

Full steam ahead for Lake Helen project

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Friday, 17 August 2012 13:18 -



Council gives blessing to pursue grants for \$1.5 million project

Supporters of the restoration of Lake Helen got their say as did local residents who oppose the plan.

Following a 75-minute hearing, that included a presentation by a consultant, the Gothenburg City Council unanimously voted to proceed with the estimated \$1.5 million project at an Aug. 7 meeting.

About 30 people showed up to talk about, listen to information about or question parts of the project that includes filling in the northern lobe of the lake—an action opposed by several citizens.

LakeTech, Inc. consultant Paul Brakage shared the project scope that included water quality data showing one of the highest phosphorous levels he has ever seen.

“Hundred-pound hunting dogs go down after they’re in something like this,” Brakage said, noting that water in Lake Helen is state owned and subject to state water quality standards.

The lake was listed in 2010 as being state impaired.

In addition to draining and filling in the smaller lake and dredging the larger lake, the plan calls for such measures as:

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interception and treatment of runoff from Highway 47 through wetlands

ridance of waterfowl which create the high phosphorous load with feces

increased use of well water that will lower lake temperatures

installation of a screen on incoming canal water to keep out rough fish.

POSSIBLE PROJECT FUNDING*	
City of Gothenburg	\$24,731
Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality	\$416,431
Nebraska Game & Parks Commission	\$460,001
Nebraska Environmental Trust Foundation	\$308,231
Total	\$1,510,204

*Funding from grants from the agencies will be applied for by September.

At an earlier meeting, residents wanting to maintain the size of the lake asked what that would cost.

Because more area would have to be dredged, the price would be about \$1 million—a cost council members said the city couldn't afford.

Resident Blaine Peterson asked why the cost was so high and was told that digging and hauling away 300,000 yards of dirt would be expensive.

Scott Bahe asked what happens if the grants aren't awarded.

Brakage said it would mean back to the drawing board but noted that the project has a high chance of being funded.

Bahe said he favored restoration since the lake has turned into a toxic cesspool.

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Randy Burge and his son, Jake, also supported the project. Burge wondered if the city could be fined for having a toxic lake.

Officials said no but noted that the lake could be fenced off if more bacteria is discovered and more algae grows.

Karole Pokorny questioned water quality in the future.

Brakage said the lake will take continuous management to keep it clean.

Brad Newcomb of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission said the restoration should last a minimum of 20 years if geese are eliminated. Cottonmill Lake in Kearney was restored in 1999 and is still in good condition.

If geese continue to be a problem, Nancy Fisher asked if the lake would again be restored and what would happen to fish, turtles and other creatures when water is drained.

Brakage said there are no guarantees but that “we take a shot or leave it like it is.”

Lake water, including creatures, will be pumped through an outlet and back to the Platte River before drainage is started, he said.

Cathi Flynn said she bought a home across the lake for a view.

“It hurts to think that I’ll look out the window and see asphalt,” Flynn said, noting that she thinks filling in the north lobe will drop property values.

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Sally Dalrymple asked if roads and sidewalks are covered in the budget.

“That’s what we’d like to see happen,” said city administrator Bruce Clymer.

Brakage said the NGPC has grant money for trail systems.

Mayor Joyce Hudson said it would be nice to keep the smaller lobe but that the lake has to be manageable. Help has been offered from other agencies, she noted.

“I’d like to see Jake (Burge) and his friends up there fishing,” Hudson said.

Council member Gary Fritch said he wants to keep a lake with quality water.

If grants are awarded, the lake could be drained as early as February of 2013.

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