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lake level

by Debra Neulkens
Regional Editor

ST. PAUL — Rep. Matt Dean (R-Dellwood) figures White Bear Lake needs about 5 billion gallons of water. He also thinks it could come from the Mississippi River by way of Sucker Lake.

In a hearing last week before the House Environment and Natural Resources Policy and Finance Committee, Dean promoted HF1557, a bill that asks for funding to study augmentation and the feasibility of constructing a wastewater treatment facility for communities surrounding White Bear Lake.

"Everyone realizes it's a big problem that I believe, and most believe, requires a two-prong approach: conservation and augmentation," Dean said. "I have been unashamedly parochial about this. For decades, groundwater was pumped into the lake. That is no longer legal. I am looking for new sources, including Sucker Lake, as well as treated wastewater."

The government affairs director for the Metropolitan Council said the agency shares the same concerns about White Bear Lake, but prefers to wait until the U.S. Geological Survey study is completed before making a decision on how to fix the lake.

"We are also concerned about a portion of the bill that relates to the council taking proposals for a wastewater facility,"

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Lake

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said the Met Council's Judd Schetnan. "We have a facility in that area today. To construct one to just augment White Bear Lake; I'm not sure how we would pay for that."

Rep. Denny McNamara, committee chairman, told Schetnan that "people in White Bear are sick of waiting."

Schetnan agreed. "We know people are anxious to get something moving. We are too. We did a Northeast metro feasibility study. This bill asks to look at augmentation from Sucker Lake. That was excluded (from that study) because of water quality issues. Obviously, the Legislature can ask Met Council to look at it again."

Rep. Rick Hansen asked how Dean's bill would interact with the Depart-

ment of Natural Resources (DNR) lawsuit agreement. Assistant Commissioner Bob Meier took the question, telling the committee the DNR shares concerns about lake level.

"Part of the mediated agreement is for us to introduce a bill and get it passed by next year that would fund Phase One feasibility and design. A finance bill was introduced today in the Senate," Meier said.

"This bill (Dean's bill) as drafted does not meet requirements of the settlement agreement. If the DNR were directed by HF1557 to pursue that course of action, the agency could be in default of the lawsuit agreement and probably find itself back in court."

The Senate bill intro-

duced by Sen. Chuck Wiger (DFL-Maplewood) March 19 does satisfy the terms of the settlement. It requests \$1.5 million for the DNR and stakeholders to evaluate long-term water supply sustainability in the North and East Metro, identify options to address any challenges and assess feasibility of those options.

Meier explained it was a general fund request that was delayed in getting introduced while language was being crafted. The delay in introducing the bill (SF1910) means it probably won't be heard this year; he added, but that just means it can sit for "fine tuning." Meier reminded the legislators that the deadline for appropriation funds under the agreement is August 2016 so it gives the DNR

one more session.

Language in Wiger's bill specifically identifies Alternatives 1B and 2B from the Met Council's report "Feasibility Assessment of Approaches to Water Sustainability in the Northeast Metro" released in December. Those options involve converting municipal water supplies from six cities that use groundwater, including White Bear Lake and White Bear Township, to a surface water source — the McCarrons Water Treatment Plant (1B) or a surface water connection to a new sub-regional surface water treatment plant (2B).

According to the bill, a report from the commis-

sioner would be due no later than Dec. 31, 2016 to the chairs and ranking minority members of the House and Senate committees with jurisdiction over environmental and natural resource finance and policy.

Dean's bill directs the Met Council to request and receive no less than three proposals for the design and construction of an augmentation supply from Sucker Lake to White Bear Lake no later than Jan. 15, 2016. It also requires the DNR commissioner and other agencies, including local units of government and the Met Council, to study the treatment facility idea.

Even though augmentation was not included in the settlement agreement, Meier said the agency understands people's desire to continue that discussion.

"Our bill does not discuss augmentation, but we would be willing to include that in this proposal," he said, adding that a companion bill is still needed in the House.

Chairman McNamara said a fiscal bill could be incorporated in the omnibus spending bill, which would meet the deadline for this session. Bill 1557 was laid over for possible inclusion in the omnibus bill. It is co-authored by Rep. Peter Fischer.