

## Legislators want to fill dental gap

- The Iron Range needs dentists, and legislators hope to pay a few practitioners to move there.

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This legislative session, the price tag for a few brighter smiles on the Iron Range could be about \$240,000.

In a session defined by broad budget cuts and a chorus of “no’s” to many with their hands out, legislators so far are giving thumbs-up to a plan to pay a couple of dentists to move to the Iron Range.

The action is designed to stem fears that the region could face an oral health care crisis if it doesn’t find a way to replace its aging cadre of dentists. The seed money also shows how a couple of hundred thousand dollars here and there barely registers when lawmakers must choke down a \$1 billion deficit. And it offers a mid-session snapshot of the legislative process in action, how a once-lean bill can become a Christmas tree for lawmakers’ prized ornaments, such as incentives for dentists back home.

“I don’t think it’s off kilter, but during hard economic times, it’s hard to justify setting that money aside,” said House Minority Leader Kurt Zellers, R-Maple Grove. “It sounds a little odd.”

The Iron Range, like other rural areas in Minnesota, faces a slow-rising health care emergency as dentists near retirement. Already, most of the dental offices on the Range are small ones, with only a few dentists. As those people retire, patients face long drives and long waits

for dental care, prompting many to go without. When people start skimping on oral care, experts say, the number of costly emergency room visits soars as people arrive with dental trauma.

“It could become a crisis,” said state Rep. Kim Norton, a Rochester DFLer who has worked on legislation to improve dental care for the poor and those in rural areas. “It affects your whole quality of life, your ability to eat, your ability to get a job.”

Under the plan, a dentist who wants to move to the Iron Range could get roughly \$120,000 in forgivable loans to offset the cost of buying an existing practice or building a new one. A recruit needs to practice in the area five years to have the loan forgiven. Iron Range lawmakers said they hope to recruit two new dentists with the money.

“The age of our dentists is very concerning to all of us,” said Senate Tax Committee chairman Tom Bakk, a Cook DFLer who supports the amendment. “For some new person coming out of dental school, the cost of buying a business is staggering. If someone wants to replace the dentists retiring, they have to be compensated.”

### Funded by taconite tax

The money would come from a sliver of the taconite tax, a levy on the taconite extracted from area mines. Because the mines don’t pay property taxes, the money is largely used to drive down homeowners’ property taxes.

At a Senate committee meeting last week, legislators unanimously agreed to recommend 43 local projects totaling about \$8 million. They include a miners’ memorial in Virginia, a community center in Nashwauk and the money for new dentists.

The projects were tucked at the bottom of a jobs bill designed to encourage investment in small

business, reward those who renovate historic buildings and re-tool financial incentives for the proposed expansion of the Mall of America.

Top Republican lawmakers said they were unaware of the money for new dentists.

“Dentists?” said Senate Minority Leader David Senjem, R-Rochester, after being told about the plan. “I think we do know dentists in rural areas are hard to come by; I am just not sure about the appropriateness of using taconite tax money for this. This sounds like a stretch to me.”

Iron Range Resources, the state economic development agency that oversees a portion of the taconite tax money, ran the program last year and brought three new dentists to the area.

Bakk, who serves on the IRR board, and other Iron Range lawmakers said they feared the dental recruitment program might not be back in tight budget times.



They also said the program can be a cumbersome, months-long process stretching too far into the construction season. They decided a trip through the legislative process would be faster.

Dr. Michael Miskovich was one of the people helped by the program after he graduated from dental school last May.

His father and brother are dentists in Grand Rapids and he dreamed of returning to the area. He is using the incentive to buy into a practice in Virginia.

Now his four-dentist office is swamped, booked at least into May. Some patients drive nearly two hours to get there.

The Iron Range desperately needs more dentists, Miskovich said. "I feel like I am trying to save the world, but there are just too many people who need care."

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