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Tax solutions elude Sanborn residents

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One local leader is increasingly convinced that the state won't step in to solve a crippling tax problem in Sanborn — though lawmakers say they're not giving up.

Ashland County Administrator Dan Grady said he believes residents in Sanborn and in Bayfield County's town of Russell likely will have to seek their own solutions to the problem that saw some property taxes double this year.

State Rep. Chanz Green and Sen. Romaine Quinn, though, told the Daily Press they still are seeking solutions — though they also acknowledged that they've discussed dissolving the town entirely.

Eighty-five percent of Sanborn's land was declared tax-exempt last year when a federal appeals court ruled that Bad River tribal members who own property that was once sold to non-native tribal residents but has come back into tribal hands cannot be taxed under the 1854 treaty between the United States and the Ojibwe Nation. The ruling leaves the remaining 15% of property owners bearing the tax burden for the entire town of Sanborn.

"Realistically, I don't think they're going to give us anything," Grady said of the state during a recent county Finance and Economic Development Committee meeting.

Green said the issue stretches well beyond Sanborn because the impact of the court decision extends across much of northern Wisconsin around established reservations at Red Cliff, Lac Courte Oreilles and Lac du Flambeau.

Residents in Russell, for example, which sits adjacent to Red Cliff, saw their property taxes increase by 30% this year as a result of the ruling.

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TOM STANKARD/STAFF PHOTO

ABOVE: Supporters embrace Ashland teacher and tennis coach Bob Graf after his contract was renewed Wednesday. Graf was reportedly under fire from parents who wanted him dismissed for his open support of LGBTQ+ students.

TOM STANKARD/STAFF PHOTO

More than 100 supporters waited outside school district offices for word on whether Graf would return to his classroom.

Embattled Ashland teacher's contract renewed

About 100 attend meeting in support

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More than 100 students, parents and others gathered at the Ashland School District office Wednesday to support a teacher who faced losing his job for his open support of the LGBTQ+ community.

People carried signs saying, "We Love Bob" and yelled messages of support for art teacher and tennis coach Robert Graf as administration and school board members met to discuss whether

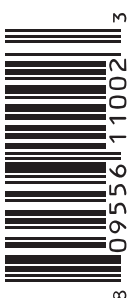
to renew his contract after some parents reportedly voiced concerns about him. Graf said he was placed on administrative leave in recent weeks, pending Wednesday's meeting, after parents told the district he made some kids "uncomfortable."

As Graf and others exited the building after the school board met behind closed doors for more than two hours, Graf gave a thumbs-up, indicating the district had renewed his contract.

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RELIGION COLUMN

Creativity to the rescue

An artist recently shared with me that much of her inspiration comes from the mistakes and mishaps that happen when working with a piece. Whatever preconceived idea was there, when something goes awry, a new form emerges. Often these become her favorite pieces of art. This reminded me of a quote by author Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The two terrors that discourage creativity and creative living are fear of public opinion and undue reverence for one's own consistency."

I have been thinking a lot about creativity recently as we enter into the time of year in Creation Spirituality known as the via creativa, which I understand as the time from the spring equinox to the summer solstice. It is known as a season of birthing in the northern hemisphere, when plants begin to bud and leaves unfurl, baby animals are born and the whole world seems to hum with productivity. In spiritual communities that honor the seasons, such as Celtic Christianity

or Celtic Spirituality, the via creativa is described as a breakthrough, or the point at which we are called to co-create by birthing God's presence into the world. One author, Donald Schmidt, explains it this way: "We are creative beings, and yet so often, we are denied our creativity. Or we deny it in others. Or we believe those who tell us we are not, or cannot, be creative. To be creative in a god-like way is to celebrate what has been created, including ourselves, and to open ourselves to the life possibilities within each of us."

This is a time of year when art appreciation such as visiting galleries, listening to music, and taking in beauty is encouraged. Yet creativity is not reserved for those who identify as artists. Creativity can be a way of life, and if appreciated, cultivated and practiced as the via creativa, it can be a way of life in harmony with all of creation.

I recently made a mistake that turned into a lesson. During a worship service, the music director flagged me

over and pointed at the order of service, and yes, I had accidentally skipped two of the musical selections. I asked if we could move one to another part of the service, and he gave the approval. It just so happened that some deep and tender sharing happened at the service, which was followed by this forgotten song. It was an instrumental version of Sidney Bechet's "Petite Fleur" which was introduced as an ode to the crocus and all of the little flowers that surprise us with their tenacity as they bloom right alongside the melting snowbanks. The song held the moment perfectly. There is nothing I could have said or done that would have provided just the right note of hope despite insurmountable challenges that this moment called for. It was another reminder why worship and ritual include art and music. So often, creativity comes to our rescue in moments of sorrow or joy. Sometimes, it's the mistakes that lead to a whole new possibility.

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STACY CRAIG

Teachers/from A1

"We are now in a time where certain students and parents, even communities, can weaponize words. When they hear those words, they have to react because they want to protect kids. Words that are used right now are things like 'pedophile' and 'groomer.' And unfortunately, adolescents at this age in the middle school, they're just learning about a lot of people. Unfortunately, there are some people who feel like, if I make an accusation, I can get that teacher out of my room, and that's really unfortunate," he said when asked what happened to put his contract into question.

School Board President Jeff Moravchik declined to comment after the meeting about what the board discussed or who raised concerns about Graf's performance.

Among those who gathered outside during the meeting to support Graf was Ashland freshman Dorian Foster, who came out as queer last year. Foster said Graf knew what Foster was going through during that difficult time and made it a point to be supportive.

"He was one of the most important people for me in that school. He is supportive and cares about you, no matter who you are, what you believe or what you look like," Foster said.

Foster has since joined group co-sponsored by Graf called the Gay-Straight Alliance. Through the alliance, Foster felt like she was part of a community, and enjoyed making new friends



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

A group of local pastors attended Wednesday's gathering to support Graf and the students who he has helped.

in the group.

Foster was one of many students who voiced their appreciation for Graf. Seventh-grader Harper Hollis-Heidenreich told the crowd she came out as "mostly" queer recently and received support from Graf when no one else stood by her.

"He has always given me a safe place. It's really great to have someone to talk to at the school," she said.

Coworkers said they admire Graf's love for students. Bayfield School District teacher Zach Larson worked with Graf from 2015 to 2021 in Ashland and said he looked up to Graf as a role model because Graf always had an outstanding rapport with kids.

"He always brought humor, he always brought fun," he said in front of the crowd. "He has all the qualities as one of the greatest educators I ever met."

Not all administrators at the district feel the same way, Larson said.

"You can see the community loves him, but right now that level of respect is not coming from the administration. That's kind of been an ongoing problem. It was when I was here. It continues to be a problem and teachers need respect," he said.

Ashland Superintendent Robert Prater declined to comment about the matter.

Graf said after the meeting he could hear the support from crowd inside the building during the meeting. As he walked outside, he tried his best to hold back

tears. Doing so proved to be difficult as students and supporters hugged him to congratulate him.

"I'm ecstatic, absolutely ecstatic," he said after hugging someone. "The hardest thing about the last month and being out has been being away from my kids. I know that I'm a safe place. The output from the overflow of families that I was getting from the community was literally amazing."

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Taxes/from A1

Bayfield County Administrator Mark Abeles-Allison also has been working with Green and Quinn to come up with a solution on behalf of Russell residents.

"We need assistance to address it. Our local economies have been structured this way for many years. With this change, we need assistance in the form of a financial perspective for local governments," Abeles-Allison said.

That message has been relayed back to Madison, Quinn said.

"I am working with my colleagues in the Legislature to provide a solution in the state budget that recognizes the local commitments that were made to close that funding gap, as well as providing increases in shared revenue to affected towns," he said.

As time goes on, however, Grady said he is worried the state will tell the county to handle it themselves.

Quinn disagreed. "The court's decision put local municipalities and taxpayers in a position they did not ask for nor did they create," he said.

Abeles-Allison said he remains hopeful that a short-term solution can be found while a long-term plan is worked out.

"Everything has been discussed," Green said. "A lot of factors come into play. I want to make sure everyone involved is treated fairly."

Green did not elaborate on solutions that have been proposed.

As a result of the court's decision, taxes have gone

up from about \$2,168 on a \$100,000 property last year to \$4,438 this year in Sanborn. As dire as that sounds, Bad River Tribal Chairman Mike Wiggins Jr. has said tribal members suffered for more over the years as they were unfairly taxed.

Following the court's decision, tribal members have been seeking a return of about \$750,000 and interest on taxes dating to 2015 that shouldn't have been collected, according to the town. Grady said the town was seeking a loan from the Bureau of Public Land Commissioners to refund those taxes.

Sanborn Clerk Jamie Weaver declined to comment on the matter, referring questions to Chairman Luis Salas, who couldn't be reached for comment.

Addressing the problem now and in the future may require multiple remedies to ensure taxpayers are not driven out of their homes — or subsidizing residents who aren't paying for services they receive, Quinn said.

"Viable solutions will require the state working together with local communities and tribes," he said,

As talks continue, Abeles-Allison said he remains optimistic that the state and federal governments will help find those solutions. But Grady fears that if a fix can't be found, the town of Sanborn may be forced to dissolve. If that happened, Green pondered who would pay for or provide services to residents.

"It has been discussed. We would want to make sure people are provided access to services (currently being provided)," he said.

3 Things/from A3

What to expect: Brett and the Little Big Show will perform as a fundraiser for the Chequamegon Humane Association.

•FIX-A-FLAT REPAIR CLINIC

When: Saturday from 5-6:30 p.m.
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What to expect: Bay City Cycles mechanics will lead you through the process of taking the wheel off your bike, taking the tire off the wheel, identifying the cause of the flat, using a patch kit and putting it all back together. Bring your bike or practice with a provided wheel.

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