

Newsletter



Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz – KRHCC Board Member

“DON’T MESS WITH KR.”

After living 50 years in Knife River (KR), I realize I have experienced an equal number of years of KR history. And also, that I had some first-hand knowledge of a few significant events that occurred during this time.

The ones that stand out were land use proposals for Knife River that had any of them become reality, the KR landscape, character and even quality of life we enjoy, today may very well be different.

Image credit: Public domain and used under Fair Use Provision.



Two of these proposals helped define KR’s values. A third was so bizarre that you may not believe it - but it is true! The lesson to be learned from these land use proposals is “Either you stand for something or fall for anything.” To put in more local language - “Don’t mess with Knife River.”

What follows is from memory supported by clippings from news stories and documents I saved.

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Proposal 1: “Amphitheater above KR will present historical and classical theater. Proponent’s project 85,000 theatergoers in first year. “

In 1974, several members of the Minneapolis arts community who either owned property in KR, or were frequent visitors here, proposed an outdoor amphitheater on Hawkhill Road near the highest point of the ridge. It would be on nearly 80 acres of county land at the site of what was then the KR town dump, which had recently been closed by the MPCA.

According to the proponents, the amphitheater would present historical and classical drama indigenous to the North Shore. It would be funded primarily with EDA funds (Economic Development Administration) much in the same manner as the KR marina had been funded two years previous.

“Local share” in the project would be demonstrated by the county donating the value of the landfill site to the developers. (For reference, the local share in the marina was the value of land that had been owned by local fisherman, and then deeded to the county in order for the county to make the EDA application.)

There was an informational meeting about the proposed amphitheater held at the Earthwood Inn that I attended, mostly out of curiosity. But, also, I was the chair of the Knife River Development Council, which was formerly the Knife River Harbor Association. The Harbor Association ceased to exist after the harbor was turned over to the county. Frankly, I found the presentation to be interesting and even appealing as I have always enjoyed history on several levels.

Reaction to the proposal was varied, but soon began to cool with the promoter’s estimated first year attendance of 85,000, and with ambitious plans that included building a moat across which a replica Viking ship would float.

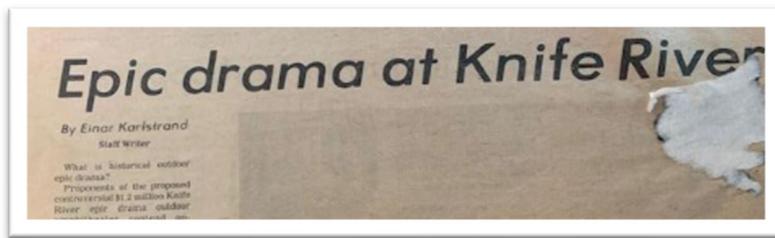
The \$1.2 million proposal sparked a lot of talk among locals, most of whom couldn’t get past the ambitious claims being made, and the most obvious obstacles of cool summer temperatures, short 13-week season, bugs, loss of public recreation land and the peacefulness the community valued. And what if it failed? What use would be made of it then?

The editor of the *LAKE COUNTY NEWS CHRONICLE*, at the time, liked the idea of the amphitheater and printed all the promoters news releases to where it sounded like

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the project was viable and should be taken seriously. This is when a group of KRers organized to voice our concerns.

I was elected to generate the news releases and send to the media as I worked in advertising and communications. This also meant I was the contact for additional information. So, by default, I became spokesperson for the opposition and as a result, a target for the promoters, particularly as I was chair of the KR Development Council and now was openly opposing “development.”



The *DULUTH NEWS TRIBUNE* jumped on the opposition story right away with feature story on Dec. 22, 1974 - “Epic Drama at Knife River” as did the *MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE*

(“All the World’s a Stage for Amphitheater in Knife River”).

At some point, as the controversy was being played out in the media from both sides, Lt. Gov. Rudy Perpich entered the picture as he had been assigned the coordinator of the Minnesota bicentennial observance in 1976. He was scouting projects to qualify for funding, which would be submitted to the 1975 Minnesota Legislature for authorization. For the amphitheater to be selected for funding would be a dream come true for the amphitheater promoters. But, Rudy made it clear “projects needed to be wanted and supported locally and improve life in the state.”

Rudy decided he would check out the proposed project himself and chair a hearing at the Lake County courthouse. KRers were organized and ready. The court room was packed. The developers presented their case and the response from KRers was not pretty. Rudy tried to referee and keep order and finally said, “Look, if the community does not want this, I see no reason why this project should go any further.”

And with that, the whole project was dropped and never heard from again. The KR area landowner who first proposed the idea sold his property and left town.

Looking back all ended well. The county still owns the land and as far as I know it is still available for multi-use outdoor recreation as the KR community and county may decide.

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Your bewhiskered writer (left) and Dennis Ojard pose for the *Duluth News Tribune* in this 1974 photo. We hold a well-researched report that Dennis (an electrical engineer who actually wore a plastic pocket protector) wrote in opposition to the amphitheater that was circulated to area elected officials.



One fact that stood out was the average outdoor historical theater attendance in 1970 was 59,064 – far less than the projected first year attendance of 85,000.

The average attendance of similar facilities in existence four years or less in the same year had an average attendance of 36,453.

Dennis concluded that if the proposed amphitheater drew an average attendance the first year, under ideal circumstances while maintaining estimated annual expenditures, it would lose \$205,000.

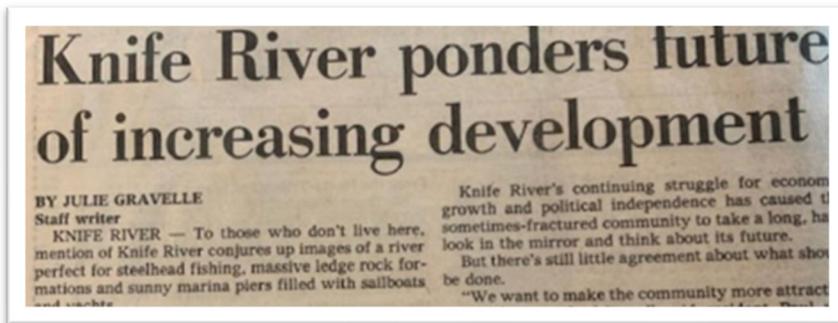
Proposal 2: “County looks to increase tax base by selling 36 acres of land surrounding KR Marina; 44 upscale townhouse units are planned.”

In July of 1986, Lake County commissioners voted to contract with the NorthSpan Group, an affiliate of Arrowhead Regional Development Commission (ARDC) to draft a master long-term plan for the 36 acres of county-owned land that surrounds the marina. Cooperation and technical support would be provided by Lake County and Architectural Resources of Duluth. I believe the county agreed to pay NorthSpan and Architectural Resources a total of \$3,500 for their services.

County planners envisioned as many as 44 upscale townhomes that would add significant tax base. The homes would be single-family, two-level living space at 1,000 – 1,500 sq. ft. per floor. The homes would sell in the \$80,000 range in 1986 dollars.

To pre-empt anticipated push back on the proposal from KR, the county had NorthSpan form a “KR Community Council” to serve as a liaison between the community and the county in a visioning process that would result in a townhome plan acceptable to KRers.

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The proposal was covered by the Sunday *Duluth News Tribune & Herald* on March 22, 1987. Headlining “Knife River ponders future of increasing development.”

I agreed to serve on the council to protect KR’s interests and my own as the road that leads to our home passes through a portion of the proposed development site. I do recall calling our district’s county commissioner to get “the real story” and was told quite frankly that the county wanted the tax base as a hedge against the county’s dependence on the unstable mining industry. He assured me, and in a voice not to be ignored, that the county land in question would be developed and it would be in KR’s best interests to be part of the planning process. OK, I understand, “Name your poison.”

There were four of us in KR who were recent graduates of the Blandin Foundation’s “Community Leadership Program,” which continues to be a five-day boot camp on how to “create positive environments within communities to harmoniously deal with change and prosper.” I called the other three and two agreed to serve on the council, which was charged with actively involving the community in gathering ideas for development of the property and selecting those that may be acceptable to KRers.

Ron Jordan, a KR resident, a sail boater, and owner of a hardware store in Lincoln Park (West Duluth), agreed to chair the community meetings, which would be called and facilitated by NorthSpan.

I can’t recall the details of the brainstorming or visioning process that took place over at least two community meetings, but some of the ideas for the KR community seemed to have merit.

Three that stand out were “Riverplace Park” along the west shore of the Knife River that would offer picnic tables and shelters, trails, fishing access and toilets and trash receptacles. Another was public beach access at approximately where the KRRC agate beach and parking area is today. A third was a community center, historic depot and “fishing village.” This idea, in effect, is the KRHCC today.

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There was a fourth use that had to be included as per the county's intentions and that was "Townhouse Development." Three sites were identified by NorthSpan and the architectural firm hired by the county:

South Harbor Homes – 2.7 acres, 10 units

West Harbor Homes – 8.5 acres, 16 units

North Harbor Homes – 5.0 acres, 18 units

The SRDC site plan for land surrounding marina developed by ARDC and Architectural Resources in 1986. Part of what they envisioned the KRHCC has accomplished on its own. The plan "...shows the old rail depot being replaced by a new building that could double as a community center and depot for excursion trains being planned by the Regional Rail Authority. Next to the depot a 'fishing village' display could be built featuring vintage boats." Site map also shows proposed locations of townhomes (in bold) that would surround the marina.

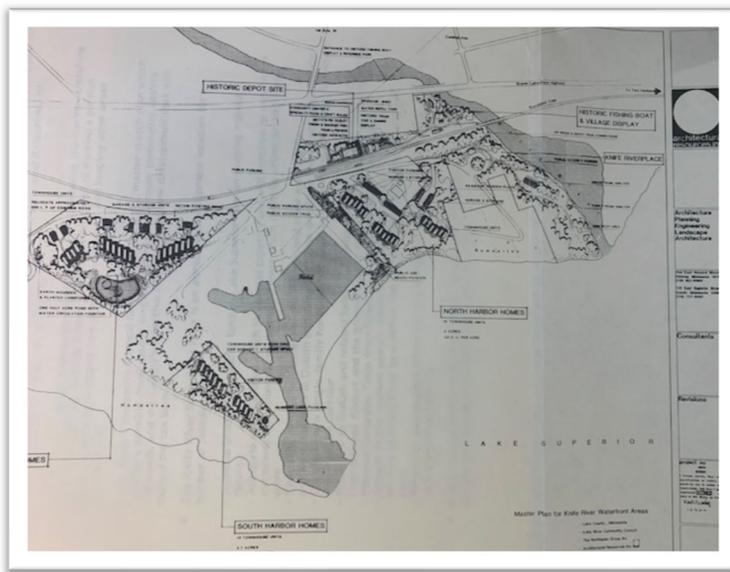


Image: Architectural Resources.

Image credit: Architectural Resources.

Timeline from approval of the KR community of the plan, to identifying a developer, to beginning of construction was estimated at 12 months.

The county asked NorthSpan to send out Requests For Proposals (RFPs) to potential developers for how they would build and market 44 upscale town homes and what they were prepared to pay the county for the acreage.

Potential developers were told that KR offered many attributes that would entice people to buy the townhomes. Among them were the adjacent marina, proximity to Duluth, scenic setting, and sewage system at the time that had capacity to spare. Three potential developers responded, but two later withdrew their proposals, and the third was questionable in terms of ability to finance.

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County commissioners throw the KR3 under the bus.

Once it was learned RFPs had gone out, several KRers became vocal in their opposition to the whole idea of the county selling land for tax base. Myself and the two others who had agreed to help form the “Community Council” (later to become known as “The KR3”), tried to explain that we weren’t thrilled with developing the land surrounding the marina either, but we had been assured in very clear language that the land would be sold for development and we were being given the opportunity to be part of the process (ie: “Name your poison.”)

The opponents organized and forced a county board meeting to be held at the old KR school (Rec building had not been built yet) where the community could express their reaction to the whole townhouse idea.

Emotions rose throughout the meeting, much like the amphitheater meeting in Two Harbors (TH) which Rudy Perpich chaired (see Proposal 1). Finally, one of the opponents asked for a show of hands of those who opposed the county selling the land. Nearly every hand went up. Then the question was asked, “So who wants it?”

“It’s those three!” came the response with fingers pointing.

I had visions of the three of us being dragged from the building, tarred and feathered, and sent down Scenic 61 in a Yugo. “Well, said the county board chair, if you don’t want the land sold, we won’t.” **What????!!!**

If there was ever an example of what is meant by being “thrown under the bus,” this could be it. Note to self: “Elected officials will do whatever is necessary to save their political backsides.”

That was the end of the county selling the land around the marina, and it had a happy ending, except for the KR3 who had to live with being branded as “developers.”

The whole incident did trigger a later discussion between the KRRC and the county board, on best use of at least a portion of the land around the marina. Result was the county would give the KRRC about 300 feet of beach frontage and about two acres of access and parking lot, with the covenant the land be available to the public. And that’s what we enjoy today.

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The remainder of the land in question remains county owned today. One issue that did arise during the whole townhouse debacle was the integrity of the local water reservoir. Could it supply enough water for 44 town homes and not impact existing wells in the area? Take the risk and drill, or take water from the Lake and treat it?, which would be very expensive. That question remains today, and for the time being at least, may discourage any large-scale townhouse development anywhere in KR.

Proposal 3: “Nuclear power plant “near Knife River.”

This will forever be the most bizarre land use proposal ever for KR. I remember either reading or hearing about a proposal to locate a nuclear power plant at or near Knife River in the mid-1960s. I remember it because my dad would bring our family’s 40’ cruiser to KR to fish in the mid-50s, so our family had some attachment to KR, and I thought a nuclear power plant was a really bad idea.



Image: Nuclear power plant cooling towers.
Photo credit: Internet public domain

Or, I may have read about it as in the mid-1960s I was working for the then *Duluth News Tribune & Herald* in advertising sales and I had to proof my clients’ ads daily and so read the paper at the same time. The proposal apparently died soon after it was made. Then, while pondering this story on bad land use proposals for KR, I remembered the nuclear power plant.

Thanks to the internet I found a blog written on March 18, 2011, by Jim Heffernan, long time *Duluth News Tribune* writer and columnist who still writes a column today. Jim and I both worked at the DNT in the mid-1960s. Jim was on the editorial side, and I knew him to be a good reporter and good guy. I still see Jim on occasion, and we enjoy talking about the good old days when the DNT was of the powerhouse for news and gobbled up most of area advertising dollars.

According to Jim, a news release received at the DNT in the 1960s announced a nuke power plant to be located “near Knife River.” It would use the frigid waters of Lake Superior to cool its reactor. (OK, I get it - the only logic I see so far). Jim believed Minnesota Power & Light (Later Minnesota Power) and U.S. Senator Hubert Humphrey were prominent in making the plant announcement.

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Jim said in his blog that everyone appeared jubilant about the proposal. It would mean many steady high paying jobs and be a buffer against the area's dependence on the feast and famine nature of the mining industry.

Now, please remember that the nuke plant proposal was before Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and the Japanese meltdown due to an earthquake and the ensuing tsunami. And, it was at the same time Reserve Mining was discharging taconite tailings directly into the lake. Anyway, according to Jim, the nuke proposal eventually died a natural death from radiation poisoning.

All this took place 60-some years ago and I have no clue how KRers reacted to this proposal, but it could have been on several levels from the obvious to the potential warming of the waters around KR, which would have adversely affected the habitat for commercial fish species.

Content for the story 'Don't mess with Knife River' came from my own records and memory, and from the December 22, 1974 issue of the "Accent North" supplement to the Duluth Sunday News-Tribune, March 22, 1987 Sunday Duluth News Tribune & Herald, the March 23, 1988 edition of the Lake County News-Chronicle, and Jim Heffernan's Blog of March 16, 2021.

Proposals we weren't thrilled about but now couldn't do without.

Both proposals were the initiatives of the Lake County Board of Commissioners.

- KRLSD: In the early 1980s, the MPCA and the EPA acknowledged that most or, if not all, private septic tanks and even mounds along the North Shore were failing, and in many cases raw sewage was finding its way into the watershed and ultimately the Lake. The county worked with these government agencies to bring central sewage to KR in 1984 at a cost of \$3.25 million, and through grants and loans made the system affordable to homeowners.

Displeasure with the system was mostly focused on the engineering firm that designed the system that resulted in a bumpy startup. Eventually these issues were resolved, more or less. Today the Knife River Larson Sanitary district (KRLSD) is managed by a local volunteer board of directors, of which I was one for ten years back in the late 80s and 90s. Its meetings are open to all who receive service from the district.

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- High speed broadband: This was a massive undertaking by the county beginning in about 2003. Projected cost was the big issue given that federal funding required that service be made available to all Lake County residents, commercial businesses, and institutions. Given Lake County's rural setting and lack of concentrated population, homeowners were skeptical of the cost estimate and how it would break down in monthly user rates. When completed, there was a significant overrun, but the county was able to develop a reasonable plan to retire it.

Best ideas for Knife River come from KRers.

It's been my experience that KRers are open to ideas that can provide valued services to locals and visitors, improve the local or regional economy, or our quality of life - whether these ideas come from inside or outside of KR.

History has shown what KRers value today has come from local initiatives. To name a few:

- 1927: Community buys Presbyterian church to create Knife River Norwegian Lutheran Church.
- 1947 - 1953: Local fishermen create a co-op to fund dredging of a harbor which now forms the footprint of the KR marina.
- 1953: KR commits to creating a Rec Council to provide recreational opportunities for children.
- 1968 - 1972: KR fishermen gift the harbor land to the county as "local share" in an application to the EDA for funds to create the marina, which opens in 1974.
- 1988: KRRC negotiates with Lake County to acquire 300 feet of agate beach and approximately two acres of access land.
- 1990s: KRRC buys land from school district to build tennis courts and children's playground.
- 2013: KRRC introduces Julebyen to fund its programs.
- 2018: Community endorses plan to create a heritage center at site of depot.
- 2020 - present: KRRC acquires land to expand its trail system culminating with the Huldrefolk trail.

In the October issue we will tell you about how much of a 2003 U of M's design team plan for KR became reality nearly 20 years later.

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TODD LINDAHL RECEIVES PRESTIGIOUS STATE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AWARD

KRHCC board member and historian Todd Lindahl was awarded the 2022 Hill – Lewis Award by the Minnesota Archaeological Society (MAS). It was announced in the Society’s spring newsletter. The award is given annually to a living avocational archaeologist who has made outstanding contributions to Minnesota archaeology. It epitomizes the MAS goals of increasing public involvement in archaeology and promoting the stewardship of the unique and irreplaceable archaeological record of Minnesota.

Nominees for the award have generally made important contributions to Minnesota archaeology (prehistoric or historic) through original research or publication, collaboration with professional archaeologists, site stewardship, public outreach, or exceptional K – 12 teaching.

Susan Mulholland, president and co-owner of the Duluth Archaeology Center, nominated Todd for the award and organized the letters of support. “Todd is extremely knowledgeable about historic archaeology focusing on Lake County of Northeast Minnesota and I draw on his expertise extensively,” said Mulholland.

Photo: Todd was instrumental in the archeology associated with the Two Harbors “Whiskey Row” dig. Photo credit: Public domain



Mulholland said letters of support for Todd’s nomination noted that Todd has made important contributions to Minnesota archaeology through research, collaboration with professional archaeologists, site stewardship, and public outreach.

Some of Todd’s accomplishments mentioned were his activity in the archaeology of the historic period of the Arrowhead Region and a consistent interest in more remote time periods; work in the Whiskey Row archaeological project, reflecting on the early American settlement of Two Harbors; contributions to the restoration of a historic locomotive in Two Harbors; and the Knife River train depot.

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The Society recognized Todd's surveying skills to track old railroad grades and associated logging camps, his study of copper mines and shafts from the 1800s, and his role in creating the KRHCC.

One of Todd's letters of support put it in these terms: "Todd is a purist and can speak to all on subjects ranging from locomotive restoration, what floats on Lake Superior & what is on the bottom, dioramas, ... railroading, glacial & lithics, building restoration, curation & just about anything in the 'yesterday' of history...".

It brings great satisfaction to all of us who know Todd that he has been recognized for his many contributions to the archaeological heritage of the Arrowhead region. Thank you, Todd!

SIGHTED OFF KR: "WHAT IS THAT?"



Those of us who may have been looking out over the Lake on Friday and Saturday of Labor Day weekend may have been perplexed by what we saw. Too big for a net marker, too small for a sailboat.

Thanks to KRer Craig Whiting and the link he provided; we now know what it was. It was a "saildrone". Photo caption: Saildrone underway
Photo credit: Saildrone, Inc.

Two of these bright orange, solar-powered sailing drones were on a mission to study the changing fish populations in the Apostle Islands and across Lake Superior. One goal was to better track the sustainability of lake trout populations, by gathering more precise data about the prey fish the trout eat.

The 23-foot-long saildrones are propelled by the wind and guided by computer with oversight from remote operators. The onboard research equipment is powered by solar arrays on the boat and sail. Sonar equipment (essentially scientific-grade fish finders) will estimate fish populations and biomass in the Apostle Islands and elsewhere in Lake Superior.

The saildrone mission will go on until the end of September. For more info and a video of a saildrone in action, go to: <https://www.saildrone.com>.

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ADDING MORE 'SCENIC' TO SCENIC 61

With the summer winding down, many thanks go out to members of the KR Garden Club for their tireless work in keeping the flowers in the boxes on the bridge over the river blooming throughout the summer. Members and volunteers take turns by the week to make sure the flowers are watered and old blooms "dead-headed."



Thanks also to Michelle Gratton and Jeff Peterson for the boxes they maintain on the north and south direction signage to Michelle's local art and gift shop.



Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

SALE OF SWEET CORN NETS \$1,300 FOR CRUSADER VIEWING DECK!

Many thanks to all who purchased ears of Lee & Jim Bujold's famous NW WI sweet corn. Total sales came in at \$1,297 with some donations still to come in. Lee and Jim donated the corn and made the 200-mile round trip on September 9 to pick it up south of Ashland where it had been picked that very morning! All total 50 dozen dozen ears of corn were sold.

The sales from the corn sale will go towards a viewing deck that will run parallel to CRUSADER and allow people to look inside and see the working operations of a fish tug.

THANK YOU LEE & JIM!

Image: This year's KRHCC Corn Princess was Elin von Goertz by unanimous vote of her grandparents.

Photo credit: Papa



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SEPTEMBER DONATIONS, MEMORIALS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS

Donations

- A bucket of taconite pellets from Jodi Anderson to help visitors to the KRHCC understand the taconite mining process.

On loan to the KRHCC

- Velocipede by Todd Lindahl
- Diorama of KR rail yard circa 1915 by Todd Lindahl

Memorials

- The following individuals made donations to the KRHCC general fund in memory of John Safstrom, much loved tireless KRHCC volunteer.
Gail Safstrom
Laurie Jackson
Alan and Kristin Goodman

Sponsorship

- Depot clock in honor of Todd Lindahl by Jim and Deb Alert.

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

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