

FALL FEST ROYALTY: A former Queen gives an inside look at a summer of representing Amery P2

County continues toward uniformity through rural addressing project

Cooperation with area municipalities is helping bring about consistency for EMS responders

BY RAYMOND T. RIVARD
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Better future communications from Polk County could be the key to less push back from residents concerning address updates.

Over the past several years, hundreds of area residents have cooperated in having their physical addresses changed as part of the Polk County Rural Addressing Project – an extra effort to bring all addresses into compliance with the county ordinance.

County Zoning Administrator Jason Kjeseth, told the county board last week the most recent efforts, in cooperation with the sheriff's office, "has evolved into a partnership between towns and the county and is part of the 911 Next Generation project at the state."

Kjeseth also described some pushback the county has received for the project, especially most recently in the Town of Lincoln.

Because of the concerns raised by residents in that area, Kjeseth said he has had to take a step back and review how best to make changes to their project.

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Lawyer gives insight to city issues, where Amery will land is unclear

BY APRIL ZIEMER
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In the days, weeks and months to come, the City of Amery could very well look different. Whether it is the faces of those who work for or represent the City, policies and procedures, or possibly all of the above.

After months of closed session meetings, ethics complaints and investigations and a hearing concerning whether Administrative Assistant Bethany

Eskro had been wrongfully terminated, a lawyer's video posted online has shed light on things taking place within City Hall.

Ben Hitchcock Cross, the attorney representing Eskro during her wrongful termination hearing took to YouTube last week to read a letter his law firm, Cross Law Firm, sent to the City of Amery March 17, 2023. It was allegedly sent to Mayor Chad Leonard, City

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CONTRIBUTED

Residents have wanted to know what has been taking place within City Hall.



OWENS FAMILY PHOTO

Let freedom ring: July Fourth activities set to begin all around Amery area

There is no excuse to be bored later this week and into the beginning of the next. Independence Day activities galore are about to ignite into fireworks of fun in Amery and surrounding communities. Grab your red, white and blue and decide what to do! See area events on page 12



APRIL ZIEMER | AMERY FREE PRESS

Kallie Andersen and Darby Trent are shown with a trunk full of shoes.

No need to walk a mile in another's shoes to make a difference

BY APRIL ZIEMER
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Just by donating new or gently used shoes, you could be changing lives in various ways. We have all heard the saying that speaks of trying "to walk a mile in someone's shoes," in a reference of having em-

pathy. Maybe donating shoes is the answer to showing you care.

The Amery FFA is currently collecting new or gently used shoes as a fundraiser for their group. In the past, members of the FFA have sold fruit and tried

They were looking for a new idea when they learned about something

that had worked well for another organization. A family member of one of the FFA members works with a group who collected shoes. Their group was then paid for the shoes by the weight of the shoes. The Amery FFA decided to give it a

SEE SHOES, PAGE 23

Just around the bend

Orthopedic care close to home



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CITY: Complaint states Mayor Leonard wouldn't look at images and videos provided

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Administrator Patty Bjorklund and Alderpersons Sharon Marks, Eric Elkin, Rick Van Blaricom, Mike Manor, Sarah Flanum and Mykaela Thompson. It was sent on behalf of city employees Eskro, Heather Hegarty and Jason Hickok.

This letter came to the city after the three named employees had filed ethics complaints against Mayor Chad Leonard and City Administrator Patty Bjorklund.

The Amery Free Press was able to see a copy of the ethics complaint dated January 19, 2023 against Mayor Leonard where the three city employees ask the City of Amery Ethics Board and/or City Council to investigate whether Mayor Leonard violated Ethics codes, Personnel Policies, and the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution when a complaint was brought to him regarding the incoming candidate for Chief of Police.

They allege the public behavior of the selected candidate for Chief of Police would immediately constitute violations of the City of Amery Ethics Codes and Personnel Policies and Amery Police Department General Orders. The claimed the information and facts supporting these claims were:

- A matter of public interest regarding information about the activities of Steven Hainzl was brought to a member of the Amery Police Department by a citizen of Amery. This information was reported to a supervisor through the proper chain of command and was then provided to Interim Chief Hickok.
- The matter of public interest was at the time and remains the discovery of several thousand sexually explicit videos and photos, which would be considered pornography, of the spouse of the incoming Chief of Police, Hainzl, which linked to his personal profiles. This content was public for anyone to view on various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube and posted by its creator and performer, Anna Marie Christine Hainzl under the guise of numerous aliases. The content included sexually graphic videos and photos of dancing, humping, twerking, rubbing, and thrusting, in various states of nudity in public places, including a church.
- After a review of the information, Interim Chief Hickok, along with Office Manager Heather Hegarty reported the sexually explicit social media content to the City Administrator, Patty Bjorklund. According to the ethics complaint, Administrator Bjorklund initially indicated that she found the videos and photos to be disgusting and offensive displays of behavior that would be inappropriate for a city official. The City Administrator brought the matter to the attention of Mayor Chad Leonard.
- Upon coming to the police department, Mayor Leonard's demeanor was hostile and authoritarian. Mayor Leonard accused Interim Chief Hickok of handling this matter improperly, not bringing the matter to his attention soon enough, and abusing city resources to look into the matter. Mayor Leonard demanded an explanation as to how the activity was

criminal, Interim Chief Hickok explained that the activity was not criminal, but that it was morally questionable, and it demonstrated a lack of good judgment.

According to the complaint, at the time, Mayor Leonard would not look at the images and videos that were being provided to him in print and on a computer monitor. It should be noted at the time that this information was brought to the attention of the City Administrator, she allegedly advised a background check on Hainzl had not yet been returned to the City of Amery. Mayor Leonard left the police department indicating that he would be calling Hainzl.

Mayor Leonard later returned to the police department and stated to Hickok that Hainzl provided an explanation related to his wife being a model, but he also directed Hainzl to delete the online content.

“The City of Amery, or its administration is apparently aware of its legal predicament because as threatened by the Mayor, the Amery administration and police department are retaliating against my clients, especially Lt. Hickok, with the evident purpose of forcing their resignation. I hope that cooler heads can prevail, because I can assure you that further retaliation will only lead to greater liability.”

Ben Hitchcock Cross
Lawyer

Multiple requests were made for this information be brought to the full City Council for the council's review, and a Special Common Council Meeting was posted that afternoon. Hickok was later assured by City Administrator Bjorklund that he would be given ten minutes during the meeting to speak on this matter during the Special Common Council to the City Council about the information that had been provided to the City Administration.

Allegedly, during Hickok's preparation for the 4:00 meeting, it was discovered a lot of the social media content, primarily the videos, was no longer available to the public. Hickok waited outside of the Council Chambers during the closed Special Common Council Meeting on December 13, 2022, while it was in progress, but he was never called in to report on this matter, as he was previously told by Bjorklund.

Shortly after the meeting was adjourned, Bjorklund and Mayor Leonard informed Interim Chief Hickok the City Council did not wish to speak to him about the matter and that the appointment of Hainzl will remain in effect.

A short time later, Bjorklund called Hickok from City Hall and said that the Mayor was there with her and wanted to speak with him. Mayor Leonard issued a directive to Hickok to let his team know the information that was presented that day better not be made public by any member of the Amery Police Department or there would be

consequences as per the confidentiality agreement.

The complaint says, “It should be noted that there would be no privileged information regarding the confidentiality policy, as the information was already public and that if there was nothing offensive or in violation of policy, there would be no reason to issue such a directive. Furthermore, issuing such a directive would also be in violation of the First Amendment, which prohibits limiting freedom of speech.”

The complaint said, “There remains tremendous concern regarding the sexually explicit social media content that was posted publicly online. While the video links are no longer active, photos of much of the content are still available. The social media accounts at the time they were discovered had up to 137,000 public followers and one social media account indicated that 4,370 items had been posted to date. Additionally, the social media was linked to accounts held by Hainzl, and a rmative reactions to the content were given through ‘loves’ and ‘likes’ from the accounts held by Hainzl. The sexually explicit behavior portrayed in the content and available publicly is in direct violation of City of Amery Personnel Policies regarding Employee Conduct, which states that employees shall refrain from any action of public pronouncement that reflects adversely upon the City. A department head should be held to the highest standard of conduct for all employees of the city to serve as an example of appropriate behavior.”

The three stated since the date of the Special Common Council Meeting, an abundance of comments from community members and surrounding law enforcement agencies have indicated that they were aware of the online content and videos and the connection to the incoming Chief of Police and they were dismayed the City of Amery had chosen to move forward with the appointment.

“This puts into question whether the City Council was provided with the gravity of the situation and granted transparency so that they could make an informed decision about moving forward with the appointment of Hainzl. Had the online social media content been benign, it would contradict the purpose of calling a Special Meeting of the Common Council,” they said.

Their claim went on to say, “It was our duty to report this matter of public interest to the City Administration. It was Mayor Leonard's duty to take the matter seriously, give it due diligence, and ultimately to uphold the policies of the City of Amery for the benefit of the public that we all serve. In an effort to save the city from being embarrassed by this information that inevitably would become public knowledge, we were asking City Administration to review the findings. Based on the response of Mayor Leonard it can be concluded that he had no interest in reviewing the information and hearing the concerns of the Amery Police Department staff. The Mayor also showed no concern about the violations to the department's General Orders and the City's own policies.”

The complaint also alleges:

The complaint about the social media content that was brought to the Mayor's attention was not taken seriously and was met with hostility on his part.

That if the social media content was not considered to be offensive in nature or a violation of policy, a Special Com-

mon Council Meeting would not have been necessary.

There was not transparency to the Amery City Council as to the extent and content of the sexually graphic social media that was in question, which defeats the purpose of calling a Special Common Council Meeting.

The social media content directly violates the City of Amery Ordinance and Personnel Policies and the Amery Police Department General Orders.

There were directives made by the Mayor to the Amery Police Department staff not to discuss publicly the already public content or there would be consequences, which would be considered a threat.

There were directives made to Hainzl by Mayor Leonard to delete the social media posts, which would contradict that the posts were simply those of modeling.

The results of a background check on Hainzl were not complete prior to the public appointment of Hainzl at the City Council Meeting on December 6, 2022.

The letter later sent by Cross stated he represented the three who collectively represented over 24 years of good service to the Amery Police Department. “From what I understand, these city employees used their free speech rights to raise issues for you to consider when making your decision to appoint a chief based on publicly available information,” said Cross.

The lawyer went on to say, “What is at stake here is the right to be free from retaliation for exercising their constitutionally protected free speech rights, not whether their concerns were unfounded or even self-serving. An American response to free speech should be more free speech not censorship. Censorship usually backfires and invites more attention. Here it is Amery's retaliation that will draw more attention to the Police Chief's qualifications than anything my clients could have done.”

“Although I am only in the preliminary stages of my investigation, I write to you now in hopes of resolving these claims short of formal litigation. The City of Amery, or its administration is apparently aware of its legal predicament because as threatened by the Mayor, the Amery administration and police department are retaliating against my clients, especially Lt. Hickok, with the evident purpose of forcing their resignation. I hope that cooler heads can prevail, because I can assure you that further retaliation will only lead to greater liability,” Cross said.

Cross addressed those he sent the letter to by saying, “Naturally, you have every political right to hire Mr. Hainzl, and I know some have accused Mr. Hickok and others of attacking Mr. Hainzl because Mr. Hickok wanted to be Police Chief. I want to address that issue head on because it underscores the fact that Mr. Hainzl's wife's online presence is known to the Amery public and Mr. Hickok was initially doing his duty to alert the City of Amery to the potential problem with one of the candidates for police chief, which he did only after speaking with the City Administrator.”

The lawyer makes allegations against Hainzl by saying, “I also understand that Mr. Hainzl's wife's photos were only the tip of the iceberg of Mr. Hainzl's bad judgement. Indeed, because of the threats of the Mayor, Hick-