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Lake pipeline: 'Too many unknowns'

BY DEBRA NEUTKENS
REGIONAL EDITOR

WHITE BEAR LAKE — Pumping river water into the lake isn't something city leaders are ready to embrace.

"There are too many unknowns," said Mayor Jo Emerson at the Feb. 9 City Council meeting. "We have no idea what the costs will be."

The mayor was referring to operating costs that could range anywhere from \$570,000 to \$4.1 million per year depending on how advanced the level of water treatment.

Water quality, mostly regarding phosphorus flowing into White Bear Lake, environmental impact and operating costs were all concerns raised by the City Council if an augmentation project gets state funding.

"It's going too fast," maintained Councilman Kevin Edberg. "I'm not saying 'stop the discussion,' but we should back off. This is a tremendous environmental issue. We have some of the purest water in the state. Phosphorus is of great importance. We don't want algae blooms in our lake. If we screw that up, we have committed a massive sin."

How and by who the project will be managed was also a hot topic for discussion.

White Bear Lake Conservation District (WBLCD) board members Scott Costello and Bryan DeSmet attended the council meeting to get feedback on its fiscal agent role.

The board has not taken a position on augmentation, Costello noted, but tentatively agreed to serve as fiscal agent if the Legislature awards bonding money for augmentation. The district would immediately hire consultants to manage the pipeline project, he said, estimated in a DNR study to cost \$55 million.

Emerson asked the two representatives who would pay for a project manager and if the plan was to levy member cities to pay those costs.

"There is the question of where that money would come from," DeSmet replied. "We can request our communities to provide up to \$1 million per year. In reality, we are appointed by you folks and serve at your favor. We don't want to get too far afield from member communities."

In an email to City Manager Ellen Richter, a spokesman for Friends of White Bear Lake wrote that the group's stance is that the state would fund capital costs and the five communities around the lake would pay operating costs for the system through the WBLCD.

"The expense per household for operating costs would be at most a few dollars per month in the years the proposed system operates," said spokesman Greg McNeely. "Alternatively we may ask the counties to operate the system, but in either scenario, the homeowners in the area would pay about the equivalent of a good cup of coffee per month to fill up the lake and keep it full."

The mayor said she has "a big concern" with how

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LAKE PIPELINE: Sharing the costs

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operating costs would be divvied up. "We have no idea what the costs will be. As a city that pays 52 percent of the district's budget, I have a problem with this."

Councilman Doug Biehn said the lake issue didn't start until the outer ring of suburbs, "the Woodburys, Lino Lakes and Oakdales," started developing. "Are they making more of an impact? Why should White

Bear pay for it? For decades we didn't have this problem. After these suburbs starting growing, now we're experiencing issues. The costs should be shared."

Emerson asked if the Rice Creek Watershed District could handle the fiscal agent role. "Has anyone discussed it with them?" she inquired. DeSmet said it was "not to his knowledge" but other agencies have been suggested, including the

Metropolitan Council and Ramsey County.

"This seems like an awfully large project for the WBLCD to take on," added the mayor. "You are all volunteers with other jobs."

Councilman Edberg flat out told the district board members they are the wrong fiscal agents. "I applaud the work you do but to go from a \$100,000 budget to \$50 million is nuts. You have no experience doing a project of this scale," he stated.

Even the city's engineering department couldn't handle managing a project of that scope, noted Public Works Director Mark Burch.

The Friends group is working on a "counter estimate" to the DNR cost estimate to design and construct a pipeline. That estimate is due March 1.

McNeely asked that the city support the WBLCD as potential fiscal agent if bonding money is granted. The conservation district planned to decide on that role at its Feb. 16 meeting (after press time).