

Focus on Energy

Energy savings are available

By GILLIAN POMPLUN

Chad Laibly from the Focus on Energy program delivered a presentation entitled 'Energy Efficiency Rebates' to the Monroe County Climate Change Task force (CCTF) at their January meeting. Laibly is an Energy Advisor with the program.

"This year will be one of the best incentive years ever for energy efficiency rebates due to passage of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) by the U.S. Congress in 2022," Laibly said. "Noteworthy among the many energy savings options are tax credits for installation of heat pumps, help with installing home electrical upgrades for vehicle charging, and the 'Homes' rebate program."

Laibly explained that the Public Service Commission's Office of Energy Innovation (OEI) is working closely with the Department of Energy (DOE) and the National Association of State Energy Offices (NASEO) to identify options for program delivery to prepare for the implementation of these federal programs when guidance becomes available.

Laibly told the group that 'Focus on Energy' is Wisconsin utilities' statewide program for energy efficiency and renewable energy. Since 2001, they have worked with eligible residents and businesses to install energy efficiency and renewable energy projects.

"The program provides financial incentives, education, information and other resources to encourage participation that leads to increased energy savings and reduced utility bills," Laibly said.

Both residential and non-residential customers are eligible for Focus on Energy services. Eligibility for Wisconsin utility customers is determined by whether the measures save a fuel type purchased from a participating utility.

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For Riverway

FLOW wants NRB to target funding

By GILLIAN POMPLUN

At their February 9 meeting, the Friends of the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway (FLOW) Board of Directors learned that president Timm Zumm and vice president Dave Marshall plan to provide public input at an upcoming meeting of the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board.

Specifically, according to Dave Marshall reached after the meeting, the two will discuss the need to dedicate funds from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund for land acquisitions within the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway.

In particular, one acquisition that has been discussed in recent years is the Wintergreen Resort in Iowa County. At the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Board's (LWSRB) November 11, 2021, meeting, LWSRB Executive Director Mark Cupp had reported that he was approached by the Shifflet family about the possibility of the State of Wisconsin acquiring the old Wintergreen Ski Resort and Frank Lloyd Wright style building on the property.

According to Cupp, the Shifflet Family's asking price for the Wintergreen Resort is \$4.25 million for the building and land.

The property includes about a mile of Wisconsin River frontage, as well as timbered hillsides.

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Playing Pickle Ball is fun!

Gays Mills resident Craig Anderson makes a nice return while playing Pickle Ball in the Old Community Building on Wednesday, Feb. 8. The Pickle Ball gang will have to reschedule their Wednesday, Feb. 22 date, when the Second Harvest Food Pantry will be using the site. To learn the rescheduled date and time, call Paul and Margaret Benzing at 608-734-3550.

At a joint meeting in Viroqua

Watershed councils gather

By AMBROSIA WOJAHN

A joint meeting of the Tainter Creek, Bad Axe River, Coon Creek Community, and Rush Creek watershed councils was held at the Eagle's Club in Viroqua on Wednesday, Feb. 8. Residents and council members heard from several local figures, as well as a policy director from the River Alliance of Wisconsin.

Around 40 people were in attendance. Meeting-goers began with coffee and fellowship, then enjoyed supper from a 'burger bar,' which included toppings, sides, and desserts. When everyone had finished eating, Nancy Wedwick opened the meeting by going over the night's agenda.

All attendees introduced themselves, their organizations, and the watersheds they were from. Meeting-goers were largely local, including NRCS and Crawford and Vernon County employees. Two new Vernon employees, Samer Kharbush and Sam Bibby, introduced themselves to the group for the first time. Some folks from Iowa, Madison, and other branching watersheds were present at the meeting as well.

After introductions, Chuck Bolstad spoke about the Tainter Creek Grazing and Water Quality Project. He shared the success of the project with warm optimism.

"We're like proud stage parents now," Bolstad said of the implementors.

TCGWQP is partnered with the Wallace Foundation and involved with Valley Stewardship Network, as well as Crawford and Vernon County Land and Water Departments.

The three-year-old project focuses on regenerative agriculture and managed, intentional grazing with the purpose of studying positive effects on water quality as a result of these practices.

"There is real power in small farmers practicing regenerative agriculture," Bolstad said.

The program collects and uses real data such as water testing to conduct research. Bolstad emphasized the fact

that carbon sequestration into the soil for the reduction of the CO2 being released into the atmosphere is a top priority for those working to combat climate change.

Following Bolstad's presentation, Brandon Larson from Vernon County Emergency Management introduced a five-year, multi-hazard mitigation plan put into place by FEMA. The plan's goal is to address climate change by distributing grants for natural disaster-related action and conducting surveys. Larson gave details and specifics of the plan, which he is introducing to several organizations around the area to spread awareness to local landowners.

The closing speaker of the night was Michael Tiboris, a Clear Water Farms Director with the River Alliance of Wisconsin. He began by praising the watershed groups.

"I'd just like to start by congratulating the Tainter Creek group and all of you who are contributing to this growing movement... sometimes it only takes a handful of creative, dedicated people to keep an effort moving forward."

Tiboris described the origins and efforts of the River Alliance. The 30-year-old program began with a focus on aquatic recreation and dam re-

moval. Their mission has expanded to empowering people to protect and restore water through a network of close to 300 producer-led groups. The River Alliance works with these groups, which are typically local organizations similar to the watershed councils and founded by 'handfuls' of people, to improve functioning, resilience, and efficiency in a range of ways.

Tiboris highlighted the importance of carrying on and passing down the mission of water restoration.

"You want to build an organization that hands the mission from group to group, party to party, down the line... we know that's how watershed protection happens."

After Tiboris outlined the River Alliance and the efforts made by groups across the state, Nancy Wedwick took the floor and encouraged everyone to break into discussion groups.

The room was split into discussion of conservation areas including event planning, education and outreach, and perennials and cover crops. Discussion ran until eight o'clock at night, when Tucker Gretebeck whistled for the meeting's conclusion. Many people stayed afterward to visit and continue conversations through the evening.



MAKING A POINT, Michael Tiboris, from River Alliance Wisconsin, was the final speaker at the recent gathering of local watershed members held in Viroqua last week.

In Crawford County

Incorrect assessments lead to property tax chargebacks

By GILLIAN POMPLUN & CHARLEY PREUSSER

The Crawford County Board Finance Committee learned at their meeting on Wednesday, Feb. 1 that the incidence of municipal property tax chargebacks has been on the rise in recent years.

This means that property taxes have been levied for properties that should not be taxed, or levied in the wrong amount, based on incorrect information submitted from municipal assessors.

"We almost never used to see these, but in recent years we've been seeing more and more of these chargebacks," Crawford County Treasurer Deanne Lutz told the committee.

This has likely arisen because of a change in process from a more manual system used by the county that allowed some troubleshooting to the system, Lutz explained. Now, municipal assessors enter their information directly into the program used by the county to compute property tax levies.

The county treasurer later clarified to the Independent-Scout that it is not her office's responsibility to check the assessor's work for accuracy. However, more of the errors were coincidentally found, when her office had to manually enter information from the assessors' workbooks. With software entry from the assessors now, there is less observation of the assessments.

Lutz informed the committee that the county had the largest municipal chargeback in county history for seven property assessments in the City of Prairie du Chien occurred in 2022.

The \$16,667 chargeback to the county occurred because information submitted from Accurate Appraisal, the City of Prairie du Chien's contracted assessor, was incorrect on two property assessments made in 2018; two others made in 2019; and three more made in 2020.

At their meeting in February of 2022, the full Crawford County Board approved the \$16,667 repayment of the overcharged taxes on the seven incorrectly assessed properties.

Mistakes in assessments included adding the value of a building that did not exist to a property's assessment; assessing property that is owned by a tax exempt organization for two tax years; assessing land of 0.001 acres at \$517,000; assessing for two tax years a property owned by the Prairie du Chien Redevelopment Authority, which is exempt; and double billing for a building on a property that was already included in the assessment.

While the county has paid back its share of the incorrect assessments made on properties in Prairie du Chien, it is not known if the other tax units receiving revenue have followed suit.

The other units of government and the amounts they received from the seven incorrect assessments are: City of Prairie du Chien, \$27,808; Prairie du Chien School District, \$25,308; and Southwest Technical College District, \$2,825.

During her report to the finance committee, the county treasurer also explained an overcharge on 2022 taxes that was caused when land in the Town of Freeman, which is now owned by the State of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, was incorrectly assessed. It goes without saying the WDNR is exempt from taxes.

This assessment covers nine parcels, which cumulatively includes 252 acres. The total amount of taxes on the incorrectly assessed WDNR-owned acres is \$8,557. Taxing unit revenue received on the incorrect assessment included: Crawford County, \$3,432; Town of Freeman, \$1,166; DeSoto School District, \$3,145; and Western Technical College District, \$618.

The deadline to pay the Town of Freeman back is February of 2024. This will also constitute a revenue shortfall for the 2023 budgets of the technical college, the school district and the township.

"This situation is really totally the assessor's fault, but unlike the City of Prairie du Chien, Freeman's ordinances don't contain any language that exempts them from liability," Lutz said. "Assessors have insurance, and could file a claim to cover any business losses they incur in these kinds of situations, but the Town of Freeman doesn't have language in place that would put the liability for errors like this on the assessor."

Crawford County Board Finance Committee Chairman Gary Koch said Crawford County Corporate Counsel Mark Peterson has advised that the county has the right to go after the assessor in this matter. Peterson has advised that the county should begin the process by sending the assessor a letter.

Lutz also told the committee that there were two other chargebacks currently being fielded by her department. The two have a total dollar amount of \$1,700. One is \$432 from the Town of Clayton and the other is \$1,269 from the Town of Eastman.

Foreclosure sales

Lutz explained she is still working on the unpaid property tax foreclosure sale list, and will need committee approval for that when it is ready. She said this year's foreclosure sales will involve unpaid 2019 property taxes.

Foreclosure sales in 2022, for unpaid 2015 and 2016 property taxes, were conducted in two live auctions, and two sealed bid events. Lutz said that sales transacted before a new law requiring counties to provide justification for retaining the revenue realized brought in \$86,320, and the second sale, after the new 2022 law went into effect, brought in \$11,576. That means as much as \$97,895 will be deposited into the county's revenue account.

Governor Tony Evers signed Wisconsin Act 216 in March of 2022 — the foreclosure equity bill — into law. The new law requires counties to pay any net proceeds in a property tax foreclosure sale to the former owner of the property. The county treasurer can justify keeping portions of sale proceeds for payment of delinquent taxes, cost of the sale and more.

Depository addition

The finance committee is recommending that the Crawford County Board approve a contract with the PMA company for public funds management services. The company serves municipalities, school districts, and other institutions across 14 U.S. states, and will administer the county's local government investment pool.

"This is a great, secure way for the county to invest, and is like having a money market account," Koch explained. "In this investment pool, the county's money will be very well protected."

The committee voted to add approval of the PMA contract to the February Crawford County Board of Supervisors meeting, and to have Corporate Counsel Mark Peterson draft a resolution to add PMA to the official list of Crawford County depositories.

In other business

In other business, the committee:

- heard that Gary Koch and others had met recently to respond to the draft of the law enforcement agreement with the City of Prairie du Chien, and had sent some questions back to the city's corporate counsel
- learned that when the law enforcement agreement between the county and Prairie du Chien is approved, the

