



COUNTY TASK FORCE: Keep indoor rinks on ice **PAGE 8A**

Conservation board assumes fiscal agent role to help lake

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WHITE BEAR LAKE — Augmentation advocates breathed a sigh of relief last week when the people tasked with conserving the lake agreed to take on an unprecedented role.

That role is to serve as fiscal agent should bonding money be procured this session to build a pipeline from Vadnais Lake to White Bear Lake. An entity had to step forward to take the money before area legislators would introduce a bill. The buck stopped with the White Bear Lake Conservation District (WBLCD).

The decision wasn't easy. In fact, it took months of research and task force meetings to delve into the aspects of the role and what it would mean to the group's budget. The WBLCD gets an allowance from five communities around the lake and operates on a budget less than \$100,000. The group of 10 board members mostly work to control invasive species and issue dock permits.

Dellwood's representative, Pat McCann, felt the decision was now or never.

"If we decide not to be fiscal agent, I don't know when we'll have another shot. We are the entity responsible for White Bear Lake. We have a chance to fix the lake. The planets are finally lined up to get it rolling."

Several legislators attended the meeting to push for a commitment.

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FISCAL AGENT: 'No other entity is in a better position to help the lake

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"No other entity is in a better position to help the lake," said Sen. Chuck Wiger (D-Dist. 43), who commended the board for "doing its job."

Three things are important in getting bonding money for the project, he told the board: sustainability, affordability and community support. When asked what Wiger considers affordable regarding capital costs, the senator replied, "\$20 million."

The DNR cost study conducted by SEH engineering estimated a price tag of \$57 million to run a pipeline from Vadnais to White Bear Lake. A second opinion is coming end of February from a study commissioned by the Friends of White Bear Lake. That estimate is expected to be much lower.

The senator pointed out that the \$1 billion bonding bill already has more than \$4 billion in requests and "it's growing."

"I can assure you that many of those projects have strong community support. If there is reasonable doubt as to efficacy and sustainability on this project, it will make it a tougher sell," Wiger said.

He also wanted the board to know he will pull the bill if the WBLCD decides it's not comfortable being the fiscal agent.

Before the vote, Friends of White Bear Lake Chairman Harry Melander reminded the board there are no guarantees for bonding money. "We are just looking for a chance to continue the conversation. We are far from constructing a project to help the lake. But we have a chance to get the resources and create a structure that makes sense for all the communities around the lake. What we are asking tonight is to not say 'no'."

"If you give it a thumbs down, it takes the wind out of our sails and gas out of our engines," Melander said.

Mahtomedi's director, Gene Altstatt, admitted the move was a leap of faith.

"If the state feels we can't handle the project, we won't get the money," Altstatt said. "Our task group has worked months wrestling with this decision. We have come to the conclusion we think we are the appropriate organization to take this on. We must move forward on faith if we want to get water back in our lake. This is a very important regional asset. If we didn't have this lake, it would be like a cold Omaha."

Ramsey County Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt also spoke to the board about the county's role in the potential project. She promised to work with the district on building a pipeline on county right of way, if

it comes to that. "We have done it in other projects and it is not uncommon for public entities to work together to make it happen," she said.

The commissioner added that the county was approached about being a fiscal agent, but the matter was moot. "Acting as fiscal agent has to be part of the county's core mission," Reinhardt said. "The type of thing you're working with is not part of our core mission. We don't have control over local water infrastructure."

Reinhardt, who lives in White Bear Lake, assured the board if there is a role the county can play, it will.

That doesn't mean the district endorses augmentation. At its meeting Feb. 16 to affirm the role, Chairman Jane Harper made it clear the board has not taken a position on a pipeline project. "We merely stand ready to help if the project is funded," she said.

Wiger said he will be chief author of an augmentation bill in the Senate and Rep. Matt Dean will author a companion bill in the House. The bill will be introduced at the start of session March 8. It will likely be late May before the district learns if it gets a piece of the bonding pie.