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WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2015
VOL. 120 NO. 5 www.presspubs.com \$1.00

DNR mum on cost of augmentation

BY DEBRA NEUTKENS
REGIONAL EDITOR

WHITE BEAR LAKE — The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) isn't talking when it comes to a lake augmentation figure.

It's not that the agency hasn't been asked. Members of the White Bear Lake Conservation District (WBLCD) met with DNR representatives last month to get an update on the cost estimate study, but to no avail.

"There isn't a number yet," reported district Chairperson Jane Harper. "That is what everyone wants to know; but the DNR made it clear there will not be any leak of a figure until the draft report."

The DNR is working with the Metropolitan Council, which hired SEH, the Vadnais Heights engineering firm that installed augmentation systems in North Oaks. SEH was also the firm that did the 2014 water sustainability study for the Met Council.

The preliminary report is due in mid-January, Harper told the board at its Nov. 17 meeting. A final version is due to the Legislature by Feb. 1.

WBLCD: Fiscal agent role pondered in preparation for bonding money

FROM PAGE 1A

If bonding money is approved in 2016 for augmenting White Bear Lake, there is another important matter: Who will be the fiscal agent to receive the funding?

A WBLCD task force met last month with three of the five communities around the lake to discuss the district taking on that role. The conversation centered on whether the WBLCD has authority to take on an augmentation project and its capacity to administer such a project.

"We feel we should get changes to our legislation that explicitly says we can work on water quantity and quality issues and receive funds from entities other than state and federal," Harper said. "If we are fiscal agent, we may receive funds from private entities and local governments. We want to be sure if we go forward with this project and funds are available, our legal framework is very clear."

Harper pointed out from talking to area legislators that this should not be a problem.

"There will be authors for a bill," she said. "There also doesn't appear to be concern or pushback from communities if we tweak our authorizing legislation."

White Bear Lake, White Bear Township and Mahtomed officials participated in the Nov. 16 task force meeting. Dellwood and Birchwood did not attend.

Harper said the district, which consists of volunteer citizens appointed by their community, needs to be certain it can take on the responsibility if bonding money is

directed to the board.

By agreeing to be fiscal agent, the WBLCD would "own" the infrastructure. "The caveat is we can contract out for operation and maintenance of the facility," Harper noted.

Whether the state will fund 100 percent of both capital costs and soft costs (engineering, permitting, legal, land acquisition, etc.) to construct an augmentation pipeline is unknown. "There seems to be a difference of opinion," continued the chairperson. "Some believe that typical bonding projects look for local funds in the amount of 50 percent. As fiscal agent, we could need to secure commitments from local sources. We haven't done that in the past."

Other highlights from the task force meeting:

- Accountability and responsibility would be with the fiscal agent.
- The question arose whether the board is the best organization to lead this project.

- The board would not only be accountable to the state for spending on the money, but to local communities, elected officials and landowners both on and off the lake. Off-lake residents may not be excited about potential maintenance costs for such a project.

- No communities around the lake have taken a formal position on augmentation.

Harper reminded the directors that the board has also not taken a formal position on augmentation.

Director Pat McCann, who represents Dellwood, feels the upcoming session is when bonding could

happen. "There isn't another bonding bill for a couple years," he said. "There are a variety of numbers (for augmentation) floating around, but SEH did Snail and Gilfillan lakes, so this isn't their first rodeo. The assumption I've got is the figures will be close to accurate."

McCann added that there seems to be a "lot of enthusiasm for this."

"Legislators who approach us indicate we're the most viable entity to be the fiscal agent," he said. "After six years of messing around with this (lake issue), it seems we're getting closer to a solution. For the first time, it appears a lot of activity is moving in that direction."

Harper told the board the district should be ready to make a decision in February on whether it would take on the role as fiscal agent for the complex project.

"Let the task force know your questions so we can research as a work group and be ready to make a decision. We might want the Legislature to find someone else to be the fiscal agent."

It was noted that the district could contract with entities like Met Council or St. Paul Waterworks to operate and maintain an augmentation infrastructure.

"Gene (director Altstatt) and I aren't going out with a bag of tools to clean a filter," McCann said. "I own a crescent wrench. I don't want to get too bogged down with none of us knowing how to do this. These projects are handled by professionals."

Task force member Altstatt feels the district is the most obvious

group to be fiscal agent.

"I think a number of us have the will to take it on and deal with the issues to make it happen," he said. "All this is not beyond our capability. We are big boys and girls and we can figure this out. We should accept the challenge."

The fact neither the board nor local governments have taken a formal position on augmentation has caused what Harper describes as "an interesting dynamic that creates complexity on the front end. We're walking on eggshells a little," she said. "I don't feel our board should be out in front of our communities but yet they have not taken a formal position. The train has left the station."

WBLCD attorney Alan Kantrud told the board the district is recognized by the Legislature as a very important asset. "You are here to govern this," he said. "If that means taking money from the state to fix a problem specific to your district, that is what they expect you to do."

Kantrud did not feel the board needed to have "that intellectual debate whether augmentation is good or not. It doesn't matter. Let's assume it's not augmentation, but some other project. They expect you to have a catcher's mitt on for funds. The whole notion of being a fiscal agent is not dependent on a project that has specifics of augmentation, but the idea is motivation at the legislative level to push money into local hands — to be the trustee to get something done to fix the problem."