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Medford Homecoming  
 Pages 10-11 Second Section



BRIAN WILSON/THE STAR NEWS

Firefighters from the Medford Area Fire Department responded to a possible gas leak and carbon monoxide (CO) on Main Street in Medford on September 28. According to fire chief Mike Filas, they found dangerously elevated levels of CO likely due to a malfunctioning gas appliance. Filas reminds people to check the batteries in their CO detectors every six months. See full story on page 5.

# Budget busting

Committee calls for health insurance change, staffing cuts

BY BRIAN WILSON  
 NEWS EDITOR

Members of the Taylor County finance and personnel committee saw the option for big insurance savings and took it while also calling for eliminating county support of the Taylor County Housing Authority and cutting a position from the two-person forestry department.

At Tuesday's budget review session, committee members met with Tim Deaton, vice president of the Horton Group that serves as the county's insurance brokers.

Deaton noted that the county's current health insurance is through Wisconsin County's Association Group Health Trust and that the company had initially proposed a 19% increase for the renewal. Deaton said they negotiated it down to a 14% increase with the option to go down to 13% with minor changes to the expansive nationwide list of in-network providers this would put the increase in actual dollars at

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# City commits to shelter, park band stand

Council commits to getting projects done as fundraising continues

BY BRIAN WILSON  
 NEWS EDITOR

The city of Medford is taking a leadership role in two proposed community improvement projects.

Council members at Tuesday's city council meeting approved spending up to \$550,000 from county undesignated reserve funds to ensure a new bandshell is

built in the city park and a new shelter with bathrooms will be built as part of the redevelopment of the Whelen Ave. parking lot area.

The big question for council member Laura Holmes was if the proposed stage was going to be big enough to hold concerts and events.

"It will be 36 feet by 40 feet," replied city coordinator Joe Harris.

"That means nothing to me," Holmes replied. Harris then compared it to being about the same size as the city hall council chambers which would allow for ample stage space. He noted the picture in their packet showing an artist

rendering of a proposed design is not necessarily to scale.

The stage is planned to be angled to have the stage area open to the hill leading up to the park shelters. Council member Mike Bub questioned if there will be a rear wall to the band shell noting that there usually is as a way to improve acoustics.

Council member Ken Coyer said he has seen others including a performance stage in Duluth where it is open in the back and the speakers are directed to the front for the sound to come forward.

Holmes noted this is a preliminary

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Scott Mildbrand

Page 10: National speaker visits Medford schools

SPORTS: Area cross country teams have strong races

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## ★ County makes major shift to health insurance for cost saving

Continued from page 1

\$317,191 per year. He noted other plan changes could also be implemented to raise deductibles and other out of pocket costs to bring the rate down to about 10.1% increase. All of these were well above the 8% projected increase county finance director Larry Brandl had worked into the proposed budget.

At the same time, Deaton solicited proposal options from Security Health Plan which proposed three options, a Premier POS plan with an 8.31% increase over current rates, a Premier HMO plan with a 5.52% increase over current and a HMO SimplyOne plan that would result in a 10.63% reduction in premium for the county working out to be a \$240,772 decrease in total premiums. Under the premier plans, the employees enrolled in the plan would have access to providers in Marshfield Clinic, Aspirus, Mayo, ThedaCare, UW Health and a half dozen other healthcare networks. The SimplyOne plan limits those enrolled in the plan to only go through Marshfield Clinic providers.

Other than an increase in overall out of pocket expense from \$9,000 per family plan to \$13,000 under the Security Health options and the addition of a Tier 4 with a corresponding 25% prescription drug copay for those high-end medications, the plans are overall similar outside of the provider lists.

Committee member Scott Mildbrand gave the example of a cancer medication that cost \$250,000. Under Security Health an employee would pay \$13,000 of that cost while under the WCA plan they would pay \$9,000 of that cost.

Mildbrand proposed the county switch to the Marshfield Clinic-only plan for all employees and give the option for employees to buy up to the premier plan by paying the difference in premiums out of pocket.

Finance Director Larry Brandl estimated about half of county employees currently go through Marshfield Clinic providers. He said the others would have to switch providers or could end up paying more to keep their current providers.

County employees currently pay 15% of the overall premiums.

Under the SimplyOne plan, the employee portion of the premiums would be \$96.59 per month for single plans, \$205.53 for single plus one plans, and

**“We need to make a decision, are we really going to be concerned about retention and recruitment?”**

**— County board member Lester Lewis about the need to have quality insurance offerings for employees.**

\$239.41 per month for family plans. This is under what is currently being paid and would result in a reduction in premium expense for employees choosing this option.

However, those wishing to buy up to the premier plan to have additional providers would see their monthly costs increase significantly. The single plan would be \$233.03 per month, the single plus one would be \$495.86 per month and the family plan would be \$577.61 per month because it would be 15% of the SimplyOne plan plus the entire amount of the difference in the monthly premium to go to the premier plan.

By comparison the employee portions of the current premium are \$108.07 for single plan, \$229.97 for single plus one, and \$267.88 for family plan.

The major drawing point that makes switching to the SimplyOne plan attractive to county board members is that it would result in an approximately \$558,000 change in the overall premium cost.

The proposal to go with the narrow plan and a potential to buy up, drew a lengthy discussion. Committee member Lester Lewis said he would not support a plan that did not give an option for out of network coverage saying they can't take it out on the employees to reduce the budget.

“I don't like the term, ‘Take it out on employees,’” Mildbrand said. “I don't think that is the right term.”

He said for the people who wanted to keep more money in their pocket they could do so or could pay more to have a wider choice. Committee chairman Chuck Zenner noted that it would steer people toward the Marshfield providers.

Committee member Jim Gebauer questioned how hard it would be to get back into the

WCA Trust in the future if the county left it now.

Deaton said the county, with its \$2.2 million in insurance premiums, is a large enough group that he did not foresee it being impossible to get back into the trust in the future. He noted the county is comparable in size to the village of Menomonee Falls and that the Group Health Trust was aggressive in trying to get them back this year. He said he doubted the county would be able to join it next year and that going forward it would depend on what the experience level looks like and the rating structure.

Mildbrand noted that if the county stayed with the WCA Trust and had a large increase, than he would see them having to raise employee contributions from 15% to 20%.

“We keep talking about recruitment and retention,” Lewis said, noting that they are scheduled to also look at potential wage increases. He said any wage increase is unlikely to come near touching the insurance increases. “We need to make a decision, are we really going to be concerned about retention and recruitment?”

Committee members briefly stepped back from the proposal to go with the SimplyOne and buy up option in order to review the potential to make plan changes and reduce renewal costs by staying with WCA Trust. The plan design changes have the potential to bring the renewal rate to a 10.1% increase.

“It seems to me we are trying to talk ourselves into staying with WCA,” Mildbrand said. He said there would be many employees who would sign up for the cheaper insurance because it still covers Tier 3 drugs and everything, but would be way less expensive. “Maybe 50% of the people would say ‘That's great,’” he said.

In the end, on a roll call vote, Zenner, Mildbrand, Thums and Ray Soper voted to go with the SimplyOne and buy up option while Lewis, Gebauer and Cathy Lemke were opposed.

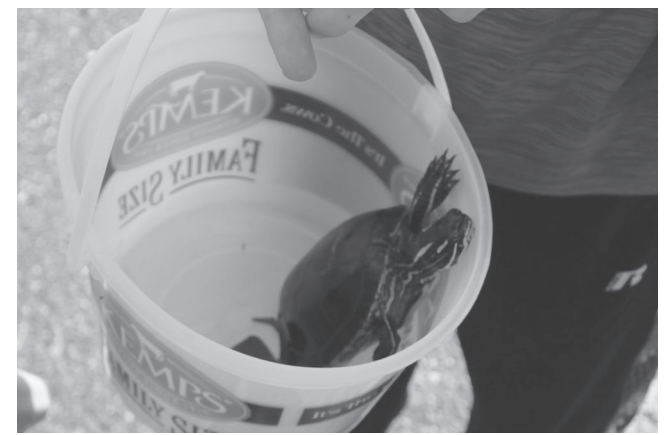
### Employee wage increase

Committee members moved on to the potential for wage increases. Brandl estimated that each percent of wage increase figured out to about \$80,000 of budget impact average across all the county employees.

Zenner proposed a 5% increase, noting that previously the committee had talked about 3% but noted with the insurance changes they could potentially afford more.

“I think 5% is too much,” Mildbrand said. He said it is always nice to be able to help county employees to navigate through high inflation periods, he said every-

**“I think 5% is too much”**  
**— County Board member Scott Mildbrand reacting to a proposal by finance and personnel committee chairman Chuck Zenner to increase base wages by 5% next year.**



EMILY GOJMERAC/THE STAR NEWS

Father Patrick McConnell, pastor at Holy Rosary Catholic Church in Medford blessed the pets of parishioners and students at Holy Rosary School on Tuesday afternoon in honor of the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Franciscan order and patron of animals, merchants, and ecology in the Catholic Church.



one is watching their 401Ks go down and the price of gas going up. "It is important to help employees through that, but it is also important to help taxpayers navigate through," he said. "Our taxpayers are paying these bills, we can't forget about them."

"I think 5% is pretty fair," Gebauer said, noting the county is losing good employees because of wages.

"What about the taxpayers?" Mildbrand asked. He noted that with the adjustment in the compensation plan some employees could see a 7.5% increase this year. "That is too much," he said.

"Not everyone is going to get that," Zenner said.

In the end, committee members voted in favor of a compromise increase of 4% with Mildbrand opposed.

### Last minute budget cuts

Coming out of the discussion of wages and health insurance committee members then looked at the overall budget picture with a combination of cuts, use of fund balance and short term borrowing to get the levy down and the overall taxes down to the goal of an 8% increase over the current year.

While typically at this point in the budget process, committee members would be tying up loose ends in order to get the budget ready for publication, committee members weren't finished with making substantial changes.

Mildbrand proposed that rather than applying \$200,000 of fund balance to the budget, the county should apply \$400,000 and reduce the amount they needed to borrow. He said that in the long term, the answer to the county's budget problem is to have fewer employees and pay the remaining employees more. He said the best option to do this is through attrition, which he described as being a "friendly departure."

"I think our committees and this committee need to be really diligent starting now that when a position opens up we question do we really need that position," Mildbrand said. He called for the county to have a goal of having five less employees by this time next year.

"I think it is possible to do that and not have a reduction in service," Mildbrand said.

Along that same line, Lewis suggested that with the announced plans for the county surveyor to retire late next spring that the county not rehire for the position and instead look at contracting some of those services out.

In addition, he said there were other areas he thinks the county could save money. He made a motion, seconded by Thums, to withdraw the \$30,000 per year the county contributes to the Taylor County Housing Authority. "That was always supposed to be self-supporting," he said, saying he didn't believe they should be paying taxpayer money for it. Tied to that, he called for the county to switch to contracting with Northwest Regional Planning Commission to administer the county's CDBG housing grants which he said would be done at no additional cost to the county.

Zenner questioned how the Housing Authority would be able to survive with the county pulling its funding and disagreed with going to the Spooner-based NWRPC noting that especially for older people having someone to talk with here was important.

Thums disagreed saying they could reduce budget costs without reducing any services and that all the work could be done via telephone or online. "The service will not disappear," he said.

"I feel it should stay here," Zenner said.

Brandl noted that most of the grants the Housing Authority operates under are in the Housing Authority's name, those would remain with the Housing Authority. While the county has a representative on the Housing Authority board and it has office space in the courthouse, it is separate from the county as a stand-alone entity.

At this point in the meeting, committee members Soper and Lemke had to leave to go to a land conservation committee meeting. As a result the vote on Lewis's motion to withdraw the county funding from the Housing Authority passed on a 4 to 1 vote with Zenner opposed.

Lewis was not finished cutting and noted that at about 18,000 acres the Taylor County forest is one of the smallest in the state. He said he checked with other counties and was told Taylor County was overstaffed. He made a motion to cut the department by one employee. Thums seconded the motion. This would leave just one employee in the department.

Brandl estimated this would result in about a roughly \$100,000 reduction.

## "We are here to look out for the taxpayers"

— County Board member Rollie Thums supporting a call to cut a position out of the county's forestry department saying the two-person department is overstaffed.

Lewis said he thinks the county would have to do some contracting for things the county is currently doing such as trail maintenance.

"I will not vote for this," Zenner said. He noted the county has relied on this department for revenue and it has been a good money-maker for the county. He said he felt they should leave well enough alone.

"We are here to look out for the taxpayers," Thums said supporting making the staffing cut. He said he agreed with Mildbrand's sentiment of having fewer people and paying them better. "Our function is to run a county," Thums said. He raised the county's use of borrowing in the budget and questioned what the interest would be. Brandl said he has already locked in interest rates from local institutions and that with the borrowing being under 90 days, the amount of interest would not be very much.

"I think both suggestions should fall under the entire county board to decide. Those are major decisions," Mildbrand said.

Zenner defended the use of the borrowing, noting it was not something they were seeking out to do, but it was because the state legislature did not give them the ability to raise the levy as they needed to in order to meet rising costs.

As far as bringing those changes to the full county board, because they are being approved as part of the budget changes, they would not come as a separate line item, but would have to be brought up by a board member to be addressed during the October 26 county board budget session.

Zenner and Mildbrand voted against making the cut to the forestry department staff with Gebauer, Thums and Lewis voting in favor of making the cut.

On a voice vote, committee members voted to apply \$400,000 of fund balance rather than \$200,000 to the budget. While committee members expressed a desire for this to come out of the forestry department's land acquisition account, any adjustment

or spending from that account requires action from the full county board. At the meeting, Brandl said he expected borrowing would be about \$700,000 with the changes, although he said it could be less after he factored in the changes made.

## "I think both suggestions should fall under the entire county board to decide. Those are major decisions"

— County Board member Scott Mildbrand about proposed cuts to Taylor County Housing Authority and the forestry department.



# Tax rate projected to drop as county comes in under cap

BY BRIAN WILSON  
NEWS EDITOR

Thanks to cuts and use of fund balances, Taylor County is coming in below its maximum allowable tax limit.

On Tuesday, members of the county's budget review committee met to finalize and approve the budget to be presented to the full county board on October 26. Members of the committee included Chuck Zenner (chairman), Scott Mildbrand, Lester Lewis, Ray Soper, Catherine Lemke with county finance director Larry Brandl coordinating the process.

The budget hearing will be held at 10 a.m. on Oct. 26, with action on the budget to occur that day.

The budget was presented to the committee with a projected county levy of \$13,682,100 which would have a tax rate of \$8.07 per \$1,000 of equalized value. After going through the review process including cuts, applying additional fund balance and other changes, the committee approved sending a budget with a \$12,376,998 levy with a tax rate of \$7.64 per \$1,000 of equalized value.

In setting the rate, the county used \$1.5 million of anticipated county sales tax revenue to reduce the budget.

The tax rate for the 2022 budget was \$8.11 per \$1,000 of equalized value. The county's tax rate is projected to drop by \$0.47 per \$1,000 of value resulting in a tax savings of approximately \$700 on a home valued at \$150,000.

The equalized value for all property in the county was set by the Wisconsin Department of Revenue at \$1,695,402,100 an increase of \$169,076,000 or 11.1% over last year.

As in the past, the county is under a county levy limit freeze imposed by the state. The allowed levy limit is the 2022 adopted county levy plus a .881% increase, plus the county special levies for ambulance, bridge aid and libraries, plus allowable debt service adjustments. Based on this formula, the total maximum levy for the county is \$13,644,849. The proposed 2023 budget of \$12,945,513 will be under the allowable maximum limit by \$699,336.

While initially the county had looked at the option of utilizing short term borrowing to exceed the revenue cap, and that option remains on the table, based on changes in the county budget Brandl said that may not be as necessary this year. The county is planning to borrow funds for capital projects and with the total repayment built into the tax levy this year allowing the county to pay the loan back in under 90 days.



SUBMITTED

Volunteers were busy over the weekend helping the Medford Area Chamber of Commerce decorate the city of Medford with harvest-themed pumpkins, hay bales, flowers and other seasonal decoration.