



## HI, WE'RE FROM THE COUNTY AND WE'RE HERE TO HELP

September 20, 2022

Near the end of the September 7 County Board of Commissioners meeting, Chairman Rob Hentschel reached into his bag of magic tricks, adding a surprise item to the agenda that he had intentionally withheld. He then turned to one of his sock-puppets, Commissioner Penny Morris, and asked her to read a “letter of support” for the beleaguered chairman of the Northern Lakes Community Mental Health Authority, Dan DeKorse.

Referencing a “lack of communication between yourself as chairperson and the other Northern Lakes board members,” Morris’ letter invited DeKorse to ask the county commissioners “how we can best support you,” adding this: “We know at times the environment created on the Northern Lakes board can be intimidating and it may not be what you are anticipating. If this is the case, there is no shame in stepping back and allowing someone else to lead the Northern Lakes board in its duties.”



In typical Morris fashion, her reading of the letter was preceded by plenty of hand-wringing and stammering. Hentschel then preemptively directed fire at anyone who might be inclined to read Morris’ letter – which has been withheld from the public – as an invitation to DeKorse not to let the door hit him on the way out.

“It’s a well-written letter of support,” Hentschel said. “I think it’s very well-intentioned and if anyone intends to speak ill of it, I think you’re misreading it because Commissioner Morris’ heart is really in it.”

No, we’re not misreading it. It was not a letter of support; it was an invitation to resign. Unfortunately, the BOC’s resident BS Detector, Commissioner Betsy Coffia, left the meeting early so there was no one present who was even curious enough to ask for a detailed explanation of why Hentschel was laying the groundwork to give the heave-ho to DeKorse just as he and his minions did in July to board members Nicole Miller and Justin Reed.

Unfortunately for the adults and children who suffer from mental illness in Northern Lakes’ six-county service area (Grand Traverse, Wexford, Crawford, Leelanau, Roscommon and Missaukee), DeKorse and the chairman who preceded him, Randy Kamps, are not good communicators and they have been utterly unable to unify the fractious 16-member board that governs Northern Lakes. After threatening the nuclear option – pulling out of Northern Lakes, thereby dissolving the agency – Team Hentschel is now trying to preserve the agency by drafting a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to rewrite the [enabling agreement](#) that led to the creation of the Northern Lakes in 2003 (agenda item 9a). A memo from county Administrator Nate Alger says three of the counties have already signed the MOU and that he expects all six to sign it by tomorrow.

DeKorse, who was a case manager at Macomb County Community Mental Health for 20 years before retiring last year, appears to be hamstrung by the board's adherence to the so-called "Carver model" of board governance and his fear that communicating with board members individually – even to acknowledge their requests to add items to the upcoming agenda – might constitute a violation of the state's Open Meetings Act. Under the Carver model, the board interacts solely with the CEO, creating a barrier between the board and staff. Critics say giving the CEO so much authority makes the job responsibilities and well-being of employees irrelevant to the board and creates the impression that board members are aloof and don't care about them.

Indeed, [minutes](#) from last month's Northern Lakes board meeting show that to be the case. "The Board does not treat people with respect or integrity; (acting CEO) Joanie Blamer is on the ground doing what we are doing and feeling what we are feeling," said Jessica Williams, a performance improvement specialist. "Not one person from the Board has been to Cadillac or sees what the agency does." They also quote Ty Wessell, a Leelanau County commissioner, as saying that "it bothered him that there is distrust among the staff towards the Board."

Analyses of the Carver model indicate that it can be an effective model of board governance if an organization has a strong and effective CEO who has the board's support. That has not been the case at Northern Lakes, where Blamer, bizarrely, has twice been offered the permanent position and twice had that offer rescinded. Blamer's support comes mostly from the Crawford and Missaukee county representatives. After Republicans on the BOC removed Miller and Reed – who supported Blamer – for "neglecting their official duty or engaging in misconduct" and replaced them with Kate Dahlstrom and Tom Bratton, Northern Lakes members from Grand Traverse and Leelanau counties voted unanimously to oppose Blamer's appointment as the permanent CEO.

The inability to agree on a CEO or even on whether to continue relying on the Carver model to guide their meetings has virtually paralyzed the board. Minutes from the August meeting show that at the end of the 3½-hour session, board members gave themselves these ratings on the following topics:

- ✓ We spent our time on the most important governance topics – Poor
- ✓ We encouraged diversity of viewpoints – Satisfactory
- ✓ Our decisions were made collectively – Fair
- ✓ The Board used its time effectively – Poor

How depressing. Perhaps the only accomplishment they can point to came when the board voted to accept an offer from Eric Kurtz, the CEO of the Northern Michigan Regional Entity (NMRE), to appoint an interim CEO who will report jointly to Kurtz and the Northern Lakes board and to accept administrative support from the NMRE in the search for a permanent CEO. The NMRE is one of 10 so-called Prepaid Inpatient Health Plans in Michigan, which manage behavioral health services for people who are enrolled in Medicaid.

As for the issue of board governance, Kurtz asked the Northern Lakes board, given the agency's and board's current instability, not to abandon the Carver model immediately.

"Given the number of board member changes that have taken place and the lack of a permanent CEO, the NMRE Board believes moving forward with any immediate change in a board governance model is premature," Kurtz wrote. "With some of the management oversight provided by the NMRE, it is the hope that the NLCMHA Board could move through this process more slowly and take its time to consider how it wants to operate in the future."

So where does that leave DeKorse and the Northern Lakes board? In the short term, there likely will continue to be quarrels, hostility and poor oversight of the struggling mental health agency. You just won't know as much about the problems unless you attend their meetings. Included in the detailed minutes of the August meeting is this portentous notation: "Board members expressed their thoughts regarding how they would like the minutes to be written moving forward. They need to be more condensed, a record of the transactions, and shorter."

## WEDNESDAY'S BOC AGENDA: WHAT TO WATCH FOR

**THE DRAIN COMMISSIONER REQUESTS A RAISE** – Hat in hand, county Drain Commissioner Andy Smits is returning to the BOC after an appearance in June to, once again, request an increase in his salary and budget (agenda item 9c).

Smits has submitted what he says is the first annual report the Drain Commissioner's Office has filed since at least 2014. It shows that there is a significant backlog of maintenance work on the county's 12 drainage districts.

Smits, who is paid about \$18,000 a year and is responsible for administering laws involving flood protection, stormwater management and soil erosion, has not made a specific budget request to the BOC. He is asking the commissioners to form an ad hoc committee to review the maintenance backlog and recommend budgetary increases by November 1.

“The historic, baseline budgeting of the salary since 2012 is based upon 642 hours of service per year,” Smits wrote. “This may be a sufficient level for basic minimum service to the County once several decades of backlogged maintenance is completed on all the County drains, whether district or private. The historic compensation level is not commensurate with the responsibilities and demands of the officeholder, regardless of annual hours of operation, nor is it equitable with other County employees or elected officials.”

He's right. According to GovSalaries.com, the average annual salary for a drain commissioner in the United States is just north of \$75,000. The likelihood that Hentschel will agree to a raise of that magnitude is slim to none. Hentschel has already told Smits that he knew what the job paid when he ran for office, but Smits is an adept and loyal Republican and so he will at least get a sympathetic ear from Hentschel and his Republican cronies.

**FACILITIES MASTER PLAN** – Deputy County Administrator Chris Forsyth has submitted a building and facilities audit to the BOC and says he is drafting an RFP to hire an architectural and engineering firm by the end of the year to craft a facilities master plan by the end of the year (agenda item 9b).

The report has some interesting data. In total, the county owns properties that span 2,761 acres and have a combined cash value of \$262 million as of 2019.

The report shows that the county's most valuable properties are the Hall of Justice at 280 Washington St. (\$13.6 million), the Governmental Center at 400 Boardman Ave., which is owned jointly by the county and city (\$6.9 million), the Civic Center buildings at 1125 Civic Center Dr. (\$4.9 million), and the Health Services Building at 2600 LaFranier Rd. (\$4.8 million).

This is purely and information presentation that will not require a vote.

## SUNDRIES

**AIRPORT AUTHORITY PUBLIC HEARINGS** – The Northwest Regional Airport Authority will hold a public hearing on September 27 at 3 p.m. in the large conference room on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Cherry Capital Airport terminal to enact rules, regulations and ordinances for the new authority, which was formed last year.

According to a [public hearing notice](#), airport commissioners will be asked to permit the removal of improperly parked vehicles, designate authorized people to issue misdemeanor and civil infraction tickets, and to prohibit the construction of hangars or other structures that include a fire-suppression system that uses or contains per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). Sometimes called “forever chemicals,” PFAS chemicals have been found to increase the likelihood of contracting various cancers, the development of thyroid problems and other medical conditions.

The airport authority will hold a second hearing on September 28 at noon in the same conference room to adopt a zoning ordinance regulating land development at the airport. According to a [draft of the ordinance](#), the purpose is “to encourage a use or mix of uses compatible with the use and operation of the development of Cherry Capital Airport that are consistent with the current and intended character and existing development patterns” in the vicinity. Those include gas and convenience stores, brew pubs, drugstores, lodging facilities and other businesses.

**LORDY LORDY, THERE GOES GORDIE (AGAIN)** – Sunday’s Record-Eagle featured another letter to the editor from reliably cranky Team Hentschel emeritus Gordie LaPointe.

“With nothing positive to run on this fall, the Democrats’ strategy, as put forth by Biden, is to simply demagogue the 70 million that voted for Trump as ‘racist,’ ‘homophobic,’ ‘misogynistic semi-Fascists’ who ‘are an existential threat to the country worse than international terrorism,’ ” LaPointe wrote. “In other words, ‘Don’t look here, at the mess we created, look over there at Donald Trump.’”

Ugh. While LaPointe and his fellow members of the Caveman Caucus remain in thrall to Trump, President Biden has been busily cleaning up the mess and utter chaos that Trump left in his wake. He has directed tens of millions of dollars to rural areas that include large swaths of Trump voters whom Trump ignored, he rebuilt the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau after Trump gutted it, and he has forgiven up to \$20,000 in student loans for poor and middle-class Americans. And on and on and on.

What a relief it is that this right-wing windbag is no longer on the BOC.

And that’s a wrap. Stay safe, stay engaged and keep your fingers crossed that you never get a letter of support from the BOC. Thanks for reading.

NOTE: The Beacon will be on hiatus until Oct. 18.

## HELPFUL LINKS & INFO

BOC meetings are usually held at 8 a.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. The next meeting is September 21.

You can find a link to the agenda and minutes at:

<https://grandtraversecounty.civivweb.net/Portal/MeetingInformation.aspx?Org=Cal&Id=358>

You can watch a livestream of the meetings and view replays of previous meetings online at:

<http://www.co.grand-traverse.mi.us/184/Board-of-Commissioners>

You will have to attend the in-person meeting in order to make a public comment. The BOC permits public comment for three minutes at the beginning and end of each meeting.

The BOC has seven commissioners – five Republicans and two Democrats – each of whom represents a district. You can find your commissioner at this link:

<https://www.grandtraversedems.com/boc>

You can find contact info for the BOC members here:

<http://grandtraverse.org/184/Board-of-Commissioners>

You can email all the commissioners at this address:

[commissioners@gtcountymi.gov](mailto:commissioners@gtcountymi.gov)