



EDITOR – Ted Wendling  
EDITORIAL STAFF – Harold Lassers  
Bruce Moore

# The BOC Beacon

August 4, 2020

## AS VIRUS CASES KEEP CLIMBING, REPUBLICANS OFFER LITTLE BUT QUACK SCIENCE AND SILENCE

Well, that certainly was predictable.

At the beginning of July, the Grand Traverse County Health Department reported a total of 45 positive cases of COVID-19. As of today, the number of cases has nearly quadrupled, climbing to 175.

We all know why – reckless and selfish behavior by out-of-town visitors who poured into our region to celebrate Independence Day weekend and thereafter as if 2020 was any other year. Contact tracers have linked 43 positive cases alone to the annual July 4 bacchanal on the Torch Lake sandbar.



So what has the Republican majority on the Grand Traverse County BOC had to say about this? Have they urged the public to wear

masks, regularly wash their hands and adhere to social distancing requirements when in confined spaces? Have they urged local health and law enforcement authorities to crack down on businesses and customers who refuse to adhere to Michigan’s mask requirement? Have they discussed how the BOC might help alleviate the lack of diagnostic

testing available to county residents? Do they have a plan for what to do about the county’s homeless population if Safe Harbor is unable to reopen this winter?

No, no, no and no.

Instead, what we’ve gotten from BOC Chairman Rob Hentschel and his henchmen is quack Trumpism:

- Brad Jewett claims that most people who contract the virus are asymptomatic, ignoring the evidence that asymptomatic carriers can transmit the virus to people who are immunocompromised.
- Gordie LaPointe parrots Trump’s inane if-a-tree-falls-in-the-forest claim that if the U.S. stopped testing, cases would disappear, saying, “The number of new cases is tied to the amount of testing you do. For example, if we did no testing for the next week, we’d report no new cases.”
- And Hentschel flouts his disdain for Michigan’s mask edict by saying he’s “not medically trained” to determine whether his unmasked employees at Roy’s General Store have medical reasons for not wearing a mask.

With no end in sight for this pandemic, isn’t it long past time for the people’s representatives to provide some leadership and moral guidance?

## TOMORROW'S BOC AGENDA: WHAT TO WATCH FOR

### SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT STAFFING

**INCREASE** – County Sheriff Tom Bensley is asking commissioners for \$169,792.02 to hire one additional sergeant and one deputy for the department's drug interdiction team (item 9c).

Think about that. At a time when Bensley has faced unrelenting criticism for the poor treatment that his jail provides to drug defendants, at a time when he



tone-deafly drags his heels on the purchase of body cameras for his deputies, he is asking the county to pony up money in the middle of an economy-crushing pandemic to fill up his jail with more drug offenders.

It's a shameful request and we hope that callers will have plenty to say about it during

Wednesday's public comment period.

So woeful is the medical care that has been provided to jail inmates that Bensley's Democratic opponent in November's election, Greg Hall, took out a petition to run against Bensley almost solely due to the inadequate care that his mother and brother-in-law received when they were incarcerated. Hall's mother and brother-in-law have filed a federal class-action lawsuit against Wellpath, the jail's Nashville-based medical provider.

In an embarrassing admission that he made during a county commission meeting last October, Bensley threw up his hands when asked about Wellpath.

"We don't have an independent contractor or somebody who looks at Wellpath to make sure they're doing what the contract says," he said. "I don't have the expertise to know if the medical practices that they're doing in the jail are following common, agreed-upon medical practices. That's not my job."

Wrong. That *is* his job. But because he wasn't doing it, commissioners were forced in May to hire the National Commission on Correctional Health Care to assess the quality of the medical treatment being provided to prisoners by Wellpath. That is costing taxpayers \$24,640.

And now Bensley wants to increase by 50% the size of his drug interdiction team, a unit that is already staffed with one sergeant and three deputies.

As the nation continues to be convulsed by protests of police brutality in the wake of George Floyd's murder by a Minneapolis police officer, the sheriff continues to resist even modest calls for reform, such as the purchase of body cameras for his deputies. Instead of asking commissioners to expand his narc squad, Bensley, as Traverse City Police Chief Jeff O'Brien is doing, should be asking for money for body cams. Commissioners should turn down this outrageous request.

## HIGH (AND LOW) LIGHTS FROM THE LAST MEETING

**COUNTY COMMISSIONERS SPAR WITH CITY OVER A NEW SENIOR CENTER** – City commissioners called the county BOC's bluff Monday night, voting 6-1 to ask voters to approve a 50-year lease to the county for the Senior Center. The vote is an inducement to coax county commissioners into placing a millage for a new Senior Center on the November 3 ballot.

Noting that they face an August 11 deadline, the board's Republican majority had been poised to take a knee and run out the clock.

If county commissioners decide to place the millage on the ballot, the two questions would be "tie-barred," meaning both would have to be approved by voters.

The majority of the last BOC meeting on July 15 was devoted to the Senior Center. Now, with no item on Wednesday's agenda indicating that they

intend to revisit the issue, commissioners will have to decide whether they're willing to add discussion of the Senior Center to their agenda or call a special meeting before August 11.

At the last meeting, commissioners Hentschel, LaPointe, Jewett, Ron Clous, and Sonny Wheelock took turns criticizing city commissioners for not providing a reliable cost estimate, failing to address a parking shortage, and for expecting county taxpayers to fund the construction of a project that sits on city property without giving the county a long-term lease.

Allegations made by city commissioners in a July 15 Record-Eagle story that county commissioners don't trust them were met with hostility, particularly from Hentschel and LaPointe.

Hentschel said city commissioners keep changing the terms of their request. "Now it's, 'Are you going to pay for this building we own and also pay for all of the services and the programming?' When you see this in a news article, they're saying, 'They were on board and now they're waffling.' No, this wasn't what was presented.

"Every six months or so, this goes up a million to two in cost," Hentschel added. "It started out \$2 to \$3, maybe \$4 million, 5, 6, 7, 8. It's just, you know, millions of dollars every couple of months get added to this project. This is classic scope creep."

Because Hentschel and the other commissioners were throwing out numbers with no backup, The Beacon contacted City Manager Marty Colburn to ask how much the project will cost. He responded that the current cost estimate is \$5,584,000.

Wheelock provided a reality check to claims by Hentschel and LaPointe that the city is asking the county to fund the construction of a building owned by the city. He noted that county residents enjoy the use of the Senior Center too, and he pointed out that the money raised by a millage for the Senior Center would not be "county money."

"One of the things we have to remember is they're not asking the county to build the building," Wheelock said. "They're asking the taxpayers of this community to build the building. There is a difference. We're not taking money out of our general fund. We're asking the county residents, including the ones in the city, whether they're willing to build this building."

The ball is in the county's court. It's time to put up or shut up.

**LOCAL 911 BALLOT PROPOSAL PASSES UNANIMOUSLY** – With Commissioner Betsy Coffia absent, commissioners voted unanimously to place on the November ballot a local 911 surcharge that would assess a fee of up to \$2.50 a month to all county landline, wireless, and voice over internet protocol (VOIP) service users for six years – July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2027.

If approved by voters, the surcharge would increase the current surcharge by 65 cents a month – from \$1.85 to \$2.50.

**SPEAKING OF BETSY . . .** – We're happy to report that she's continuing to recover from her surgery in Ann Arbor on July 10 to remove a brain tumor that was lodged behind her left eye.

In her most recent post on her Caring Bridge site, Betsy wrote, "I am as opinionated and feisty as ever and I am experiencing no impact on memory or any other concerning symptoms post-surgery.

"This is a new and challenging experience for me," she added. "Ya'll know how I do – full throttle and unconscious are my two 'speeds.' Sitting still is not easy, but it's entirely necessary as I am also deeply tired and small tasks are surprisingly exhausting."

If you want to know how you can make a donation, provide Meal Train support, or send messages, love or prayers, you can visit Betsy's Caring Bridge site at the link under BOC Links.

And that's a wrap. We hope that you're making the best of this bumper summer. Stay safe and mask up. Thanks for reading.

## **BOC LINKS**

1. Here is a link to Betsy Coffia's Caring Bridge site:

<https://www.caringbridge.org/visit/betstheboss>

2. You can find a link to the agenda, packet, and minutes of BOC meetings at:

<https://grandtraversecounty.civicweb.net/Portal/MeetingInformation.aspx?Org=Cal&Id=163>

3. You can watch the meetings live and see replays of previous meetings online at:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiB1eEx7uvQn7L1LM1kShGQ>