

Ray commission wants to start imposing nuisance fines

By Brad Nygaard
With the implementation of a redeveloped nuisance property ordinance and hiring of a code enforcement officer, the city of Ray is now starting to levy out some fines, according to Commissioner Eric Barman. Barman said the city recently sent repeat letters to property owners notifying them of violations, after already sending letters to them once last October and November. “So everyone had fair warning on what was going down,” Barman said. Barman said one property owner who received a fine appeared in municipal court, where Judge Michael Weyrauch levied a \$25 fine. “Which was very, very weak,” Barman said. “It kind of puts us in a position where we’re trying to enforce things, but the ordinance, there’s no teeth or backing behind it.” Commission President Troy Kupper clarified Barman’s statement, saying the original fine was much higher, but the individual went to court and Weyrauch reduced the amount to \$25. Barman said the city’s nuisance committee is looking for

community support to encourage Weyrauch to impose more substantive fines. The nuisance property ordinance, adopted last October, references a number of items that could be considered violations, as well as the city’s procedures for determining if a violation exists and the steps to be taken before a citation is issued. But it doesn’t specifically mention the amounts of fines levied for violations. Barman said he has at least 10 letters from property owners in support of the ordinance and encouraging Weyrauch to impose heftier fines, “to ensure there’s some follow-through.” Barman said he intended to forward every one of the letters to Weyrauch for his consideration. All of them, according to Barman, express support for the city’s efforts behind creation of the ordinance and the establishment of a code enforcement officer and nuisance committee. Reading from one letter, Barman quoted the author’s desire for Weyrauch to take code enforcement violations seriously. “I expect you to do your job

and help us clean up the mess by enforcing the laws that we have. I expect you to be fair to all parties involved, not just the accused,” the letter states. “Like the \$25 fine, there was a date to have everything cleaned up by,” Barman said. “In the sentencing, if it wasn’t cleaned up by May 6, which it wasn’t, there’s no additional fine. There’s nothing to the policy right now.” That property owner won’t have any contact with city officials now. “I guess they assume it’s going to go away,” Barman said. In situations like refusal to pay fines, or refusal to comply with a lawful order, state law gives a municipal judge like Weyrauch the authority to submit a declaration and petition the state’s attorney’s office for an arrest warrant. **New class of license** Following up on a meeting held roughly a month ago, Barman proposed the possibility of the city creating a new class of liquor license for entities operating as restaurants. “That’s really nothing that’s been discussed before,” said Barman. “It’s always just been a liquor license.”

That meeting, according to Barman, included fellow commissioner Casey Brunner and Deano Vass. Vass, of Williston, owns the building located at 20 N. Main St., which is the site of the former Palace Saloon. Last July, commissioners voted down a proposal to increase the number of liquor licenses, thereby negating a plan by Lori Nowlan to open a bar in the building. Kupper said the new class of license, if established, would not be commingled with the four city-issued liquor licenses currently available. Those licenses are currently held by Horizon Resources, doing business as the Cenex gas station and convenience store; the Northside Tavern; Club Ray Lounge and Casino; and the Ray Golf Association. Creating a new class of license requires a new ordinance, according to Kupper, who asked Barman if he would be willing to work with the city’s attorney on development and verbiage. Commissioners discussed criteria behind the classification that included a percentage of food sales versus alcohol.

Barman suggested a “split” might be unreasonable and countered with criteria regarding hours of operation and the availability of a full menu. “If we do an hours of operation, it’ll be policed by the public because we’re going to hear about it right away if they’re not open,” Barman said. “I think that would be a very simple way to do it.” “I have no problem moving forward with this,” Kupper said. “From what I’m hearing from Eric’s visit to the property, I guess it’s more conducive to a family-type environment. I guess there’s even a back room they were looking at for people eating.” Commissioners expressed support for bringing new opportunities to Ray, with Barman expressing hope development of a restaurant would be well-received. “I know I’d support it,” he said. Barman then forwarded a motion to create a new class of liquor license for restaurants. The motion passed unanimously. **Clearing the air on trees** City Auditor Ronda Rustad

clarified previously published reports pertaining to tree rows on the north side of town along Seventh Street. “The two north rows are 98% dead,” Rustad said. “So yes, the two north tree rows will probably have to be completely removed.” Kupper said confusion created by previous reporting caused his “phone to blow up.” The affected area contains as many as six rows of trees in some spots, according to Rustad, who said some diseased trees will be removed as well. In other business, Rustad informed commissioners she’s still waiting to hear from the city attorney regarding forms to be used by applicants for the city’s newly approved Economic Development Fund. “As soon as I have that, I have a waiting list of two or three people,” Rustad said. In response to a question from Kupper, Rustad said advertising on the proposed day care building continues, despite some comments to the contrary in the community. Also in other business, commissioners renewed publication of city minutes and public notices in The Journal.

Oil, gas bounce back in ND with stronger March

By Jody Michael
North Dakota’s oil and gas production rebounded in March, increasing 2.4% and 5.2% respectively to recover from decreases in the previous three months. March’s production averages of 1.19 million barrels of oil per day and 3.44 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day were the state’s highest since November. The state Department of Mineral Resources released the March oil and gas production numbers in its monthly news conference Friday. “February had the extreme

cold temperatures, and so a rebound was expected,” Director Nathan Anderson said. While statewide oil and gas production had decreased for three consecutive months from December to February -- a not-uncommon occurrence in wintertime -- Divide County production in March was increasing for the fifth time in six months. The county’s gas production rose 14.3% in March, to 54.8 million cubic feet per day, after a 7% decrease in February. Oil production improved 5.3%, to 44,381 barrels per day.

Williams County seeks input for road safety plan

By Jody Michael
The Williams County Highway Department is seeking public input as it starts the development of a countywide Roadway Safety Action Plan. Funding for the plan comes from a grant through the U.S. Transportation Department’s Safe Streets and Roads 4 All Grant Program, the county said in a news release. The SS4A program aims to support local, regional, and tribal initiatives for preventing roadway fatalities and serious injuries. Through the end of this

month, the public can provide input about county roadway safety via an online survey at www.wcsafetyplan.com. The survey is composed of a few basic questions as well as a map for logging safety-related comments related to specific geographic locations. Additional opportunities for public engagement will be included in future phases of the plan’s development, the county said. A draft action plan is expected to be completed by the end of July, with final adoption by the end of January 2026.

Serious injuries in rear-end crash west of Ray

By Jody Michael
The North Dakota Highway Patrol says it is investigating a crash west of Ray last week that left a driver seriously injured. Richard Hopkins, 44, Tioga, “suffered serious injuries” after striking the rear end of a grain trailer ahead of it on the westbound lanes of U.S. Highway 2 the morning of May 12, according to a Highway Patrol news release. The grain trailer was being pulled by a Peterbilt truck driven by Kasey Knox, 32, Ray, who had slowed down to make a right turn on 118th Avenue

Northwest, about 3 miles west of town. Hopkins, who was driving a Ford F-350 pickup truck, was transported to Tioga Medical Center. Knox was not injured. Both drivers were wearing seat belts. The westbound lanes of Highway 2 at the scene were shut down for approximately five hours following the crash, which occurred just after 8 a.m. The Williams County Sheriff’s Office, Ray Fire Department and Ray Community Ambulance responded in addition to the Highway Patrol.

Deep cuts to public transit looming in parts of state, US

By Kevin Hardy
Stateline
Compared with major American cities, the ridership on public buses in Minot, North Dakota, can seem relatively minuscule. But the 82,000 rides taken each year allow people without cars to get to work, help those with disabilities get around and connect patients with crucial health care. “The value of those rides is unmeasurable, because the people that are using our system need our system,” said Brian Horinka, the city’s transit superintendent. Like in many cities -- from sprawling metropolitan areas to smaller and rural communities -- the financial future of public transit is questionable in Minot, population 48,000. While increasing, ridership remains below pre-pandemic levels. Federal funding and state budgets remain uncertain, while inflation is pinching transit services. For example, Horinka said he’s looking to buy a new 30-foot heavy-duty bus. He expects it will cost up to \$700,000 because of inflation. Just five years ago, a similar model could be had for about \$400,000, he said. “We’re in dire straits, from a financial standpoint,” he said. North Dakota’s four largest cities, including Minot, asked lawmakers for millions in extra grant dollars this year to keep transit buses rolling. The state enacted a new law awarding \$2 million in grants -- a welcome reprieve, but far less than the \$15 million initially requested. Republican state Rep. Dan Ruby, a sponsor of the legislation, said cities will likely need to increase local funding for bus systems. “I don’t think it’s enough,” he said. “I think it is going to

Wildrose Public Transportation says it’s not affected so far

By Jordan Rusche
Report for America
While some public transit networks are grappling with state and federal funding cuts, so far local services in Divide County haven’t felt any such effects. Amber Haugenoe of Wildrose Public Transportation said the only change she’s seen is a lapse in the organization’s contract requiring translation services. “We are, as a public transportation, required to provide translation services for folks who have English as a

second language,” she said. “That contract has not been renewed at this time. I’m not sure why, if it’s a federal funding cut or not.” She added WPT does serve a few individuals whose first languages are something other than English: primarily Russian, Spanish and Tagalog. “We kind of, on our own, have a workaround with Google Translate, and we have some other options,” she said. WPT is federally funded through a Formula Grant from the Federal Transit Ad-

ministration, which provides “capital, planning and operating assistance to states to support public transportation in rural areas with populations of less than 50,000.” “We’re required to have matching funds of either 80/20 or 50/50, depending on if it’s administrative costs or operating costs,” Haugenoe said, “and those come almost exclusively from the state.” As far as ridership, Haugenoe said the number of rides given has stayed fairly consistent over the last year with some minor highs and lows.

levels even as costs for labor and equipment skyrocket. A recent Bloomberg News analysis estimates the nation’s largest transit systems are facing a \$6 billion shortfall -- only heightening fears of a so-called death spiral in which a combination of service cuts and fare increases cause further erosion of riders and revenue. In Oregon, Democratic lawmakers have proposed increasing the state’s dedicated transit payroll tax. Billed as “a starting point,” the plan would increase the tax from 0.1% to 0.18% -- estimated to raise \$269 million over each two-year budget cycle. “That’s appreciated, but it’s nowhere near what it needs to be,” said Brian Vitulli, general manager of the Tillamook County Transportation District in western Oregon. “There could be some service reductions in the near future if we don’t get more funding.” Aside from rising costs, Vitulli faces major hiring challenges: The district has 19

providers across the state to cut services by as much as 25% in the next few years as inflation and decreased fare collections push many into deficits. TriMet, which operates rail, bus and paratransit services across 533 square miles of the Portland region, said it would still need to cut services even if the lawmakers’ proposed 0.08% funding increase were approved. The agency faces a deficit of nearly \$75 million for the upcoming fiscal year. Oregon lawmakers are broadly concerned about federal spending cuts, which could turn the state’s modest budget surplus into a gaping deficit, the Oregon Capital Chronicle reported. Nearly a third of the state’s budget comes from federal money. Democratic state Rep. Susan McLain said budget uncertainty has heightened scrutiny of all state spending this session. She is one of the authors of the state’s transportation proposal, crafted after nearly two years of meetings across the state. Aside from increasing the transit payroll tax, it calls for boosting the gas tax and hiking vehicle registration costs to help pay for road improvements. McLain, co-chair of the Joint Committee on Transportation, said budget negotiations are ongoing, with aims of having hearings later this month. While the state wants to do more to ensure everyone can access medical care, schools and jobs, McLain noted that belt-tightening is imperative for all manner of agencies, including transit. “We’re really trying to dig in and find ways to do more with less,” she said, “but also to make sure that we’ve got sufficient, adequate types of investment in areas that we value.”
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just be somewhat of a stopgap for some of them to be able to function.” The law also calls for a study to develop a proposed funding formula for fixed-route bus systems. Ruby said he would prefer a permanent funding model that doesn’t require cities to continually rely on legislative grants. “We also want to make sure that they’re not sitting on funds or running inefficiently just because they have the funding,” he said. “That’s the key to get support from most of the legislators, to show that they really do have a need and there’s no way to find any more cuts in their operations without affecting the people that need the rides.” It’s indicative of discussions occurring in state capitals across the country as public transit faces existential funding challenges. Public transit systems in major cities including Chicago, Dallas and San Francisco face the potential of deep service

cuts without more funding. But the problems also extend to smaller systems that connect people in rural America and smaller cities. In Pennsylvania, Democratic Gov. Josh Shapiro said the transit financial crisis affects residents in all 67 of the commonwealth’s counties. “Let me just say, we face a dire situation for mass transit agencies all across Pennsylvania, from Pittsburgh to Philly and rural communities in between,” Shapiro said at a news conference in April. **Pandemic ‘death spiral’** Mass transit saw some of the most immediate impacts of COVID-19 as people worked from home and avoided public spaces. The federal government provided nearly \$70 billion in pandemic aid to transit programs, which saw revenues drop sharply because of reduced fare collections. But with the rise of remote and hybrid work, ridership remains below pre-pandemic

levels even as costs for labor and equipment skyrocket. A recent Bloomberg News analysis estimates the nation’s largest transit systems are facing a \$6 billion shortfall -- only heightening fears of a so-called death spiral in which a combination of service cuts and fare increases cause further erosion of riders and revenue. In Oregon, Democratic lawmakers have proposed increasing the state’s dedicated transit payroll tax. Billed as “a starting point,” the plan would increase the tax from 0.1% to 0.18% -- estimated to raise \$269 million over each two-year budget cycle. “That’s appreciated, but it’s nowhere near what it needs to be,” said Brian Vitulli, general manager of the Tillamook County Transportation District in western Oregon. “There could be some service reductions in the near future if we don’t get more funding.” Aside from rising costs, Vitulli faces major hiring challenges: The district has 19

drivers but could use eight to 10 more. With too few drivers, bus service has been cut to six days a week. For some riders, the transit services provide a lifeline. After last year’s closure of Tillamook’s only dialysis center, for example, the agency began offering rides to other dialysis clinics well outside its service area. That has driven up costs and tied up drivers, making services such as the on-demand Dial-A-Ride less available for other residents. “We’re kind of the only option for these dialysis patients,” he said. “And we’re kind of prioritizing those trips rather than somebody who just wants to go to the Elks Club for lunch or something.” Vitulli also serves on the board of the Oregon Transit Association, which is lobbying instead for a 0.4% increase in the transit payroll tax phased in over eight years. The association said the current 0.08% proposal could force transit

providers across the state to cut services by as much as 25% in the next few years as inflation and decreased fare collections push many into deficits. TriMet, which operates rail, bus and paratransit services across 533 square miles of the Portland region, said it would still need to cut services even if the lawmakers’ proposed 0.08% funding increase were approved. The agency faces a deficit of nearly \$75 million for the upcoming fiscal year. Oregon lawmakers are broadly concerned about federal spending cuts, which could turn the state’s modest budget surplus into a gaping deficit, the Oregon Capital Chronicle reported. Nearly a third of the state’s budget comes from federal money. Democratic state Rep. Susan McLain said budget uncertainty has heightened scrutiny of all state spending this session. She is one of the authors of the state’s transportation proposal, crafted after nearly two years of meetings across the state. Aside from increasing the transit payroll tax, it calls for boosting the gas tax and hiking vehicle registration costs to help pay for road improvements. McLain, co-chair of the Joint Committee on Transportation, said budget negotiations are ongoing, with aims of having hearings later this month. While the state wants to do more to ensure everyone can access medical care, schools and jobs, McLain noted that belt-tightening is imperative for all manner of agencies, including transit. “We’re really trying to dig in and find ways to do more with less,” she said, “but also to make sure that we’ve got sufficient, adequate types of investment in areas that we value.”
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