

New business offering a (whirley) bird's eye view of Grafton

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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GRAFTON - This autumn, visitors to Grafton will be able to enjoy a complete view of the changing leaves thanks to Prairie State Helicopters, based out of Riverton, Illinois.

Grafton Mayor Rick Eberlin said he signed the business license Wednesday morning allowing Prairie State Helicopters to continue offering helicopter rides to Grafton visitors at the Hawg Pit. Eberlin said the helicopter company had been offering rides for about a month under an agreement it would seek a business license. Eberlin said all the qualifications for the village had been met, including insurance and FAA regulations. Eberlin said the rides would be offered throughout the winter.

While no definitive schedule has been made for helicopter rides throughout the season, Rob Thorpe, who runs Prairie State Helicopters with his business partner, Jesse Moats, said he expects rides to be offered throughout October one weekends. Rides are \$40 and take people over the riverfront and circling above the islands. Eberlin said the rides can last between 15-20 minutes.

"People get a different perspective from the air," Thorpe said. "We get lots of repeat customers, and people like to bring their friends and families up with them. It's been very positive for us."

Thorpe said the business is relatively new, but he expects the season to end with colder weather. Currently, he said rides begin around noon, unless a special event begins

earlier, and last until dark. When asked when the potential season would resume, Thorpe said it would most likely happen around spring.

As fall brings autumn colors, however, Thorpe said he plans on changing the route to circling above the bluffs behind Grafton to showcase the leaves.

Both Eberlin and Thorpe said this is not the first attempt of the business to reach out to Grafton customers. Eberlin said former members of the Grafton Village Council would not allow such a business to operate. He said the current village government is much more favorable to such endeavors.

Thorpe said both he and Moats attempted to establish a business offering in Grafton. Thorpe said he attempted with another, unnamed local business previous to contacting Steve Kasten, owner of the Hawg Pit.

"I tried with another local business before, and they didn't think it would work for them, but I was persistent and kept looking for other avenues," Thorpe said. "I thought it would be good for the community there. St. Louis hasn't, and Grafton didn't, so I kept asking, and I think it works good where it's at."

Eberlin said the rides have been popular enough to warrant lines of people getting rides over the weekends they have been available. Thorpe also agreed the choice was a good decision for both the village and their business.