11 Hennepin watersheds: Is that 8 too many?

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Eleven groups in Hennepin County work to improve the water quality in lakes, rivers and creeks, but they are not all equals.

The Minnehaha Creek Watershed District has a $12 million annual budget, with 27 employees.

At the county’s western edge, the Pioneer-Sarah Creek Watershed Management Organization’s budget is $195,700, with no permanent staff and no office.

While the duties of the two are very different — Minnehaha Creek has responsibility for Lake Minnetonka, Minneapolis’ Chain of Lakes and Minnehaha Creek, some of the state’s most popular water bodies, while Pioneer’s duties includes manure management — in the eyes of Hennepin County Commissioner Jeff Johnson the arrangement isn’t quite equitable, either.

Johnson is proposing that the county’s 11 watershed groups merge into three, all with taxing authority that just four of the 11 now have. He would change board membership of the groups from citizens appointed by the county board to elected city officials.

"It’s not a broken system ... but some changes would make it better," he told fellow county commissioners at a work session this week.

The county’s watersheds districts and management organizations work to improve water quality, and have spent about $230 million over the past decade. Minnehaha Creek, Nine Mile Creek and Rice Purgatory Bluff Creek watershed districts have taxing authority, as does the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization. The other seven groups rely mainly on payments from member cities for their budgets.

More transparency sought

Johnson called the watershed system “fragmented” and said groups’ activities would be more transparent if elected city officials were board members. Allowing all the groups to have taxing authority would make spending more equal, he said.

Taxes paid to watershed groups tend to be modest. Residents who live in the Minnehaha Creek watershed, the county’s biggest and busiest such group, pay about $3 a month. Johnson’s proposal would cap taxing authority at a percentage of total taxable market value within a group’s boundaries.

Other commissioners were lukewarm to the proposal. Board Chairman Mike Opat noted that the amount that tax districts collect — and how much money they spend — depends on how much water they deal with.

"I see this proposal as a little bit of overkill," he said.

Commissioner Peter McLaughlin said the change in board membership raised an inherent conflict for city officials who are interested in development that may clash with protecting water quality.

"This is just handing it over to cities," he said.

U report recommends merger

Fewer and bigger watershed groups could simplify things for cities. Four cities are in four separate watershed groups, and another four are in three watershed groups.

Johnson’s proposal follows a 2011 University of Minnesota report to the county on simplifying the governance of water. The U report suggested merging water groups into four that have taxing authority and said improving coordination among water groups, cities and the state should be a high priority.

Steve Kelley, a former state legislator who is director for the Us Center for Science, Technology and Public Policy, said that when his group did the study it did not reach consensus on the membership of watershed governing boards. Cities already have "enormous power" over water, he said. Conflict over water issues is likely to increase, he said, and improved cooperation is important.

"Is it better to have tensions between cities and water groups, or is it better to have increased collaboration?" he asked at the session. "I recognize the power issues you are raising, but finding mechanisms to increase collaboration rather than increase conflict is a wiser course to pursue."

Commissioner Jan Callison said she sympathized with the desire to shrink and simplify watershed organization in the county but said Johnson’s proposal felt "too top-down." The board agreed to talk to constituents and watershed groups in their districts and return to the topic later.

Roles would change

Eric Evenson, administrator of Minnehaha Creek Watershed District, said in an interview that having a board of all elected officials could create a group that focuses on intensely local needs rather than watershed-wide issues. In the past, he said, the county board has appointed a public finance expert and someone intimately familiar with Lake Minnetonka to his board.
"The system we have now is very good, because the county board can find a person who is right for the job," he said.

Under Johnson's proposal, Minnehaha Creek would expand from a district that is almost solely suburban to one with agricultural areas.

"It would be a real shift in the way we work," Evenson said. "If this is a cost-saving measure, I'm not sure it would save money."

After the county board meeting, Johnson said he does not want the issue to fade away. He hopes the board will discuss it again no later than the beginning of next year.

"There are examples of watershed districts and cities that are at great odds with each other," he said. "And that's in no one's interest."

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