

Our Mission: Providing quality services through responsible leadership, innovation and the cooperation of dedicated people

Date: Sept. 15, 2020
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The following actions were taken at the Sept. 15, 2020, Washington County Board of Commissioners meeting at the Government Center in Stillwater, Minnesota

County Board accepts grant to support veterans programs

The Washington County Board of Commissioners accepted a \$17,500 grant Sept. 15 from the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs to enhance services to veterans.

Washington County has received funding from the department since 2012. This Operational Enhancement Grant will allow the Washington County Veterans Service Office (VSO) to provide outreach to the county's veterans, assist in the reintegration of combat veterans into society, enhance services offered to veterans and veteran homelessness, and enhance the overall operations of the office.

Contact: Ryan Carufel, Veterans Service Officer, 651-430-6857

County Board approves application for gambling event next summer

The Washington County Board of Commissioners approved an application Sept. 15 for a permit for lawful gambling received from Welch Charities Inc. to conduct a raffle at 12300 40th St. N. in Baytown Township in August 2021.

State law allows a permit to be issued to an organization that conducts lawful gambling on five or fewer days and awards less than \$50,000 in prizes in one year.

The county is an authorized agent for the permit.

Contact: Patricia Gillen, Taxpayer Services Technician, 651-430-6183.

A great place to live, work and play...today and tomorrow

Siegfried Construction will continue improvements to Law Enforcement Center parking lot, ramp

Siegfried Construction will construct a parking lot entrance on the Washington County Law Enforcement Center in Stillwater, after the County Board approved a \$112,200 contract with the company Sept. 15.

This is a planned step in the overall ramp improvement project. Work under the contract will extend the entrance 16 feet from the front of the building, improving pedestrian safety and building security. It will also provide a new Americans with Disabilities (ADA) ramp at the front entry to improve accessibility and install additional surface and subsurface waterproofing. Work is expected to be completed this fall.

Contact: Joe Welter, Building Services Project Manager, 651-430-6226

County Board conducts public hearing on county cross-country ski pass

The Washington County Board of Commissioners conducted a public hearing Sept. 15 while considering whether to implement a Washington County specific cross country ski pass beginning this winter.

No residents participated in the hearing. After the hearing, the board authorized a revision to Washington County's 2020 Fee Schedule to implement a Washington County Parks Cross-County Ski Pass, beginning with the 2020-2021 ski season.

A public hearing is required for revisions to the county fee policy.

Washington County has been a part of the Great Minnesota Ski Pass since 1980. The state-run program has seen no increase in revenue since 2008 to assist in the maintenance of cross-country ski trails. In recent years, the fund has not generated enough revenue to off-set grant expenses, which has delayed payments to Washington County and has the potential to create funding gaps. State grant requirements to receive funding have also increased, which takes additional administrative time and limits the county's ability to collect revenues.

Reimbursement for the state ski pass has been \$21,000 a year, plus \$1 for each permit that the county sells, which has remained the same since 2008. In 2017-2018, the county sold 1,169 daily passes, 721 annual passes, and 113 three-year passes.

Creating a county cross-country ski pass will reduce the administrative burden to staff, maintain revenue, create a lower barrier to entry for new skiers, and allow more flexibility in county operations. Based on Department of Natural Resources ski pass sales at Lake Elmo Park Reserve, it is expected that ski pass sales would generate \$23,000 on a low snow year and \$40,000 on a good snow year.

There are ski trails in five county parks:

- Big Marine Park Reserve, 1.1 miles
- Pine Point Regional Park, 4 miles
- Lake Elmo Park Reserve, 12.2 miles
- Cottage Grove Ravine Regional Park, 4.9 miles
- St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park, 7.2 miles.

Contact: Sandy Breuer, Parks Director, 651-430-4371

County Board conducts public hearing on county's parks ordinance

The Washington County Board of Commissioners conducted a public hearing on changes to the county's parks ordinance Sept. 15.

Several residents provided comments to the board, via email or telephone calls, in support of the ordinance change.

This hearing was conducted to receive public comment on proposed revisions to the Parks Ordinance to include County Conservation Areas, to ensure the county's legal authority to acquire and establish conservation areas as part of the county parks system.

The county's current ordinance is focused on regulating county parks, and conservation areas were not contemplated in the writing of the ordinance. The ordinance update would allow the creation, regulation, and management of conservation areas within Washington County.

Were the ordinance to be revised, conservation areas in the county would:

- be open from sunrise to sunset;
- be available for special uses, such as for group events or rentals, requiring a "special use permit;" and
- not require a county parks vehicle permit for conservation area use and parking.

The focus of the area would be to preserve the natural environment of the conservation area.

After the public hearing, the County Board repealed the current county parks ordinance and adopted the new ordinance that includes conservation areas.

Contact: Sandy Breuer, Parks Director, 651-430-4371

County Board approves annual housing program report to HUD

The Washington County Board of Commissioners approved the 2019 Consolidated Annual Performance and Evaluation Report for submission to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Sept. 15.

The Consolidated Annual Performance and Evaluation Report (CAPER) details Washington County's progress toward meeting the goals outlined in Washington County's 2015-2019 Consolidated Plan and projects undertaken with 2019 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and the Home Investment Partnerships (HOME) program funds. The CAPER communicates to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and policymakers how funds are spent and the impact the programs make in the community.

Washington County's Program Year 2019 accomplishments included 13 home improvement loans, sewer drain improvements in Landfall, acquisition and improvements of three single-family homes scattered throughout Washington County, construction of four single-family homes in Hugo, and acquisition of three vacant lots in the Red Rock Corridor. Funds also were used to prevent homelessness by providing public services to 1,755 people with housing emergencies.

During the year, the program leveraged \$1.6 million of other funding, meaning that the Community Development Agency's (CDA) received \$1.44 for every \$1 available in CDGB and HOME funds.

The draft CAPER was released for public comment and published on the CDA website Aug. 28 with instructions on how to comment. The public comment period was open until the end of business Sept. 15. Sept. 22 a public hearing will be conducted in Dakota County on behalf of Dakota County HOME Consortium.

The County Board approved the report, and authorized its submittal to HUD on or before the Sept. 28 deadline.

The full report may be viewed on the Washington County Community Development Agency's (CDA) website www.washingtoncountycda.org

Contact: Karly Schoeman, Community Development Agency, 651-458-6556

September proclaimed Library Card Sign-Up Month in Washington County

The Washington County Board of Commissioners proclaimed September as Library Card Sign-Up Month in Washington County Sept. 15.

Library Card Sign-Up Month is a national campaign to emphasize the importance of library cards to a child's education and to combat illiteracy. The campaign first started in 1987 as a response to then Secretary of Education William Bennett who encouraged a campaign because, "Every child should obtain a library card and use it."

Washington County Library is celebrating September as Library Card Sign-up Month by promoting the benefits of signing up for a library card, including access to materials and resources that serve students of all ages, as well as lifelong learners, job seekers, small business owners, and more.

Contact: Aubrey Fonfara, Library Communications Specialist, 651-275-8504

County Board approves grant to provide COVID-19 testing in county

Washington County will use a \$360,000 grant from the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) to support COVID-19 testing.

The County Board accepted the grant Sept. 15.

The county has been actively involved in the COVID-19 response since March. Diagnostic testing for COVID-19 remains a barrier for residents and facilities in the county, due to supply shortages and access to labs. The county will work with the SEOC to coordinate additional COVID-19 testing in the county. Testing services could include mobile delivery, as well as testing events, both small and large, at locations around the county. Events may be targeted to high-risk and high-need populations, with the emphasis on residents who may be especially vulnerable to COVID-19. The testing will be done at no cost to residents who are tested, and will be done regardless of symptoms.

Testing events will be coordinated between the county, the SEOC, and the City of Cottage Grove, which will provide trained testers/swabbers and other support. The County Board approved a contract

with the city for an amount not to exceed \$860,000, which will come from the \$360,000 grant and \$500,000 that Washington County received through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The money will pay staff, such as nurses and community health workers, and for supplies for the clinics.

The county is planning initial events, which will depend on available locations, supplies and staffing. The county will work with other agencies as needed.

The testing will be done in addition to the testing by Bluestone Physicians under a county contract. The primary focus of the work of Bluestone will be targeting and offering testing at residential care facilities, such as long-term care and group homes, but it may be expanded to include other community-based settings.

Contact: David Brummel, Public Health & Environment Deputy Director, 651-430-6662

County Board approves payment to Meyer Contracting to raise CSAH 12

The Washington County Board of Commissioners approved payment to Meyer Construction Sept. 15 of \$627,421 for raising County State Aid Highway (CSAH) 12 in Grant above flood waters.

The Washington County Board agreed to a contract to complete work necessary to raise CSAH 12 above flood waters after the adoption of a local emergency declaration related to the localized flooding. Washington County solicited request for quotes from six contractors for this work, and received five bids July 15. The lowest responsible quote was received from Meyer Contracting Inc. The work was started July 21, and the road was opened July 31; the work was completed Aug. 5. In recent years, Minnesota has received unusually high precipitation and a number of landlocked basins are over capacity, creating localized flooding. An unnamed basin, north and south of CSAH 12 (Stillwater Boulevard), just east of Kimbro Avenue, continued to rise in 2019 and 2020. Prior to winter freeze-up in 2019, the basin was at an elevation that required closing the bituminous trail south of the county highway.

After spring 2020 snow melt and the rain this summer, the basin water has overtopped CSAH 12. The roadway was closed to traffic June 29. The elevation of the pond will rise to approximately three feet above CSAH 12, before the pond flows to the south. Kimbro Avenue was also closed to traffic earlier this year, due to water on the roadway.

Contact: Wayne Sandberg, Public Works Deputy Director/County Engineer, 651-430-4339

County Board approves conservation area in May Township

The Washington County Board of Commissioners agreed Sept. 15 to use the county's voter-approved Land and Water Legacy Program (LWLP) to establish a County Conservation Area (CCA) in May Township.

The LWLP protects land and open space in the county through the acquisition of parkland and conservation easements on highly-valued natural areas. Opportunities exist to purchase land outside of the county's park system to provide protection and meet the goals of the county LWLP.

The first potential CCA is the Guarnera property in May Township, which has 38 acres of land with natural features with hardwood forest, wetlands, and waterbodies, including Long Lake shoreline.

The property is on 170th Street North to the west of Norell Avenue, a half-mile from Big Marine Park and within one mile of Warner Nature Center. It is in the Carnelian-Marine-St. Croix Watershed District. The land has rolling topography, with seasonal wetlands, white and red oaks, red and sugar maples, and paper birch trees, along with significant wildlife.

Activities that will be allowed on the land are hiking, walking, running, nature observation, visits by education/school groups and research with a use permit, watercraft access by carry in, archery hunting, and shore fishing. Waterfowl shotgun hunting on Long Lake and trapping by permit will also be allowed. No development, property division, or industrial, mining, or agricultural use will be allowed.

The landowner approached the county and the Trust for Public Land several years ago, seeking permanent protection of the parcel. The county will contribute \$240,000 from the county's LWLP. The project lead and partner is Trust for Public Land, which will be matching the contribution with state funds. The county will be the owner and steward of the property, as well as a financial contributor to the project. The Trust for Public Land will negotiate the purchase, and do the due diligence for the purchase, as well as contribute financially.

The Trust for Public Land and the Washington Conservation District will create a restoration and management plan for the project.

Contact: June Mathiowetz, Senior Planner, 651-430-6016

County Board takes first formal action on 2021 county budget

The Washington County Board of Commissioners took the first formal steps in approving the county's 2021 budget Sept. 15.

The board:

- certified the proposed property tax levy payable 2021 for Washington County, with a net levy of \$114.5 million, no change from 2020;
- certified the proposed property tax levy payable 2021 for the Washington County Regional Rail Authority of \$660,000, also no change from 2020;
- adopted the Washington County proposed 2021 budget, with operating expenditures of \$195.2 million, an increase of .18% over 2020, and capital expenditures of \$47.9 million, an increase of 20.3% from 2020;
- adopted the Washington County Regional Rail Authority proposed 2021 budget of \$669,200; and
- consented to the proposed property tax levy of \$5.4 million payable 2021 for the Washington County Community Development Agency.

The proposed budget includes non-levy revenue of \$115.6 million, an increase of 7.66% from 2020, and expenditures of \$24.9 million for the Gold Line Transit project.

The board will continue to review the budget through the fall, until a public meeting on the budget is conducted Dec. 1, and the adoption of the final budget Dec. 15. While the board has set the proposed property tax levy payable in 2021, it may still lower that levy before December, but it may not raise it.

The board has been reviewing the 2021 budget since mid-August with presentations from individual county departments. The presentations reviewed by the board may be found on the county website www.co.washington.mn.us by searching "budget."

The County Board is preparing the 2021 budget during a time of uncertainty created by the response to and economic impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Washington County continues to grow in households and population, which increases the demand for county services.

Despite the uncertainty, the county has the highest credit ratings available from both Standard & Poor's and Moody's ratings' agencies, is within its self-imposed levy and expenditure targets, and has a decreasing tax rate as a result of increasing tax base and responsible levy increases.

Especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the county is the safety net level of government for residents who may experience economic hardship due to the pandemic, and the county may need to provide more human services for residents in the coming year. The proposed budget calls for no increase in the county's tax levy, which, when combined with the growth in the county's tax base, would translate into a decrease in the county's tax rate. Should the proposed levy be approved, the impact on the owner of the median valued home in the county, which is \$308,000, would be a decrease of \$27 a year in county taxes. The county proposed budget anticipates receiving less revenue than previously from the state for infrastructure projects, such as roads and bridges, with the state experiencing a reduction in the gas tax and leased vehicle sales tax revenue that it collects.

The capital projects in the capital budget include pavement and roadway reconstruction throughout the county, as well as construction of an interchange at Manning and Highway 36 in Stillwater, traffic signal and trail work at Interstate 694 and County State Aid Highway (CSAH) 14 in Oakdale, and work on CSAH 19 from Dale Road to CSAH 18 in Woodbury. The budget proposes seven new employees for 2021, with one being paid for with property tax dollars, and the other six being paid for with state and federal human services funding. If the proposed positions are added, the county's employees per 1,000 capita would fall from the current 5 to 4.9. The budget also proposes maintaining programs such as Stepping Up, a national initiative to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses and co-occurring disorders who become involved with the criminal justice system, and opioid treatment programs.

The county's estimated market value of taxable property increased by almost 5% for taxes payable in 2021, with new construction valued added at \$620.2 million, with a median value change of 2.2% on existing homes.

All budget workshops were webcast, and archives are on the county's website, www.co.washington.mn.us, found by searching "County Board Meeting Webstream."

Contact: Jennifer Wagenius, Deputy Administrator, 651-430-6007, and Jan Lucke, Deputy Administrator, 651-430-6003