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Range boondoggle now poses test of character, leadership

Wednesday, August 31, 2011 By Aaron J. Brown

The implications of Peter Passi's *Duluth News Tribune* [groundbreaking investigation](#) into the squandering of \$41 million in public money by Excelsior Energy on the Iron Range continue to unfold. The story now appears to be the biggest fiscal disaster in Iron Range economic development history, but there's more yet to explore. Karl Bremer at Ripple in Stillwater digs into what I think will bring this story to a head: [Excelsior's massive lobbying and campaign contribution operation](#) at all levels of government, in both major parties. You should read [Bremer's post](#).

In addition to the company regulars, one key figure at the center of this Excelsior Energy influence ring is former DFL State Sen. Doug Johnson, who has been one of the central lobbyists for Excelsior and whose influence in Range political circles is very strong. He's the political mentor of Sen. Tom Bakk, Johnson's successor who is now the Senate Minority Leader and the lead apologist for Excelsior in the Passi story.

Johnson and Bakk have long labored in the good graces of Bill Hanna, the editor of the Range's largest daily newspaper and a man very much without a political party. Hanna's *Mesabi Daily News* has maintained radio silence over the project's failures and the Duluth investigation after a string of pro-Excelsior front page stories and glowing editorials in the mid- to late-2000s. Hanna has a great deal of sway in Range media circles. Few politicians, save Tom Rukavina (a noted Bakk/Johnson rival within the delegation), seem willing to take Hanna on for fear of him painting them as anti-job or anti-Range, his favorite things to do to politicians.

Rukavina, however, also voted for Excelsior legislation at every turn, along with most of the DFL-dominated Iron Range legislative delegation. State Sen. David Tomassoni (DFL-Chisholm) has used this project as his legislative priority for most of his time in the Senate. Sen. Tom Saxhaug (DFL-Grand Rapids) has also dedicated great amounts of time to defending the project against early questions and keeping its dealings as quiet as possible. Iron Range state senators continue to publicly support the project in the face of the damning information found in the Passi DNT report.

In the House, along with Rukavina, defeated former Rep. Loren Solberg (DFL-Grand Rapids) and Rep. David Dill (DFL-Crane Lake) carried most of the legislation for the company over the last decade. Former Rep. Tony Sertich, who had supported the project early on, is now the IRRRB commissioner charged with executing the agency's loan agreement with Excelsior. Even Sertich's successor Rep. Carly Melin (DFL-Hibbing) and Carolyn McElpatrick (R-Grand Rapids), who beat Solberg, had a chance to break away from the pack this last session, but both ultimately voted for a pro-Excelsior amendment anyway. So, too, did the entire House GOP majority caucus!

The only Iron Range legislator who has not voted for Excelsior language, who also hasn't taken any money from Excelsior, its officers or lobbyists and who has clearly stated the numerous problems with the Excelsior project at every turn has been Rep. Tom Anzelc (DFL-Balsam Township).

As I've disclosed before, Tom Anzelc is a personal friend and fellow Balsam resident. I've run each of his successful legislative campaigns in District 3A, a vast territory including the western Iron Range, northern Itasca County, Koochiching and Lake of the Woods counties along the Canadian border. We are in many ways different people, from different Iron Range generations and political traditions, but we very much share our position on this project and the need for a new direction in Range economic development and government strategies. I believe there are others who share this view and I know they will join the fight. Indeed, they must.

To be clear, on this blog I speak only for myself. The Iron Range must do better. There is no acceptable defense of the status quo in the context of this story. Those who persist to ignore facts and advance the causes of private interests over the public good are enemies of the people of the Iron Range and should be treated as such.

In private conversations, I know many leaders on the Iron Range know of the troubles with this project and share my assessment of its failures. I know some of these people well and believe them to be of good will. They are paralyzed by the fact that admitting there will be no project means admitting the fundamental error of the initial IRRRB loans, and never getting back the \$9.5 million in Iron Range money, which mostly paid for Excelsior's salaries and legal fees. Everyone on the Iron Range faces an important decision in coming months. Will we learn from this terrible mistake? Or will we bury our heads in the sand.



IRON RANGE

If it is to be the latter, the voters should rightly bury the rest.

- Reform disclosure rules so people know how their money is spent.
- Reform loan agreements so that developers share risk with taxpayers.
- Focus public-private partnerships on smaller projects with clearer, less politically-dependent plans and more specific expectations.
- Focus public spending on public good: education, redevelopment, and needed services and infrastructure that the private sector can't or won't deliver.

UPDATE: I have repaired an error in my links to Bremer's post. [You can find it here.](#)



Labels: [excelsior energy](#), [iron range](#), [politics](#)

[0 comments](#)

Coming Oct. 15, the Great Northern Radio Show!

Monday, August 29, 2011 By Aaron J. Brown

Times are neither good nor bad nor normal here on the Iron Range. We seem to be going through a transition that no one fully understands. And it occurs to me that the rest of the country, even the world, might be doing the same.

So I could double down on my concerned missives on Range political topics. A couple hundred people would be mildly pleased with that. Or I could do something a little different. I could add something of aesthetic value to my community, fulfill a longstanding ambition of mine, and encourage people with doubts that we can forge our own hope from the light of the horizon.

To that end, **I am proud to announce the Great Northern Radio Show, Saturday, Oct. 15, 2011 on the stage of the Hibbing Community College Theater.** This will be live radio from 5-7 p.m. featuring a couple dozen musicians, voice actors and more. The theme of our first show will be "Hard Time Good Times." I've got a jug band, Finnish folk musicians, a choir, a teenage singing prodigy and a few surprises in store.

I've already booked and written most of the show, but I am open to new ideas. If you'll be in Hibbing that day plan to attend this free show at the theater. We'll be taking free will donations and signing up new members for KAXE, which will be putting on their annual fall fundraiser that week. If you're anywhere else, plan to listen live on 91.7 FM or streaming at www.kaxe.org or in one of the many scheduled rebroadcasts. This show will be made available to independent public radio stations all over the country so be sure to contact your local station to encourage them to re-run this show.

If the Great Northern Radio Show is successful we hope to do a few of these each year at different stages around northern Minnesota. We have affordable underwriting and cross-promotional opportunities for businesses and organizations. E-mail me or call KAXE at 218-326-1234 for more information.

And stay tuned, there will be more on this soon.



Labels: [radio](#)

[2 comments](#)

COLUMN: School days are here again (Whoopee!)

Sunday, August 28, 2011 By Aaron J. Brown

This is my weekly column for the Sunday, Aug. 28, 2011 edition of the [Hibbing Daily Tribune](#).

School days are here again (Whoopee!)

By Aaron J. Brown

I'm a teacher by trade so I'm always revved up for the school year. A new school year means new students, new opportunities and a fresh new chance to do your job better. Not everyone gets a moment like this and I appreciate it.

But this is the first year I'm also itching for my kids to go back to school, too. Kids. They're great. They're cute and funny and we love them. And they need to go to school.

Our oldest Henry is 6 and he'll be a first grader. You learn a lot in first grade. More words. Number stuff. I really don't care. He needs to go to school.

The twins, Doug and George, they're 4 and have an array of preschool activities on tap. They're going to prepare for kindergarten, expand



ON THE AIR

