this would open the door to other departments asking for similar concessions. Treasurer Sarah Holtz noted that there is no other department that routinely has lines of people waiting to get in like hers does during tax time. Mildbrand voted against the additional hours.

★ Approved moving forward with filling the deputy clerk of courts position. The person in that job transferred to the judge’s office and an employee hired seven months ago is leaving the county creating the vacancy.

★ Approved job description changes for the confidential administrative assistant for the human resources department. Linda Daniels, who currently has the position, noted the county typically updates job descriptions when people leave with changes to reflect what they are actually doing in those jobs.

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