



the Wright County Board meeting last Tuesday, Feb. 16.

Concern about Gov. Tim Pawlenty's recent speech on the need to cut the budget caused the commissioners to hesitate when faced with the need to fill a family based

services provider position at Wright County Public Health. The Personnel Committee recommended filling the position.

Most of the programs and services offered via the position of family based services provider are billed and funded by grants. Because the position has been vacant over six months, the grant funding has been lost for the remainder of 2009, the committee was told. Public Health is short staffed, and many clients have been placed on a waiting list.

Services provided by the family based services provider include: role modeling, promoting mental health throughout pregnancy, instructing adults how to speak to kids so they listen, medical assistance, and other special programs. The committee learned there are studies proving these types of community programs save money in the long term.

Commissioner Pat Sawatzke said he favors filling the position because grant revenue essentially pays for the position.

However, Board Chair Dick Mattson cautioned that Gov. Pawlenty is planning some significant budget cuts, which could affect Human Services and Public Health.

"We're just happier than heck to hire people," he stated rhetorically.

Sawatzke said it is not known right now if the governor's cuts will affect this position.

Commissioner Jack Russek expressed concern about a scenario in which the position is filled and then having no money to fund it.

Commissioner Rose Thelen said the need for services is not being met. She suggested that, if cuts take place, the county should "look at what we have and what we need." Then decisions can be based on need versus attrition, she said.

Mattson said it would be easier not to fill the position. Thelen replied that maybe something else could be cut after looking at the whole picture.

Russek offered a motion to lay over the matter one month. He said the Board could have a better idea a month from now about what's going to happen in the Legislature.

Commissioner Elmer Eichelberg asked for confirmation that a waiting list for services exists.

Sawatzke and Russek said more information can be obtained in a month. Thelen expressed frustration with the governor's recent speech.

"The governor says 'boo' and we all scurry. We should take a stand. These are valuable services," she said.

In the end, the Board did not accept the committee's recommendation, which is uncommon. The motion to delay the hiring decision one month was approved 4-1, with Thelen opposed.

In other business:

DANGEROUS DOG FEE

A public hearing was conducted in regard to setting a dangerous dog registration fee that would be paid annually. Setting the fee followed the recent adoption of a dangerous dog ordinance.

The Board considered a fee of up to \$500. Sawatzke said Sherburne County has a \$100 fee. He suggested \$200, saying it would cover costs and also send a message.

Brian Asleson, chief deputy county attorney, said Crossroads Animal Shelter, which handles dangerous dog matters for the county, received about 80 calls last year related to dog complaints. He estimated the number of dangerous dogs registered each year could be 10-15.

Sawatzke mentioned that a dog owner could face a misdemeanor charge for failing to register a dangerous dog.

The Board voted in favor of setting the fee at \$200.

BERTRAM PROJECT

A hearing regarding grant applications for the Bertram Chain of Lakes Regional Park project was conducted. The county and the City of Monticello are involved with purchasing about 1,200 acres from the YMCA over several years. With grant funds, the acquisition could be complete at the end of 2013.

Marc Mattice, the county's parks administrator, said 319 acres were acquired in 2008. So far, grants received for the project total \$1.2 million. He has plans to apply for grants of about \$411,000 and \$6.4 million, which involve county and city matches. Mattice reported that maintenance costs for the park could be around \$125,000 a year.

Commissioner Jack Russek expressed much concern about the county's budget and the county's ability to take on the added park costs.

"We can't keep increasing the budget," he said.

He added that the state should own the regional park and suggested the county already has a fine parks system.

Sawatzke talked about a high level of local interest in the Bertram project. He added that during a one-day special event at the park site, many people attended and two people came from as far away as Bemidji. Commissioner Rose Thelen said people serving on a "Friends of the Regional Park" committee come from all over. She added that the 1,200-acre site is a jewel. "If it is lost, it is lost forever," she stated.

The Board will learn more during a Parks Committee of the Whole meeting on Tuesday, March 2 at 10:30 a.m. Mattice said he will have the costs all laid out.