

School board worries about dam-removal tax effect

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EDGERTON, Wis. (AP) - School districts that worry about their budgets should dissuade Rock County from lowering property-tax revenue by removing a dam and pushing down the value of lakeside homes and businesses, Edgerton school officials say.

The county must decide whether to invest in repairs for the Indianford Dam on the Rock River or abandon the old structure, which would lower the level of Lake Koshkonong.

The Edgerton school board has joined defenders of the dam who say a reservoir drawdown would expose mudflats, reducing the value of lakeside property including homes, motels and other recreation-oriented businesses.

Many people seem unconcerned that lower real estate values would mean less property-tax revenue for local governments including school districts, Edgerton school board member Brian Donnelly says.

People whose property is far from the reservoir are unaware their taxes could rise if revenue requirements are shifted to other homes and businesses to compensate for a lakeside cutback, he said.

"I don't think people realize the issue is, 'Who is going to pick up those taxes?' It's going to be everybody else," School Superintendent Norm Fjelstad said.

The school board decided Monday to send letters to each member of the boards of supervisors in Rock, Jefferson and Dane counties and to members of the Janesville, Milton, Fort Atkinson and Jefferson school boards, recommending preservation of the dam.

The dam is in Rock County just a few miles downstream from the Rock-Jefferson county line. Because the reservoir is mostly in Jefferson County, Rock County expects Jefferson County to accept a big share of maintenance costs.

The Edgerton School District has not calculated what it would lose if the dam is removed.

Jerry Richardson, Rock-Koshkonong Lake District treasurer and a Newville marina owner, is a leader of the campaign to preserve the dam and prevent lowering the water level by an estimated 6 feet.

Some environmentalists argue the dam should be removed so the lake, one of Wisconsin's largest in area, would revert to its original, shallow condition that included large areas of reeds and other aquatic plantlife.

The state Department of Natural Resources has ordered local authorities to remove the dam or restore it to a safe condition.

The DNR told Rock County more than a year ago to pick one of the options or risk paying a fine of \$1,000 a day.

A report to the county's Board of Supervisors last year said dam removal would reduce real estate values \$23 million, generally in Jefferson County.

People would have to build docks extending as much as 500 feet from shore to reach water deep enough for boats, said Joe Moskal, a University of Wisconsin-Extension community development agent.

Cost estimates in a 1998 study included more than \$600,000 for repairs, more than \$800,000 for removal and \$50,000 to \$75,000 a year for maintenance.

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