

# Social Services Programs Appeal to County Commission for Same Funding as Last Year

## Commissioners Learn Health Insurance Costs Will Rise by 7%

By Karen Gould

Social service organizations appealed to county commissioners to maintain the same funding levels for the coming year as they received in 2008. The county invested \$94,900 in the social welfare of its residents in 2008. Commissioners say they still are reviewing the 2009 budget, which they must adopt by December 31.

During the budget planning session Tuesday, October 21, commissioners met with representatives from the Department of Human Services, Community Action Agency, Hiawatha Behavioral Health, and E.U.P. Regional Planning and Development. They also heard from insurance representative Greg Cheeseman on rising health care insurance costs.

Ken DesArmo, director of Mackinac/Cheboygan County Department of Human Services, along with board members Philip Ruegg and Louis Litzner, requested continued funding of \$11,000. Board Chair Helen Johnson was unable to attend the meeting. Mr. Ruegg and Mr. Litzner are appointed by the commission and Mrs.

Johnson is a state appointee. "Our board here is one of the best boards I've ever worked with," said Mr. DesArmo of the human services board. "The one thing that really stands out about this board is they are not only sensitive to people in need in the community, but at the same time, they're very conscious of the money, and that's a good combination."

The state agency administers financial assistance and operates social programs to help families. Programs include children's protective services, foster care, food stamps, senior citizen daily care.

There are 1,417 county residents, about 12% of the population, said Mr. DesArmo, who receive assistance.

The agency was slated to move to Cheboygan several years ago, Mr. DesArmo said, the board convinced the state to keep an office in St. Ignace. Representing Community Action Agency were Donn Riley and Don Wright. The agency receives \$30,000 from the county to support the Meals-on-Wheels program, which provides nutritional meals to 747 senior citizens.

More than 19,500 meals were delivered in 2008 and about 12,500 meals were served at the senior centers in Cedarville, Curtis, Engadine,

**At right: Preparing to serve a meal at the St. Ignace Community Action Agency on Reagon Street Friday, October 24, are (from right) assistant cook Darlene Brown, head cook Sheri Gould, and volunteer Mark Broden.**

and St. Ignace. The agency receives \$84,000 in federal and state funding for Mackinac County. The agency also asks participants for a donation. For meals on wheels, the average donation is 60¢ a meal and for meals at the centers, the agency receives an average of \$2.10 per meal. The cost for raw food for a meal has risen from \$1.50 per meal in 2007 to \$1.76 by mid-2008.

"When you multiply that by tens of thousands of meals" said Mr. Riley, "that 26¢ is a lot of money. I can see possibly a meal costing \$2," he added. "That's going to be devastating."

Sam Harma, director of Hiawatha Behavioral Health, and Patti Crawford, finance manager, asked for a renewal of \$45,900. The funds represent the county's match, set in 1997 when the agency was formed. Chippewa County contributes \$169,000 and Schoolcraft County provides \$70,000 in funding. The



of E.U.P. Regional Planning and Development, requested \$10,000 for county support. Projects planned for the coming year include drafting an M-134 Heritage Route management plan, which is a three-year process. Work continues on the non-motorized trail that would run from St. Ignace to Drummond Island. A recycling education program for Luce and Mackinac counties will include community workshops and school presentations. Technical assistance for economic development district planning will continue to be available to local governments.

Services are available to communities on a fee basis, and in 2008 included assisting Portage Township in writing a Master Plan and working with Garfield Township on updating its Master Plan and zoning maps, Mr. Hagen said.

Mr. Cheeseman, insurance agent for the county from the Cheeseman Agency, advised commissioners that health insurance costs are rising again in January. The 7% hike will cost an additional \$32,000. Last year, the county paid \$456,000 for health insurance coverage for employees.

Mr. Cheeseman suggested that reducing office visit coverage could cut the premium increase in half. The county, not the employees, would absorb the additional co-pay for office visits. It would only save money, therefore, if the additional co-pay for employee office visits is less than the \$16,000 in reduced premium.

agreement is that the match requirements can not be increased, although they can be reduced, depending on expenses.

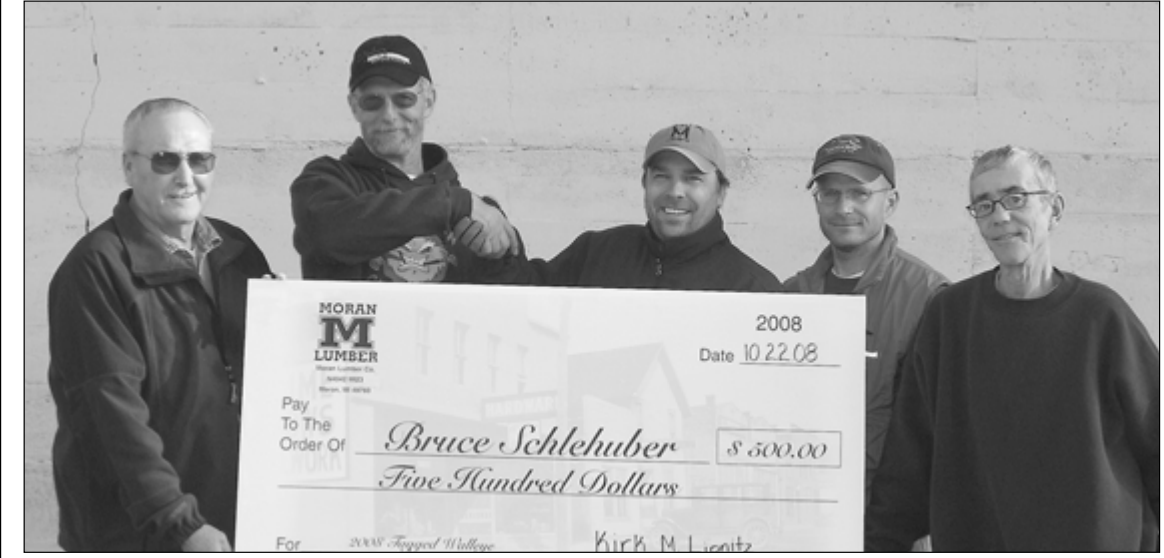
The agency serves about 200 to 230 ongoing cases each year, not including crisis cases. About 15% of the agency's clients come from Mackinac County, said Mr. Harma,

a relatively consistent number through the years.

The agency operates with a \$15.6 million annual budget. Total expenses for the county were about \$2 million, \$1.8 million of that spent on services to residents and \$264,000 for administration.

Jeff Hagen, executive director

## Elusive Walleye Landed by Schlehuber at Brevort Lake



**Bruce Schlehuber of Moran caught a walleye that has eluded anglers since it was tagged for the Brevort Lake Walleye Derby this past spring. While fishing with Steve Sayles and his son, Troy, Sunday, October 5, Mr. Schlehuber caught the walleye using a chartreuse night crawler harness in about 14 feet of water. When tagged, the walleye was 16-1/4 inches in length, and had grown to 18 inches when caught. Moran Lumber offered a \$500 reward for the tagged walleye, which was presented Wednesday, October 22. Pictured are (from left) Jimmie Miller, Mr. Schlehuber, and Moran Lumber employees Kirk Lipnitz, Lee Kanitz, and Darryl "Smitty" Smith. There are two more tagged walleyes in Brevort Lake that have yet to be caught. Moran Lumber will pay a \$200 reward for each fish. The next tournament will be the Brevort Ice Jamboree February 14 and February 15, 2009.**

## Lack of Jobs Means Wage Withholding Not as Effective in Mackinac County Economy Challenges Child Support Collections

By Ellen Paquin

The lack of steady jobs here, the poor local economy in general, and an interest rate the state tacks onto child support payments are all factors that can work against parents, making it easier for them to fall behind in their payments, and making it harder for court officers to collect them, says Bruce Cranham.

Mr. Cranham is the Friend of the Court in this county and also serves as a referee who presides over family hearings to make recommendations to judges about child support and custody in five counties, including Mackinac.

When parents are divorced and can't reach decisions together about their child's living arrangements, support, or even medical care, they need someone who can look beyond the couple's personal differences and help decide what's in the best interests of the child. That's the typical situation that brings Mackinac County families to the office of Friend of the Court, he said.

He makes decisions for families who are in crisis, and whose emotions are involved in the process, Mr. Cranham said, so many times, it's impossible to find a decision that makes both parents happy. Often, the job is about solving two main problems: getting child support payments that are owed to the parent who has custody of the child, and getting fair parenting time for the parent who does not have the child full time.

"The two most important things to people are their children and their money, and we are involved with both," Mr. Cranham said. "The family is not intact anymore and we have to make decisions that won't please everybody. Divorce is not an easy time in anyone's life. Friend of the Court can't change people's personalities, so the problems that will be there in the marriage will often still be there after the marriage."

In Mackinac County, Friend of the Court is currently working on about 720 cases. The bulk of its workload, roughly 75%, involves trying to get child support payments into the hands of the custodial parent who needs them to provide for the child, said enforcement officer Kathleen Smith.

Some of the methods that work well for this in other parts of the state, such as withholding wages, don't work as well here because of the county's high unemployment rate. If a non-custodial parent – the father, in about 85% of local cases –

is not paying child support, the Friend of the Court office has several ways it can collect that money for the child. It can order a garnishment of his wages and savings account, it can intercept his tax refund, it can take money from a worker's compensation payment, and it can intercept per-person payments that are given by some Indian tribes to their members. The office also intercepted money from many of the Economic Stimulus checks that went out to local taxpayers this summer.

If a parent falls behind on child support payments, the office reports the fact to credit bureaus, and can suspend the parent's driver's license, occupational licenses, and access to Department of Natural Resources licenses.

The local office has about an 80% success rate in collecting the money without a problem. But what happens in a case when these methods are not working?

A hearing before the court is often the first result. Jail time can also be used as a punishment, Mr. Cranham said, although this method isn't an effective way to collect money.

Parents who do not pay are summoned to court for a show cause hearing, in which they are asked to explain the circumstances that have prevented them from paying. They can be called before Mr. Cranham for hearings an unlimited number of times – and many are.

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## Developer Offers City Rights To Waterfront Land

### Zoning OK'd for New Hotel on Mackinac Island

By Ryan Schlehuber

A year from now, the open waterfront property across from McNally Cottage in downtown Mackinac Island may become a hotel and retail complex, or it may continue to offer a view of the harbor, as it has for many years.

To work with the city, and those in the community who would like to see the open space preserved, business owner and developer Ira Green has agreed to hold off on building plans for a year to allow the city to mull the idea of purchasing development rights of the lot from him. He received zoning approval to do so from the Planning Commission Thursday, October 16.

If the city chooses not to purchase the development rights of the property, Mr. Green will proceed with his plans to build a three-story, 25-room hotel and three-unit retail complex. He intends to incorporate his bicycle business into the larger retail unit on the first floor of the building, and lease out the other two units.

He has a year before his zoning approval expires. At that time, Mr. Green will need to purchase a building permit and submit construction drawings to the city's building inspector.

Mayor Margaret Doud told *The St. Ignace News* that it is possible the city may be interested in purchasing the development rights to the waterfront property.

The lot includes a two-story building that once was the Donnelly and McNally meat market and was later used as a state liquor store. In recent years, it has been used as a bicycle rental shop by the Iroquois Hotel and was sold last year to Mr. Green, who operates it as the Mackinac Island Bicycle Shop, with a second outlet

at the Lake View Hotel.

Tom Pfeiffelmann and Gwen Baker own Island Bicycle Livery and rent part of the empty lot for their rental operation.

The waterfront parcel is part of the McNally Cottage property across the street. Mr. Green purchased both lots earlier this summer. He is selling the cottage to a local buyer and is close to completing the deal, he told the *Town Crier*.

Both McNally Cottage and the old meat market building are historic, and contributed to the Island's National Historic Landmark designation. The city recently has become worried that losing too many of its historic buildings could jeopardize that designation.

Mr. Green said he is willing to sell the development rights to the waterfront property as long as he is able to continue to operate his bicycle businesses and keep the 100 bicycle licenses he has now at the former meat market building, and 25 at his shop on Hoban Street. The Pfeiffelmann and Baker bicycle operation has another 200 licenses.

If Mr. Green goes forward with plans to build the hotel, it will trigger city discussion of street congestion from the bicycle rental operations. The city worries about too much traffic in the vicinity of the Shepler and Star Line passenger docks and a change of building use already has given city officials the opportunity to reassess the merits of a bicycle rental operation there.

"We definitely have to know how it's going to work there with drays, bicycles, and people coming and going from the docks," said Planning Commissioner Mary Dufina, "but the building he proposed is very nice. There is a lot of thought and consideration that must go into this."

bine the existing building with new construction on the empty lot to make a hotel, and move his bicycle operation into part of the lower level.

Mrs. Dufina is one advocate for seeing the open, scenic view of the waterfront preserved.

"I'd like to see some entity or conservancy purchase it," she said. "I don't know if the city should be involved or not."

Councilman and Planning Commissioner Michael Hart also is afraid of losing one of downtown's last open views to the water.

"It doesn't matter to me who is involved," he said. "It's a loss of open space and lake view, and completion of a tunneled downtown. It seems we're in a race against our own complacency because we are now pressed for retention of some vestige of original ambiance, historic preservation, all of that."

Mr. Green's offer to the city, said Mr. Hart, "is certainly grounds for really good discussions [on] the whole thing."

Mr. Green, speaking with the *Town Crier* Friday, October 24, said he can be flexible.

"There are a lot of politics involved here, but I am not trying to make this controversial," he said.

"There are those who feel strongly that the space should be open and there are those who feel strongly that the city should build its tax base," said Mr. Green. "I don't want to be in the middle, so I offered a year for the city to decide if they want to buy the development rights to the property and keep it open."

"If the bicycle licenses stay as they are, and it's in the city's best interest to keep the building in a contributing status, then I will agree to do so. I'm willing to cooperate." Council has yet to schedule a meeting to discuss Mr. Green's offer further.



**Jamie Stelmaszek, master instructor of Tae Kwon Do and organizer of the cage fighting event set for Saturday, November 1 at Little Bear East Arena, prepares the base for the cage Thursday, October 23.**