

County appears amenable to providing right of way for lake pipeline

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WHITE BEAR LAKE — Two vocal proponents of augmentation actually walked the 3.7-mile route a pipeline could take from Lake Vadnais to Commercial Bay.

"It takes a couple of hooks," said Greg McNeely, chair of the White Bear Lake Restoration Association (WBLCA), but it's doable along county right of way.

The Birchwood resident

made the trek with Jim Markoe, president of the White Bear Lake Homeowners Association. Both sit on the board of Friends of White Bear Lake, a new advocacy group pushing for a pipeline.

Ramsey County Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt agrees, saying a route along county right of way is "a possibility."

"I have talked to our public works folks and we will work with people on this," Reinhardt said. "County right of way has been used before for augmenta-

tion. We have done it in the past with Gilfillan Lake (in North Oaks) and other lakes. It's generally easier than working with the railroad. I tell people: 'you know you can work with the county.'"

Reinhardt, who lives in White Bear Lake, maintains that the lake level issue is "bigger than a lot of people think. This is about water: drinking water, lake level and its impact," she said.

Those advocating for raising the lake's elevation through augmentation are optimistic about bonding money, despite its absence in the governor's \$1.4 billion bonding proposal.

"We were told the governor has indicated he is interested and supportive of the project and is awaiting final cost estimates," noted McNeely, WBLCA spokesman.

In a news release following Gov. Mark Dayton's bonding proposal, Sen. Chuck Wiger (D-43) wrote that he is encouraged by the governor's interest in the future of White Bear Lake.

"This has been nearly a decade-long problem and now that we are

getting close to final cost estimates on a real solution, I'm really looking forward to the prospect of getting our low lake levels under control," the senator said.

Wiger is referring to the DNR augmentation cost report due to legislators and stakeholders Feb. 1.

Augmentation, by the way, is allowed under the lake lawsuit settlement agreement. The plaintiff, the WBLRA, and the intervening homeowners association, retain the right to "relief of any kind," as stated in the agreement, including augmentation, "should Phase One not be funded, permitted, constructed and placed in operation."

Phase One refers to the Metro Council's Northeast Metro Project on water sustainability that involves connecting the municipalities of Vadnais Heights, White Bear Lake, White Bear Township, Mahtomedi, Shoreview and North St. Paul to either raw water or treated water purchased from the St. Paul Regional Water Service.

The lawsuit, remember, is currently on hold for three years while both sides work to meet its conditions.

With most conversations focusing on augmentation, a

question was posed last week to plaintiff attorney Dick Allyn: Is everyone satisfied with how things are going with the agreement?

"The answer is mixed," said Allyn, who represents the WBLRA for Robins Kaplan LLP. "There are different elements to the settlement that are working out well. For example, the DNR is working hard on developing a protected elevation. Lead politicians and others are doing a great job providing information on conservation. What is not working out so far is the six communities that would be involved in phasing into use of surface water versus groundwater. Some communities are very opposed to it. As a result, the legislators from those towns have not been eager to fund a feasibility study."

In the meantime, Allyn noted, augmentation, which was always preserved in the settlement agreement, is picking up speed and interest.

"Ironically," the attorney noted, "the opposition to surface water is making augmentation look a lot better. That is why it's picking up steam."

If augmentation becomes reality, will that settle the lake lawsuit? "Yes, it could," Allyn replied. "No question about it."

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS ADDRESS LAKE'S PROTECTED ELEVATION LEVEL

Ramsey County Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt provided a letter she and Commissioner Blake Huffman wrote to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) last month regarding the lake's protected elevation.

The DNR is required to set a level by Nov. 1, 2016 as part of the lawsuit settlement agreement between the WBLRA and the DNR.

Addressed to Luke Skinner, director of ecological services and water resources, the commissioners said they supported the White Bear Lake Conservation District's (WBLCD) request to set the protected elevation of the lake between 924.0 and 924.5 feet above sea level.

"Ramsey County has been working with the WBLCD, the Legislature, Metropolitan Council, DNR, USGS, cities and townships and many concerned citizens and businesses to find solutions to address the low lake levels. The establishment of a 'protected elevation' is key to solutions that will allow for safe recreational use of White Bear Lake," they wrote.

Reinhardt and Huffman pointed out that Ramsey County Beach has been closed for eight years. The public beach and boat launch are "key resources" to the region, they said. "The beach will remain closed as long as the lake level is below 923.26 feet. Parks and Recreation staff prefer a level of 924.75. A protected elevation of 924 to 924.5 feet would create a safe public beach."