

Coffers called 'too high' for lake conservation group

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EDITOR

WHITE BEAR LAKE — The entity responsible for protecting the lake has too much money in its bank account. At least that's the contention of City Council members who feel the White Bear Lake Conservation District (WBLCD) should give some of the money back.

Formed by the Legislature in 1971, the WBLCD is one of two in the state with statutory authority to regulate use of the lake. That authority governs things like type of boats, speed, public beaches, dock placement, weed removal, and just about anything related to preserving the lake.

A 10-member board consisting of two appointed representatives from each of five communities that touch the lake make up the district. Its operating budget is funded through assessments paid by those five: Birchwood, Dellwood, Mahtomedi, White Bear Lake and White Bear Township. White Bear Lake taxpayers contribute the most, or 45 percent of the total assessment.

Councilman Kevin Edberg has made it known more than once that the WBLCD has too much in its bank accounts, despite conversations about maintaining "reasonable" limits.

Edberg calculated district assets as a percentage of budget over the last 15 years. In 2017, he figured the board could run its business 2.5 years without needing a single penny based on its reserves.

"I find that excessive," Edberg said.

"The district's reserves continue to grow. Even in years when there has been a deficit, the highest number has been \$22,000 (in 2009). Yet they are carrying \$226,000 in reserves. While their budgets have increased 25 percent, the district's total assets have quadrupled since 2010."

The councilman acknowledged that the district has obtained better accounting services for "a coherent financial statement" but has failed to heed city warnings about the amount in its reserve.

"We have a perennial conversation on this topic," Edberg told council Feb. 13.

"I say put aside \$100,000 as a contingency; I wouldn't have issue with that. But our taxpayers have paid 45 percent of the district budget, which is equivalent to about \$60,000. I would like to have that in our coffers rather than theirs."

Adding that requests to lower the reserves have gone "unresponded and disrespected," Edberg said the money the district is sitting on is no-

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City Councilman

where close to what they need to operate.

Edberg said he values the district's work and knows board members care about the lake. "But I also fear they may be building reserves to put in a pipeline to the lake or do some other aspect in terms of being project managers for a lake augmentation project. That was not anything contemplated in the legislation."

His solution: "Next time the council has a formal conversation about their (assessment) bill,

I'm going to suggest we strongly encourage them to go a year without assessing member communities and eat up that budget for a year, or plan for half an assessment for two years. If they fail to do that, we institute a discipline expressing concern over their financial management or consider going to the Legislature to address their powers."

Councilman Dan Jones agreed with Edberg, pointing out auditors recommend a fund balance of 35 to 60 percent of operating expenditures. The WBLCD maintains 150 to 200 percent.

Mayor Jo Emerson said she was willing to meet with her counterparts around the lake to see if they feel the same. "We might be alone on this," she noted, "but I don't mind being alone. It is frustrating and they don't listen to us. I agree, the reserves are too high."