

County Line Road project to restart in April

By **JULIE HULLETT**

HUNTING VALLEY — After a delay last fall, the reconstruction of County Line Road is scheduled to restart on April 1, Village Engineer Joe Ciuni said.

Service Director Don Cunningham originally expected that the project would be complete mid-December of 2019, but that was before FirstEnergy decided to replace poles throughout the construction area. Mr. Ciuni explained that the widening and realignment of the road required 25-30 utility poles to be relocated. But representatives at FirstEnergy decided to relocate all 170 poles because many were old and leaning.

He said that moving the utility poles delayed the project. Although FirstEnergy tried to stay ahead of the road crews, Mr. Ciuni said that “there were some things we could not do.” He said that asphalt plants closed after Thanksgiving so the project was cut off until the spring.

From the Gates Mills municipal boundary to Whisperwood Drive, the County Line reconstruction project is shared between Hunting Valley and Russell Township. From Whisperwood to South Woodland Road (Route 87), County Line is only in Hunting Valley. The contract is with Trax Construction and was bid by the Geauga County Engineer’s Office.

According to Mr. Ciuni, the cost of County Line was reduced to \$3.786 million when it was originally closer to \$4 million.

Gauga County Deputy Engineer Nick Gorris said that there are \$317,000 worth of credits on the project, but also \$92,000 in additional costs from change orders. Mr. Ciuni said that this leaves a project cost savings of \$225,000 overall.

An example of a credit on the project was insulating a waterline. Mr. Ciuni said that waterlines have to be buried deep enough in the ground so they will not freeze in the winter months. Part of the project cost was to lower 1,200 feet of a waterline along County Line Road. The Cleveland Division of Water, however, allowed the contractor to insulate the pipe rather than lower it, he explained. Mr. Gorris was not sure yet of the price tag, but said that it will reduce the project cost because it reduces the amount of labor.

The other large credit to the County Line project is the retaining wall. To widen the road, it is necessary to cut into a hillside. A retaining wall is used to keep the hillside in place. For this project, Mr. Ciuni said that the retaining wall is made of timbers.

Mr. Ciuni said that the retaining wall was “non-performed,” meaning that it was removed from Trax’s contract and Hunting Valley hired Great Lakes Construction to do that instead. Mr. Gorris did not have a definite cost for this because it is still under construction.

“[Great Lakes Construction does] that kind of stuff all the time,” Mr. Ciuni said. “And it’s in the 100 percent Hunting Valley section [of the road] so we had the liberty to do that.”

Mr. Ciuni is expecting that County Line will be complete in August or September.

The project to resurface Cedar Road cost the village \$673,593, according to financial records. The village paid \$135,022 on the portion of Cedar that is shared with Gates Mills Village between SOM Center Road and Woodstock Road. The records show that Hunting Valley paid \$538,571 on Cedar Road from Woodstock to Chagrin River Road, a portion of the road that is only in Hunting Valley. Cedar has been open to traffic since June.

Nonprofit helps kids purchase Wi-Fi hot spots

By **COLLIN CUNNINGHAM**

Hope for Kids Geauga has allocated \$15,000 to help school districts across the county purchase Wi-Fi hot spots for students who lack home internet access.

Chardon Middle School guidance counselor and Hope for Kids Geauga board member Janelle Stuart said there is a void. “We found out across all the districts in Geauga County that there is a need for accessibility to Wi-Fi and for kids to be able to continue their education from home, especially they needed to have that access since everything is now on a virtual learning platform.”

Gov. Mike DeWine closed schools grades kindergarten through 12 for three weeks in an effort to contain the highly contagious COVID-19 virus that is spreading through the nation and world. Districts responded with distance learning programs for their students. The governor is considering keeping school buildings closed for the remainder of the academic year.

That could leave students without Wi-Fi access in a bind.

Hope for Kids board member Engelina Koberna took the initiative to contact each of the Geauga school districts about acquiring internet hot spots. The project will end up costing about \$25,000 per year, she said.

To make this project a reality, Mrs. Koberna worked closely with Mike Daugherty, director of technology and information systems for Chagrin Falls Exempted Village School District.

Mr. Daugherty said Geauga County schools

are using MiFi 8000 Mobile Hot Spot, which Sprint is providing for free with a \$29.99 per month unlimited data plan.

Chagrin Falls Superintendent Robert Hunt said the schools would provide instructions and directions to remotely help individuals who have difficulty setting up the hot spots. “What we know about technology is, often, the kids are the ones who know the best, and I think they’ll certainly be familiar with logging on as they do it at school all the time,” Mr. Hunt said.

The hot spots will work in tandem with the take-home laptops that many school districts now offer to students. “We have Chromebooks for grades K-12 in our district,” Mr. Hunt said, “however, in grades K-3 those have just remained in the classrooms for students. Obviously, with this event, we had students in K-3 take those home. They’ve had them all year, but it’s the first time those students have taken them home.”

On March 17 alone, Chagrin Falls schools recorded 496 active Google classrooms, 985 posts made by teachers, upwards of 300 video conferences and more than 5,000 files created by their students.

Mrs. Koberna said, while the hot spot project had a fast turnaround in the wake of the coronavirus scare, the idea originated months before the outbreak.

“We had a retreat in January with all our board members,” Mrs. Koberna said. “We were asked to brainstorm ideas of what areas that we hadn’t attempted to assist students in Geauga County with needs, like avenues that we haven’t explored.”

Commissioners declare COVID-19 state of emergency

By **SAMANTHA COTTRILL**

The Geauga County Commissioners declared a countywide state of emergency on Tuesday in response to the COVID-19 epidemic. The board, however, stressed that the declaration is purely fiscal.

County Administrator Gerald Morgan said this is in response to a change in advice from the state for access to funds that may be available to counties because of the novel coronavirus causing hundreds of people to get sick.

“We had been told that because the state declared [an emergency] for the entire state, we were OK and we didn’t have to do the declaration in order to get funds from FEMA,” Mr. Morgan said of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. “As of this weekend, they’ve changed that and said that each county would have to do their own [declaration].”

He explained that the change became necessary after Gov. Mike DeWine’s stay-at-home

order, which went into effect Monday at 11:59 p.m. He said the declaration allows the county to submit to FEMA any additional costs the county incurs as a result of the state actions during the current health crisis for the potential to get reimbursed.

By declaring a state of emergency, the county also waives the bid process normally required for purchases of more than \$50,000, so long as the cost is less than \$100,000 and the county receives at least three quotes, Mr. Morgan said.

Commissioner Timothy Lennon, board chairman, said it also gives Mr. Morgan authority to make decisions in the event the board “can’t convene in a quick enough fashion.”

Gauga County Department of Emergency Services Director Roger Peterson echoed Mr. Morgan’s emphasis that the declaration is strictly administrative.

“It doesn’t change our response, it doesn’t change our outlook, it’s just purely a fiscal event,” Mr. Peterson said.

Also in response to COVID-19, the board agreed to indefinitely postpone the March 31 meeting to err on the side of caution and accommodate social distancing and Gov. DeWine’s stay-at-home order.

Mr. Morgan said the board decided to hold the week’s session after Gov. DeWine’s order so commissioners could combine it with action that would have been taken next week.

One of these was home Wi-Fi access. Mrs. Koberna said her daughter, who teaches in the Kirtland Local School District, and Mrs. Stuart had expressed concerns about students’ access to the internet.

“And some teachers know as well, if a student needs extra time to complete certain things or they have to get creative with homework,” Mrs. Stuart explained. She also said that students completed a Google form survey in class to let the schools know whether they would need a hot spot at home.

When choosing a service provider, Mrs. Koberna said, the board considered contracts from Sprint and Verizon. “Sprint had, by far, a better program for schools and government, so that’s who we recommended they purchase through, and then we granted them according to that price schedule.”

For now, some Geauga school districts are signed into seven-month contracts with Sprint to keep the hot spots, but others have opted in for longer terms. Mr. Daugherty said their contract is set for 12 months, with the option to pause service during the summer months.

Mr. Hunt said that, while schools and staffs have been forced to work much harder to meet demands brought on by the current pandemic, this event has also helped schools adapt to digital learning technology.

“As difficult as this [outbreak] is and a lot to manage,” Mr. Hunt said, “there’s an opportunity here to really leverage and see what you can do digitally and manage and monitor student growth and academic progress during this time.”

Mr. Lennon said the board should keep the situation flexible and only meet for an emergency or special meeting when necessary. “There’s no need in our day-to-day business congregating like this,” he said.

Commissioner Clerk Christine Blair said the board is required to have a public notice no less than 15 minutes prior to an emergency meeting and no less than 24 hours prior to a regular or special meeting.

Under the board’s regular business, the commissioners approved several bids and payments for county departments.

For the Geauga County Engineer’s Office, the board approved the payment of \$387,783 to Aero-Mark Company, LLC, for various road repairs throughout the county. The board also awarded a \$716,296-bid to Lake Erie Construction Company for guardrail replacement throughout the county. Finally, the board approved the usage of municipal road funds for the Goodwin Avenue improvement project in Burton Village in the amount of \$200,000.

For the Geauga County Department of Water Resources, the commissioners approved two service contracts with Hannon Electric Company for three-year periods, including a \$15,000-contract (\$5,000 per year) for motor and blower services and repairs within the department, along with a \$96,000-contract (\$32,000 per year) for programming services for the McFarland Wastewater Treatment Plant.

Councilman resigns after less than three months

By **JULIE HULLETT**

WOODMERE — Village Council members have a position to fill now that Councilman Charles Smith resigned on March 17 after his recent election to the post. Mr. Smith, who served as mayor of the village from 2010-2017, said that his resignation was effective immediately.

In an email to the Times on Friday, Mr. Smith said that he needs to address his health but wished the Village of Woodmere and its organizations the best.

“I think it came as a surprise to all the council members,” Councilman Craig Wade said last week.

According to the village charter, a vacancy on council must be filled by a majority vote of the remaining six council members. If the vacancy is not filled within 40 days, the mayor

appoints a council replacement.

The new council person would serve until Dec. 31, 2021. In the fall of 2021, the appointed candidate may run for the unexpired term, which would end Dec. 31, 2023, according to Law Director Frank Consolo.

In the past, Mr. Wade said that the council reached out to candidates from the most recent council race to see if they are still interested in the position. Then council meets with the candidates to vet them, which he said may be difficult due to the state’s stay-at-home order linked COVID-19, a novel coronavirus.

“Last time, I encouraged residents to come visit Village Hall,” he said.

Sitting council members would not be part of the vetting process if they are related to a candidate. For example, SharNette McCully, Mr. Wade’s wife, ran for council last fall. If council chooses to reach out to former

candidates, she would be among that pool.

Mr. Smith was elected to council in November and won one of four available seats in a race with eight candidates. The other three candidates who did not win a seat besides Ms. McCully were Planning and Zoning Commission Chairman Seth Young, former Councilman Tennyson Adams and resident Beata Fleszar.

During his campaign, Mr. Smith said that he planned to return to village government because he did not like the direction that the village was headed in.

At the January organizational meeting, Mr. Smith ran against Councilwoman Jennifer Mitchell Earley for the position of council president. Ms. Earley has held the position of council president in 2011, 2018, 2019 and 2020. He lost in a 4-3 council vote.