



OTTER TAIL RIVER MAY GET NEW OVERSEERS

By Lisa Kaczke

Twenty-five percent of a new watershed district proposed by Wilkin County officials would sit in Otter Tail County if approved by the Otter Tail County Board.

However, before Otter Tail County officials agree to any proposal, they want to know if the benefits of joining outweigh the costs.

The issues discussed in a meeting between the two counties Tuesday included educating affected residents and funding about the district, which would stretch from west of the Pelican River to the Red River.

After hearing about the proposal from Wilkin County officials, the Otter Tail County Board unanimously agreed to explore the proposal to create the Upper Red-Lower Otter Tail Watershed District. The motion was made by Commissioner John Lindquist and seconded by Commissioner Lee Rogness.

The commissioners didn't make a motion of support for the proposal, reasoning that they may find they don't want to be part of it.

Rogness pointed out that part of the process needs to be learning what the costs and benefits of the watershed district are to residents and the county.

Wilkin County Board Chairman Lyle Hovland said it would mean the county would lose control of the water. He explained, as an example, when the county Highway Department needs to file permits for projects, it would have to do so with the watershed district, which would slow down the project.

To create a watershed district, the county petitions the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR).

Brad Mergens, manager of the West Otter Tail Soil and Water Conservation District, said he sees the proposal as a

"great natural resources opportunity."

However, he also expressed concern regarding how residents would be educated about the proposal. Mergens was designated by the commissioners Tuesday as the county's contact on the proposal.

The process needs to include informational meetings prior to petitioning the state to create the district, Mergens said, noting that many residents will want to know how it'll affect them personally.

While BWSR doesn't require informational meetings, staff encourages meetings to be held prior to creating a watershed district, said Pete Waller, a BWSR conservationist based in Fergus Falls. The next step in the process is to build local support in the townships and counties, Waller said.

Hovland noted that some residents will oppose a new watershed district because they don't want more government control.

A public hearing is required before the proposal can be approved by the state, according to Terry Lejcher, hydrologist with the Department of Natural Resources in Fergus Falls.

Rogness also questioned whether Otter Tail County townships in the district

would have representation on the watershed district board.

Waller responded that when the district is first established, BWSR staff will appoint the initial board based on recommendations from the county commissioners. The board would consist of either three or five members, according to Hovland.

To fund the district, a maximum of \$250,000 can be levied, Hovland said.

Mergens questioned how the funding would be collected from residents. Waller responded that it would be a percentage of a resident's market value.

Commissioner Doug Huebsch wondered if creating a watershed district would bring more funding in for projects. Hovland said his experience with the Buffalo-Red River Watershed District has shown him that being part of a watershed district puts them in a better position to negotiate for funding. The district also could become part of the Red River Basin Commission, which provides funding for projects, Lejcher said.

The watershed district could also become the ditch authority for ditches located in the district. It would be up to Otter Tail County officials if they want to turn their ditches over

to the district board, Hovland said, adding that Wilkin County would plan to do so.

The watershed district is being proposed to help with flooding issues, according to Hovland. The flooding in the portion of Wilkin County not under a watershed district jurisdiction is straining the Highway Department and their county budget, Hovland said.

Wilkin County Highway Engineer Tom Richels said his staff doesn't have the expertise and time to deal with the water issues. He added that a watershed district board could do a better job with it and also have an engineering firm to give advice.

Hovland echoed that sentiment, pointing out that if an entity is consistently reviewing the water, it can do better than the county's department can.

After creating a citizen committee to research and review different options for flooding, the committee recommended the creation of a watershed district.

"Water issues don't stop at county lines," Hovland told the Otter Tail County commissioners.

A watershed district would establish an entity that would remove the politics and focus

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OTTER TAIL RIVER WATERSHED DISTRICT ESTABLISHED

In accordance with its mission to institute, coordinate and finance projects and programs to alleviate flooding and assure the beneficial use of water in the watershed of the Red River of the North and its tributaries, the Red River Watershed Management Board (RRWMB) extended its support toward the initiative of establishing a watershed district for the Otter Tail River in August of 2009.

Legislation relevant to the establishment of the RRWMB allows our member watershed districts to levy up to two mills ad valorem tax to be utilized for flood water retention projects. One-half of the tax collected is retained by the individual member watershed district for projects within their district and the other one-half provides funds for projects of common benefit throughout the basin. Although the RRWMB has participated as a funding partner in over 30 projects of common benefit within the basin, we are equally proud that our member districts have been able to complete many more local projects by using those funds associated with their membership in our organization that were otherwise unattainable.

An invitation to consider the programs and benefits enjoyed by member districts of the RRWMB was extended to the counties within the Otter Tail Watershed.

Naomi Erickson, Administrator

RRWMB MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

At its regularly scheduled November meeting, the RRWMB:

- Received a report from Mark Meister, Public Information Officer.
- Received a report from Ron Harnack, Project Coordinator.
- Received an update from Lance Yohe, Executive Director, Red River Basin Commission (RRBC).
- Received a report from Naomi Erickson, Administrator.
- Discussed rescheduling a meeting of a sub-committee of the board with a contingency of the North Dakota Red River Joint Water Resource Board.
- Received a report from Dan Thul, Red River Coordinator.
- Distributed the Step II submittal of the Redpath Project of the Bois de Sioux WD.

on the water issues, Hovland said.

The watershed district would include 427.6 square miles, with 75.2 percent of it sitting in Wilkin County and 24.8 percent of it in Otter Tail County.

The watershed district would cover a third of Wilkin County that isn't currently under the jurisdiction of a district.

In Otter Tail County, it would include Trondhjem, Oscar, Carlisle and Orwell townships, according to a map of the proposed district. It also would cover the southwest corner of Elizabeth Township. The eastern border of the district hits Highway 59 between the cities of Elizabeth and Fergus Falls in the northwest corner of Fergus Falls Township.

The watershed district would cover the Otter Tail River west of the Orwell Dam. The dam would not be impacted.

The western border of the watershed district would be the Red River.

What is a watershed?

There are 10 watersheds in Otter Tail County. However, only four watershed districts have been formed that include

WATERSHED DISTRICT DEVELOPMENTS

ROSEAU RIVER WD

The Roseau River WD reported on the Hay Creek/Norland Project. After waiting for over two years, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit has finally been received. Phases 1 and 3 of the project are nearing completion. Outlet structures for Phase 2 have been started and should be completed by July of 2010 or sooner.

The construction of one ring dike has been completed. The District is currently working on two new ring dike requests through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and rural ring dike program with construction slated to begin next summer.

The District, Roseau County, and the DNR are currently working on an operation and maintenance plan for the Palmville Project. The DNR has forwarded the District and County a Joint Powers Agreement for the structures and operation which are currently under review by the DNR.

TWO RIVERS WD

The Two Rivers WD reported on the Kennedy Project No. 6. This two-mile long ditch was petitioned by the City of Kennedy under watershed law as a flood control project. Construction was completed on the project this past fall and the project is now operational. The project consisted of linking the upstream ditch, Kittson County Ditch No. 4 with a downstream ditch, Kittson County Ditch No. 27.

The District was awarded over \$78,000 in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funding to repair various projects that were damaged by the 2009 spring flooding. Repairs were made to the following: Dewey Project No. 5, Roseau County Ditch No. 4, Judicial Ditch No. 10, Ross No. 7, and Springbrook / County Road No. 61.

land in the county, according to Land and Resource Director Bill Kalar.

The Buffalo-Red River Watershed District comes into the northwest corner of Otter Tail County. The Cormorant Lakes Watershed District comes down into the county east of the Buffalo-Red River Watershed District. The Pelican River Watershed District also dips into the northern portion of the county. The Bois de Sioux Watershed District comes into the southwest corner of the county.

There are 46 watershed districts in Minnesota. A watershed district is created when citizens, cities or county boards petition the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources.

Created by the Legislature in 1955, watershed districts follow natural hydrologic boundaries of the watershed, which is land that drains to a lake or river, according to the Minnesota Watershed District

Guidebook.

Their purpose is to cover water-related concerns, which includes water quantity and water quality. A board of managers, appointed by county commissioners, govern a watershed district, according to the guidebook.

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EVENTS COMING UP

The next meeting of the RRWMB will be held at the Sand Hill River WD, 219 North Mill Street, Fertile, MN on December 15th, starting at 9:30 a.m.

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