

Role of Port Authority questioned

By Tim Krohn

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NORTH MANKATO — A request for a grant to open a business on Commerce Drive set off a discussion of the public perception of the North Mankato Port Authority.

Laura Dhuyvetter requested a \$14,000 grant from the Port Authority Commission to help her open Laura's Coffee and Candy Bar in the former Dunn Bros. Coffee shop.

Commission member Greg Abbott questioned whether the proposal fit the commission's role because some of the money requested was earmarked for things other than building and site improvements, such as signs and equipment.

Commissioner Dave Arnold said he had concerns about " picking and choosing" which business gets grants, particularly for a building on the successful Commerce Drive strip. The Port Authority largely has focused on assisting in renovation or removal of blighted properties, often in lower North Mankato.

City Administrator Wendell Sande said the commission would likely assist any business moving into a vacant building.

Commission members Jim Kirschbaum, Bob Knutson and Mayor Gary Zellmer said they supported help for the Commerce Drive building because it has a history of businesses opening and closing.

" Commerce is a good area, but there's been a problem with this building," Knutson said of the structure, which has been a Dairy Queen, Burger King and coffee shop.

Zellmer said he looked at the request favorably because of the building's failed past. " If we don't

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address it, we'll be doing more in the future."

Commission members also defended themselves against public criticism that they are increasing property taxes by providing loans and grants to businesses.

" The Port Authority doesn't impact people's property taxes," Sande said. He said the loans given are from state grants and a revolvingloan fund that by law can't be used for the city's general budget.

He said the loans have, in fact, increased the tax base and created jobs.

Zellmer said the commission's long discussion at Thursday's meeting should dispel another public perception: " This accusation that this body is a rubber stamp for the city administration is false," Zellmer said. " That's evident by all the questions here."

In the end, the \$14,000 grant was unanimously approved with the condition that all the money be earmarked for building and site improvements. Sande said Dhuyvetter should have no problem reworking the grant application considering the grant is a small part of the \$102,000 she is spending on opening the business. The rest of the money is coming from a \$32,000 bank loan and \$56,000 of the owner's equity.

Sande said Dhuyvetter also is planning a second phase of improving and expanding the building in the future.

Dhuyvetter already operates Laura's Candy, a homebased business she opened in 2003. The business features gourmet marshmallows, graham crackers and S'more Kits. She plans to have the new business open by mid-January.

In the new retail location she will expand her candy offerings to include handmade chocolate truffles, caramels, brittles, chocolatecovered items, artisan chocolate bars, other specialty candies and baked goods.

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