

# Health Insurance Restrictions Are Cause of Concern in Potential School Layoffs

## Les Cheneaux District Checking Into Other Options To Solve Problem

By Jonathan Eppley

Of the several factors contributing to the revenue deficit at Les Cheneaux Community Schools, employee health insurance is causing headaches for the Board of Education.

The board faces the dilemma of whether it can remain on its current health insurance plan or revert to a former, more expensive, plan. For many, the choice would be to stick with the inexpensive plan, but the choice before the school board is a complicated one.

For many years, the district provided full-coverage, premium-based health insurance to its employees. When Blue Cross Blue Shield changed its requirements for self-funded insurance programs in 2004, the district made the switch, saving more than \$200,000 in annual insurance costs.

To qualify for the self-funded insurance plan, the district needs a minimum of 50 employees. The

district met that requirement until last spring, when several staff members left the district's employ, and several positions were consolidated, lowering the number of employees to 48.

Because of the reduced number of employees, the district may be forced to revert to the previous premium plan, however, if two employees were to be hired, the district could remain on the self-funded plan without a problem.

The dilemma is that with the \$134,000 budget revenue deficit, the district cannot afford to hire two more employees. Principal Amy Scott told *The St. Ignace News* it is cheaper to hire two employees than to return to the old insurance plan, but the lack of funds in the budget doesn't allow the district to do so.

The deficit in the district's revenue is the reason 13 employees have been given 60 days notice they may be laid off. That notice was made November 19. If the

district has to switch back to the previous insurance plan and layoffs become necessary, the money saved by not employing these 13 people would be put toward the district's deficit and paying the higher cost of the premium plan insurance, said Ms. Scott.

District Superintendent Rod Goehmann said the district pays

about \$505,000 a year, or about \$10,500 per employee, not including prescription medication coverage, on the current self-funded plan. If the district has to switch back to a premium plan, it would cost the district about \$750,000 a year, or about \$15,500 per employee.

The difference between the two types of plans is that under a full coverage plan, the employer pays

an annual fixed premium rate per employee, and under a self-funded plan, employers pay only incurred costs and typically provide additional stop-loss coverage. Stop-loss coverage covers claims that exceed a certain amount.

Mr. Goehmann said the district is exploring options to remain on the self-funded plan, including renegotiating with Blue Cross Blue Shield to lower the minimum

number of employees required, and if the district can partner insurance plans with another district.

"All we can do is put forth the request," he said. "If they allow us to do that, we would move in that direction."

The district is working with a Blue Cross Blue Shield agent to see if such renegotiations are possible, Mr. Goehmann said.

## St. Ignace Welcomes Santa With Parade, Tree Lighting

At right: Snowflakes in the air help make Santa and Mrs. Claus feel right at home Friday evening, December 5, as they arrive in St. Ignace aboard a firetruck and are greeted by Mayor Paul Grondin and his granddaughter, Jennie Bird. Here, Mayor Grondin presents the key to the city to the couple, who led the countdown to the lighting of the community Christmas tree near the marina. Then, Santa and Mrs. Claus were off to the Pavillion Mall on State Street, where area children patiently waited their turn to climb on Santa's lap to tell him their Christmas wishes.



A snowy march down State Street for the annual Christmas parade was a fun adventure for Gros Cap School students (from left) Lillian Calcaterra, Cole Thompson, and Rebecca Brown.



Rosy cheeks and chilled fingers didn't stop (from left) Emily Goudreau, Ally Bird, and Trevor Soblaskey from offering a smile and a wave as they participated in the Christmas parade.

## Northern Michigan News Roundup

The news in brief from communities around the U.P. and northern Michigan

Compiled using information published in various community newspapers.

### Kiwanis Club Gets Physical To Boost Scholarship Fund

To raise funds for local youth scholarships, Kiwanis Club of Petoskey members are taking pledges from people as they pursue individual goals in the physical activity of their choice, such as running, walking, or bicycling specific distances. The members choose their own activity and schedule, and ask people for financial donations for scholarships as they accomplish their goals. Many have set up their own online pages at a fundraising Web site where donations can be made, and others are accepting donations in person.

— Petoskey News Review

### Petoskey, Gaylord Report Strong "Black Friday" Sales

Despite concerns about a faltering national economy, retailers in both Gaylord and Petoskey reported they were pleased with "Black Friday" shopping on the day after Thanksgiving, November 28. Some noted shoppers traveling from nearby communities, including Mancelona and Alanson, to take advantage of sales that day. Downtown shopping in Petoskey was judged to be successful, with most parking spaces filled and many shoppers carrying bags, according to the Chamber of Commerce there.

— Gaylord Herald Times and Petoskey News Review

### New Park, Two New Stores Indicate Momentum for Downtown Sault Ste. Marie

A new pedestrian park at the corner of Portage and Ashmun streets in downtown Sault Ste. Marie, which will host summer farmers markets, and two new stores that have opened in the downtown district have provided some encouraging momentum for the business climate there, says Lee Brown, director of the Downtown Development Authority. New stores are Christian Freedom International Imported Handcraft Store and Riverstone Gallery. She also pointed to a handful of building renovation efforts going on downtown and the potential to hold other events and demonstrations in the park, in addition to the farmers market, as positive signs for the district.

— Upper Peninsula Business Today

### Children's Camp Singled Out for Recognition

Camp Daggett, which sponsors a camp for young cancer patients near Petoskey as well as an Adventure Center that helps students and other groups develop team building skills, received the top honor from the Petoskey Regional Chamber of Commerce at an annual awards breakfast December 2. The awards recognize those working to improve local communities.

Camp Daggett is supported in part by fundraisers and volunteers from across northern Michigan, including the Upper Peninsula.

— Petoskey News Review

### Dickinson County in U.P. Says Auto Industry Turmoil Does Not Impact Its Economy

Retail businesses in Dickinson County in the Upper Peninsula are thriving despite the poor national and state economy, and officials there point to diversity in the local economy as one reason for retail success. Jobs are split evenly among service, retail, manufacturing, and governmental sectors in that county, they say, and the fairly insulated nature of the local economy is another protective factor.

"We have a localized, regional economy rather than a national one. If there are problems in the auto industry, Silicon Valley, or national banks, we might not feel the effects at all," said Bruce Ortenburger, president of the Dickinson Area Partnership. The agency combines the Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Alliance, and Tourism Association in the county.

Retail businesses account for 25% of the county's employment, and the sector has seen growth in the past year as national chains like Walgreen's and Tractor Supply have set up in Iron Mountain.

Residents are the main consumers there, the partnership reports, and this area of the U.P. also draws shoppers from nearby Wisconsin, rather than financially troubled southeast Michigan.

— Upper Peninsula Business Today

### Trail To Be Resurfaced From Alpena to Cheboygan

A \$500,000 project to resurface the rail-trail that runs from Alpena to Cheboygan is expected to begin in late 2009 or early 2010, following last week's approval by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

The project includes surfacing improvements to more than 70 miles of state rail-trail, and includes surface, grading, drainage, bridges, culverts, surface amenities, and signs.

The improvements planned for this project will mirror those that were completed on the rail-trail that runs from Gaylord to Mackinaw City during 2007.

The state legislature is expected to complete fund appropriations by the end of next summer.

This is one of 81 projects and acquisitions totaling \$48.5 million that were approved by the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund Board of Trustees.

— Cheboygan Daily Tribune

## West Michigan Television Station Will Feature St. Ignace Sites

By Karen Gould

The St. Ignace boardwalk, the Fort de Buade Museum, and the Museum of Ojibwa Culture will be featured sometime in the next six months on public television station WCET-TV in Hudsonville near Grand Rapids. They will be part of the station's "Michigan Travelogue" series, said producer Randy Cotton of West Community Education Television.

Photographs and recorded telephone interviews are being used to create the pieces, said Ms. Cotton.

This is the fourth Upper Peninsula area the series is featuring, following a feature she did on Marquette County. People interviewed there told her reduced budgets made it difficult for them to promote tourism to the north, and poor economic conditions around the state made drawing tourists even more challenging.

The Marquette segment worked so well, Ms. Cotton said, she decided the timing was right to cover more areas around the Upper Peninsula, including St. Ignace. She is finishing or has completed segments on Delta, Marquette, and Dickenson counties.

The program is produced at the WCET-TV facilities at Hudsonville High School. The nonprofit organization has three staff members and is operated largely by volunteers. The public access community education station provides equipment and support staff who assist volunteers in producing local programs.

One of the segments is based on St. Ignace history from the boardwalk, said Janet Peterson, director of the St. Ignace

Chamber of Commerce, who is working with Ms. Cotton on the project.

The Chamber will receive a copy of the final segments. Telephone charges from interviews with museum directors and staff time to gather photographs are the only costs the Chamber will incur for the segments, said Mrs. Peterson.

"Anytime we can get St. Ignace out for people to see, that's what we do," said Mrs. Peterson. "I feel that's what the Chamber is here for. If we can get three [St. Ignace] programs on, that cover the Grand Rapids area, then why wouldn't we do it?"

A slide show entitled "St. Ignace History," produced by resident Keith Massaway in the 1990s for an annual Chamber of Commerce dinner, is serving as a resource for the piece. Ms. Cotton also interviewed Mr. Massaway for the segment. Mr. Massaway's slide show, which was later transferred to video, tells the history of St. Ignace by depicting downtown buildings in the past and present.

A history walking tour booklet available for use on the boardwalk sparked the interest of residents and visitors last summer, said Mrs. Peterson, and that prompted her to suggest the boardwalk television feature. The booklet now is being updated for next summer.

Ms. Cotton will interview Judi Engle, manager of Fort de Buade Museum, and Shirley Sorrels, director of the Museum of Ojibwa Culture.

When completed, the three St. Ignace segments will be distributed in Kentwood, Wyoming, Byron Center, Grand Rapids, Lowell, Holland, Zeeland,

Hamilton, Midland, Cadillac, Lake City, Manton, and Lake Orion.

WCET-TV does not have its

own transmitter, rather the public access station distributes programming via cable public access channels.

## Grassroots Effort Succeeds in Securing Veterans Medical Clinic in Cheboygan

Community health clinics will be established for military veterans in Cheboygan and Grayling, to improve access to care for veterans in northern Michigan.

U.S. Congressman Bart Stupak announced the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs plan Thursday, December 4.

The new facilities, called community-based outpatient clinics, will become operational in early 2010. The Cheboygan and Grayling clinics will provide primary care and general mental health services and provide referrals to the Saginaw VA Medical Center for other services.

The Cheboygan clinic is expected to provide services to 1,200 patients in its first year of operation, increasing to 2,000 patients in the third year. While the facility was not included in the VA's strategic plan, it was approved after a grassroots effort by community leaders, local volunteers, and Mr. Stupak worked to convince the VA the facility was needed.

"This is great news for northern

Michigan's veterans," Mr. Stupak said. "The 1st Congressional District has more veterans than any other district in the state. Especially given the distances between communities in our area, it is critical that the VA establish these clinics to provide veterans health care services where they live."

The clinic will reduce veterans' drive time to seek care, reduce waiting times to receive follow-up care, and ease the burden on other area VA facilities, Mr. Stupak pointed out.

Local Veterans Administration officials will keep communities and veterans informed of milestones in the creation of the new clinics, and Mr. Stupak said he will continue to work with the VA and monitor the progress of the facilities.

The Grayling clinic is expected to provide services to 1,500 patients in its first year of operation, increasing to 2,200 patients in the third year. The clinics are among 31 approved in 16 states by the department.

## Pair Fall Through Ice Near Cedarville

Wayne and Claudia Brood, caretakers of the Les Cheneaux Club, fell through the ice between Marquette Island and the mainland while on a snowmobile on their way to the mainland Saturday morning, December 6.

The two spent eight minutes in the freezing waters before being rescued by visiting family member Bert Nettleton, who heard their calls for help. The Broods suffered minor bruises but no serious injuries.