



COVID-19 changes Vets' Day plans

Public access will be limited, or banned altogether, at many indoor ceremonies scheduled for this year's Veteran's Day observance on Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2020, according to area sources.

The restrictions/cancellations are all caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, sources in area communities said.

In some cases — such as the village of Cameron — no ceremony will take place, according to Cal Briggs, Pieper-Marsh American Legion Post 194, Cameron. Briggs added that public events for veterans will be postponed until after the first of the new year.

At Prairie Farm School, Principal Casey Fossum said that a live program — normally performed for veterans and the public in the school gymnasium — will be recorded as a video instead, and will be posted on the district's Facebook page.

At Barron, a traditional outdoor ceremony is scheduled to take place at 11 a.m. next Wednesday, Nov. 11, at the flagpoles outside the north entrance of the Barron County Government Center, according to Brown-Selvig American Legion Post 212, Barron.

However, that will be the only ceremony to which the general public has access.

A series of indoor ceremonies is also scheduled Nov. 11 at Barron Area School district buildings, but attendance will be limited.

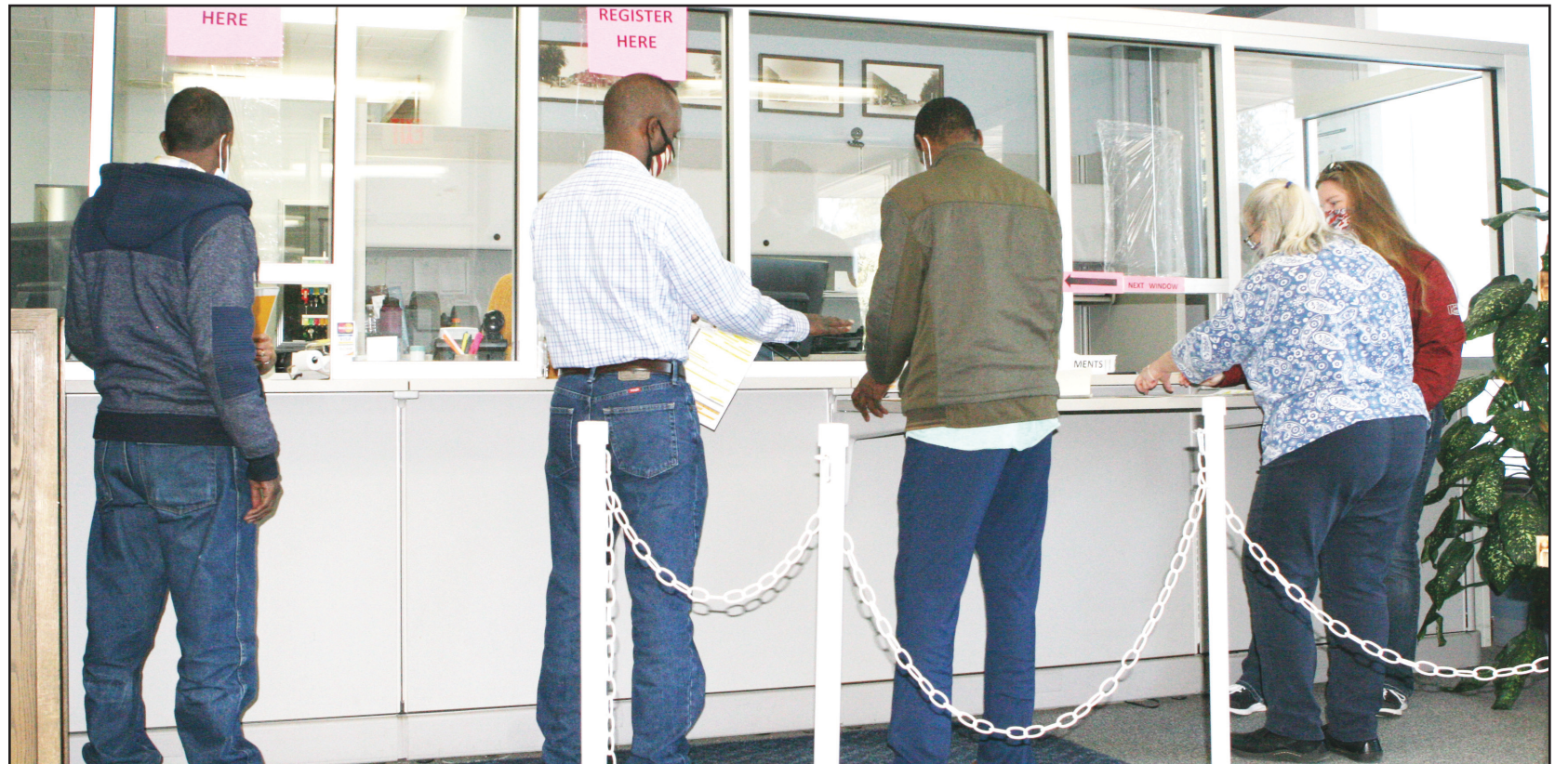
Barron High School music teacher Marty Pederson said that veterans will be invited to watch a performance by the school band and choir at 8:20 a.m. Nov. 11, but that no students and parents will attend.

The ceremony will be live-streamed for BHS students and staff, as well as the general public, he added.

The next ceremony will be at 9:15 a.m. at Woodland Elementary School, where there will be a discussion about the importance of Veteran's Day in relation to freedom, sacrifice and gratitude, according to Principal Jennifer Clemens.

Students will then meet veterans at the flagpole outside the school for a flag raising, the playing of Taps, and a rifle salute, she added.

Three other district schools will host similar outdoor ceremonies, including Riverview Middle School at 10 a.m., Almena Elementary (Barron Montessori School) at 10:30 a.m., and Ridgeland-Dallas Elementary School at 2 p.m.



Busy Election Day at City Hall -- The same-day registration desk was just as crowded as the rest of Barron City Hall early Tuesday afternoon, Nov. 3, 2020. City Hall workers reported there was a line outside the door well before the polls opened that morning. A steady stream of voters were in and around the building at lunchtime, and well over 800 absentee ballots had already been returned before the polls opened, sources added. **Photo by Bob Zientara**

Trump carries Barron County

Armstrong wins assembly race

Election Day did not conclude with a clear winner at the top of the ticket, but down-ballot, voters elected Republicans Tom Tiffany and Dave Armstrong to seats in U.S. Congress and the Wisconsin Assembly, respectively.

As of midnight, Armstrong carried 61% of the vote to win handily over Democratic challenger John Ellenson. In Barron County, vote totals were 15,337 for Armstrong and 9,611 for Ellenson.

"I'm humbled and honored to be chosen by the voters of the 75th (Assembly) District," Armstrong said in a text message sent just before midnight Tuesday.

As a first-time candidate, Armstrong said he was "grateful that voters saw past the negative campaigning and chose the person they felt is best able to represent them in Madison."

Ellenson did not immediately respond to requests for comment as of deadline Tuesday night.

Armstrong prevailed in a race where the issue that took center stage was his own social media behavior. Armstrong expressed support for QAnon conspiracy theories, retweeted a video featuring KKK leader David Duke, and used some offensive language on Twitter a number of times over several years. But the majority of voters were not dissuaded from Armstrong, who has been Barron

County's Economic Development director for several years while serving on various other commissions and community boards.

Tiffany was reaffirmed as northern Wisconsin's choice for U.S. Congress, as he defeated Democrat Tiffany wins again

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Contested elections News-Shield circulation area		
Office	Barron County	Statewide*
• President of the United States		
Donald Trump/Mike Pence, R	15,797	1,524,383
Joe Biden/Kamala Harris, D	9,188	1,416,060
• 7 th Congressional District		
Tricia Zunker, D	9,114	159,576
Tom Tiffany, R	15,930	246,271
• 75 th Legislative District		
David Armstrong, R	15,337	20,102
John Ellenson, D	9,611	12,133

Sources: Barron County Clerk's Office, Wisconsin Votes
Percent of precincts reporting at 2:13 a.m. Nov. 4: *97% **98% ***98%



Surprise visit—Donald Trump, a tireless campaigner, was in Barron Friday and again Monday, seated at the intersection of Hwy. 8 and North Mill Street (just outside the Ed Halverson residence) waving a salute to passing motorists, many of whom returned the gesture with return-waves and horn honking. His appearance undoubtedly gave his campaign a last-minute boost here, although not everyone was thrilled by his 11th hour appearance. **Lindsey Bell photo**

Ryan Urban named News-Shield editor

Ryan Urban has joined the Barron News-Shield as its next editor.

Urban had been employed at the Rice Lake Chronotype for the past 6 years and was previously editor of The Chetek Alert from 2012-2014.

"I am excited to be working for a locally owned news organization once again," he said. "My colleagues at News-Shield and Bell Press have a wealth of experience and dedication to local news."

Urban is succeeding Bob Zientara, who will continue to work part-time

as the News-Shield's contributing editor.

"Bob is a consummate pro, and I look forward to collaborating with him in providing comprehensive news coverage to all of Barron County," said Urban.

Urban is originally from Milladore, Wisconsin. He graduated from Burnside High School, and earned a degree in English and writing from UW-Stevens Point in 2010. He and his wife, Anna, live in the Town of Stanford.

COVID-19 cases continue to climb

Barron County Department of Health & Human Services reported 331 new cases of COVID-19 in a seven-day period ending at 2 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 3, 2020.

Two new deaths were also reported, bringing the county's total to nine fatalities since the outbreak began last March (see related story).

The county also recorded several new "public exposures" to the coronavirus during the same week.

For the week ending Tuesday, Nov. 3, DHHS reported exposures at the following dates, times and locations: Mister Bob's, Rice Lake, Monday, Nov. 1, from 12:45 a.m. to 2 a.m.

Jay Bird's, Rice Lake, Saturday and

Sunday, Oct. 31 and Nov. 1, from 11 p.m. to 12:45 a.m.

St. Croix Casino, Turtle Lake, three exposures, including: Friday, Oct. 30, from 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Saturday, Oct. 31, from 10 a.m. to 8:15 p.m.; and Monday, Nov. 1, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. and from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Casa Mexicana, Rice Lake, Wednesday, Oct. 28, from 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.

Club Cumberland, from 7:30 p.m. Oct. 23 to 2:30 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 24.

Shananigan's, Rice Lake, from 4:30

(See COVID page 2)

Life's work continues for Zientara in semi-retirement

By Ryan Urban

From A to Z, Bob Zientara—or 'Z' as the busy editor signs his emails—has covered all types of news stories around Barron County.

This week marks his last as editor of the Barron News-Shield, as 'Z' transitions to semi-retirement as contributing editor of the 144-year-old community newspaper.

News-Shield Publisher Mark Bell said, "Bob brought a career of knowledge to our newspaper. Whether covering crime, school news, the county board or a major breaking story, Bob does so thoughtfully and fairly."

"He has a great nose for news. Where an average reporter might see an obituary, Bob sees a feature story. Wherever news was happening in Barron County over the better part of the last nine years, Bob was there."

Zientara grew up in Cicero, Illinois, and graduated in 1971 from Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, with a bachelor's degree in journalism.

He began his career working for a chain of weekly newspapers in the Chicago suburbs, but soon headed north to Wisconsin lake country, which made an impression on Zientara in his youth.

"I began visiting the Rice Lake area in the early 1970s. My uncle and aunt (the late Eugene and Joan Wyka) owned and operated Bear Lake Resort near Haugen," he said. "It was that connection that gave me a bit of knowledge about Barron County, and led to my job at the News-Shield in the mid 1970s. I met my wife at almost the same time I started working here."

He spent the next 29 years in northwestern Wisconsin, including the News-Shield from 1975 to 1976, the Ladysmith News, 1976 to 1984, the Hudson Star-Observer, 1984 to 1997, and the New Richmond News, 1997 to 2004.

Zientara spent the next 7-plus years in Iowa, first doing stories with the

Des Moines Register. Later, he was an education, business and political reporter for the Ames Tribune.

He returned to Barron County and the News-Shield in 2012. He and his wife Beverly built a home in Rice Lake in 2014. They have three grown children and seven grandchildren.

"I've done some work in larger news contexts—including two rounds of the Iowa Caucuses and, unfortunately,

the Closs case two years ago. But I am most at home with community journalism," said Zientara.

As contributing editor, he will continue to cover some general news, court beat and community news in Almena, Dallas, Poskin, Ridgeland and around the area.

"Bob filled our pages with interest-

(See Zientara page 12A)



Editorship changes hands—Ryan Urban, left, has become the new editor at the Barron News-Shield, taking the position being vacated by Bob Zientara, right, who is retiring. **Jim Bell photo**

cia Zunker for a second time in a 6-month span.

As of late Tuesday night, Tiffany carried more than 60% of the vote.

Tiffany will have 2 more years in Congress, having also beaten Zunker in a May 12 special election. The special election was held to decide who would serve out the term of Rep. Sean Duffy, who resigned in November of 2019.

In Barron County, vote totals were 15,930 for Tiffany and 9,114 for Zunker.

Close race for president

As of press time it was not clear if Donald Trump or Joe Biden had won the presidency. Wisconsin's vote totals remained incomplete, but Barron County tallies were complete. Trump and Vice President Mike Pence were favored in Barron County with 15,797 votes (63%) to 9,188 for Biden and his running mate Kamala Harris.

By comparison, 2016 vote totals were 13,606 for Trump and 7,879 for Democrat Hillary Clinton, with 1,158 going to third-party and write-in candidates. In 2020, only 348 votes went to such candidates.

Statewide results were still being tallied well into the night, particularly in the state's biggest cities, in part because all early ballots are counted separately.

Clerk out with COVID

Barron County Clerk DeeAnn Cook confirmed Tuesday, Nov. 3, that she is isolating at home with COVID-19, but assisting somewhat in tallying election results.

Cook has been at home since Oct. 29.

"I tested positive so I can't go back to the office for two weeks," Cook said in an email message.

"I'm very thankful for technology because I can do almost everything from home," she added. "But I feel horrible deserting my deputy (Jessica Hodek) at the busiest time ever!"

Cook said her symptoms were fairly mild, including a slight fever and slight cough.

"Not feeling ill at all," she added. "If I actually felt ill, it wouldn't be so hard to stay home but I will do what I'm told to do."

Cook was also elected on the ballot unopposed, as were Register of Deeds Margo Katterhagen, Treasurer Yvonne Ritchie and District Attorney Brian Wright.

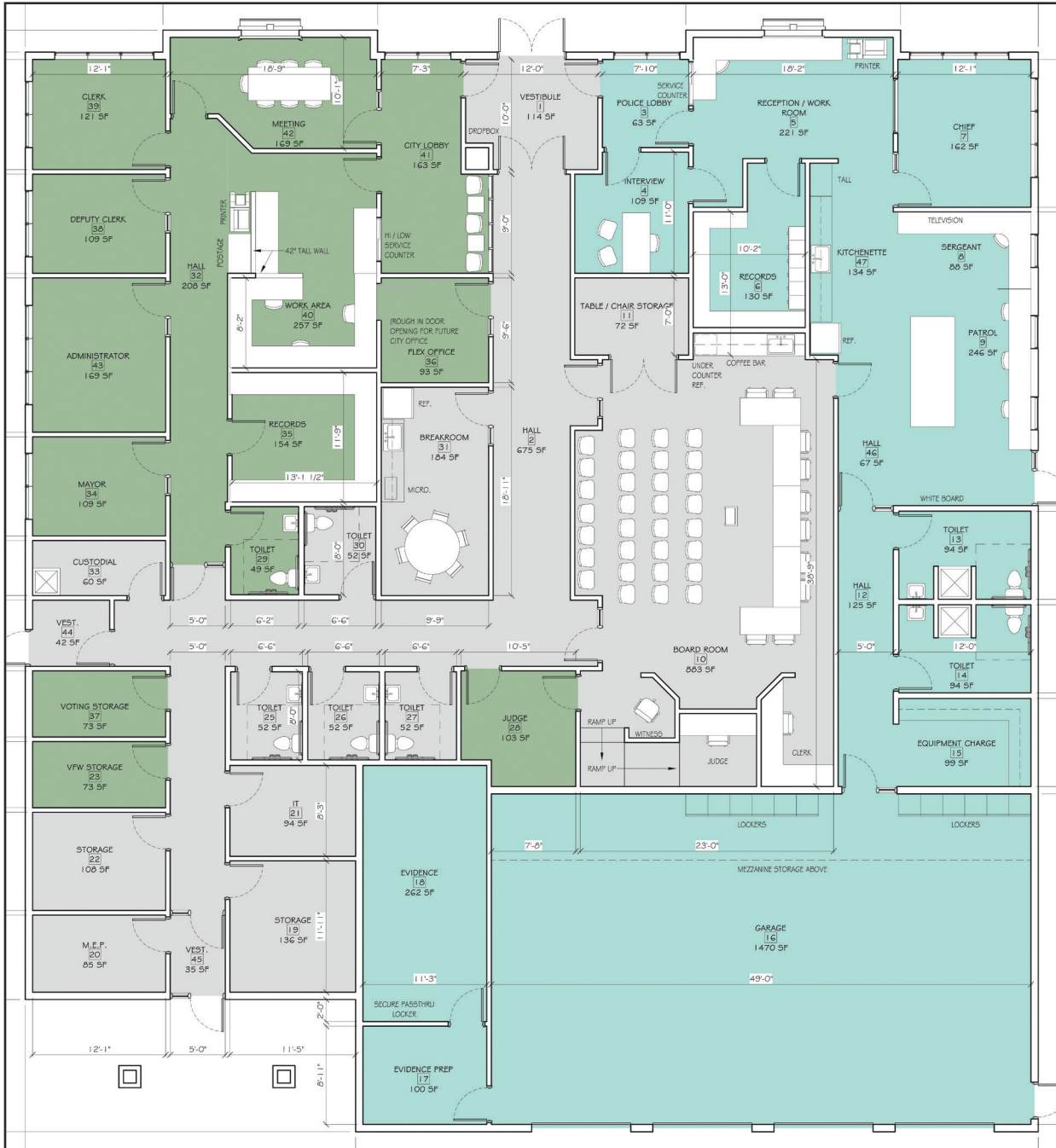
Referendums
There were three referendums on the ballot in the News-Shield circulation area.

Voters in the city of Barron approved a non-binding referendum to have the Wisconsin Legislature design a nonpartisan process to draw new legislative district boundaries in the state. The vote was 966 yes to 393 no.

District boundaries will be re-drawn in 2021 for all state and federal elective offices in Wisconsin, a process mandated by the U.S. Constitution after each federal Census is taken.

In the town of Vance Creek, voters supported two proposals to convert the elective offices of clerk and treasurer to appointive positions. The clerk proposal passed 249-yes to 117 no, while the treasurer proposal was supported by a 244-113 margin.

Bob Zientara, Ryan Urban and Carl Cooley contributed to this report.



Proposed Barron Municipal Center — The city of Barron proposes to build a new structure at the southeast corner of La Salle Avenue and Fifth Street (site of the former Family Dollar store). Covering roughly 6,900 square feet, the ground floor of the municipal center includes space for city administration (shown in green in the above floor plan), the Police Department (shown in blue) and common areas (shown in gray) that include the Council Chambers, as well as meeting, storage, custodial and restrooms. Image provided by Cedar Corporation, Eau Claire.

Budget reflects city's plans for 2021 and beyond

The city of Barron is preparing to adopt a municipal budget for calendar year 2021 that calls for total spending of \$2,407,102 and a property tax levy for long term debt approaching \$350,000, according to figures reviewed earlier this month by the City Council.

With the help of Milwaukee-based Robert W. Bird & Co., the city is restructuring its long-term debt to allow for the borrowing of an estimated \$3.5 million in 2022.

If the city does borrow the funds, it will help finance a new municipal center proposed for the former Family Dollar (also known as the Farmer Store) property, at the corner of East La Salle Avenue and Fifth Street.

The city has already agreed to sell its existing City Hall site (the former home of Barron Electric Cooperative) to La Crosse-based Kwik Trip for just over \$1 million.

Combined with long-term debt restructuring, a \$1 million federal grant, and the expected long-term borrowing package, the city expects to set the stage for construction of the municipal center, a municipal garage near 14th Street and Woodland Avenue, and reconstruction on a four-block stretch of La Salle Avenue, from the intersection with Memorial Drive (on the east) to Seventh Street on the west.

The project is the first phase of a multi-year city effort to replace century-old underground utilities on La

Salle Avenue through much of downtown Barron.

City Administrator Liz Jacobson said Friday, Oct. 23, that discussions are still ongoing regarding the purchase of two "big-ticket" items — a new dump truck for the Street Department and a new "rescue truck" to replace a used vehicle purchased about seven years ago.

Deputy job dispute in county budget

By Carl Cooley

Barron County's budget resolution for 2021 was passed on a vote of 22 for and six against, with one board supervisor absent on Monday evening, Nov. 2.

The budget met challenges from a small contingent of supervisors who disagreed with expanding the sheriff's department to make the recreation officer a fulltime position. They said it violated a two-year moratorium on new hires and increases to the sheriff's department budget that was enacted after an oversight issue in 2018.

The new position accounted for an extra \$151,879 in the budget for a new sheriff's deputy position, which

Mike Romsos, chief of the Barron-Maple Grove Fire Department, said last week that there was a rescue vehicle on the market for about \$125,000, but it had been purchased by another department. He said the Fire Department is searching for an alternative.

also included a \$30,000 Department of Natural Resources grant.

After the budget resolution was brought to the floor for discussion, Supervisor Bob Rogers, Dist. 1, town and city of Chetek, made a motion to remove the financing be amended "by eliminating the additional funds for the patrol position for the sheriff's department and directing that those funds for that position—which amounts to \$56,000 for the squad and equipment and \$65,879 for salary—be reallocated to capitol projects, for instance, upgrading this auditorium," Rogers said. Rogers' motion was seconded by Supervisor Bob Anderson, Dist. 24, town of Rice Lake.

Rogers said the sheriff's department was in the middle of a two-year ban on new hires and budget increases under a corrective action plan approved in June 2019.

"The original corrective action plan was very clear as it was written. No new hires for the sheriff's department for a period of two years," Rogers said. But it was one year later, in September 2020, when a clarifying resolution gave exceptions to new hires to address public safety issues, and to a lesser extent, increases to normal operating contracts for medical and food service at the jail.

"In my mind, the clarifying resolution is [...] a loophole," Rogers said. "We've passed legislation and a resolution specifically to get a loophole in place and it troubles me."

Rogers recognized the need and value of having a recreation officer monitor the county's trails, woods and waterways, and help secure grants for outdoor recreation.

Deputy Jeff Wolfe, the current part-time recreation officer, does and would do a great job, and Fitzgerald and his department had Rogers' support, he said.

"But couldn't we have waited just one year, to allow the corrective action plan to take place? Why didn't we do that?" Rogers asked the board.

The original action plan should be restored and that could free up \$121,879 for other projects, such as upgrading the auditorium where the meeting was taking place. Upgrades were discussed at last month's meeting.

Gary Taxdahl, supervisor for Dist. 8, town of Almena and village of Turtle Lake, agreed with Rogers.

Please see above

"I think people have forgotten the gravity of what happened when the sheriff [...] signed a three-quarter of a million dollar contract obligating the county," Taxdahl said. Any other department head would have been fired, he said. But the sheriff was elected and could not be fired and that is why the corrective plan was enacted.

He did not think it was important to hire a new fulltime officer this year.

"As a county board, do we say what we mean? What kind of a message are we sending to other departments [if the plan was not followed]?" Taxdahl asked.

Supervisor Jim Gores, Dist. 9, town of Clinton and village of Almena, said he was not happy with the sheriff's original financial oversight. But ATV trails were being used more during the pandemic.

"I just think that there is a need to have that be a fulltime position," he said. Gores was also concerned the DNR grant was not guaranteed next year.

Supervisor Bill Schradle, Dist. 7, towns of Turtle Lake, Vance Creek and Prairie Farm, agreed with Rogers' views. It set a poor precedence, but agreed the sheriff does a great job, Schradle said. The job could wait and upgrades to the auditorium were needed.

Bob Anderson, supervisor for Dist. 24, town of Rice Lake, expressed his support for the department and its deputies. With the pandemic, there were fewer court cases and the bailiff was now being utilized in other positions. Anderson felt that deputy could help the rec officer, the department could maintain four deputies on duty at all times and the department could wait one more year for the new position.

Chief Deputy Jason Leu said the county only has four deputies on duty for about 50 percent of the time. The rest of the time there is just three on duty because they are short-staffed, Leu said. The bailiff was helping out with patrol positions but it was not enough to free up Wolfe for recreation duties. It would be costly to cross-train other positions to fill other gaps, Leu said.

But because of COVID-19, there were many more people on the trails and lakes, said Bun Hanson, supervisor for Dist. 21, city of Rice Lake. "The miles of trails we have now, need attention," and was a big deal for tourism in the county, he said. Supervisor Pete Olson, Dist. 12, city of Barron, agreed with Hanson, noting more municipalities were opening up their streets to ATV traffic. It was a matter of public safety.

Fitzgerald added that the recreation officer also helped oversee grants and projects received by area snowmobile and ATV clubs. The officer helped manage administrative duties, including the individual land-use agreements with each owner that had a trail cross their property.

It would also help cut down on overtime, especially when there were big outdoor events like concerts on the lake.

Fitzgerald said the DNR grant occurs every year and that the more hours the rec officer works, the more money is funded.

Supervisor Dana Heller, Dist. 23, city of Rice Lake, saw the benefits of having a fulltime position by securing more grants and doing more patrols on lakes and trails. Since Wolfe was being moved from parttime to fulltime, was it should be excluded from the ban, he added.

Supervisor Terry Lee, Dist. 4, town of Prairie Lake, did not like going against the corrective action plan, but tourism was a big driver of the county's healthy sales tax revenue. Tourism must be promoted and the rec officer would help that, he said.

John Banks, supervisor for Dist. 3, city of Chetek, asked if the position could be approved but the corrective action plan extended one more year. County Board Chair Louie Okey, Dist. 16, towns of Cedar Lake, Doyle and Oak Grove, said it was not possible since it was established with a resolution.

"If you make rules and then you don't go by them, then you have no rules," Taxdahl leveled. There were irresponsible riders on the trails, but

responsible riders report them and a rec officer was not needed now. It was more important to follow the corrective action plan and rectify a "major infraction of a county policy," he said.

Okey called the question.

Supervisors Rogers; Banks; Schradle; Anderson; Taxdahl; Tod Gerland, town of Stanley and city of Rice Lake; and Jerry McRoberts, Dist. 19, city of Rice Lake, voted for the amendment to remove the new rec officer position from the budget.

Twenty-one other supervisors voted against the amendment. Supervisor Don Horstman, Dist. 26, towns of Cumberland and Stanfold, was absent.

With the amendment failed, Rogers made an objection to the original motion on the budget. He claimed the budget—with the new position—was improper because it did not follow the corrective action plan and increased the sheriff's budget.

Okey countered that this position was needed to address public safety issues, which was allowed by the second version of the corrective action plan.

Rogers said his objection did not require a second, but did require a ruling by Okey, and if orderly, a two-thirds vote.

Olson requested a point of order and a 10-minute break for County Administrator Jeff French and Corporation Counsel John Muench to determine how to address the objection according to Robert's Rules of Order for meetings.

After the break, Okey ruled that Roger's objection was in order and it now went to a vote before the board.

French explained that if at least two-thirds of the supervisors voted "yes" on the objection, it would pass the budget without funding for the new position. If more than a third said "no," it would kill the objection and the board could then vote on the budget as originally presented, with the new position.

On the objection question, seven supervisors—Rogers, Banks, Schradle, Anderson, Taxdahl, Gerland and

McRoberts—voted in favor of it. Twenty-one voted against it, killing the objection.

Okey called the question on the original motion to approve the 2021 budget, which required a simple majority to pass.

Only six supervisors—Rogers, Banks, Schradle, Anderson, Taxdahl and Gerland—voted against the budget. Twenty-two supervisors, including McRoberts this time, voted for the budget and it was approved.

Zientara

Continued from page 1

ing copy from his first week on the job, and I look forward to his future contributions," said Mark Bell. "I have no doubt Bob will enjoy new found free time. Whether relishing his many hobbies, such as hiking, kayaking or gardening; taking in ball games or spending time with his grandchildren, Bob will make the most of well deserved retirement years."

The change comes amid a pandemic and a historic election and all-around turbulent times in Barron County and beyond. But the veteran newsman sees cause for optimism.

"I believe strongly in free, compulsory K-12 public education and a representative form of government. I agree that the process often looks like 'making sausage.' But we have the strongest nation and society on earth. I think public education and representative government are two of the most important reasons why that happened," he said.

Zientara added that journalism must continue its crucial role as America's Fourth Estate.

"At a time when both newspapers and revenue are shrinking or disappearing, there is still a vital role for newspapers to play in their communities," said Zientara. "No one is better equipped to inform readers, interpret the news, and keep an unbiased (if critical) eye on local government, than the local journalist."

History of sheriff budget corrective action plan

The 2021 budget issue was due to restrictions placed on the sheriff's department in 2019 and altered in 2020. Restrictions were placed on the sheriff's department after the sheriff secured long-term financing without proper oversight or county board approval.

In February 2018, the county approved the sheriff's department to spend \$321,932.10 for a new computer-aided dispatch system called Spillman.

Around that time, Sheriff Chris Fitzgerald entered into a multi-year financing contract with Spillman for the product and support services. With the initial payment and four annual payments of \$105,576.60, the total package cost \$744,238.50.

However, Fitzgerald did not have the authority to enter the county into a contract of this size and nature and

in 2019, it was discovered the annual payments had not been budgeted for. The county rectified the shortfall by issuing general obligation debt to pay the outstanding \$422,306.40 balance in January 2020.

In light of the oversight, county board chair Louie Okey drafted a 10-point corrective action plan. It set policies for oversight on the department's budget, assets, sales, general operations and contracts. The plan also froze the sheriff's budget and restricted new hires for 2020 and 2021.

The corrective action plan was approved by a resolution in June 2019 and clarified in September 2020 to allow new positions to address public safety concerns and allow for specific and minor budget adjustments, such as wage increases or for food services and medical services at the jail.



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