

Whoosh! Lake water begins journey to Platte

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Friday, 14 December 2012 14:24 -



Council moves ahead with \$1.5 million project

Ridding Lake Helen of fowl and high phosphorous levels from feces has been hashed around in city council chambers for years.

After a decision to drain the lake, Nebraska Public Power District's outlet gate was opened Tuesday morning and lakewater gushed into a tail race.

Water will wind through the west side of town, eventually ending up in the Platte River.

A handful of residents attended last Thursday's meeting when the council decided to drain the lake in another step toward creating a more user-friendly body of water.

Draining, dredging and shrink ing the lake, for an estimated \$1.5 million, is expected to help clean and rid the lake of geese.

Funding nearly intact

With funding in place from all but one state agency, the council voted unanimously to drain Lake Helen and make other improvements.

City officials won't know until March of 2013 whether or not the project will receive \$308,331 in Nebraska Environmental Trust Foundation funds (see funding sources table) but Lake Tech,

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Inc. consultant Paul Brakage said he thinks the grant will be awarded.

“You’re getting a heck of a bargain,” Brakage said.

If the money isn’t awarded or construction bids are high, he said the project could be scaled down.

“I would be hugely disappointed if you don’t get funded,” Brakage said.

Draining date moved up

TENTATIVE TIMELINE	
Drain lake this week
Submit permit 1/1/2013
Bid package 6/1/2013
Construction 9/1/2013
	to 3/1/2014
Refill lake 9/1/2014
Fish stocking 9/1/2014
Alum treatment Fall 2014
Grand opening Spring 2014
*Alum is put in the refilled lake to seal phosphorus into the bottom.	

Although draining the lake was supposed to happen in February of 2013, the council decided to move ahead before geese start migrating to Lake Helen this spring and also give the lake bottom time to dry out.

Fish that don’t flow into the outlet and become trapped in small pools in the deeper parts of the lake will be retrieved by city workers and put in the outlet.

Nancy Fisher, who lives across from the northern lake lobe, asked that fish be removed before the lake dries out so dead ones aren’t left to rot and smell.

Filling in the north lobe of the lake with dirt will shrink Lake Helen from about 27 to 20.7 acres and make it more manageable, officials said.

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Design changes discussed

During the meeting, engineer Travis Mason of Miller & Associates Consulting Engineers talked about recent changes to the design such as the addition of a handicapped-accessible jetty and a scaling-down or elimination of cables stretched across the lake to deter geese from landing.

City services director Shane Gruber said cables should be used as a last resort because of the time and manpower required to pull them out in the fall and put them back in each spring.

Council members discussed several ways to eliminate waterfowl such as using trained dogs or a water cannon, installing high vegetation along the walking trail and concrete rip rap at the water's edge.

No hunting decision made

Licensing hunters during migration season to kill and scare geese from the lake was also brought up but no decisions were made.

A mostly waterfowl-free lake is crucial to keeping water clean after the lake is drained, dredged and re-filled.

Brakage said geese feces contribute to about 99.5% of the lake's phosphorous load, noting that the lake can handle about 40 pounds of phosphorous load yearly.

Studies show Lake Helen's load at a whopping 6,400 pounds a year, an amount that can be toxic to animals and humans who come into contact with the water, officials have said.

The lake has been declared impaired by the state.

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Skating area brought up

GUARANTEED FUNDING	
Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality	\$416,431
Nebraska Game & Parks Commission	\$460,831
Nebraska Environmental Trust Foundation*	\$208,301
Central Platte NRD	\$50,000
City of Gothenburg	\$206,761
Total	\$1,520,224

*Nebraska Environmental Trust Foundation funds have been applied for but not yet awarded.

City administrator Bruce Clymer said he thought about leaving a shallow portion of water in the northern lobe for ice skating.

Fisher was against it.

"It would become nasty and mosquito ridden," Fisher said.

In other action, council members authorized the mayor to negotiate with Brakage on a contract to administer grants, track documents and assist with the rehabilitation project.

Brakage is asking for \$39,400 to do the work.

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