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## WHAT'S INSIDE

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## Connection to Cuyuna, Brainerd bike trails is tourism priority



Don Niemi, county commissioner; Rick Courtemanche, county land commissioner; John Welle, county engineer; Jessica Seibert, county administrator; Ann Schwartz, Habitat for Humanity and NewsHopper; Loren Solberg and Bruce Halgren, former public officials and present ambassadors for Enbridge Energy.

"I feel kids who grow up in rural Minnesota should be able to live there," Klobuchar emphasized in her video

address. "This is an opportunity for you to highlight local initiatives," Klobuchar explained. She said she needs real stories from rural areas to use as examples so that "When we fight for funding on the senate floor we don't want to leave rural Minnesota behind."

Broadband (internet) infrastructure, transportation and housing bring economic expansion to rural Minnesota, she noted, so those topics

**Continued on Page 2**

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By ANN SCHWARTZ  
"Our funding priority has to be to connect our trail in west Aitkin to Deerwood," said Aitkin Mayor Gary Tibbitts. "Our biggest industry is tourism and tourism is about bikes, right now. Look what has happened in Crosby — it's exploded from bikes and we need that."

Tibbitts and other local

leaders were at a listening session with members of Senate Amy Klobuchar's staff on Sept. 17 in Aitkin. Klobuchar herself was not there but was present by a video presentation — assuring that her staff would bring back ideas and concerns to her.

Klobuchar's and state MnDOT staff included: Rommel Lee, Kurt Johnson and Ida

Rukavina, outreach directors from Sen. Klobuchar's office; Serge Philips, Government Relations Director, MnDOT

Locally, there were government and development persons present, including: Stacy Cluff, Mille Lacs Energy; Barb Carr, Aitkin County Growth; Ross Wagner, Aitkin County Economic Development; Gary Tibbitts, mayor of Aitkin;

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**Connection to bike trails tourism priority | Continued from Page 1**

were emphasized. The staffers held other listening sessions in the region, including in Crow Wing County.

**Transportation**

Of concern was that there are thousands of deficient bridges in rural areas and highway spending is not keeping up with road improvement needs.

Engineer Welle explained that most of the county's funding comes from the state. But the most dangerous roads in the rural areas are the two-lane state highways, such as Hwy. 65, that carry thousands of vehicles a day in traffic. MnDOT has had an ongoing gap in financing its own roads. "In most areas, county roads are in better shape than state highways," noted Welle.

"The state highways carry so much traffic and their needs are so great."

Many spoke in favor of a federal or state gas tax increase. A local sales tax option dedicated to roads would not generate much revenue in Aitkin County as there is not much retail and folks shop elsewhere.

"Crow Wing County funds its roads on the backs of the region," observed Welle. Since Brainerd/Baxter is the shopping mecca for the region, the sales tax generated there comes from the whole region but benefits Crow Wing County the most.

Welle said if people realized how dangerous these rural state highways are they would hesitate to drive on them. He said a lot of traffic

accident deaths could be avoided.

He emphasized that a gas tax is a user fee paid by those who buy the gas. "It's like buying a ticket at Valley Fair to ride the rides. You pay at the pump to improve the roads."

**Housing**

Carr from Aitkin County Growth emphasized the need for market-rate housing to be developed locally. She said a large percentage of people working in Aitkin County are commuting here. "If they lived here they would shop here."

Carr said we have a great area with amenities but we need more housing to attract a quality workforce. Aitkin County Growth has spent \$25,000 on a housing study and over \$100,000 tearing

down the old turkey plant in downtown Aitkin to develop 30 units of housing. More will be spent.

Ann Schwartz from Habitat for Humanity said there is a need for funds to do small repairs on aging homes so folks can continue to live at home. There is also a great need for funds to replace roofs.

**Broadband**

It was discussed that suppliers are overbuilding broadband fiber optic lines in some areas. Three different vendors installed lines on CR 12, for instance.

Wagner and others agreed that there needs to be better area broadband maps and more coordination.

Cluff said that Mille Lacs Energy has received grants and done substantial invest-

ing of their own for internet services. "Year to date, we've spent \$3.5 million with \$1.9 million in grants," said Cluff. "But that only served 1,100 people. It is expensive to do." She said more grants are needed.

Welle noted that suppliers want to put in broadband before roads are upgraded. "They put the cart before the horse." He said that they dig up an area with a poor road to put in broadband lines and then it has to be dug up again when the road is improved. He said that also some broadband permits are held up to wait for the completion of road construction. "We are putting state-of-the-art facilities in some very primitive areas."

Another problem is that

school students can't access the internet from home to do their homework properly.

The group also discussed how charging stations would be needed as electrical cars become more plentiful. Moose Lake already has such a station and Mille Lacs Energy is building one.

**Trails**

Mayor Tibbitts told the group that the Cuyuna Lakes Bike Trail was just extended to Deerwood. Now is the time to complete the extension to Aitkin, to hook Aitkin up with the Cuyuna Lakes and Paul Bunyan Trails.

Tibbitts said that Aitkin needs to work with all the agencies: the county, IRRB, MnDOT, DNR and DEED to get a recreational trail extended from Aitkin to Deerwood.

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