

## METRO BRIEFS by Pat Peckham

# Congregations dip toes into social activism

## Predatory 'payday' lenders, inmate treatment & homeless issues provide fertile ground

Representatives of eight local religious congregations gathered Sunday and formally agreed to identify the greatest social issues in the Wausau area — and then go after those issues. With other congregations still undecided about whether to sign on, the core of eight had a covenanting event at St. Stephen Lutheran Church. They will be part of a network of WISDOM groups in the state and will go by the name NAOMI, for North-Central Area Congregations Organized to Make an Impact.

The Rev. Steve Brice of the St. Anne Catholic Church, who was among those who spoke to the 140 attending, said he was part of a similar group nearly a decade ago. A host of local churches then vowed to first learn about those beliefs that they shared and those they did not, and then work on community issues. It never got beyond talking before foundering, Brice said. "Today, we have an invitation to do the real work." Faith is a great thing, he told the group, but it is best when people have both faith and works — things they have done to make things better for their fellow man. The previous effort took the comfortable route, he said. Brice would not like to think the previous round of meetings was wasted time. "I'd like to think that I just didn't know then that the Marathon County jail is punishing people who are sick," a reference to inmates who are dependent on illegal drugs or alcohol.

The afternoon's keynote speaker, too, said feathers might be ruffled if NAOMI "leaves the congregational comfort zone." The Rev. John Celichowski, a provincial minister in the Capuchin Order in the Milwaukee area, said the group should not count on "moral persuasion" to change minds. It might take some creative demonstrations to change the minds of area leaders, he said, on things like the need for a larger jail in Marathon County. If NAOMI takes that on as an issue and believes that treatment can be more cost-effective for offenders than jail time, they have to be able to prove it convincingly, he said.

Congregations that have contributed to establish a treasury and get NAOMI going are the Church of St. Anne, Bread of Life Congregation, Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Faith in Christ Church, St. Michael Catholic Church, Church of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ, St. Stephen Lutheran and Mount Sinai Congregation. Leading NAOMI in the early going will be the Rev. Gary Froseth, who was involved in a similar group at his previous church, but if enough congregations join and contribute, the group could hire a director.

To decide what issues to take on, members will get training April 12 in how to interview people from the community. After the interview information is in, they will have an issues assembly May 24 to pool the interview results and "discern" which to give priority. Other WISDOM chapters have worked on housing issues, predatory "payday" lending, education, immigration, public safety, help for the homeless, environmental issues, jobs and



Rev. John Celichowski

transportation. As representatives of the congregations stated why they are involved, Ron Alexander of the Episcopal Church said, "It's time to step up and look at the root causes of social justice issues." Tony Patterson, from the Bread of Life Congregation, said faith-based organizations "can actually change how we think, live and act."

Froseth can be reached at 845-7858.

## Water pipeline to Abby urgency loses steam

Plans that seemed to be steaming along to sell water from the City of Wausau to western Marathon County communities could be running aground. Abbotsford, Colby and, to a degree, even Marshfield, have problems with low-producing drinking water wells, so plans were in the works to lay a \$36 million pipeline from Wausau to the western edge of the county. According to a report in the Record-Review newspaper, though, Abbotsford just got lucky with a new series of wells and the urgency for the city of 2,000 people has nearly evaporated. Colby Mayor James Schmidt says his community still is interested, though it also has a new well that is producing volumes that are "good, for this area." Colby's new well, which has been drilled but is not operational until the well house is built, has a capacity of 50 gallons per minute (gpm). One of Wausau's newer wells, thanks to proximity to the river and the lack of thick bedrock found to the west, produces 3,000 gpm. Record-Review Editor Peter Weinschenk says Abbotsford's new series of wells, closer than the others to the Eau Pleine River, are together capable of about 200 gpm. That is sufficient to serve a heavy water user such as Abbyland Foods.

Joe Gehin, the former director of public works for the City of Wausau, who now is the project manager for Ghidorzi Construction, says Abbotsford's pressing need might be reduced, but "Colby was pretty desperate for water." Gehin said Ghidorzi does not construct pipelines, but is likely to bid on the two to three above-ground booster stations needed to move the water more than 30 miles, if the pipeline is built.

Colby's Schmidt says representatives of the water pipeline coalition communities

are meeting today, Thursday, Feb. 4, in his city to decide what to do. "It's not dead as far as I know." Connie Gurtner, Colby's city clerk, says her city's situation is not dire, but "One new development could change things in a quick hurry." If there are enough communities in the area that are interested and if funding is available (there has been talk of federal stimulus funds), it is definitely something to pursue."

## Olive Garden rumblings

Some rumors just will not die. The latest is that Olive Garden applied in December for a liquor license in Rib Mountain. That specific rumor is not true, according to Town Administrator Gaylene Rhoden, but the restaurant chain has shown some interest in another way. Rhoden says her office has had an inquiry related to Olive Garden but she would not specify whether the inquiry came from the company or from a developer looking into sites to offer the company. "Nothing official has come through," she says. Town officials have learned not to get excited about what can be routine inquiries, she says. When a business shows up and starts to ask for applications and detailed information, then they get excited. "We get lots of inquiries."

## Skiers qualify for nationals

Remember that preliminary cross-country ski race at Greenwood Hills that required a backup plan to make artificial snow? Four Wausau skiers excelled when the Midwest Junior Olympic Nationals preliminaries took place here for the first time and they continue to train for the national event March 8 to 13 in Presque Isle, Maine. The contenders are Matt Nichols and Ashlee Marshall of Wausau West High School, Adam Martin of Wausau East High School and Ben Hugus, a Wausau West graduate now at Northern Michigan University in Marquette. Hugus will be making his third trip to nationals, Marshall her second.

## UWSP aims for new chancellor by July 1

The 19-member search committee is narrowing the field in steps to find a new chancellor for UW-Stevens Point. The process that began in late October will net in the next two weeks a pool of up to 12 semifinalists. After they are interviewed off campus, the committee will recommend five to UW System President Kevin Reilly, who will announce the names of the finalists to have on-campus interviews. Final approval of the top applicant is expected at a May meeting of the Board of Regents. The previous chancellor, Liada Bunnell, appointed in 2004, resigned effective May 31 after clashing with the school's foundation director and failing to initially report a traffic mishap in a state-provided vehicle. ☐