

Showdown set on lake level issue

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FORT ATKINSON-Some regard it as the most important meeting in the short history of the Rock-Koshkonong Lake District.

Two seats on the board are up for the taking, but perhaps more important will be the vote Saturday morning on the district's annual budget.

The vote on the budget is symbolic, a barometer on how lake district residents feel about the district's ongoing battle with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources over the lake's level, said Brian Christianson, lake district chairman.

Lake district leaders want to raise the district's special assessment \$5 to \$50 per parcel to cover legal costs.

"We need extra revenue to make sure that we don't cheapen our own effort," said Christianson, the leading proponent of raising the water level.

"It's an investment."

Some don't see the tax hike as an investment.

Norbert J. Johnson is running for the board on a platform of fiscal responsibility, he said. He is up for one of two seats against Frank Micale and Jeff Folk, both proponents of raising the lake's level.

"The potential tax increase, for the use that it's going to be put ... is a waste of money," Johnson said.

In April, the DNR rejected the Rock Koshkonong Lake District's 2003 request to raise the level more than 7 inches in the summer to improve boating and recreation on the 10,400-acre lake.

The DNR's environmental assessment listed a slate of damages raising the lake could cause. Wetlands advocates have backed the DNR's conclusions that raising the lake would harm the environment.

Scientists contracted by the lake district disagree with those conclusions, Christianson said.

The lake district appealed the DNR's decision in May to a public contested case hearing.

DNR lawyers granted the hearing but have not scheduled it.

Rick Persson of the Lake Koshkonong Wetland Association says he wants to see the lake district's science, which lake district leaders say contradicts the DNR.

"We've asked for it. Many people have asked for it," he said.

The lake district will make its case at the public contested case hearing, Christianson said.

And that will likely mark the end of the fight if the lake district doesn't win, Christianson said.

"Next year at this time, we will have won or lost the water level battle," he said.

Persson said that if the lake district manages to raise the lake levels, property owners would pursue legal action.

"There would be people around that lake that would appeal or contest it," he said.

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