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Ex–sheriff paid \$50K to broker land deals

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ELK RIVER – Former Sherburne County Sheriff Bruce Anderson is wrapping up two years of work as an independent contractor for the county negotiating for the purchase of land for a recreational trail.

His contract – for more than \$50,000 a year for 20 hours of work per week – has caused at least one county resident to question the arrangement during tight budget times.

County officials say the former sheriff is well known and respected, and his negotiation skills have proved to be an asset as the county tries to acquire land to extend the Great Northern Trail between Elk River and Princeton.

"He was obviously well known in the community and was able to have some instant credibility with landowners," said County Administrator Brian Bensen.

Anderson retired in early 2009 midway through his fifth term as sheriff after more than 33 years with the department. He was succeeded by Joel Brott, who won a second term last November.

The county's contract with Anderson began in June 2009, was renewed in June 2010 and again last month, Bensen said. But he said Anderson's work likely will be wrapped up by the end of the year.

"Many of the projects we had on our list have been completed," Bensen said.

Reached by phone, Anderson said he expects to be done sooner than that, possibly by the end of the month.

The Great Northern Trail is an old railroad grade between Elk River and Princeton that the county wants to turn into a recreational trail. Over the years, the railroad had sold some of the land to adjacent landowners. In part because of Anderson's work, the county has agreements with the landowners on all but two parcels, Bensen said.

According to Anderson's contract, requested by the Times, the former sheriff has been paid \$51,984 per year to "provide assistance with overseeing and managing any county board–approved construction or remodeling projects" as well as "support the county board goal of completion of the Great Northern trail" by working with property owners to acquire right–of–way or easements.

Also among Anderson's tasks: coordinating park improvement projects and "special projects as determined and assigned by the county administrator."

Records obtained from the county auditor–treasurer show Anderson has been paid \$103,968 since July 2009.

At a recent county board meeting, Elaine Philippi, a Baldwin Township resident and tea party activist, voiced concerns about spending tax dollars on consultants. She said Anderson's contract raises questions because of

its ambiguity and salary amount.

"As a taxpayer, I wanted to know what he was doing to earn that 50-plus thousand a year for part-time work," Philippi said. "I think it's a little too open-ended."

Philippi said she thinks public jobs should be offered to everyone, not tailor-made for certain people or former employees.

But County Commissioner Felix Schmiesing said Anderson was the right person for the job "because of his knowledge of the county, his connections with people throughout the county and his connections with people up and down that trail."

"The ability to negotiate and put some of those deals together is what Bruce brought to the table," Schmiesing said.

Schmiesing noted that due to the difficult budget times, the county isn't taking on building projects right now. He thinks Anderson's work likely will end soon.

"We're in a different place and time now," he said.

Anderson declined to comment about his contract other than to say he's accomplished a lot. He said he doesn't need to justify his time to anyone other than the county administrator.

"I'm not one to hang around just to hang around," he said. " ... People who know me know I'm there for a reason."

With counties facing difficult budget decisions and having to lay off employees, it's possible that hiring consultants could become more common. Sherburne County in 2008 eliminated its parks and forestry coordinator, a position that likely would have handled the negotiations for the trail extension.

In the past the county also had an economic development adviser on staff, but those duties are now handled by a paid consultant, Janna King.

There are advantages to using consultants, Bensen said. They don't get health insurance and must provide their own liability insurance. And their work can be scaled back if the economy stalls or funding for a program disappears, Bensen said.

"It's difficult to have people on staff and then lose them," he said.