

County Should Enlist Citizenry in Protection of the Lakes

COLA Call

by Ed Mutsch

This column has been appearing semi-monthly in the Park Rapids Enterprise since May of this year. Over the intervening five months these articles, all of which can be found at the Hubbard County COLA website, www.mnwaters.org/hubbardcola, began with an explanation of COLA, its membership, its mode of operation, and its goals and objectives. They then put forth the contention that Hubbard County's water resources are its MOST IMPORTANT resource, discussed numerous mounting threats to that resource, and suggested ways that Hubbard County citizens could help minimize, if not eliminate, those threats. The articles have been written with the objective to create an enhanced appreciation of what we too often take too much for granted, in the hope that such heightened awareness would inspire an ever greater commitment on the part of us all to be better stewards.

While the cumulative benefit of better water stewardship on the part of a larger number of citizens is important, and while lake associations and the Hubbard County COLA are capable of providing some degree of leverage to the efforts of individuals, a more broad-based, proactive, county government-sanctioned approach is critically important---nay, essential--- to the assurance of optimal protection of water quality and the preservation of its recreational and economic benefits. However, the current organization chart of Hubbard County government does not include any box into which such a responsibility can be reliably placed. The ESO office is the logical first option; however that office is insufficiently staffed to adequately meet its broad range of quotidian responsibilities, much less to include the extra measure of time to plan for the future preservation of county water resources. While the name itself might suggest the Planning Commission as the logical group to develop policy suggestions, that group is concerned with the full range of county real estate issues, not merely those with water impacts. In addition, it, like the ESO office,

functions largely in a reactive, rather than a proactive mode, forced to respond to a never ending abundance of citizen petitions leaving little time to ponder or plan the larger picture of future land use.

Given the crucial importance of our county lakes and rivers and the lack of a full time, local governmentally-focused effort on their preservation, we would urge the Hubbard County Board of Commissioners to establish a "Waters Advisory Board" (WAB) to assist it in assessing the current state of our county waters and wetlands and to make recommendations on how their quality can be improved and/or protected. This group would report regularly to the Commissioners and the public at large. It would solicit citizen input and draw on any and all available resources including the expertise of outside individuals and organizations. The board would have no rule-making authority but would be charged with the responsibility to develop water resource policy recommendations.

A WAB would have many appealing features. One would be that it would bring together the dedication and best thinking of a group, say 10-20, of Hubbard County citizens concerned about maintaining the quality and economic contribution of the county's water resources. And since the citizen board members would be dedicated volunteers, the effort would involve little to no county expense, a major plus given taxpayer resistance to higher levies and commissioner reluctance to impose them. But the most compelling feature of a WAB would be the increased public visibility of county water resource issues that would result from the publication of its ongoing deliberations and recommendations. Broad-based input from the public would insure that any action items championed by the WAB before the county board would have been thoroughly vetted.

As with any proposal such as this, "the devil is in the details". How many members? Who would they be? Would the commissioners appoint all the members; delegate that task, say, to the ESO office; or appoint a chair and co-chair and leave the remaining membership to them? Would the board be a permanent creation or would it be established with a sunset provision? How and how often would the WAB provide progress reports to the county board? Etc. Etc. Etc. While the importance of the details should not be minimized, since their inappropriate implementation can spell the difference between ultimate success and failure of the overall effort, neither should they deter us from the attempt to preempt the spoliation of our precious water resources rather than sit haplessly waiting for it to happen. For at that point the choices we face are dismal indeed, i.e., either permanent impairment or an expensive, time-consuming remediation effort with no guarantee of ultimate success.

The much heralded and indisputable quality of northern Minnesota life demands our best efforts to ensure its preservation.

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This article appeared in the November 3, 2007 edition of the Park Rapids Enterprise.