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County, Round Lake shoreowners at odds over water

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Posted: Thursday, October 18, 2012 10:00 am

By Terrell Boettcher News Editor

Sawyer County officials and the Round Lake Property Owners Association have presented conflicting recommendations on how to best manage the water levels on Round, Little Round and Osprey lakes.

The proposals in the long-standing issue will be discussed and probably acted on at this Thursday night's Sawyer County Board meeting.

At their Oct. 10 meeting, the county's Zoning and Conservation Committee approved a report from the Round Lake Watershed Management Task Force and passed it along to the full board.

The task force, consisting of board members Chuck Gundersen and Bruce Paulsen, County Conservation and Zoning Administrator Dale Olson and County Clerk Kris Mayberry, recommends:

- Replacing the Carlson Road bridge at the outlet of Little Round Lake, removing the existing stop-log dam beneath the bridge and replacing it with a concrete box culvert or similar structure set at the natural streambed level. The new structure would have increased capacity to pass water, within the limitations of the width of Osprey Creek and the existing beaver dams.

• Petitioning the Department of Natural Resources to rescind the 71-year-old Public Service Commission order that established a minimum, average and maximum water levels on Round Lake, as measured by a gauge on the north end of the lake.

The task force states that the large amount of storage in the lakes and the small change in elevation downstream "makes it virtually impossible" to effectively manage day-to-day water levels, given the limitations of the Carlson Road opening and Osprey Creek. Consequently the task force intends to "in a passive way, increase the amount of water passed during times of high water while letting nature take its course in the event of low water."

The task force adds that the beaver dams downstream from Osprey Lake are "outside the county's jurisdiction. Although they appear solid and substantial, the task force cannot predict what will happen to them in the future."

The estimated cost of the task force's recommendations is \$29,250 for design and legal work, and \$100,000 to \$120,000 for replacing the bridge, removing the dam and related construction. The recommended source of funds is the Resource Development Fund — derived from timber sales revenue.

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RLPOA response

The RLPOA board of directors has submitted a response to the Task Force recommendation, stating that the proposal leaves no one responsible or accountable for the stewardship of the lake levels. Alternatively, the RLPOA recommends that the Carlson Road dam be replaced with a culvert, but it should be designed in a way that V-notch weir could be added to provide high-water control in the event of a major rainfall.

The RLPOA says the task force's recommendation leaves the lakes exposed to "undesirable changes in the current low water levels (i.e., breach of the beaver dams) and related lowering of the lake levels; and an unattended risk of shoreline damage during high water levels due to the reduced capacity of the downstream channel to discharge peak flows."

The RLPOA says that as long as the beaver dam remains intact, the Carlson Road dam is "redundant and inconsequential as a low water control." There is a risk that the beaver dam can wash out and leave the lakes at least a foot lower, without a water control.

The RLPOA says that data collected on the lakes this year "supports our belief that the shorelines of the lakes are at risk of damage due to high water . . . while we appreciate the county's investment in lowering the Highway NN culverts (on Osprey Creek), the data indicate this investment has been rendered less effective due to downstream obstructions."

The RLPOA also recommends that the 1941 PSC order be modified — not rescinded — to reflect that the lakes' water level cannot be managed within a specific range but that it continue to specify responsibility and accountability for the monitoring and maintenance of the health of the lake.

RLPOA representative Jim Purdin said the organization is willing to contribute to the engineering costs related to the capability of the Carlson Road structure being converted to a dam if the long-standing beaver dam upstream from Highway NN fails. They are willing to share in funding and performance of ongoing maintenance.

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