

Trail Grooming Arrangement Draws Debate Between Snowmobile Clubs, DNR

By Ryan Schlehuber

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and volunteer snowmobile trail grooming groups have reached an agreement that will allow grooming and funding to be resumed for at least this year, but some of the groups say they are still working to change state funding guidelines that were issued two years ago.

Agreements with all of the 69 snowmobile trail grant sponsors have been reached, the DNR announced Thursday, December 20. The groomers maintain more than 6,546 miles of trails. Most are volunteer snowmobile clubs like Straits Area Snowmobile Club in St. Ignace and Les Cheneaux Snowmobile Club in Clark Township. Other groomers are private businesses and tourism agencies.

The state's snowmobile trail grooming system is funded mostly through \$25 trail permits required for snowmobiles used on state trails. The program also receives some funding through snowmobile registration fees and state gas tax revenue.

Mackinaw City

Underground Power Lines Need Repair

By Paul Gingras

Mackinaw City residents accustomed to bright and elaborate Christmas lights in the village have complained about the lack of holiday lighting this year, a problem addressed by Village Manager Jeff Lawson at the Thursday, January 3, village council meeting. He said the dwindling number of lights on East Central Avenue is related to underground electrical-system failures. The electrical system along East Central needs to be replaced, he said, and the cost is estimated at \$350,000. The village is likely to receive \$240,000 in state grants for the road work, he added.

A section of lights on the 100 and 200 blocks of the road has failed, owing to broken and corroded electrical lines underground. So far, no street lights have gone out, probably because they are connected to thick power lines. Thinner underground wires that power Christmas lights have succumbed to surges and corrosion, Mr. Lawson said.

"If we do not correct this situation, we could get [more breaks] in the future, and probably will," he said. The electrical system involves 15 to 20 lines beneath the sidewalks.

In the meantime, the village is looking for a new electrical company that specializes in tracing specific types of underground wires. Charlevoix Electrical Service, which installed the system in 1989, is under new ownership and no longer does this type of work.

"The objective is to replace the system over the next several years, prior to resurfacing [Central Avenue] in 2011," he wrote in his report to the council.

The village must pay to repair the electrical system. Mr. Lawson noted that as much as \$175,000 worth of the project can be done by village crews.

Village President Ronald Wallin called for a "responsible party" to explain the reason for the council's vote to remove Florence Tracy and Nancy Dean from the planning commission last month, one meeting after they were approved. He called for an explanation at the next village council meeting Thursday, January 17.

Mr. Wallin discussed the need for council business to take place in public view, referencing the Open Meetings Act, which enables citizens to know what their elected officials are doing by mandating that they meet and deliberate in public.

While a question-and-answer period with city attorney Tom Evashevski Thursday, December 20, and resulting newspaper coverage brought public attention to the

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The DNR will give \$5.8 million of the \$7.3 million from the snowmobile trail grooming program to trail partners this year, with \$1.2 million to be used for administrative costs. The \$5.8 million reimburses groups according to the number of miles groomed that season.

Each club, or grant sponsor, is reimbursed by the state for expenses, such as insurance. The Straits Area Sportsmen Club and Les Cheneaux Snowmobile Club will each receive a base reimbursement of \$56,721 for grooming 101 and 109 miles of trails, respectively.

The state also pays \$90 per mile for brushing and cleaning trails, as well as installing and maintaining signs, said Neil W. Hill, vice president of the Straits Area Snowmobile Club.

Clubs say problems still must be worked out in the DNR's reimbursement program.

"The program has always worked that clubs put some money in it and, as long as you use the groomers five years or more, we get to own the equipment," he said.

At right: The Straits Area Snowmobile Club, created in 1989, grooms 101 miles of state snowmobile trails in the Eastern Upper Peninsula. The club's tractor has a front groomer that can tilt side to side for better clearing of snow, said Club Vice President Neil W. Hill. Pictured are (front, from left) Club President Jim DeKeyser, Mr. Hill, and (back) groomers Dave Hiser and Gerry Riley. Groomers missing from the photograph are Nick Oliver, Jim Krug, and Keith Grogan.

"Now the state is saying they get that equipment back, but clubs have long-term and back-up plans that may be washed out now."

The DNR's guidelines made two years ago require all used equipment to be returned to the state, leaving clubs with no returned equity on the 40% investment they made in years past, when they helped purchase new groomers.

"Many grant sponsors were upset because they had sweat equity in the old equipment and aren't getting anything back," said Martin Cottle, treasurer for the Michigan Snowmobile Association. "Many club members believe we paid for 40% of that equipment and we are



owed that. That was the biggest issue with the new wording in the handbook, which we are still trying to work out."

The trade-in value of the used

equipment, especially if it was kept in good condition, Mr. Hill said, was essential to long-term planning for clubs seeking to accumulate funding to build storage buildings for equipment, something the state does not cover in the program.

"It was hard to get ahead before, and now it's just that much harder," he said. "We're not making any money here. We're doing this for the love of snowmobiling and to build winter tourism in our area for businesses and visitors."

Mr. Hill pointed out that volunteer clubs like his and Les Cheneaux are not getting any reimbursement for actual labor, routine maintenance, or unexpected repairs to equipment.

"It is all supposed to be volunteer," he said. "There are no funds

for routine maintenance of tractors, or for a storage garage."

Reimbursement funding is made over a number of payments, while clubs are expected to "float" expenses until funding becomes available 45 days after it is approved, which, Mr. Hill believes, is a way for the state to collect interest.

Covering the cost of diesel fuel can be challenging for clubs, especially when there is no snow to groom. Clubs get reimbursed only for actual grooming, explained Mr. Hill, however, the fuel truck comes only once a week to St. Ignace, so the Straits club purchases the fuel when it comes, and hopes to be grooming that week to get reimbursed by the state.

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First Grade Class Donates \$172 to Project Hope

Students in Kathy Everson's first grade class at St. Ignace Elementary School pose for a picture celebrating their contribution of \$172.90 to St. Ignace Area Project Hope. The money was generated this fall through a pumpkin decorating contest at Autumn Apple Days in St. Ignace, in which the public dropped money into jars beside their favorite pumpkins, decorated by various classes. The winning class was allowed to choose a local charity for the funds. Pictured (not in order) are Riley Allen, Philip Campbell, Ben Coveyou, D'Angelo Davis, Hunter DeKeyser, Victoria Geldner, Gabrielle Grigsby, Colby Harmon, Hannah Harvey, Dakota Holbrook, Kylee Horn, Emma Ingalls, Andrea Kinjorski, Shawn Livingston, Jason Matlock, Andy Metz, Randy Rickley, Gavin Smith, Kayla Smith, Lacilynn Soblaskey, Saylor Sorenson, Anton St. Andrew, Aubree Vallier, and Michael West.

City of St. Ignace Begins Review of Charter Bus Station Funding Becomes Available

By Karen Gould

The 38-year-old St. Ignace city charter will be reviewed over the next three months to find out-of-date material and identify changes that will make the document more useful to government. The city council, meeting Monday, January 7, said it will also ask for suggestions from the city staff.

"It's our job, as the seven of us, to decide whether or not this document is something we can continue to live with," said Mayor Paul Grondin, "or it's a document that needs to be changed."

Beginning in February, Council plans to discuss the charter during the first meeting of each month; chapters 1 through 5 will be reviewed in February, 6 through 11 in March, and 12 through 16 in April.

In other business, City Manager Eric Dodson said the state has given the city a one-year extension to complete a \$5 million upgrade to the 20-year old wastewater treatment system, because grants and funding schedules did not line up. A Michigan Department of Environmental Quality administrative consent order had required the city to make improvements by November 15, 2008. A conflict in requirements from the State Revolving Fund led to postponement of the deadline to July and November 2009.

"The good news about that is the longer we can sit and wait to construct," said Mr. Dodson, "the longer we don't have to pay a bond payment."

The consent order required the city to complete force main work and replace plastic pipe on Reagon Street by November 2008. The extension, said Public Works Director Les Therrian, now moves the work to July 2009. Liners, screening, and other upgrades was moved to November 2009.

Replacement of the gravity sewer line on Portage Street, between Fourth Street and State Street, is being planned, he said, although it now won't begin until 2010 or 2011.

Funding for the planned bus station in St. Ignace is again available, said Mr. Dodson, after the state's budget crisis put the project on hold last year. Because of the delay, the state will need to approve about 3% more funding for the \$1.3 project.

"There is no city money being invested in this whatsoever," he reminded Council.

Planned to be built on the corner of Church Street and US-2, discussion now is underway between the design firm DLZ and Indian Trails and an update on the project is expected within the next two weeks.

"I'd like to have this thing built in 2008," he said.

The city is offering Open Meetings Act training February 27 at 2 p.m. in the council chambers, although it could be moved, depending on the number of people interested in attending. The seminar is in response to notice given Council by Mackinac County Prosecuting Attorney Fred Feleppa last November that Council could not meet in executive session to

negotiate contracts with non-union employees. The St. Ignace News had charged the city had violated the Open Meetings Act when it gave building inspector Paul Sved an 8% pay increase in September.

Council approved a taxi cab license for Anthony Fehrenbach of St. Ignace.

A wine tasting with music, called "Live at the Pavillion," was approved. Planned for the summer and early fall, the event will take place each Tuesday from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. beginning July 1 and ending September 30.

Mr. Dodson also gave Council written updates, which were not discussed during the meeting, on several ongoing projects.

Development is underway on the city's Web site with a goal to provide minutes, ordinances, and general public information.

The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians is withholding \$52,000 from Pittsburgh Tank until the Evergreen Shores water tower repair is finished. The company is waiting for warm weather to paint the tank.

A bid opening for two police cars and a grader is set for the first council meeting in February.

Council took no action on a letter that Dafter resident John Lechner read during public comment. He had written the letter to 11th Circuit Court Judge William Carmody in support of his friend, Kevin Samphere of St. Ignace, who was convicted in September of child abuse.

Council next meets Monday, January 21, at 8 p.m. at the St. Ignace Library.

Show Will Draw Top Skaters to Little Bear East Next Week

Ice Follies To Raise Funds for Abuse Prevention

Top-level figure skaters will give audiences at Little Bear East Arena in St. Ignace an outstanding Ice Follies show, said organizer Mary Pemble Swiderski.

"We are really excited about the skaters who are coming this year," she said. "This is going to be a fabulous year for the show."

The third annual ice skating show will take place at 1 p.m. Sunday, January 20, raising funds for prevention programs for child abuse and neglect in the county.

Lyndsay Schrader, a senior ladies level figure skater, will be the highlight for the two-hour program. Ms. Schrader is a two-time gold medalist in the National State Games of America competition and is a member of the Northern Michigan University figure skating team in Marquette. She also coaches the Marquette Figure Skating Club. Ms. Schrader is retiring from figure skating competition this year, but will continue to coach.

The Twin Bay Figure Skating Club of Traverse City will also be a part of this year's Ice Follies. The 26-person group is a top-level award winner in figure skating, ice dancing, and pairs skating. The club is a two-time champion of the National Showcase in Fort Collins, Colorado, and will feature its award-winning figure skating production of "Hairspray" at the Ice Follies as the closing of the show.

Gold medal synchronized fig-

ure skaters of the club will perform, as will its top solo figure skaters, who have performed at the National Showcase Competition in Balencia, California.

Also performing are local figure skating sisters Katie, 15, and Linda Raynard, 9, of Pickford, members of the Hiawatha Skating Club in Sault Ste. Marie. Katie has been skating for 11 years and is at the novice figure skating level, while her younger sister has been skating for six years and is at the preliminary level.

St. Ignace City Manager Eric Dodson will be the event's master of ceremonies.

Advance tickets are \$5 per person and \$20 per family (up to eight family members). Tickets are \$6 per person and \$26 per family at the door. Tickets are available at the St. Ignace Recreation Department in Little Bear East, the Chamber of Commerce, U.P. State Credit Union in St. Ignace and Cedarville, B-n-L Cafe, Central Savings Bank in St. Ignace and Pickford, First National Bank main branch, D&D Mobil Mart in Engadine, and at the Michigan State Extension (MSUE) office in the annex building of the county Courthouse.

The Ice Follies is sponsored by the Mackinac County Child Protection Roundtable. Call Mrs. Pemble Swiderski at the MSUE office at 643-7307 for more information.

Grondin of St. Ignace Named Interim Tribal Police Chief

Sergeant Dan Grondin of St. Ignace will be the interim chief of police for the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, the

tribe announced Monday, January 7, during the absence of Fred Paquin, who has been suspended since August.

Ferry Service Schedule Reported

Arnold Transit's ferry *Huron* will continue to provide transportation between Mackinac Island and St. Ignace until further notice.

A reduced schedule was issued Friday, December 27. Three boat trips between the two cities will be offered six days a week. There

will be no service on Sundays. From St. Ignace, the *Huron* will sail at 7:30 a.m., 11 a.m., and 3:45 p.m. The boat will leave the Island at 8:15 a.m., noon, and 4:30 p.m.

In winter, the boat often provides transportation until ice forms between the Island and mainland.