

## **WAP crafts mission statement, hears reports from trails and hospital task forces**

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Progress reports and a mission statement were the focus of the Sept. 21 meeting of the Walker Area Partners (WAP).

### **Mission statement**

Over lunch at Hope Lutheran Church, about two dozen members drafted a mission statement that will be reviewed by WAP's steering committee.

The preliminary version reads, "Walker Area Partners: unlocking the potential of the Leech Lake area through progressive partnerships."

WAP, which supports the Leech Lake Area Healthy Communities Partnership, also heard reports from its media team and trails task force, and from a separate community Critical Access Hospital Task Force.

### **Trails update**

Twenty-two people, including Trails task force chair Steve Bilben, Department of Natural Resources, Land Department and city council reps and interested citizens met Sept. 12 to discuss how to connect and extend existing bike trails and build others to create a system that encircles Leech Lake.

This was a major recommendation of the Minnesota Design Team that visited the area in June.

At the meeting, participants shared information on how to connect routes and state, regional and federal grants. The task force is looking for a grant-writer and plans to meet again next week.

"It'll be interesting," Bilben observed. "Lots of people are competing for those trails grants, including the city of Bemidji."

The group welcomes additional input from the public, he added.

WAP chair John Fjelstul, who attended on behalf of the Walker city council, said a major impression was that "Bicycling in Minnesota is really taking off!

"There are trails all over the state that I'd never heard of; it's such a big part of recreation today. We need to get behind it and promote it. Bike trails could become a big income engine for this area — if we do it right!"

### **Hospital project**

WAP member Steve Rogness, who serves on the Critical Access Hospital (CAH) task force, reviewed progress on creating an urgent care facility at the Ah-Gwah-Ching (AGC) campus.

As reported earlier this month, Benedictine Health Systems (BHS), which operates St. Joseph's Medical Center in Brainerd and other facilities, was chosen by the task force to lead a hospital feasibility study for north central Cass County.

BHS is working on a financial plan for building and operating a 24-bed hospital with 24-hour emergency room at AGC, a state-owned facility slated to close in January 2007.

Rogness said the latest problem is that the state will not grant the project an exemption from a 35-mile distance requirement needed to gain CAH status. CAH status brings a higher level of federal Medicare funding. But federal rules require a critical access hospital be at least 35 miles from the next hospital, which is at Park Rapids, just 27.5 miles away.

Cass County is anxious for AGC to be redeveloped as a health care campus, so the task force is not looking at another site. Instead, Benedictine will develop its plan without critical access status. Area legislators are also working on special legislation to exempt the project from a state moratorium on new

hospital beds.

"The hospital task force is not a group that gives up easily," Fjelstul observed. "They recognize there's a medical void in this area, and they're taking this on."

A critical access hospital at AGC would also benefit area ambulance services that now make long runs to Bemidji or Park Rapids, he added.

#### Media team update

Media Team member Nancy Ramp said volunteers will be working on a brochure, event promotion and ads, local organizations and clubs, a newsletter and a Web page. Fund-raisers may be needed to raise money to cover advertising and newsletter costs.

#### City park report

Fjelstul also said the Walker City Council has designated \$90,000 in its 2006 city budget for park improvements. Tentative plans are to resurface the tennis courts, extend the dock at the swimming beach, add a lifeguard chair and hire a lifeguard.

#### October WAP meeting

Next month's meeting may include a progress report on a city park visitor's center. This was another recommendation of the Design Team and one that has gained considerable support.

The next meeting of Walker Area Partners will be Oct. 19 at 11:30 a.m., not noon, at Hope Lutheran Church. Those who plan to attend should note, this will not be a lunch meeting; unless you plan to brown-bag it yourself.