

Monday, August 03, 2009

Rock-Koshkonong Lake District discusses dredging

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The Rock Koshkonong Lake District held its 11th annual meeting at the Fort Atkinson High School on Saturday morning.

The meeting had a number of agenda items on it, including approving the 2010 budget which included an assessment reduction, hearing updates on the status of litigation involving the Department of Natural Resources and a comprehensive study that might lead to dredging Lake Koshkonong, hearing from two special guests, hearing special reports on last year's flood damage, and electing new board officers.

The two guests who spoke were State Rep. Andy Jorgensen and Boat Patrol Captain Henry Stautin. The special reports were from Rob Montgomery of Montgomery Associates/Resource Solutions, LLC and Steve Hjort of Eco-Resource Consulting, LLC.

While these were all separate agenda items, several were inter-connected due to budget or legal issues. Leading the two-hour meeting, which drew about 182 people overall, was RKLK board chairperson Brian Christianson.

District residents approved a reduction in assessment of \$6, from \$41 to \$35 per parcel. When the RKLK was first formed in 1999, the special charge - not a mil rate - was \$25.

The special charge reached a peak in 2006 of \$100, which was dropped in 2007 to \$45 and again in 2008 to \$41. Initially, that charge was proposed to drop to \$40, but members elected to charge an additional \$1 from property owners to help cover costs from last year's flood. That extra charge raised about \$4,000.

During the meeting, Christianson explained that 87 percent of the post-flood costs were covered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The other 13 percent was split between the RKLK and the five towns surrounding Lake Koshkonong.

He said that the amount RKLK was responsible for totaled about \$3,900 - which was covered by the extra \$1 charge.

The new \$35 charge was approved unanimously by the attendees.

Afterward, Christianson explained why the charge was able to be lowered.

"We have been really frugal," he said. "None of the RKLD commissioners are paid. We are fortunate that we have meeting space donated to us.

"We are able to keep our overhead very low, so the monies we do tax our constituents are put right back into improving the lake and river, and overall ecosystem," Christianson added.

The overall operating budget that was approved during the meeting by electors was \$140,000, which is a difference of \$24,000 or about 14.63 percent from last year's budget of \$164,000. That operating budget is derived entirely from the special charge.

On the expenditure side, the biggest expenses included \$30,000 for Indianford Dam maintenance, \$35,000 for shoreline restoration and \$37,000 for water level proceedings.

The segregated Indianford Dam fund has a fund balance of \$377,130.

The annual audit report was not discussed during the meeting because the auditor had a family emergency on Saturday. The full audit will be posted on the RKLD website this week, Christianson said.

He also noted that RKLD operates on a calendar year, not a fiscal year.

During the budget deliberations and before the final vote, there was discussion of possibly charging property owners an additional \$1 to help fund the boat patrol. That motion failed for lack of a second.

Sautin had explained during his remarks prior to the budget discussion that budget cuts from the surrounding towns - which fund the patrol - were having an impact on the Boat Patrol operations.

Also during the meeting, RKLD attorney Bill O'Connor of Wheller Van Sickle, and Anderson S.C., updated the audience on the status of the Lake Koshkonong water-level legal dispute.

The matter is still before a three-judge appeals court. O'Connor said he had hoped that the matter would have been resolved one way or another in time for this year's annual meeting, but he noted the appeals court does not operate under time constraints.

"I hope we know something within in the next 90 days, but there is no timetable," O'Connor said.

He also informed the board and audience that it needs to be prepared for the ruling, no matter which way it goes. He noted that if the DNR loses, the agency will appeal to the state Supreme Court.

If the RKLD loses, it then becomes a question for the lake district to determine if it wants to pursue it to the Supreme Court, although it could choose not to do so.

There would be additional legal costs if RKLD does choose to go the Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, on a related Lake Koshkonong issue, Christianson also announced that the district has received funding to study the possible dredging of Lake Koshkonong. He discussed that RKLD has been working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, primarily in the form of grants, to fund the study.

The Army Corps' federal grant program, Planning Assistance to the States (PAS), provides assistance to conduct preliminary engineering required to determine the viability of dredging and island formation.

The PAS grant for the study was for \$100,000, but that needed to be matched locally. Christianson said both Jorgensen and speaker Mike Sheridan supported matching the grant, and that the matching funds were approved in the recently passed state biennium budget.

Christianson said this shows that the RKLD is moving in the right direction.

"This is a big step forward, and a big step forward into the future," he said. "We have dwelled on this litigation and getting the DNR operating orders changed for the last four or five years, and we still have that process to play out in the courts. But this gives something for folks to be really excited about.

"This lake is not going to look like it does today 10 or 20 years from now," Christianson continued. "It is going to be better; there is going to be better water quality, better fish habitat and we are going to protect the wetland shorelines. It is a win-win situation."

During his remarks, Jorgensen said the project was the right thing to do.

"Everyone knows about Lake Koshkonong," he said. "Everyone knows about its draw for tourism, and that is the heartbeat of this state. What we have done here is something good for Lake Koshkonong, good for Jefferson County and good for the State of Wisconsin."

During their joint reports, Montgomery and Hjort focused mainly on post-flood issues.

They presented a slide show that had many pictures of the flood-damaged shorelines and trees. They also explained why so many shoreline residents have newly-formed sand- or gravel-bars.

"The flood was so high for so many days that the wind created wave-actions," Montgomery said. "This energy disturbed the bottom of the lake and flooded areas, causing the material to follow the movement of the waves. The bars were left when the waters finally receded."

They also said that some wetland areas, particularly areas with cattails, had parts of the ground literally ripped away. This led to numerous reports of "cattail rafts" floating in the lake.

The specialists also discussed, in brief, the Lake Koshkonong Comprehensive Plan which will be formulated in more detail in the coming months, and there likely will be public hearings on the plan as well. Montgomery said the plan will work in conjunction with the PAS grant.

At the end of the meeting, there was an election for one position on the RKLD board. Christianson's term was expired, and he was running for another term unchallenged. He was re-elected by secret ballot 74-2, and those two votes were write-ins.

Afterward, the board met to elect its officers. All current incumbents were re-elected: Christianson as board chairperson, Ed Sander as board secretary and Ray Lunder as board treasure