Watershed district proposes setting maximum levy

By Julie Buntjer on Aug 3, 2016 at 9:43 p.m.

WORTHINGTON -- With a lengthy list of projects, the Okabena-Ocheda Watershed District’s board of managers proposed Tuesday to seek the maximum levy possible as it prepares its 2017 budget.

While the board doesn’t officially set its levy until September, managers have asked OOWD District Administrator Dan Livdahl to develop a budget based on a $250,000 levy, with an additional $50,000 levy for data collection and a $3,000 levy for insurance. The combined $303,000 levy is an increase from the district’s 2016 levy of $190,000.

Livdahl said there are a number of watershed projects planned in the near future that will require the district to have funds available.

“The (Lake) Ocheda project alone is $300,000 -- best guess. If that’s going to happen in two years, we need to start levying for that,” he said.

In addition, the district has promised to cost-share on a rain garden at the site of the new community garden in Worthington, discussed purchasing a data buoy for Lake Okabena, and talked about implementing a sediment and nutrient removal project on the property ISD 518 purchased in hopes of building a new high school.

Livdahl, along with Manager Jay Milbrandt, have already talked with potential funding partners to assist with some of the projects. For instance, the county’s share of Aquatic Invasive Species money (approximately $26,000) can be used to help pay for the fish barrier on Lake Ocheda. The data buoy, meanwhile, could be funded in part with contributions from the Olson Trust, Lake Okabena Improvement Association and the Southwest Minnesota Fishing Club -- entities that have already expressed interest in the project.

The data buoy is capable of gathering data on Lake Okabena’s turbidity, algae level, dissolved oxygen, water temperature and other measures.

“It will allow us to see some trends in the lake, but we still need to do our monthly sampling,” Livdahl said. “It’s useful information for people using the lake for recreation, too.”

As for the District 518 property, Livdahl said if the board wants to do a project to reduce sediment flow into Lake Okabena, it will cost an estimated $30,000 to $50,000 just to look at options.

Manager Les Johnson said the watershed district has been frugal with its budget in the past and noted that an increase in the district’s levy is “long overdue.”
OOWD Advisory Board member Keith Schroeder, however, cautioned the board not to increase the levy.

“I think you need to think about the crop prices that are coming in,” Schroeder said. “You have to think about the people living on the land. This is adding up. When’s it going to stop?”

“That’s true, but we have a lot of expenses we’re looking at,” replied OOWD Manager Casey Ingenthron.

Manager Jeff Rogers asked if the board should concentrate on the Lake Ocheda enhancement project and forego the buoy for now, while also delaying some of the other smaller projects.

“The school district is going to ask for a referendum,” Rogers said, adding that property taxes are also rising.

Scott Rall, another OOWD Advisory Board member, asked, “If you intend to address some of these projects on your list, how are you ever going to do them if you don’t raise the levy?”

Livdahl said approximately half of the money generated through the watershed’s levy is funded by residents within the city of Worthington. Meanwhile, anytime the watershed makes incentive payments for projects impacting water quality, they are paid to individuals in the ag community.

A public hearing on the watershed’s levy request is slated for 4 p.m. Sept. 6 at the Nobles County Public Works Facility, 960 Diagonal Rd, Worthington.

In other business, the board:

- Discussed options for community outreach regarding the Lake Ocheda Enhancement project. The watershed district continues to work with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources on plans for a lake drawdown as early as 2018. The plan, developed with riparian landowner input, calls for a winter drawdown, taking water depth to an average of two feet. Conducting the drawdown will aid in the reduction of the lake’s large population of rough fish while providing opportunity to establish vegetation in the three basins.

The DNR and OOWD recently published the draft management plan on the watershed district’s website (okabena ochedawd.org), and copies of the plan are also available at the watershed district office, 960 Diagonal Road, Worthington. The plan includes information on proposed modifications to the dam on the west basin, as well as a planned fish barrier.

Leading up to the public hearing next fall, watershed managers discussed hosting a series of public meetings.

“To get people educated, we need to start now,” said Manager Rolf Mahlberg.
Livdahl said the plan is the minimum step the watershed district can take to try to improve the health of Lake Ocheda.

“It’s either this or nothing,” he said. “Two years ago, you guys decided doing nothing was not an option.”

Johnson said it is time to do something.

“The lake belongs to all of us,” he said. “What’s good for the lake is good for the community and all the residents, whether they live on the lake or not.”

The board plans to host its first educational meeting with members of the Okabena-Ocheda Watershed District’s Advisory Board.

- Authorized the submission of a Clean Water Legacy grant application. The OOWD is seeking a $532,000 grant to help fund construction of a dam and filters on the former Prairie View Golf Links property. This is 75 percent of the estimated cost of the project. The 25 percent match is expected to come from the city of Worthington’s Clean Water Partnership fund.

- Heard a presentation from Julie Blackburn, RESPEC Consulting Services, regarding watershed modeling. The agency gathers data and does intensive modeling looking at pollutants and impaired streams.

If the OOWD’s application to the Board of Water and Soil Resources is selected as a One Watershed One Plan project, Livdahl said the district will need to work with a consultant to move the plan forward.

“This is the future for receiving money from the state of Minnesota in the water management world,” Livdahl said.