



Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz - KRHCC Board Member

“GROWING PAINS”

On March 18th a hearing was held at the Law Enforcement Center in Two Harbors (TH) to review the KRHCC/SOS (Viking ship people) request for a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) at the KRHCC site. The request was for “Construction of a multi-purpose gathering space with a focus on the community’s railroad history, and Scandinavian culture through exhibits featuring the commercial fishing boat CRUSADER II and the Viking ship LEIF ERIKSON.”

Note the request is for a “multi-purpose gathering space.” This language somehow, to some, has evolved into “event center”. The KRHCC has no interest in creating an “event center”. And, how could it be with one handicapped accessible portable toilet, no water and parking for about 20 cars? Our goal has always been to restore the depot and CRUSADER II as symbolic of KR’s rich history of railroading and commercial fishing.

We have set aside open public green space primarily for Julebyen and its winter farmers’ market, as well as other outdoor activities appropriate for a history center and the community.

County Planning & Zoning (P&Z) had mailed notices of the March 18 meeting to about 100 Knife River (KR) residents residing in proximity to the center. About a dozen attended and half asked to speak before the P&Z board. All had concerns on potential impacts of visitors on surrounding property owners and the community in general.

I was taken aback by some of the comments and realized the KRHCC had not done a very good job of informing residents why we have a history center and why we accommodate visitors. So here goes:

We got into the history center business by accident

In the fall of 2016, I was asked to speak to a group of Beaver Bay history enthusiasts on the restoration of the iconic 20’ North Shore gas boat STAR. I mentioned it was accomplished by several KR men with boat building/restoration skills.

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After my talk, Mel Sando, who was the Executive Director of the Lake County Historical Society at the time, asked me if the KR community would like the return of the 35' fish tug CRUSADER II that was currently on display at Lighthouse Point in Two Harbors. Mel explained that the Society could no longer care for it and perhaps the boat building talent in KR would accept the challenge to restore and display it.



Mel was aware the boat had long ties to KR and was christened by Crown Prince Olav of Norway in 1938. Acting with no authority from the KR community, I accepted the offer on the spot. Thanks to Randy Ellestad's connections, the boat was at the KR marina a week later. The Knife River Rec Council (KRRC) agreed to be the boat's steward until a non-profit organization could be formed to restore and display the boat as one of Knife River's historic icons.

Photo left: CRUSADER II returning to Knife River.

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

In late 2017, the KR depot came available when a dispute between the landowner, the St. Louis and Lake County Regional Railway Authority (RRA), and Randy Ellestad, the depot owner, resulted in the RRA canceling Randy's lease. Randy and KR native Larry Ronning came up with the idea to create a "Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center" at the depot site to feature both KR icons – the depot and CRUSADER II.



CRUSADER II before and after restoration. Photos: Jim Allert



Depot before and after restoration.
Photos: Todd Lindahl (left) and Paul von Goertz (right))

A sample of the KR community endorses the idea of a history center

Over the winter of 2018 three community meetings were held to help determine the community's interest in a history and culture center. The first presented a brief history on KR's founding fishing families by Bill Berg, followed by a discussion on preserving the families' histories. The second meeting asked attendees what should comprise a KR history center and where would be a preferred location. The last was a survey of support for a history center at the depot site. Thirty-six attended, 34 supported the idea of a history center and at the depot site.

"Whatever you guys do (at the depot site) must support economic development." - RRA

In the spring of 2018, with what we felt was the support of the KR community given the KRRC agreeing to be the boat's temporary steward, Bob Entzion (his grandfather was the original owner of CRUSADER II), Larry Ronning, Randy Ellestad and myself appeared before the RRA to present our idea of a history center and ask for a lease on their land.

Our request was met with skepticism. But we were given a charge that "Whatever you guys do (at the depot site) must support economic development." We figured that charge would not be difficult because our center would be a historical attraction and optional destination for North Shore Scenic Railroad (NSSR) riders. So, we would be fulfilling the charge to support economic development by helping the NSSR grow.

We left the meeting with a five-year renewable lease at \$1 a year, since revised with a 20-year renewable and still \$1 a year.

We learn what a "Conditional Use Permit" (CUP) is all about

In the fall of 2022, the KRHCC applied to county Planning & Zoning for a permit to pour a slab and build a shelter over CRUSADER II. To support our request, we showed the committee how the shelter would fit into a bigger plan for the site that could lead to another North Shore attraction, thus again helping to fulfill the charge from the RRA that our endeavors serve economic development.

Site components included a potential location for the Viking ship, a picnic shelter, parking lot and a spur coming off the mainline to park up to three B&B luxury business cars. All but the depot, CRUSADER II shelter and freight house were hypothetical at this time, but we wanted to show the commission that space had been set aside should these site additions ever materialize.

The discussion then led to the need for a Conditional Use Permit, or CUP. The commission wanted to know about facilities for visitors arriving by train and car and use of public green space. Issues were parking, toilets, garbage removal, noise and traffic. The commission charged us with addressing these issues with our “Save Our Ship” (SOS) Viking boat people and NSSR partners and getting some idea of their future plans. We included the KR Rec Council (KRRC) in the discussion as they maintain a parking lot and facilities for beachgoers across the tracks from us, and we partner with them in the highly successful Julebyen Christmas festival. The CUP discussion also revealed the seriousness of a CUP; once issued, it cannot be rescinded.

The commission did approve our request for a permit to build the shelter for CRUSADER II, but tabled our CUP request until we could provide the requested additional information. For the time being we were happy.

Drainage issues

County Planning and Zoning and Soil & Water were concerned about site drainage. The KRHCC and SOS had several meetings with Soil & Water to arrive at a drainage plan. A county soils engineer developed a plan to drain the site to a swale (wide shallow ditch) along our north border with the campground. The swale would be planted with native shrubs and vegetation to settle the fines in runoff and speed evaporation.

The unexpected cost to implement the grading and drainage plan was split between the KRHCC and SOS. The county did apply for grant help from the state, but the amount has yet to be determined. Work on the swale began last fall but was cut short by a 4” rainfall in mid-September. Contractor Shoreview Natives will complete the swale by June 1.

Photo: Swale under construction on May 10th. About 3,000 water-absorbing native grass plugs were eventually planted, each one punched through a weed suppressant fiber mat that will hold the plug until rooted. As the mat degrades it will fertilize the plugs. In addition to the grass plugs 12 shrubs will be planted in areas where privacy screening is desired and sprayed with deer repellent. Look for swale plantings to appear around mid-August. Photo credit: Paul von Goertz



The KRHCC plans to plant “memorial trees” adjacent to the swale along the north boundary of the site, and along Marina Road on our west border. The trees along the north border will form a green border between the KRHCC and the Knife River Campground, and eventually provide shade for seasonal campers. Families will be able to plant a shade tree in memory of a loved one. See the April issue of this newsletter for details.

Our second run at a CUP

Our second run at a CUP was the March 18 meeting mentioned earlier. Several people asked to address the commission on the issue of the KRHCC's capabilities to provide for visitors and larger groups. The KRHCC did have a draft of rules and regs for those who wished to use the site, but as conversation developed, we realized our draft did not adequately address the specifics presented by the speakers. Acknowledging the long agenda of requests before the commission that night, chairman Hoops recommended the KRHCC, SOS, NSSR and the KRRC (which often gets in the position of speaking for the community) get together and come up with rules and regs to give people wishing to use the site. This was agreed to by the four parties. Second request for a CUP tabled.

We get our ducks in a row

On April 4, the KRHCC/SOS arranged a meeting at the Law Enforcement Center in Two Harbors with Christine McCarthy, Planning & Zoning administrator, Tonya Feldkamp, Environmental Services Director, Rick Goutermont, Lake County Commissioner and board member of the Regional Railroad Administration, Pat Meyer, president of the KRRC, Scott Shelerud, KRRC board member and former member of the P&Z commission, Ken Buehler, executive director of the NSSR, John Vigen representing SOS and me (Paul von Goertz) representing the KRHCC.

Purpose was for all parties to hear first-hand from Ms. McCarthy what her department's issues were regarding how the KRHCC/SOS intended to address visitor issues (parking, toilet facilities, garbage collection and noise). This meeting would be a prelude to another meeting with board members of the KRHCC, SOS and the KRRC to arrive at a final draft of visitor rules and regs that covered the concerns of Ms. McCarthy's department and the comments from KR residents from the March 18 CUP hearing. This meeting would be held in KR on April 11.

Invitations to the April 11 meeting were sent to the board members of the KRHCC, KRRC and SOS by the respective organizations' board chairs. Attendance was as follows: KRHCC 6, SOS 5, and KRRC 3. Discussion focused on the intended use of KRHCC's green space and buildings and arrive at rules and regs for "Temporary Use" permits. The discussions were highly productive, and consensus was reached on regs. "Teeth" were put into the regs in the form of a "damage fee" collected in advance which could be revoked should any one of the regulations not be followed.

Language of the "Use Fee/Damage Deposit:"

Permittee shall pay to KRHCC a sum of \$_____ for temporary use of the site for the stated date(s). The Permittee shall also pay KRHCC with a separate check a damage deposit in the sum of \$_____. In addition to any damage occurring to the site and its exhibits, failure of the Permittee to abide by site regulations may result in forfeiture of all or part of the damage deposit. Both User Fee and damage deposit are payable one week prior to the event. Separate checks are to be made out to KRHCC and sent to KRHCC, PO Box 240, Knife River, MN 55609. Upon completion of the Permittee's obligations under this Temporary Use Permit, and following KRHCC's after event site inspection, KRHCC shall return to the Permittee, or destroy, the damage deposit minus any amounts deemed necessary to repair damages inflicted upon the cultural exhibits and site by the Permittee and/or the Permittee's associates, guests, invitees, contractors, and all other persons whatsoever who enter the premises during the temporary use period, whether or not such persons did so with the Permittee's knowledge or consent.

A third run at a CUP

On May 20, the KRHCC and SOS appeared before the Planning & Zoning Commission to present a revised “KRHCC Site & Facilities Temporary Use Permit” that was written by a coalition of board members from the KRHCC, SOS and the KRRC, and with assistance of a Duluth attorney. Also in attendance was Ken Buehler, Executive Director of the NSSR as “Agent” for the NSSR. His presence was requested by Planning & Zoning, I assume, as resource person for the commission and was helpful during discussion.

The document that was presented addressed and expanded upon all the concerns of those who expressed opposition to the KRHCC/SOS CUP application at the March 18 hearing. A copy of this document is attached at the end of this article.

The KRHCC and SOS representatives were given the opportunity to explain their request for a CUP stressing that “the KRHCC solely retains the right of site control in determining frequency of temporary use by others as well as the ability to deny those requests if deemed inappropriate based on their character or size or potential disruption to neighbors or community as a whole.”

Acting Commission Chairman John Bathke then gave those in attendance the opportunity to speak for or against the CUP request. Good arguments were presented from both sides. It was then time for commission members to discuss among themselves the CUP request. They finally arrived at several conditions that would need to be met before they could consider granting a CUP. These conditions are not yet in final form at the time of this writing (May 22), but in summary they address event hours and frequency of events, third party events (those not initiated by KRHCC, SOS, KRRC and NSSR), number of people attending, and a KRHCC contact person if it is observed by center neighbors that Temporary Use regulations are not being followed during an event.

After lengthy discussion by the commission, a motion was made and seconded to accept the CUP request with conditions. Motion was carried followed by a unanimous “Yes” vote with Commissioner Goutermont abstaining as a member of Railroad Authority board.

The whole exercise was a good example of respectful discourse and compromise to reach agreement.

A look back - what if the KRHCC was never created?

When Randy Ellestad’s lease on the depot, which he owned, was not renewed in 2016, the Regional Railroad Authority, the landowner, had three apparent options:

1. Demolish the depot and freight building as blight and target for vandals. This was the RRA’s intention as by policy they do not care to own or maintain buildings.
2. Advertise for parties to develop the land for use under conditions established by the RRA, that meet county P&Z regs, and with community involvement.
3. Do nothing and allow the site to return to its original and natural state (popple trees and tansy weeds)

The land upon which the KRHCC rests is its best use.

- It is leased to a non-profit managed by a local board of directors.
- The site provides an educational and historical experience and helps preserve the Scandinavian culture of the town and North Shore as well.
- The site has allowed Julebyen to double its footprint and provide train service for visitors from Duluth and festivalgoers from across the state to seek out trolls.
- The center has given KR a sense of community pride and place.
- The center acknowledges and honors KR's founding fishing families of which many descendants still reside in KR.

And, maybe best of all, the site remains under the control of the KR community at least until 2042.

Depot site regulations as agreed upon and included with CUP application:

- **Condition:** The cultural exhibits, Depot and site must be left in a clean and orderly condition. There is no garbage service on site. Therefore, garbage, trash and recyclables generated as a result of the temporary use must be collected and removed by the Permittee from the premises.
- ***Failure to leave the site in an acceptable condition and/or remove trash/recyclables will result in forfeiture of the damage deposit.***
- **Placement of Event Structures:** KRHCC reserves the right to approve placement of event-related vendor booths, tents, or other temporary structures supportive of the event.
- **Toilets:** The KRHCC site provides one handicapped portable toilet, serviced weekly, from June 1 – October 31. The Permittee is responsible for provision cost of additional portable toilets necessary to accommodate the event.
- **Electrical:** Electricity is available on site. Generators may be used provided operating decibel levels are not disruptive to those living near the KRHCC center.
- **Safety requirements:** The Permittee is responsible for assuring the Depot building does not become overcrowded. No open flames, sparklers or any fireworks are permitted on site. Portable cooking equipment and outdoor grills for food preparation are permitted provided there are no public regulatory bans against such cooking equipment. Pets are to be leashed.
- **Tables and chairs:** The KRHCC has four tables and 24 chairs that may be used by lessee. All must be cleaned after use and returned where found in the depot.
- **Water:** There is no water available on site.
- **Parking:** Permittee guests may park on site in the parking lot provided. Parking on Marina Road is not permitted at any time. Additional parking is available on American Dock Road south of the KRHCC site. No one may enter the KRHCC site in any way that causes damage to the grounds or interferes with traffic or safety.
- The large gravel parking lot south of America Dock road is owned by the Knife River Rec Council. The lot, its toilets and trash containers are reserved for beachgoers.
- **Smoking:** The KRHCC site is smoke-free and smoking, of any substance or vaping within 30 feet of the site entrance on Marina Road is prohibited.
- **Railroad right-of-way:** Visitors must not walk on the railroad-right-of way as per federal law. The right-of-way is defined by the KHRCC fence line.
- **Hours:** All Permittee activity on site must be conclude by 10 PM. Music or amplified sound systems should be at a decibel level not disruptive to those living near the KRHCC Center.
- **Alcohol:** UNAUTHORIZED DISPENSING OF ALCOHOL ON SITE IS PROHIBITED.
- If Permittee is to sell or dispense alcohol on the KRHCC site, proof of compliance with Lake County Auditor's procedural protocol which requires adherence with liquor provisions of Minnesota

Statute 340-A, evidence of applicable liability insurance and approval of Lake County Commissioners is to be provided KRHCC one week prior to the event.

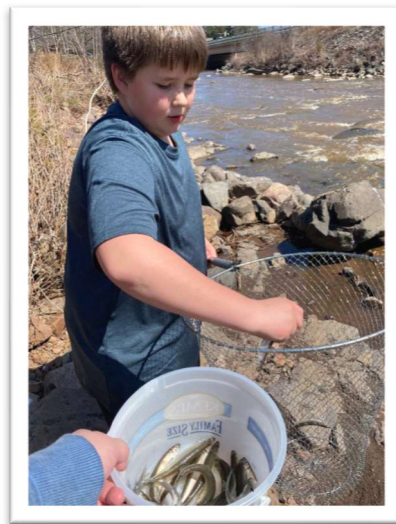
- **Responsibility:** The Permittee assumes full responsibility for the appropriate conduct of persons at the site during the Temporary Use hours and for any loss, breakage or damage caused to cultural exhibits or the site. The premises must be used for a lawful purpose. The undersigned Permittee agrees to pay to correct all damages that occur during the time of its temporary use, above and beyond the damage deposit.

KR'ERS CAPITALIZE ON SMELT TRICKLE

It was almost like the old days that many KRers would rather forget. Hordes of people from all over the state packed along the banks of the Knife River to celebrate the arrival of spring with the yearly April smelt run, leaving behind litter and trampled yards. But this year it was all to the benefit of KRers.



Gunny Skadberg displays a productive dip the Knife



Tor Skadberg empties his net of the slippery silver fish.

Photo credits: Chris Skadberg

Lee and Jim Bujold were on their way to church services at Knife River Lutheran when they saw a sure sign the smelt were running – flocks of seagulls displaying their diving skills by plucking smelt from the river. Word travels fast in KR and soon there were many locals scooping smelt.



Anne and Chris Skadberg suggested a “pop-up” smelt fry in their garage and so it happened with many friends and neighbors attending. Finally, a fun smelting experience in KR!

Photo left: Some who heard the smelt pop-up dinner bell. Photo credit: Lee Bujold

MAY MARKS THE 5TH YEAR THE KRHCC NEWSLETTER HAS BEEN PUBLISHED

It has been fun being publisher, editor, opinion page editor, critic, and reporter for this newsletter. I owe a lot to my great production person, Anne-Lù Hovis. She supports the words with her graphics and has faithfully produced all 60 issues. If each issue averaged four stories per issue, Todd Lindahl, our KRHCC historian, and I together would have written 240 stories.

Both my mother and grandfather wrote newsletters. Must be in the genes. My grandfather owned a new and used farm implement business in Elmore, Minnesota, about 10 miles south of Blue Earth on highway 169. He wrote a weekly “advertorial” for the local paper called “Paul Oldenburg Store News.” My mother wrote a column for the First Lutheran Church in Duluth called “Olina Writes Again.” “Olina” was her pen name, and she wrote about the activities of the church from the perspective of a nosey Norwegian busy body. Kind of like “The News from Lake Wobegon.” People loved Olina’s letters.

People ask if Todd and I will ever run out of material, and I doubt it. If you start to see pictures of my grandkids, you’ll know I’m desperate to fill a page. However, Todd’s well is very deep and stories just keep flowing – all well researched and documented.

I sometimes start a newsletter thinking “What news do I have for this month?”, then somehow end up with eight pages. Some of the stories I enjoy most are writing about KR memorable moments that I pull from my memory, having lived here now for 52 years.

By the way, all past newsletters are online at krhcc.org under “Recent News.”

In case it hasn’t been apparent to you, the newsletter has been a good tool for generating donations. The KRHCC has no admission fee, and this e-newsletter is sent to you at no charge. That’s reason enough to give a donation now to prove my point how effective the e-newsletter is in raising needed funds, particularly now as we build a shelter for CRUSADER II. Send to KRHCC, POB 240, Knife River, MN 55609. All donations are tax deductible. Thanks!

MAY DONATIONS, MEMORIALS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS

Donations:

- Karen Olson to offset the cost to add a little “Scandinavian flare” to the CRUSADER II shelter.

The KRHCC is a 501 (c3) non-profit so all donations whether in the form of a memorial, honorarium, or sponsorship are fully tax deductible. Your comments and suggestions for this monthly emailed newsletter are always welcome. Email to: info@krhcc.org

If you have family or friends who may enjoy reading this newsletter, they can access the current and all past issues on the “Current News” page of our website at: krhcc.org

NEWSLETTER

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