

Vruwink and Ringhand hold listening session at Dunkirk

By *Tristan McGough*
Special to the Reporter

Dunkirk residents had the opportunity to participate in two Dunkirk town hall meetings held on Monday, May 8, 2019; the first, a Listening Session conducted by State Senator Janis Ringhand and State Representative Don Vruwink; the second, the Regular Town Board Meeting.

Healthcare, a major concern across the nation, took center stage at Monday night’s meeting right from the start.

Both the senator and representative acted as the two rails to a conversation on the Medi-

caid Expansion Program, which Gov. Walker had decided to not “fully expand.”

Vruwink stated, “Governor Walker’s rejection of the federal offer to fund the 1.6 billion expansion program in Wisconsin lost both that money and the \$342,000 savings that would have accrued.

Under the present proposal by Gov. Tony Evers, Medicaid expansion would extend Medicaid—known as BadgerCare in Wisconsin—to people who earn up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level, which is about \$17,200 per year.

The next issue to be raised was Transportation.



State Senator Janis Ringhand and Representative Don Vruwink listen to the voices of Dunkirk at its town hall on May 6.

Photo by *Tristan McGough*

“That’s the number one issue,” Ringhand confessed, “that we hear about in towns.”

From the audience Supervisor Ted Olson asked, “What about any gas tax increase? How would you make sure it goes for transportation to the roads that need it?”

Vruwink responded, “Well, we’d have to monitor whatever was decided,” meaning the legislative branch would exercise its oversight duties.

Ringhand rejoined, “It would be earmarked for transportation.

“Right now,” the senator continued, “21 cents of every dollar goes to interest payments on the state budget.

What particularly concerns Dunkirk’s residents is the imbalance of transportation funding, as most dollars go to large-scale transportation projects involving the state and federal levels of government.

Dunkirkian Rae West said, “The secondary and tertiary roads are neglected.”

Both Vruwink and Ringhand acknowledged that this was a problem, knowing from firsthand experience that the townships are the last to see a few pennies from the transportation dollar.

The Tolling Option surfaced, but after considering the accompanying decrease in federal transportation dollars, as

well as the initial start-up costs and the long period required for proper planning, development and implementation, the idea was nixed.

Next item up for discussion at Dunkirk was the dairy industry.

Vruwink wants to put forward a proposal that would have milk truckers use an interactive map that would take town roads into account, particularly if they had weight limits that precluded tanker traffic.

“Don and I,” Ringhand interjected, “were on the Dairy Task Force, where 52 ideas for improving dairy farming, production and distribution were itemized.”

Vruwink thinks the best answer lies with supporting a more eco-friendly and industry-moderate type of farm, certainly of much less size. “One-half of the wells in rural Rock County are tainted with nitrates due to animal waste.”

Further, “7,000 dairy farms have been lost in the last

decade alone,” the representative affirmed, “and we need to see the fundamental part the family farmer plays in the Wisconsin equation.”

Vruwink said that Wisconsin currently exports only 5 percent of the cheese it makes from dairy products, and that there are huge markets to be tapped: namely, China. “With a quarter of the world’s population in China, our state needs to open up that and other world markets. The potential is fantastic!”

The nitrate problem toxifying rural land led to the wider issue: Groundwater quality.

The problem, both elected officials sitting at the table agreed, was statewide. They also concurred that the groundwater problem was one among several ecological issues facing the state, including climate change and more frequent and devastating flooding with the consequence of greater fertilizer and waste run-off.

The last item to be covered

at Dunkirk’s town hall meeting with State representatives was Student Loans.

Vruwink is championing a “public-private partnership to refinance student debt.” He would like to leverage the purchasing power of “pools” to restructure and pay-down the current student debt.

He emphasized that this is not “debt forgiveness, but paying back a debt at a better rate.”

Then after, the sundry items on the Board’s agenda met with swift and efficient consideration.

Noteworthy was planning for purchase of a truck replacement in 2020. At a cost of \$191,000, Supervisors have been considering financial options, though if the township is to enjoy its new truck in 2020, it will have to put the order in by Aug. 2019...just months away!

“We are currently debt-free,” vouchsafed Dunkirk Clerk Melanie Huchthausen on a positive note.

Financial struggles, unpaid debt put an end to grocery co-op

By *Amber Levenhagen*
Unified Newspaper Group
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Close to 50 people filled the front of the Yahara River Grocery Cooperative, some sitting on chairs and grocery crates, standing around the checkout lines and crowding the doorway during its April 16 annual member meeting.

The meeting had been called in a letter announcing the closing that was shared to members and on social media earlier this month. Members were told it would explain in more detail why the store would be closing.

The group erupted into applause when Steve Lawrence, a member of the YRGC board of directors, credited manager Cindy Cwik for the longevity of the store being open.

“The cooperative is completely reliant on one person, and that’s Cindy, and she’s done a phenomenal job,” he had said.

The three board members, Lawrence, Cynthia Hurtenbach and Nancy Hubing, shared details about the financial struggles that have plagued the cooperative since it opened. Lawrence explained that last year, during the last member meeting, there was a motion to close the store “within a few months” if sales did not increase and some payroll checks were not cashed, which did not happen.

“The trend continued downward,” he said. “It’s been negative for a long time. What’s happening is payroll checks are being held so we can buy inventory... and it’s been going on for years.”

During the meeting, some members shared their appreciation for the dedication and flexibility of Cwik, who Lawrence said at the meeting has only cashed some of her payroll checks in the last two years.

Hubing said financial support from Cwik and the building’s owner and landlord, who has been flexible about rent deadlines, allowed the cooperative to stay open for so long.

But the board said they could not allow the trend to continue. The last day has been set for May 31, unless the primary creditor, Summit Credit Union, sets an earlier date.

“It’s not truly a cooperative if three people are maintaining it, it’s against cooperative principles if our general manager isn’t paying herself, she hasn’t taken a vacation since I don’t know when, and it’s not right that we let her do this,” Hurtenbach said. “It’s not the cooperative model anymore.”

Financial state

The co-op has struggled financially from the beginning.

Several months after the store opened in 2008, cooperative officials announced the store had lost \$160,000, and that it still owed \$400,000 from a startup loan. Despite fundraisers and attempts to recoup that money over the next decade, the money never caught up.

Its best year for sales was in 2016, Lawrence said, when the store brought in over \$600,000 in revenue. But in order for the store to be viable, sales need to be closer to \$700,000 annually.

“And we’re way below \$600,000,” he said.

The cooperative is not behind on loan payments, Lawrence said, adding that they have been made on time every month, meaning they are in good standing with the creditors.

The board spent a majority of the meeting thanking the employees and members who have allowed the cooperative to continue operating for the last 11 years.

“We’ve had over \$6 million in revenue over 10 years, we’ve had over 60 employees, and for many of them it was their first job,” Lawrence said. “I’ve done 90 percent of my shopping here for the last 10 years, I love this store. This is not an easy process for us, as well.”

Group could go on

While the grocery store is set to close, the legal entity of the Yahara River Grocery Cooperative can continue to operate



The Yahara River Grocery Cooperative is closing after 11 years.

Photo by *Amber Levenhagen*

until 2020. The deadline for filing is March 31 of that year.

Some members spoke about wanting to continue the cooperative and turn it into something other than a grocery store.

Most who spoke at the meeting agreed that the current business model is not sustainable, and it would take a significant financial investment to turn it around.

“It’s not a viable business,” Lawrence said. “If there are owners here who want to change the direction and make it a viable business, that can be done, but from a legal standpoint the board does have the legal right, and in some instances the duty to act upon the financial state of the cooperative.”

The hiccup the board is now facing, though, is what would be the purpose of continuing the entity and who would operate it.

There has been a struggle to maintain a board of directors, Lawrence explained during the meeting. It has three directors and had nine initially, but fewer people began volunteering for the position.

“The key point is that without proper funding, it would be a really unwise decision, primarily from the liability of payroll taxes,” Lawrence said. “Folks need to be aware that if a decision is made and a vote is taken, there is a liability, it’s not simply ‘lets just refresh the store.’”

MILTON SCHOOL DISTRICT

investigate Westrick’s approval of the pay increases, submitted a report to the board and released it to the public on March 18.

In her report, Lubinsky concluded that the pay increases actually were included in the budget. She also concluded that Schigur’s pay increase violated a board policy that requires the board to set the district administrator’s salary.

Westrick’s approval of Schuetz’s pay increase, Lubinsky concluded, violated no law or policy. However, in her report Lubinsky neglected to mention a policy that requires that compensation for all administrators other than the district administrator be approved by the board.

Lubinsky also concluded Kvpil violated the state’s public records law by releasing the documents without first notifying Schuetz and Schigur. Kvpil last month apologized for releasing the documents without notifying Schuetz and Schigur first.

Schuetz’s deal

Schuetz will receive two lump sum payments of \$75,000 each—one for severance pay, one for compensatory damages and attorney fees.

In exchange, he waives claims against the district and the board of education and any board of education members arising before the date of the agreement. Claims against board member Brian Kvpil in his personal capacity are excluded from the waiver.

Additionally, the agreement specifies that Schuetz is not obligated to pay the district back for any tuition reimbursement he received for professional development. That nullifies a provision of Schuetz’s contract, which requires him to pay back all tuition reimbursement if he leaves the district within 12 months of receiving the reimbursement.

The Milton Courier reported earlier this week that Schuetz received \$33,665 in tuition reimbursement from the district from August of 2015 to October of 2018 (Schuetz obtained his Ph.D from Edgewood College earlier this year).

The district will also pay Schuetz for his unused vacation days in the amount of \$376.44 per day and provide him with a positive letter of reference.

“Agenda of hatred”

Both Schigur and Schuetz augmented their resignation agreements with written statements, as is their right under the state’s public records law.

In his statement, Schigur wrote that Kvpil’s release of

the documents “caused erroneous public scrutiny.” Additionally, wrote Schigur, the release denied him due process.

“Without this constitutional protection, the careless accusations made by school board members around my lawful actions have inflicted serious reputational damage. The damage has been further compounded by some community members who have no interest in seeking or accepting the truth.

“The false accusations levied and carried forward by board members have created an agenda of hatred towards me as an individual and towards members of the district’s administrative team.”

Schigur ended his statement by saying the board has, over the last several months, not had the best interests of the district’s students at heart.

“The sooner the board comes together to focus on the kids, the better the school community will be,” Schigur wrote.

“The darkness of hate”

Schuetz in his statement said the process that led to his pay increase was set in motion when Pierce asked whether the communications tasks the board was going to hire someone to perform could be handled in-house (Pierce told The Reporter in an email Monday night “I don’t know when I would’ve said that it was a year ago possibly”).

Schuetz also stressed in his statement that Lubinsky found that past pay increases for extra work had been authorized without board approval (she also found that some such pay increases had been submitted to the board for approval).

Schuetz said Kvpil’s release of records “continues to be the cause of considerable social and emotional distress for my family and me.” He also said that he didn’t respond to the initial release of the records because Shana Lewis, the district’s lawyer, advised him not to.

After the release of the first investigative report on March 18, Schuetz wrote, he and his wife waited three days for an apology. When none was forthcoming, they hired a lawyer to clear the family’s name.

Schuetz said he was grateful for support from family, friends and community members and ended his statement on a positive note.

“While the darkness found within some of the hate and factual inaccuracies spread about the community the past few months cast a dark shadow upon the Milton School District, it need not last. The great

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work of our staff and their love for children will shine through the darkness of hate, because hate doesn’t make a community better.”

Bitter ender?

During its meeting Monday night, the board approved the resignation agreements by approving the staffing report listed on the agenda by a 6-1 vote.

Kvpil was the lone ‘No’ vote. He complained that he hadn’t see the resignation agreements, which were signed by Schuetz and Schigur on April 26 and by Martin on April 30, until 7 a.m. on Monday and didn’t have a chance to look at them until three-and-half hours before the meeting.

Martin said that with several minor exceptions the terms of the agreements were within the parameters agreed upon by the board members during a series of closed sessions held over the last two months. And he’d polled each board member, Martin said, regarding approval of those exceptions.

“Good luck”

Schigur is the second district administrator in a row to receive a severance package from the Milton School District in exchange for his retirement.

In January of 2013, the Janesville Gazette reported that the district paid District Administrator Mike Garrow \$35,000 in severance pay after he resigned. Lewis was the district’s lawyer then too.

The board next must decide how to move forward with replacing Schigur and Schuetz, and whether to maintain the new administrative structure Schigur put in place last August.

The board’s human resources committee, which Westrick chairs, will take up those issues and present the board with options at a future meeting.

Kim Krause, Schigur’s administrative assistant, told board members Monday night that they’ll have a hard time finding a replacement for Schigur.

After lauding Schigur and Schuetz during the public participation segment of the meeting, Krause said the pool of candidates to replace Schigur was likely to be so shallow it would be more of a puddle.

“We will be fortunate if we can find one candidate that embodies even a few of the same ideals, principles and values as Tim Schigur. . . . So I wish the board good luck as they embark on the daunting task of replacing Tim—they will need it. We all will.”

Sheriff’s office looking for missing person

Submitted by
Lieutenant Trevor Greiber
Dane County Sheriff’s Dept.

The Dane County Sheriff’s Office is looking for information on the whereabouts of Joshua T. Martin, age 30. Joshua’s vehicle was located in

rural Dane County in the Town of Dane. It is believed Joshua recently left the area on foot and may have a dog described as a pit bull mixed breed with him. Joshua is 5’10” and weighs about 175 lbs., with brown eyes and brown hair.

After speaking with family

and friends, there is reason to believe Josh may be in a mental health crisis and they are concerned for his welfare. If you have seen Joshua or know where he is, please call the Dane County Communications Center non-emergency line, at 608-255-2345.

Road rage incident Saturday in Cottage Grove

Submitted by *Elise Schaffer*
Dane County Sheriff’s Dept.

At 6:30 p.m. on Saturday, May 11, a 51-year-old woman reported a female driver in a black Dodge Durango had forced her off the road in a road rage incident on CTH N near Nora Road in the town of Cottage Grove.

The victim explained the female driver in the Durango was aggressively tailgating her, would then pass her and slam on the brakes, only to start tailgating her again. Deputies located the Durango and made contact with Corissa L. Waite, age 21 of Deerfield. Waite admitted to trying to scare the victim with her driving. Waite was

also found to have a handgun in her center console, which she did not disclose to the deputies.

Waite was booked into the Dane County Jail on tentative charges of Disorderly Conduct and Carrying a Concealed Weapon. She was also cited for Operating After Revocation, Reckless Driving and no proof of insurance