

State Highway Panel Decides To Offer More Local Grants

BY BOB MERCER
State Capitol Bureau

PIERRE — The state Transportation Commission doubled the amount of highway aid available to local governments for economic development projects Friday. Then the commission spent nearly all of it.

The panel approved \$3.12 million for local-access work in 11 small communities, as well as \$400,000 for a new ethanol plant to be built at Onida and \$250,000 for a produce-delivery company opening at Dell Rapids.

Just minutes earlier, the commission concluded a long discussion by increasing the annual total to \$4 million from \$2 million for local access, agri-business and industrial park grant programs.

The commission also decided money could be moved among the three programs to accommodate more applications. The maximum grant amount remained \$400,000.

"I do want to point out again this is an

economic driven bucket of funds," commission chairman Don Roby of Watertown said.

The commission's actions came in the wake of the Legislature's decision in March approving tax and fee increases to provide more state funding for roads and bridges.

The local grants programs had been cut to zero for 2008 through 2010 because of tight funding and then-Gov. Mike Rounds' refusal to support any state tax or fee increases for roads.

The three pools of money returned in 2011 but at \$2 million total, rather than the previous \$3 million.

The commission earlier this year also committed to an annual \$15 million Bridge Improvement Grant — aka BIG — program to assist counties and cities.

The first round of BIG applications comes is Dec. 16.

The commission didn't take any action on a request for DOT to provide aid for township roads.

Dick Howard, a lobbyist for the South Dakota Association of Towns and Town-

ships, asked the commission to consider providing \$1 million annually.

Howard, who was secretary of transportation from 1985 through 1996, acknowledged that counties must take care of any bridges 20 feet or longer.

But many township roads need replacement of culverts, he said.

Of the four commissioners who spoke about the local-access programs, none indicated any support for the townships proposals. Several suggested townships should work through their county governments to get funding from the bridge grants program.

The communities that received approval for local-access grants Friday are: Canistota \$400,000; Wessington Springs \$200,000; Dell Rapids \$400,000; Tripp \$400,000; Canton \$400,000; Alpena \$379,000; Henry \$49,500; Valley Springs \$90,900; Volin \$177,120; Moberg \$243,000; and White River \$400,000.

The local-access program received 27 requests totaling \$6.57 million for the 2015 round of funding.

Hot Springs Highway Named For Mammoths

BY BOB MERCER
State Capitol Bureau

PIERRE — The state Transportation Commission agreed Friday to name a stretch of the U.S. 18 bypass at Hot Springs as Mammoth Highway.

The bypass runs along the city's south edge near the Ice Age fossil site.

The request from Mammoth Site business manager Joseph Muller

came with support from the city government, the U.S. Department of Interior, the governor's Tourism Advisory Board and various tourism and business groups across the Black Hills region.

The state Department of Transportation staff recommended granting the special name, according to Scott Rabern, a DOT official.

U.S. 18B and Indianapolis Avenue retain their names. The Mammoth Highway

designation will be noted on signs at each end of the bypass.

A non-profit organization operates the fossil location and its museum.

"The Mammoth Site boasts the largest concentration of mammoth remains anywhere in the world," Muller wrote in the application.

"It is a working paleontological dig site where scientists from all over the world come to do research.

I believe it to be one of the most significant places in all of South Dakota," he continued.

The sinkhole's contents were discovered in 1974. So far the remains of 61 mammoths have been identified along with other species of animals and plants.

Mammoths' modern relatives are elephants.

Reservation Loses Funding For Suicide Prevention Program

BY REGINA GARCIA CANO
Associated Press

PINE RIDGE — The only suicide prevention outreach program on a South Dakota Indian reservation where at least 20 people have killed themselves this year will end in December due to lack of funding, tribal officials said Friday.

The move comes after a federal agency denied the Oglala Sioux Tribe's application for a grant that would have paid for the program on the Pine Ridge reservation for five more years. A copy of the application obtained by The Associated Press shows the tribe was seeking more than \$3.6 million for a revamped program. However, federal officials rated the application poorly.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration gave the reservation the opportunity to make changes, but tribal officials didn't read the rejection letter until weeks after receiving it, when it was too late, Kevin Steele, spokesman for the Oglala Sioux Tribe said.

The Sweetgrass Program

has cost about \$480,000 per year for three years. Yvonne "Tiny" DeCory, a suicide-prevention outreach worker, said the tribe is now asking the federal agency to approve an extension that would allow the tribe to spend close to \$200,000 of unused funds from its current grant.

Under the program, outreach workers operate a hotline, respond to emergency suicide calls around the clock and provide suicide prevention training at schools. The outreach workers also help people who have attempted suicide navigate the behavioral health system: They take them to the emergency room, visit them at the hospital's mental health unit, make sure prescriptions get filled, and sometimes, even drive family members to visit a relative who's under supervision. The program also helps families whose relatives have killed themselves.

"This is very frustrating because we are in a state of emergency," DeCory said. "We are No. 1 in suicides in Indian Country."

Among the weaknesses that the federal agency found

with the application was that it did not "describe its plan for maintaining and/or improving the provision of high quality services that are cost effective throughout the life of the grant." The most serious criticism was regarding performance measurement, with the agency saying the application "does not describe how achievement of the goals will produce meaningful results" for the community.

Suicide has been a persistent problem on the reservation for years, but a string of recent deaths among adolescents has shaken the impoverished community. The youngest to die by suicide since December was 12.

Tribal leaders, school officials, students and parents point to a host of problems, including bullying on social media and at school, troubled family lives and a sense of hopelessness due to lack of economic opportunities and high unemployment rates.

Somewhere between 16,000 and 40,000 members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe live on the reservation, which was the site of the Wounded Knee massacre, in which the 7th

Cavalry slaughtered about 300 tribe members in 1890. At over 2 million acres, the reservation is among the nation's largest. It includes the county with the highest poverty rate in the U.S., and some of the worst rates of alcoholism and drug abuse, violence and unemployment.

Nearly 1,000 suicide attempts were recorded on the reservation between 2004 and 2013.

U.S. Rep. Kristi Noem, who was in Pine Ridge Friday specifically to address the suicide crisis, said her office will ask the federal agency to grant the tribe's extension request.

"We are going to see what we can do to get them that authorization, and then I think we have to renew the grant. This is something that we have to maintain."

DeCory says she will continue to do outreach work even without pay.

"Our children are in a crisis; our children are taking their own lives," DeCory said, fighting back tears. "This isn't just a job."

Daugaard Wants To Halt Syrian Refugees

PIERRE (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Dennis Daugaard has joined several of his counterparts in expressing concerns about federal policies on Syrian refugees.

Daugaard says many refugees are seeking to escape from terrorism, but the recent attacks in Paris are a reminder that terrorists can take advantage of refugee programs.

Daugaard says he hopes the federal government will review its process for background checks of applicants for asylum and consider "whether the United States should continue to accept refugees at current levels."

Twenty-seven governors have signed the letter urging a halt to the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the U.S. until federal security and screening procedures are reviewed.

Daugaard says South Dakota hasn't received any Syrian refugees in the last three years and he doesn't expect any will be sent to the state.

2 Locals Killed In Interstate 80 Crash

BUSHNELL, Neb. (AP) — Two people are dead following the crash of a sport utility vehicle on Interstate 80 near Bushnell in western Nebraska.

The Nebraska State Patrol says the crash happened Thursday night near the Bushnell exit in Kimball County when the eastbound SUV went into the median, became airborne and hit an overpass concrete barrier.

The patrol says the crash killed the driver, 57-year-old Kelly Rose of Scottsbluff, and a passenger, 64-year-old Forrest Rose, of Scottsbluff.

Investigators say neither was wearing a seat belt. They died at the scene.

2 Hartford City Council Members Resign

HARTFORD (AP) — Two City Council members in Hartford have resigned in the wake of a decision to reject a petition to recall the town's mayor.

Ryan Bortnem and Brad Bjergaard stepped down Wednesday. Their reasons weren't immediately clear.

Bortnem had voted to reject the recall petition on Mayor Bill Campbell on Tuesday. Bjergaard had voted to accept it.

The council vote to reject the petition was 4-3. The decision left some residents upset that the council went against the petition signed by more than 300 people.

Campbell and other council members have been under scrutiny after they voted to eliminate the position of economic development director last summer. In August, residents voted to keep the position after petitions were circulated.

Campbell tells the *Argus Leader* the issue has "really divided Hartford."

Ricketts Joins Letter On Syrian Refugees

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts has joined 26 other Republican governors in a letter to President Barack Obama expressing concerns about federal screening of Syrian refugees who want to enter the United States.

The letter released Friday calls for a review of the process refugees undergo before they're allowed into the country.

Ricketts and other governors have raised concerns following the Nov. 13 attacks in Paris that killed 130. The attacks stoked fears that terrorists might use refugees fleeing from Syria as cover to sneak across borders.

Ricketts has also urged state resettlement organizations not to accept Syrian refugees until federal security procedures are examined.

Jury Finds Man Guilty In Murder Trial

SIoux FALLS (AP) — Jurors have convicted a man of first-degree murder in the strangling death and rape of a Sioux Falls woman last year.

The jury in the trial of 42-year-old Christopher Kryger issued its verdict Friday afternoon on the second day of deliberations.

Kryger is convicted of killing 56-year-old Kari Anne Kirkegaard, who was found strangled in her bathtub on March 16, 2014. Prosecutors said DNA and other evidence showed that Kryger raped and killed Kirkegaard. Kryger maintained the two had consensual sex and that he didn't kill her.

Sentencing was put off to a later date, but the murder charge carries a minimum mandatory life sentence. Prosecutors haven't said whether they intend to seek the death penalty.

NE Seeks To Eliminate Savings Program

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A legislative committee is recommending the elimination of a state program that was supposed to encourage Nebraska residents to save for their long-term care needs.

The Performance Audit Committee announced Friday that it will introduce a bill next year to scrap the Long-Term Care Savings Plan.

The committee audited the program to see whether it was fulfilling its goal of reducing the state's Medicaid and long-term care costs, and concluded that it hasn't had a noticeable effect. The program was created in 2006.

Sen. Dan Watermeier of Syracuse, the committee chairman, says getting people to save for long-term care is a problem around the country, but current policy options haven't been good at solving it.

State Treasurer Don Stenberg, whose office oversees the program, agreed that it should be eliminated.

Aberdeen Murder Trial Delayed 4 Months

ABERDEEN (AP) — A new trial date has been set for Aberdeen murder suspect John Hemminger.

The 33-year-old Hemminger is accused in the death of 26-year-old Jessica Goebel, who died five days after being stabbed in January. He's pleaded not guilty to alternate counts of murder, including premeditated murder.

The *American News* reports that a monthlong trial initially was scheduled for January, but Judge Scott Myren has agreed to delay it four months. It's now scheduled May 9-27.

Both counts against Hemminger carry a minimum punishment of life in prison. Prosecutors said last week that they would not seek the death penalty should Hemminger be convicted.

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