

From the Publisher: We are all in this together!

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Last week I ventured down to the state capital to watch the Executive Committee of Minnesota meeting. Having never been to one of these I was surprised at the procedure. This meeting was a hot topic for our communities because the mineral leases on the state land once owned by Mesabi Metallica was on the agenda to be issued to Cleveland Cliffs.

What many media outlets have called an East vs. West, St. Louis County vs. Itasca County, or NK vs. Hibbing schools fight and describe as a very contentious issue is not contentious. At least that is not how I would describe it. I would say a better description is emotional, or possibly a fight for life for both sides.

I don't think anyone going into this meeting felt there was a chance the executive council was going to go against the DNR recommendation to grant the leases to Cleveland Cliffs, however that thought changed after NK School Board Member Barb Kalmi, Nashwauk Mayor Cal Saari, and Itasca County Commissioner Casey Venema testified. They gave heartfelt stories about what this means to the community and Itasca County as a whole. With mentions of the effects the Butler closing had on our schools, and how this project could be the lifeline of the area. Venema pointed out the loss of the Huber OSB project in Cohasset, he states is no longer going to happen because of the Minnesota Permitting process. The testimony appeared to sway the committee to hold off on issuing all the permits to Cliffs until the attorney for Mesabi Metallica brought up a lawsuit in Delaware and Essar Executive Ravi Ruia came to the podium.

Governor Walz scolded Ruia at times for his demeanor and unwillingness to stop blaming everyone else.

"I would have hoped to have heard an apology, a 'Sorry we didn't get this done,' " Walz said. "Instead, I heard denigration of great public servants," meaning the DNR.

When asked why the council should believe this time is different Ruia responded: "You should believe us today because we are saying, 'Don't give us any leases. "

Just as would be expected, Cliffs also brought in a brigade of people to testify. They included Hibbing Mayor Pete Hyduke, Chisholm Council President Travis Vake, United Steelworkers Local 2705 President Chris Johnson, as well as a host of others. All with the same or similar messages that this keeps the miners at Hibbing Taconite employed. One of the people testified using the analogy of a in the hand is better than 2 in the bush. Stating Cliffs has proved they can complete the project.

After speaking with many of the people who were there and that are personally affected by this decision, it was clear to me nobody wants to see Hibb Tac shut down and everyone would like to see an economic hub developed in Nashwauk. Emotions are high because there are 700+ jobs at stake as well as a lot of potential tax dollars.

Every member of the executive committee except Peggy Flanigan reiterated their commitment to helping develop something in Itasca County. Governor Walz said it multiple times.

As a community we are stronger together than we are divided. Hibbing Taconite, Itasca County, NK, Hibbing Schools, Cities of Nashwauk and Hibbing, St. Louis County we are stronger as one. Sure, this stings a little in our community, and the pain will be there until we get the opportunities Governor Walz promised. We need to hold him accountable to those statements.

This battle, as much as some make it out to be, is not personal. USW members are standing up for the families of its members. Itasca County Board Members, City of Nashwauk Officials, and St. Louis County officials are fighting to keep our communities alive which is a tough job in our area. This battle is not about the people fighting for Mesabi Metallica wanting to see Hibbing Taconite close, it is about them trying to create a tax base and bring opportunities to the community. In fact, you would be hard pressed to find any of the county decision makers past or present in Itasca County who does not have someone close to them who would be devastated by the closing of Hibbing Taconite.

As a small business owner in Itasca County, I would love to have a business-like Mesabi Metallica in the community to help pay the tax load. I also know that there are many miners from Hibbing Taconite who support our local business. If those workers were out of work, they may have to pack up the family and move, meaning I lose customers. Nobody wants to see families lose their source of income.

Moving on...What is next...How much longer do we have to wait for these things to happen?

Larry Sutherland said he had no comments on the decision by the council, but rumor has it that Mesabi Metallica is going to continue with the building process and that they have enough mineral rights to operate.

It is unclear when Cliffs will start mining the property. After talking with some workers from Hibb Tac they can rest a little easier knowing there is a better chance they will still have a job in 5 years.

How is the production tax split going to work? Will the amount of money paid by Cliffs in production tax to Itasca County and the city of Nashwauk be equal to or greater than what the property tax that was paid by Mesabi? No one seems to be able to answer this question.

Now that Cliffs has these leases are they going to support the NK school project in a similar fashion to the Rock Ridge School?

Do you think the state made the right decision? I guess only time will tell.

The biggest point I am trying to get at here is we are all neighbors and need to continue to operate in this thing we call a community. It is not a "you vs. me situation." It is a "we are all in this together" and there is a path for the whole region to thrive. We just have not figured it out yet.

So, until this dust settles, and we have some more answers to some of these questions, remember we are neighbors and friends first. Be compassionate for others. Don't gloat too much, but also don't snarl if you are on the opposite side.

As we sit today a large group of neighbors can rest a little easier because there is the opportunity for them to work past a few more years. We have a group of neighbors who are crushed because there are uncertainties on how the municipalities are going to balance their budgets. We will get through it, but only if we are compassionate with each other and work to help one another, not tear each other down.