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Augmentation bill gets stamp of approval

BY DEBRA NEUTKENS
REGIONAL EDITOR

WHITE BEAR LAKE — After a few tweaks, the City Council threw its weight behind a bill to augment the lake.

An early version of a resolution was discussed last month by council, which decided it was necessary to show "qualified" support to the pending bonding bill. Again, there are conditions.

Wording that emphasized the lake's regional appeal was added to the resolution, as was the council's concern that any ongoing operational and maintenance costs be funded by all benefiting jurisdictions and parties in a fair and equitable manner through a mechanism approved by the city. Lake water quality must also be preserved.

The council agreed that language addressing the lake level lawsuit be included to require plaintiffs request the deadlines outlined in the settlement agreement be extended one year and that the lawsuit be dismissed if the augmentation project moves forward.

Deleted from the early draft was wording in a "whereas" that singled out "those residing on its shoreline." Instead, the whereas read: "White Bear Lake is a local and regional asset enjoyed and used by residents of the entire Twin Cities metropolitan region."

Councilman Kevin Edberg felt the language encouraged the city to assess costs equally to properties.

"What are we saying about operating expense to

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AUGMENTATION: Sharing the cost

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those who don't live on the lake?" he asked.

"None of us know what will happen, nor have we talked to our colleagues around the lake. There is room for a lot more negotiation. This language facilitates ability to assess the costs without consideration of benefit. And that bothers me."

Mayor Jo Emerson said she interpreted it the opposite way.

"We don't know the operating costs. We're operating with very little information at this point. I take it to mean that this allows us to negotiate down the road what may have to come from this. It leaves us open to have those discussions if this becomes a bill," the mayor said. "We're saying these are our concerns."

Edberg went on to say on two occasions he has requested language that includes something about tax benefit and tax incidence.

"I think the people who live in my ward who are nowhere close to the lake should not be paying an allocated share based on the value of their property for operation of improvement of the lake. A different approach to taxation is necessary and I would like something added to this resolution."

Councilman Dan Jones said he just wants something about a fair share reflected in the resolution. "I want people to know this is bigger than the five

communities on the lake."

"We've deliberately tried to make this general in nature," noted City Manager Ellen Richter. "The thinking is that the resolution continues the conversation within the Legislature. If it is successful, we will take the time and energy to come to a consensus about how this will be paid for. We don't even know what the cost will be. We just wanted it to indicate that unless it's something we agree on, we're not in the game."

Richter suggested adding Edberg's words to one of the qualifications for support: that ongoing costs of operating and maintaining the augmentation project be funded by all benefiting jurisdictions and parties in a fair and equitable manner that takes into consideration tax incidence and benefit recognizing that White Bear Lake is a regional natural resource asset benefiting residents throughout the state.

The resolution was approved after adding the language. The version will be forwarded to city and township leaders in the communities surrounding the lake for their consideration.

At press time, the bonding bill requesting funds for an augmentation pipeline to White Bear Lake had not yet been introduced in the state Legislature.

Sen. Chuck Wiger's legislative assistant, Greg Weiner, said the bill is still getting signatures and should be introduced Thursday (March 17).