

Bassett Creek Watershed Commission deals with internal erosion

The future of the organization is at stake and could disband in 2015

As a result of disagreement and possible miscommunication, the days of the Bassett Creek Watershed Commission could be numbered.

The commission was formed in 1969 and covers parts or all of Crystal, Golden Valley, Minnetonka, New Hope, Plymouth, Robbinsdale, St. Louis Park and Medicine Lake with responsibilities including water quality improvements and flood control.

The cities impacted by and involved with the watershed commission do so by entering a joint powers agreement, which is renewed every 10 years.

Letters went out to member cities informing them that the agreement expires Jan. 1, 2015 and eight cities tentative agreed to extend the JPA to Jan. 1, 2025. The ninth, Medicine Lake, has not.

Medicine Lake is withholding comment and action on the JPA and will not sign until an issue concerning water level on the lake is resolved.

Should the issue not be resolved, and Medicine Lake does not sign by Jan.1, 2015, the JPA will be gone. Bassett Creek Watershed Commission would, at that time, dissolve.

The Issue

Bassett Creek Watershed Commission Chair and Plymouth representative Ginny Black briefed Plymouth City Council on the dilemma Oct. 29.

Black's presentation suggested that Medicine Lake's hold out revolves around a dam on the south side of the lake. She said the residents of the lake would like the water level reconsidered and raised because they are having difficulty taking their boats in and out of the water. It's also speculated, by some, that water level has caused significant sediment build up in parts of the lake.

The commission has taken some background information concerning the water level and has yet to act.

The dam was built in 1996 as a cooperative project between the commission, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Hennepin County and City of Plymouth. The dam maintains the normal water level as set by the previous structure, which had to be replaced due to deterioration.

Two years ago, the Association of Medicine Lake Area Citizens approached the commission with a petition of 600 signatures to reconsider the water level.

However, Black doubted the feasibility of doing anything with the water level within a tight budget.

“It would be a fairly significant process to even go down that road,” Black said at an Oct. 29 meeting. “It would take many years, a lot of studies and a lot of money.”

Gary Holter, Mayor of Medicine Lake, said the issue, as seen by his constituents, isn’t necessarily to raise the water level but to reevaluate it.

“It’s not that we want the water level raised. That’s the number one error in the whole conversation,” Holter said. “We’re not asking to raise the water level. What we are asking is to do a new study of the water level and of the dam to see if it’s at an optimum operating capacity.”

Holter made the assertion that the water level hadn’t been adjusted since a 1929 study. The height of the dam was built according to that information and the reconstruction was constructed with the same standards.

“Since 1929, we’ve moved forward on a global scale,” Holter added. “We’ve learned how to do things better since then. We just want a legitimate updated study.”

Black said the water level was more than likely reconsidered when the dam was reconstructed, and the water level was appropriately set.

Points of Contention

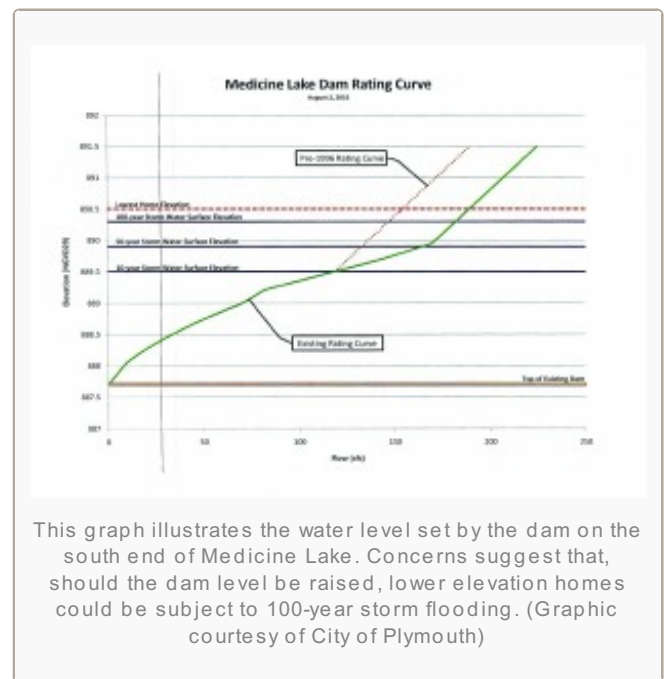
Holter said the end-goal of Medicine Lake is to construct a dam with a controllable weir, which would allow the water level to be artificially adjusted.

Black hazarded to estimate that such a project could reach into millions of dollars. She continued to note that the commission sees the project as recreational – not impacting water quality.

She said the commission has never committed such a large amount of resources to a strictly recreational issue.

“I don’t think the watershed should pay for it if this is something that only the residents of Medicine Lake want,” Plymouth Councilmember Bob Stein said at the Oct. 29 briefing. “It’s going to cause a mess to raise the dam and would cost a lot of money.”

Holter contested that the water level on Medicine Lake shouldn’t be labeled “strictly recreational.”



“Bassett Creek has responsibilities for water quality issues, which means water usability issues,” he said. “In my opinion, it’s up to the commission, they should be the lead on this. If the water level were higher and more controllable, the entire lake would be more enjoyable for people who use it.”

Black told Plymouth City Council that, because the DNR regulates the water level and because the dam is owned by Hennepin County, she didn’t feel it was the commission’s role.

Holter disagreed.

Further Complications

Plymouth Water Resources Manager Derek Asche prepared a memo concerning some of the problems he found with changing water levels on the lake.

“Generally, concerns with raising the water levels in Medicine Lake include increasing the flood potential of low properties,” Asche said in the memo.

Should water levels be raised, it’s unclear whether existing properties would be at higher risk of flooding. A study and adjustments would need to determine the potential of the problem.

He also said the need for easements to the new flood level, low expectations that a change in the dam level could be made and the high cost to study such an endeavor cause concerns from a water resources standpoint.

Additionally, if a change were to be made with the water level, more than \$2 million in water quality improvement projects would need to be studied to ensure they are not negatively affected. Projects such as regional ponding and shoreline restorations over the past eight years would have to be completely reevaluated or adjusted accordingly.

Moving Forward

Worst case scenario, a state- or county-run watershed district would be established. Black told Plymouth City Council that such a change would eliminate aspects of member city oversight in much of the watershed’s issues and management.

“It’ll be interesting to see what happens here,” Black said. “In my view, it would be a shame to see the commission go away.”

“Personally, I would be okay with it,” said Holter. “I’ll be perfectly frank here – why not? The people close to the lake are in favor of doing the study and hoping it would show they can control the lake level better. If the commission isn’t willing to take that step, we can try a different level of government.”

Since the deadline to resign the JPA is approaching, Holter anticipates frequency of conversations to increase in the coming months.

Both parties acknowledged that miscommunication in wants and reasoning has caused difficulty in reaching resolve.

“Right now, we’re still hoping we can work with people and get them to see it from our point of view,” Holter said. “We don’t want to offend them as we speak.”

Contact Brian Rosemeyer at brian.rosemeyer@ecm-inc.com