



# The News-Review

\$150

SERVING THE KEOKUK COUNTY AREA SINCE 1860

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 28, 2023  
NUMBER 26, 162<sup>ND</sup> YEAR

## Community CALENDAR

### Richland Township Trustees Meeting

July 5 at 6:00 p.m.  
Richland Fire Department  
Agenda:  
-Public input and questions  
-City of Richland  
-28-E agreement  
-Fire Board  
-Fire Station

### Richland Public Library Lego & Building Club

Wednesdays from 3 - 5 p.m. June and July.  
Ages 5 - adult

### Richland Public Library Amazing Voices Teen Program

Thursdays from 3 - 4 p.m.. Teens entering 6 - 12 grades.

Arts, Crafts, Games, Movies, Snacks and Hanging out with friends

### Sigourney Farmers Market

Wednesdays from 4 - 7 p.m. on the Sigourney Square June - September

### Blood Drive

Holy Trinity Catholic Church  
Thursday, June 22, 2:30 - 7pm

### Wilson Memorial Library Summer Reading - Music with Elyse Lyle & Family

June 22, 11-12 p.m.  
Sack lunch provided

### EVHC "Iowa and the Civil War"

Presented by Kenneth Lyftogt  
Sunday, June 25, 2 p.m.

### Clear Creek Heritage Association Breakfast

Clear Creek Church, Outside Harper  
Sunday June 25, 9-11 am  
Free will donation  
In honor of the Feast for Sts. Peter and Paul

### Richland Public Library - "Extension Fun with Emily"

Tuesday, June 27, 1-2 p.m.  
Geared for children K-5. Younger children need an adult caregiver

### Wilson Memorial Library Summer Reading -

## Tensions Blaze Over Abrupt Removal of Richland Fire Chief

By Casey James |  
The News-Review

RICHLAND - Back in April, the Iowa State Auditor's office released an in-depth report detailing problems with the City of Richland. Of special concern was a lack of a formal written agreement between the city and the fire department establishing the duties of the fire department or clarifying who has authority over the department. At a special city council meeting on May 16, members of the Richland City Council questioned Fire Chief Mitch Ehrenfelt about his duties and responsibilities under Richland City Ordinances. Ehrenfelt responded that he and the rest of the volunteer fire department work for the Richland Township, not the City of Richland. After lengthy discussion over this, the council decided to table the discussion and continue it at a future meeting when more information was available.

During the June 12 meeting of the Richland City Council, Councilwoman Alisa Tolle moved to accept the resignation of Chief Ehrenfelt. This came as a shock to Ehrenfelt, who had not intended to resign. "We all looked at each other and we're like 'Where in the hell did that come from?'" Ehrenfelt said in an interview after the meeting. "There was nothing in that that ever went in that direction. We were all kinda dumbfounded." According to Tolle, Ehrenfelt's statement that he did not work for the city counted as a resignation. Councilman Michael Hadley was confused by this and asked for clarification. "When he said he does not work for the City Council and he does not answer to the little black book we deal with, that to me is him stating that it doesn't matter what we require or what we ask. It's not gonna get done...That's fine, I'm just saying it doesn't work for what we currently have in our laws," said Tolle.

Hadley accused Tolle of putting words in Ehrenfelt's mouth. Tolle took umbrage with this. "I am not putting words in his mouth," said Tolle. "When you have an employee who says 'I'm not going to listen to you,' do you keep your employee?"

During an interview after the meeting, Tolle was asked if this meant she was firing Ehrenfelt. "It was an acceptance to his removal," Tolle said. "Because he was not going to follow the ordinances that we have to follow as a city council." Ehrenfelt has worked for the Richland Fire Department for 19 years, the last 12 of which have been spent as chief. According to Ehrenfelt, the fire department was established decades ago by the Richland Township Trustees, who manage things outside of city limits. For decades, the fire department has been run by handshake agreements between the city and township to share services and costs. The land the fire station sits on is owned by the city. According to Ehrenfelt, the station was built by the township, although a 1989 newspaper provided by long-term Richland Mayor Tom Hoekstra stated the initial \$7,000 for the station was given by the city. The city also pays for the building's utilities. The insurance and workman's compensation are paid by the City of Richland. However, most of the vehicles and equipment are paid for by the township. The fire department's fuel, services, repairs, smaller equipment purchases and day to day expenditures are paid for by a 501c3



operated by Richland Fire Department Inc.

As far as the township and the firefighters are concerned, the township has ultimate control over the department. Mayor Hoekstra and several members of the city council disagree, believing the fire department is owned by the city and thus controlled by city ordinances. "The City of Richland is the fire department. Plain and simple," said Hoekstra during a later interview.

In a later interview, Tolle stated that, because the fire department is funded by the city and exists in city limits, it is subject to control from the city. Tolle stated that the city budgets \$25,000 for the fire department each year, although most of this money isn't used. Hadley was later asked about this figure and referred to it as incredibly untrue, saying the city gives, at most, \$10,000 to the department yearly. Tolle stated the city would pay other firefighting bills if turned in, but bills have not been turned in to the city. Regarding the ownership of the department's equipment, Tolle feels that much of it is owned by the city, as the department acquired grants for the equipment using the city's tax number. "I like to keep things simple, but if it isn't broke don't fix it...The department falls under the city's guidance. It's the city's department. The mayor is the overall boss, so to speak, of whoever the fire chief is," Tolle said.

"I don't know that anybody owns the fire department," said Hadley in an interview after the meeting. "Historically, the fire department has been a joint entity...The city and the trustees, all the trustees, basically as a group work together to have a fire department. Both taking different responsibilities for different things, because the trustees could have a fire department on their own, but the city doesn't have the financial resources to do that. I don't think so, anyway. It'd be a real big burden on the city's budget if they had their own fire department."

Michael Hadley worked for the fire department for 17 years. His father was the department's chief for close to forty. During the meeting, he frequently argued with Tolle over the decision to remove Ehrenfelt. "It's really difficult, for me, to believe there's not some ill intent at some level...It seems there is ill intent in the respect that there's been multiple situations, multiple issues, where you are constantly at some kind of odds with the fire department," said Hadley during the meeting. Tolle denied any ill-intent, stat-

ing that she was solely trying to get the city back on board with ordinances.

Throughout the meeting, Hadley argued that, rather than remove Ehrenfelt to help the fire department meet city ordinances, the city should change their ordinances to match how the firefighters believe things are run. Tolle opposed changing ordinances at this time. "Why change an ordinance that no one is really following at the moment? We're getting back to ground zero again to get this working properly for the City of Richland," she said.

Hadley pointed out that the city ordinances regarding the fire department had been changed heavily in 2018, which he feels was to give the Mayor control over the department. Hoekstra took issue with this framing, stating that the ordinances do not give him control over the department and simply give him the power to appoint a fire chief with approval of the council. In a later interview, he stated that the ordinances were changed to consolidate two different sets of books.

Councilman Hadley continued arguing to change ordinances "I don't see what the problem is with working with the fire department to try and get this sorted through and set up as easy as possible," said Hadley during the meeting. Tolle argued that they can change the ordinances once they have replaced the chief.

"I'm taking it as a verbal resignation," said Tolle. "I accept. I'll be the bad guy"

"I think you're the bad guy, but for other reasons, not because of your accepting of a resignation that isn't a resignation," replied Hadley.

Currently, the township has 28E Agreements to provide fire service for the Clay, Dutch Creek, and Blackhawk Townships. The city does not have written agreements with any township. "It just seems weird to me that they've been able to go work with every other organization that they need to work with, and it's been streamlined and flawless, until it comes into this building every time," said Hadley during the meeting. "And they fight it tooth and nail. And they still show up, with attitudes like this and things being said about them and people calling them and chewing their ass for doing fundraisers and bringing money...And then you turn around and do this. It's dishonest. At best, it's dishonest. That's terrible."

A point of contention between the department and the city is over the department's insurance provider, Iowa Mu-

nicipal Workman's Compensation Association (IMWCA), which mandates firefighters take physicals every five years. Ehrenfelt feels these physicals, which he says cost almost \$5,000 a year, are too costly, and that the money spent on them could be put towards equipment and training. "The way the city says it, it's mandatory mandatory mandatory. Well, look at everybody else. Nobody else is doing this. Why are we the only ones?" said Ehrenfelt after the meeting.

According to Ehrenfelt, no other department in the area uses IMWCA. Ehrenfelt feels the city should shop around for cheaper insurance. Arguments over physicals briefly led to Ehrenfelt being removed from his chief position by the city in 2018, although the decision to remove him was later rescinded.

"Explain to me how all of these cities in Iowa, not all of them but many, a vast majority of the cities in Iowa are associated with Iowa Municipal Workman's Comp," said Hoekstra in a later interview. "The insurance company was in place long before I came in here. I think you could go around and most cities that are involved with Iowa Municipal Workman's Comp have nothing bad to say about it. The insurance company isn't the villain here. The insurance company is here to protect the city."

During the meeting, Mayor Hoekstra and city attorney Misty White argued that the fire department must be owned by the city, because a 501c3 cannot provide fire protection, according to Iowa code. Ehrenfelt argued that the fire protection is not offered by the nonprofit, but by the Richland Township. Tolle argued that townships cannot provide fire protection either. White argued that the 28E Agreements with other townships were not valid.

If the city truly owns the fire department, then because it does not have 28E Agreements with other townships, injuries to firefighters outside of Richland will not be covered by insurance. The city will also be liable if anything goes wrong outside of city limits. In a later interview, Hoekstra explained this could be devastating for Richland, costing the city millions, lowering property values, and forcing the city to raise taxes through the roof. According to Hoekstra, he has tried repeatedly to obtain 28E Agreements with other townships, but the Richland Township has interfered.

"The good old boy thing and the handshakes and all that don't work anymore," said

Hoekstra. He explained that most communities pay for fire protection via a fire fund, with townships giving the city money for fire coverage, and the city using that money to pay for fire expenses. At the moment, the Clay, Dutch Creek, and Blackhawk townships instead give tax dollars to the Richland Township, not the City of Richland. According to Hoekstra, the fire department cannot function properly with two different checkbooks. He would like to create a fire fund and set up an advisory board, on which the different townships will have seats. Under Hoekstra's vision, the city will have ultimate authority over the fire department.

"You have to get fire protection from somewhere. So the money comes here," said Hoekstra. "You have a seat on the advisory board, but the advisory board does not determine what the city's insurance carrier is. The advisory board does not determine what the cost of water is. The advisory board doesn't tell the city of Richland 'You're going to build us a new fire station.' If you want to go independent and go on your own, collaborate with the townships and build something on your own, you have every right to do that...Nobody's holding a gun to anybody's head here."

"The conclusion of this disagreement, this bickering, I'm saying is the logical solution to this, and I'm saying this to anybody that lives in the Richland fire districts, prove me wrong," said Hoekstra. "You bring your money in here. Run this for a trial basis of a year. If it doesn't work, withdraw. But if you withdraw your money, you withdraw your protection."

Later in the interview, Hoekstra was asked if he agreed with the removal of Ehrenfelt. "If the fire chief is not going to be compliant to numerous responsibilities in the outline of the city ordinances, then yes, there has to be another fire chief," he replied.

Mitch Ehrenfelt attended the June meeting, although he claims he was not invited by the city council. Councilman David Balster asked him if he follows city ordinances specifically. Ehrenfelt replied that he mostly follows ordinances and wants to work with other communities. "If you're going to be the fire chief solely of Richland, shouldn't you focus on Richland and do what it says in the ordinances, instead of focussing on another area?" asked Balster. "Are you going to be loyal to Richland?...Is the first

RICHLAND  
pg. 11

In this issue

- Agri-View.....10
- Church Calendar.....5
- Classifieds .....8
- Local .....2, 3
- Records ..... 6
- The Sun Spot.....11
- Sports .....12-13



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# THE SUN SPOT

MAHASKA COUNTY NEWS

OFF THE VINE



By Jackie Perkins

Thursday, June 23, 2023... Moving right into summer! We are still waiting for needed rain. We did have a very slight rain last weekend and I was alerted that we might get moisture as my rain lily had a single bloom, but now it is full of beautiful pink blooms, so I'm hopeful that needed moisture will arrive soon.

Auction #2 was last Saturday, and the weather was very cooperative. I was quite pleased to purchase only a few items that held memories of the past. One was a large orange glass "Viking Sling Glass Vase", not that I knew that at the time, but heard from a friend who formerly lived in Fremont who told me that she once had a large collection. Nice to know...Thanks Nancy! All I knew that it was always sat in the same spot while we grew up on the farm and wasn't concerned about value. I also purchased a framed print of the courthouse and Lewis Memorial Fountain by Ann Moore Hasselman. It is just beautiful! I consider Ann a great artist and so glad that I have several of her pieces and consider her a friend. I also won the bid on a few small pieces of glassware. With this purchase they threw in a few other pieces...all red, and I wasn't excited at the time. Getting home and looking through the box there were two little souvenir pots. One said Pella, Iowa and the other was not very legible, but into the light I discovered it read, "Harper, Iowa".....Jackpot! I was thrilled as that is where I spent the first two years of my life while Dad was in the service, with Grandpa, Grandma, Betty, Bobby and Theola.

It was so nice to see Bryan Ward and his wife from St. Louis at coffee time on Monday. I hadn't seen Brian for quite some time and he kept bugging me about newspaper....he even offered to give me a computer.....he's in the business you know. When we parted, he brought it up again and I told him that when he retired, he could move back to Fremont and we'd see...LOL! I just recently acquired a

golden colored coin which is a Sigourney-Keokuk County souvenir half dollar redeemable in taride at the 125th anniversary headquarters, on or before August 14, 1969. I had not seen one of these before, and am sure glad that it was not spent those fifty some years ago, although I imagine several ice cream cones could have been purchased with that amount.

After this weekend, I hope to give some time to work on items for the upcoming fair. We've been encouraging entries and hope to see some interesting items displayed, and to show that we want the open class to continue. I have a fair book, but am a little confused about some of the requirements....hope they call me back soon with some explanations. I have not dealt with a fair entry in over fifty years.....shame on me!

I think I may be about finished picking the gooseberries. I know there are more out there, but the bush is big, the berries are in the middle and the thorns are sharp! Greg and I also picked cherries from a friend's tree, and they were just beautiful!

We hope to take in the July 4th festivities in Sigourney on the fourth as we have the past several years. I so enjoy the town square atmosphere and hopefully will see some folks to visit with. Many show up in their red, white and blue adding a festive note to the atmosphere, and it's just fun to people watch. Don't forget Barbeque Days in Hedrick coming up the weekend following the 4th, including the ice cream social at the Legion....I hear there will be pie!

Time for family reunions and I have a few that I am excited about. In fact two on the same day! I don't know how that will work for me, as I want to attend both and know it will be difficult to leave either one to attend the other. And in closing, something I recently read: "Does anybody besides me remember when family reunions were held at a park or a venue instead of a funeral home?" Something to think about.

COUNTRY GIRL'S CORNER

## First Day of Summer

By Sheryl L. Carter

June 25—yes, the first day of summer was this past Wednesday, and we have been enjoying summer days for a few weeks now with sunshine and rain showers here and there. Yesterday I was out to clean out another flower bed, but the thunder overhead brought me back inside. I found out later that Pella had a lovely downpour of an 1", but we only had a sprinkle— with thunder. That's ok, maybe next time.

The allergies have sure been tap dancing on my head this spring with a surge of hay fever that I haven't had this bad for years. Even my eyelids have been swollen, plus coughing, blowing my nose—all the symptoms. Thankfully I have Loratadine (generic Claritin), and several homeopaths like Allium Cepa, Spongia Tosta, and an all-around allergy reliever that has Allium Cepa as the first ingredient. This stuff all works, and I am so thankful.

Monday I realized my tomato plants—which had been looking pretty haggard—were coming out of their slump, and the new ones I had planted looked good, too, and all were growing, so I had better get the tomato cages around them before they got too unwieldy. These cages are practically antiques, as Daddy made them out of #9 wire, so are heavy and sturdy—nothing like the

Mickey Mouse ones I bought a few years ago that are flimsy and nearly useless.

I carried the cages out to the garden and set them around all nine plants. I also stirred up a solution of Epsom salts and water, and poured some around each plant. Well! They liked that fine and you should see how dark green and lush they are looking already. My two long rows of green beans are also dark green and lush, and the half row of pole beans are doing their thing of winding their tendrils around the wire on the hog panel my neighbor set up for me. I am thinking—hoping—we are going to have a good crop of beans this year—to eat fresh, and to pop in the freezer, my favorite way to do beans. Some folks love their canned beans, but I much prefer fresh because they taste like they just came out of the garden.

The cabbages have big leaves, the potato patch is white with blossoms, the cucumber vines look wonderful, and the little row of beets have tall feathery tops. I am so glad we saved a big pile of leaves for the middle of the garden and after everything got established good, I spread that mulch all around and the plants are just loving it—keeps the moisture in and the weeds down and what could be better?! My garden looks the best it has in a long time, plus it's three times bigger than the last few years.

Wednesday morning a

friend stopped over for a good visit and prayer time, and in the afternoon a couple of young friends came by for a little Bible study. We are hoping to continue this every few weeks. They are all such sweet young girls, all married and one has a young baby.

Thursday, two friends and I went up to Des Moines for an early lunch and then some power shopping. I didn't buy much, but happy for what I found on some good sales. One friend had a fun time adding to her wardrobe. That was also the day a dear friend had a major surgery to remove a tumor, and I was so glad to hear she came through well and actually came home yesterday afternoon! They don't keep them long now, as maybe they realize we heal faster when we are home in our own place, smelling our own surroundings, and much more able to rest and recover.

With my big surgery last fall, I was in the hospital by noon on Monday, surgery was that mid-afternoon and by Wednesday noon we were on the way home. Amazing.

Thursday I cut my four varieties of lettuce to wash and store in a large bag in the frig, plus cutting anise hyssop, lemon balm, and spearmint for tea. I washed the leaves well, drained them on a big towel, then laid them over parchment sheets on cookie sheets and put them in the oven for a few hours on 200 degrees.

They dried up fast and I soon had three jars of medicinal teas to use. I will check them out to see how my body reacts, but hope it will be ok as each kind has their own special use.

By afternoon and a few more jobs done, I hungered for a hot fudge sundae—haven't had one since last year—so went down to Zip'n in Lynnville and had her fill up two dishes of the delectable stuff.

Back in Sully, I shared with a good friend in her cool house.

Yesterday, Saturday, I was attempting to finish the bird bath flower bed, but the thunderstorm drove me inside—and then it didn't do more than sprinkle. I changed my bed and washed up those sheets and did a few more necessary things before calling it a day and making a delicious sausage/pepperoni pizza for supper. It was mighty tasty and looking forward to a repeat performance tonight.

Today, Sunday, I spontaneously invited three friends home for lunch, and our prayer and share time. We weren't going to have time otherwise this week and they could all come, so that's what we did.

I made spaghetti with homemade sauce, garlic bread, and big salad of fresh lettuce, and a jar of home-canned peaches for dessert. We didn't hurt any.

So it's been a pretty good week, and I am thankful to the Lord for the whole thing.

Until next time!

RICHLAND from pg. 1

responsibility for the fire chief Richland, or elsewhere?"

"It's to anyone who needs help," said Ehrenfelt "If you're outside city limits, are you less important because you're on one side or the other?"

"Your first responsibility is for Richland," said Balster.

Ehrenfelt expanded on this at a later meeting. "Dave asked, 'Are you the Richland fire chief?' I said, 'Well, I'm the fire chief for everything we cover.' We cover 140 square miles, roughly. Dave says 'No, you're the City of Richland fire chief or you're nothing. The city comes first.' I'm like, 'That's not how this works. Everybody that pays taxes to get fire protection gets equal coverage. Nobody's better than somebody else depending on where you live. Don't matter the nature of the call, we're going to come help and do whatever we can.' That wasn't good enough for him."

When asked if there had been any problems with the department being spread too thin to take care of Richland, Ehrenfelt replied "Absolutely not. We have one of the best fire departments you can find. There's nobody around us that has a roster as full as ours, as well trained, as good equipment as the trustees have provided us with. Nobody."

Another point of contention between the firefighters and the city is over the fire station, which the firefighters feel is cramped and falling apart. The firefighters have purchased land to build a new fire station, but Councilwoman Tolle has sworn to deny them a building permit, instead arguing that the department should expand the current station. "Why am I going to reinvent the wheel? We currently have a fire station on the square...Why would you throw away a completely good building?" said Tolle in a later interview. She then was informed that the firefighters believe it is falling apart. "It is not falling apart. That's the first I've heard of it. We're supposed to be in charge, we're supposed to be taking care of it, but they do not tell us. They don't tell us anything...So how can we fix something we do not know is broken?"

The topic of the fire station was also brought up during the June 12 meeting, by Mayor Hoekstra. "There's other things at play here, gentlemen," said Hoekstra to the firefighters. "We have a building down here, beside your fire station that you claim is too small. And \$200 per square foot to erect a new fire station is pretty costly. The City of Richland doesn't need to tear a building down and then have another empty building on the square."

The firefighters attending the meeting requested the city host a large meeting to sort things out. They then accused Hoekstra of not doing this because he wants to prevent the township from hearing the vision of the firefighters, instead only letting them hear his vision. "No, I want the City of Richland to be fairly represented once and for all in this," Hoekstra said angrily. The firefighters replied that they also want representation. "You've had it! Meeting after meeting after meeting! You have it all the time! You're in here talking again tonight!" shouted the Mayor.

Hoekstra then explain had met with several trustees, without the firefighters, to give them the city's position, not the firefighter's position. "I respect the hell out of what you do. Believe it or not, I do," said Hoekstra. "But what I'm saying is the behavior of this thing has gone clear off the rails here. And you're partially at fault for it."

"What we've asked for, and what was supposed to be the ending of the last one, was we would all get together," said fire captain Jerry Gorman. "Trustees, City of Richland, officers of

the fire department, would get together and we would have a good discussion about this. But you're sitting here yelling at us, Tom, that we're being disorderly. We're getting broadsided here."

"Every time someone objects to what you say, you get sideways," replied Hoekstra. "The city attorney has made it very clear and the auditor has been very clear about this. We cannot sign a 28E agreement with your fraternal organization for fire protection because we will lose our immunity."

Hadley motioned to table until the city could have a meeting to sort through things. But, Tolle's original motion from one hour still had not been voted on, preventing Hadley's motion to pause talk on the removal of Ehrenfelt from being discussed until after the council had already voted on removing Ehrenfelt. Alissa Tolle, Kathy Brower, and David Balster all voted to remove Ehrenfelt. Michael Hadley and Brei Beam voted against removal. Hadley described the vote as ridiculous.

During a later interview, Hadley stated his belief that Balster, Brower, and Tolle secretly met prior to the meeting and decided in advance to get rid of Ehrenfelt, something that goes against Open Meeting rules. According to Hadley, the three councilmen carried out an illegal "witch-hunt" against Ehrenfelt.

As far as Ehrenfelt is concerned, he is still chief. If the fire department is controlled by the township, as Ehrenfelt and the trustees believe, then the city does not have any le-

gal right to remove him. He intends to continue working as fire chief, regardless of what the city says. He claimed that he is fire chief because he was unanimously voted chief by the other volunteers, not because he was appointed by the mayor. He feels one of the main causes of this issue is the fact that, while there are firefighters who have worked for the department for decades, the current city council members have only served for a couple of years. According to him, they do not understand how the fire department is run.

When Councilwoman Tolle was asked what would happen if Ehrenfelt refused to stop being chief, she stated that "My belief is a letter is sent out that he is removed from the position and all his personal belongings are taken out. Anything from the fire department is given back and he is removed. He is no longer a volunteer." She was then asked if firing a popular chief could have a negative effect on the morale of the other firefighters and lead others to leave with Ehrenfelt. "It very well may," said Tolle.

Mayor Hoekstra maintains that the city is in charge of the fire department. "Two former city attorneys, the current city attorney, and the auditor all came to the conclusion that the city is in power, as far as the fire department is concerned," he said during the interview.

It is likely that this issue will be discussed more at the next Richland Township Trustees meeting, held at the Richland Fire Station on July 5 at 6 p.m., and at the next city council meeting, held at Richland City Hall on July 10 at 7 p.m.



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