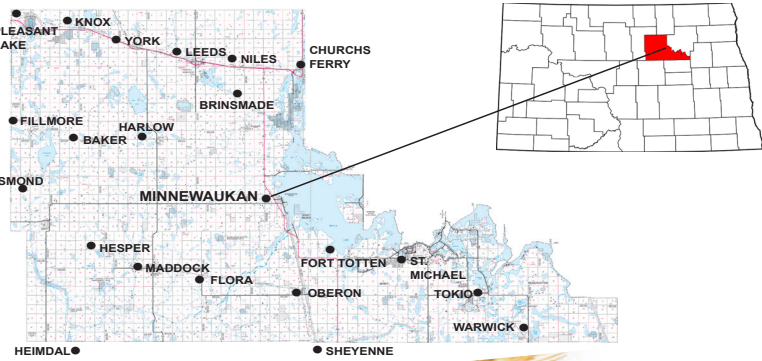


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## Solberg speaks at Maddock Library

About 30 interested people gathered at the Maddock Community Library January 14 to hear Barb Solberg, a North Dakota author, share about her book and writing experience. Attendees shared a Norwegian table of goodies provided by members of the book club and others. Harriman's Coffee House provided coffee, and the group spent a couple hours listening and asking questions. It was a delightful time and broadened everyone's minds. Her book, "What We Left Behind," is available for purchase or loan from the library.

## Benson County Commission weighs future plans for county transportation

BY K. L. GLOVER

At the January 20 regular meeting of the Benson County commissioners, the board addressed future plans for Benson County Transportation following the departure of longtime BCT Director Susan Fossen earlier this month. Possibilities outlined on the board agenda were appointing a new director; having another transit agency take over the director position and have drivers stationed within Benson County; combining the BCT director position with that of Benson County Housing Authority director; or contracting services with a company.

Chair David Davidson attended via Microsoft Teams. The other members, Dick Horner, Doris Griffin, Ron Stadum and Tammy Kuk, attended in person. Others present were County Auditor Bonnie Erickson, Sheriff Laura Wanzek, State's Attorney James Wang, Scott Todahl and Joy Orvedal of the Benson County Highway Department, and K. L. Glover of the *Benson County Farmers Press*.

The commissioners approved a motion to acknowledge Susan Fossen's resignation letter, and the motion carried. Davidson asked Erickson for her input on which BCT option would be best. Erickson stated her view that it was nice to keep jobs open in Benson County. The board discussed the option of combining the BCT director and Benson County Housing director positions. Erickson said that Becky Hanson of the NDDOT thought that might be a good idea. Horner, who serves on the housing board, stated that Laura Winson, housing director, was willing to do the BCT director job as well, and stated that to him, county transportation and housing fit together, as the availability of public transit is sometimes a factor with residents who live in public housing. Griffin indicated that combining the two positions might be a cost-savings opportunity.

Griffin made a motion to move forward with combining the two director positions,



seconded by Kuk. Stadum discussed the BCT building in Maddock and wondered whether Winson needed to be in Minnewaukan. Horner suggested getting a plan after seeing how the program works. Kuk asked if Winson could come to the next meeting for her input. The motion on moving forward with the combined position carried. Discussion was held on whether a special meeting was needed to address the proposed combined position; Davidson said that a special meeting could take place if Winson wanted one. Erickson stated that Tony Delorme had called to ask about the status of his job application. Griffin indicated that since there was no BCT director, no decision could be made at present.

Wang said he didn't think the commissioners knew exactly which assets BCT had. He suggested that an audit be performed on BCT resources, including financial records, plans and equipment, and inquiring who does vehicle maintenance. Davidson asked who would do the audit. Erickson stated that BCT had participated in Brady Martz and Associates' audits of the county and would probably have to audit BCT separately. Griffin said she felt it was essential that an audit be done. Wang stated that Becky Hanson with the NDDOT might have records of BCT's assets. Stadum asked if Winson could do an audit. Wang recommended that a commissioner participate in the audit.

### Road department update

Jessica Tagestad of Wold Engineering joined via Microsoft Teams. She indicated that word was still being awaited on the results of several flex fund applications, but good news had been received on a grant application for removal of a bridge

in West Antelope Township south of Flora. Tagestad said that she would reach out to consultants for cultural and environmental surveys, then get a preliminary engineering cost ready. She reported that the spring of 2027 was likely the earliest that this project would be ready for bidding. Todahl stated that the bridge had been barricaded a couple of years ago. Tagestad indicated that removing the bridge would also remove it from the county's and state's books, and no more inspections would need to be paid for on it. Griffin asked if there was a road leading to it. Todahl said no. Tagestad said the preliminary engineering fee on the bridge removal would be the county's responsibility. Also, Tagestad said an engineer for construction engineering on the Brown Road needed to be selected as part of the RFP process.

Todahl reported that Maddock Construction was included in the highway department bills and that would wrap up 2025 gravel costs. He stated that highway department employees were working on trailers; blade men were going out to address occasional drifts.

Regarding the emergency manager part of Todahl's position, he said that an Emergency Management Performance Grant had been applied for, but funds had not been released yet.

Stadum asked Todahl if he would be interested in a sander for sale online. Todahl said he could take a look.

### Sheriff update

Wanzek reported she had met with the director of Lake Region Ambulance to work on potential grants for the Benson County Sheriff's Office. She said she had done a job interview with a potential hire the prior week. Wanzek also reported on her attendance at a recent Minnewaukan City

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## Byron Knutson dies at 96

County native was longtime public servant, marched for civil rights with MLK in 1965

Byron Knutson, who joined Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1965 voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., died December 6 in Bismarck at 96, surrounded by family.

North Dakota voters elected Knutson to serve as legislator, insurance commissioner and labor commissioner. He was a member of the North Dakota Democratic-NPL Party. Knutson served in the Korean War as a Marine in the 1950s. "While Black Americans were allowed to fight and die alongside him, they had obstacles to voting in Southern states, strengthening Knutson's commitment to work for social justice," said a statement from Knutson's family.

Byron Knutson was born Nov. 9, 1929 in Brinsmade. He grew up in Harlow, graduated from high school in 1948 at Benson County Agricultural and Training School in Maddock, and attended ND Agricultural College (now NDSU) in Fargo in 1948. In 1949 he began a 20-year career as a depot agent and telegrapher with the Soo Line Railroad.

Byron served in the US Marine Corps from 1951-53 during the Korean War, was promoted to sergeant and honorably discharged, receiving the National Defense Service Medal, Korean Service Medal and United Nations Service Medal. He returned to North Dakota, resuming Soo Line employment. In 1955, Byron brought North Dakota its first Babe Ruth Little League, the "Pioneer League." He was elected to the ND House



of Representatives (Benson County, 1958 and 1960).

"When Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. called upon the nation's clergy and lay people to support the rights of African-Americans and all people to vote without fear of losing their lives, I was ready to do my part," Knutson said during an interview with Jim Shaw in 2021.

Byron attended Valley City State University and the University of North Dakota, graduating with a bachelor's degree. In 1971 he traveled to Norway to study the country's language, school system and political structure.

He served four-year terms as ND insurance commissioner (1976) and ND labor commissioner (1986), the only member of the ND Democratic-NPL Party to have been elected to that office. Byron also ran for ND public service commissioner in 1974, ND labor commissioner in 1982 and 1990, and ND sec-

retary of state in 1984.

In 1978, as ND insurance commissioner, Byron introduced Measure 4 to help address the high costs of health care for North Dakotans. While the measure failed, Byron became known as the first person in the United States to try to institute a plan to provide single-payer universal health insurance.

Following Byron's elected service, he continued to devote his life to volunteer work for local, statewide and national campaigns, and in 2011, along with his wife, Bernice, received the first Governor Arthur Link and Grace Link Award for Lifetime Achievement from the ND Democratic-NPL Party. In 2024, Byron Knutson's name was on the ballot one last time as the ND Democratic-NPL Party honored him for his service, making him one of three Democratic presidential electors.

"Profoundly inspired by King, our father devoted his life to public service. We are announcing his death in recognition of King's birthday today and the approaching Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday. There are still so many injustices happening in our world. Leaders like King and our father are desperately needed," said his daughter, Rebecca Knutson.

Byron is survived by his wife of 59 years, Bernice (Hofstad) Knutson, and his daughters, Rebecca and Harmony Knutson and grandchildren John, Olivia and Sophia Gowin. A celebration of life will be announced at a later date.

## Hoeven joins community celebration for acquisition of Devils Lake Hospital

On Monday, Jan. 19 Senator John Hoeven joined officials from Altru Health System and CommonSpirit Health for a community celebration to mark the acquisition of Devils Lake Hospital. Hoeven recognized Devils Lake Mayor Jim Moe, Altru CEO Todd Forkel and President Dr. Josh Deere, CommonSpirit Health Central Region President Tim Bricker, health care professionals and community members from the region for their work to advance this multi-year effort.

The agreement was approved by Pope Leo XIV, the first American Pope, in December and the final transition of ownership will occur on March 1, 2026.

"The acquisition of Devils Lake Hospital is a pivotal milestone in our efforts to bring the best possible health care to the Lake Region. I appreciate the hard work of Mayor Moe and the teams at Altru and CommonSpirit Health to advance this agreement, as well as all of the community members who provided feedback and input as we worked to identify the right solution," said Senator Hoeven. Specifically, this effort sought to:

-- Identify and advance a community-led solution to address local concerns about health care access.

Hoeven arranged three community meetings across 2023 and 2024 with local residents, regional leaders and health care providers to gather feedback and address community concerns.

-- Secure commitments from CommonSpirit Health to make improvements to the hospital and work towards a long-term



Senator John Hoeven joined area officials for a celebration on Monday, Jan. 19 at the Devils Lake Hospital.

solution that benefits the entire region.

After the first community meeting, Hoeven met with CommonSpirit Health CEO Wright Lassiter III in Washington, D.C. to advance these priorities. CommonSpirit subsequently undertook a \$10 million renovation of the hospital's emergency department.

-- Bring a unified health care system to the Lake Region and ensure access to the best possible health care for local residents.

Hoeven worked to advance the acquisition agreement between Altru and CommonSpirit Health to the benefit of both patients and health care providers.

"The timing of this acquisition is fitting, as North Dakota has just started moving on its plan to transform rural health care across our state. We've set a goal of securing \$1 billion for

this initiative, and we're off to a strong start, having secured \$200 million in the first year. Updating Critical Access Hospitals like Devils Lake Hospital is a central part of these efforts and one of the reasons our state has a head start, and I believe that we can bring state-of-the-art health care to this region, just as we've done for communities like Rugby, Grafton, Hazen and Cando," said Senator Hoeven.

The efforts to improve health care in the Lake Region align with Hoeven's broader work to advance North Dakota's Rural Health Transformation Program. Earlier this month, Hoeven, along with Governor Armstrong, set a goal to secure \$1 billion of federal funding for this initiative. North Dakota has a head start in this competitive

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