



Future of Freeborn Lake Meeting Notes

Freeborn City Hall on August 17, 2017

6:00 pm to 8:00 pm

The objective of this meeting was to provide an update for the Freeborn Lake rehabilitation project and proposed actions. Staff from Freeborn County, the Department of Natural Resources, LeSueur River Watershed Network and Ducks Unlimited, Inc. were on hand to answer questions and take comments.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR) plan for Freeborn Lake identifies management strategies for improving water quality, habitats and fish and wildlife-based recreation. Implementation of some of the strategies has begun and a progress report was presented. Additional briefings were provided on the proposed improvements for the public water access and the work of the LeSueur River Watershed Network.

This summer the County Highway 6 culvert on the Cobb River was replaced with a new culvert having flow characteristics to deter upstream migrations of common carp. The culvert is in place and functioning as of August 2017.

The outlet dam for Freeborn Lake is a contributing factor to poor water quality. Final dam design plans, an operational plan, a cooperative agreement with Freeborn County, and other requirements needed to allow dam replacement have been completed.

Construction of a replacement dam allowing for lake level management is anticipated to begin shortly. The full service level of the new dam will be the same as had been maintained by the existing dam. On a related note, the MNDNR plans to conduct an Ordinary High Water (OHW) Survey for Freeborn Lake. The OHW is useful in defining jurisdiction in permitting issues, zoning and land use planning.

The third action in the lake plan calls for a major drawdown to facilitate removal of rough fish, improve water quality and regenerate aquatic vegetation. A drawdown will begin in conjunction with the dam construction. Lake levels will be lowered to facilitate construction of the dam and an intake channel to bring water from deeper sections of the lake to the outlet.



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We anticipate initiating drawdown for construction in late August or September 2017 and continuing to lower the water level as far as possible through winter. The objectives of a winter drawdown are to remove existing carp populations and to consolidate and oxidize exposed lake sediments. Dewatering will continue through the 2018 growing season. The growing season drawdown will actively lower water levels 30 inches below normal runout to regenerate aquatic vegetation including emergent varieties (i.e., cattails and rushes). If undesirable fish populations prove difficult to eradicate a second winter drawdown will be planned for 2018-2019, potentially in conjunction with rotenone treatment.

Somewhat lower water levels need to be maintained during the first year of refilling (the second growing season) to encourage survival of beneficial vegetation. As plants mature lake levels will be returned to normal given adequate precipitation and runoff.

Once most or all of the existing fish community is removed the MNDNR plans to restock Freeborn Lake with northern pike and yellow perch to help support water quality and habitat objectives. The resultant fishery should be considered “boom and bust” which is typical of shallow lakes.

The County and MNDNR are also cooperating on improvements to the water access at Arrowhead Park. A newer dock was installed this summer. Additional improvements are planned in conjunction with the lake drawdown including an improved ramp and wider dock to improve accessibility to the lake. In addition, MNDNR and County staff will work with local fire departments to explore possibilities to improve access to the lake as a source of emergency water supplies.

The LeSueur River Watershed Network continues to be active in watershed restoration activities and is working with the Freeborn Soil and Water District and landowners to identify and implement strategies to improve water quality. This network also provides a pathway to organize efforts to educate and take action to improve watershed health. The possibility of coordinating a clean-up effort of near shore areas was discussed. This type of project would likely require a volunteer effort, but Freeborn County and the Watershed Network can help facilitate this work.

A background image showing a sunset over a body of water, with the sun low on the horizon and its reflection on the water.

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Questions and comments were discussed throughout the meeting. Concerns about the predicted changes in the amount of vegetation in the lake and impacts to lake views, lake access and certain recreational boating activities were revisited. It was noted that the current absence of vegetation in Freeborn Lake is a symptom of the lake's degraded condition. Minnesota law provides for lakeshore owners to obtain permits to clear aquatic vegetation for reasonable access to open water and/or maintain a limited area free of submersed plants. Since plants also provide habitats and improve water quality, the permit system is intended to protect these values in the public water portions of the lake.

The potential for work in the watershed (vegetated buffers, etc.) to improve water quality in Freeborn Lake in the absence of lake management was discussed. These efforts are necessary, but not sufficient. The lake has become a source of water quality problems exacerbated by rough fishes. The proposed management actions are designed to reduce the influence of carp and restore aquatic vegetation to work with nature to help reduce nutrients and algal blooms.

The rehabilitation project for Freeborn Lake is a cooperative venture made possible by Minnesota's Outdoor Heritage Fund. The majority of the funding for the culvert and dam replacement is from grants obtained by Ducks Unlimited to improve degraded shallow lakes in Minnesota. Ducks Unlimited is also providing engineering and construction oversight. Freeborn County will continue to own and maintain the new structures. The MNDNR will be responsible for habitat and fisheries management efforts.