Blaine studying more wells in northeast area of city

By Eric Hagen on June 13, 2013 at 8:47 am

The city of Blaine wants more wells to accommodate future development, but wants a better handle on how much water could be pumped before it starts drilling.

The Blaine City Council May 16 approved a not-to-exceed contract of $140,000 for Barr Engineering of Minneapolis to study the drilling of at least two new wells in the vicinity of 125th and Lexington avenues.

Barr Engineering, which worked with the city on well No. 17 near the Johnsville Library, has been working with Blaine for over a year on the new well study. Blaine has spent $24,900 so far, not including the new contract, according to Robert Therres, Blaine's public services manager.

Further study is needed because the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is concerned about the impact the new wells could have on local surface waters, private wells and sensitive wetlands. Well No. 17 by the library and wells No. 6 and 11 near three Centennial School District schools are the closest city wells to this area.

According to Therres, even if a well has the capacity to pump more water, the DNR may restrict how much it can pump because it has become sensitive to the concern of the groundwater supply drying up as development continues throughout the metro area.

Therres said Blaine does not want to get into a situation where it drills a well that can handle 2,500 gallons per minute (gpm) only to have the DNR reduce the capacity to 500 gpm.

“At that point that becomes a very expensive well, so we want to get that work done ahead of time so we know what we're getting into before we sink the money into it,” he said.

The city may even be able to drill more than two wells. Therres said well study results submitted to the DNR in the early 2000s showed that Blaine could have four more wells, but he cautioned that the additional number of wells and the capacity of each have yet to be determined.

“I think it would be to our benefit based on past history to look at trying to get as many as we can in,” Councilmember Wes Hovland said. “The rules are changing and they’re changing fast. I’d hate to be caught short in the future.”

The shrinking groundwater supply

A Metropolitan Council area master water supply plan completed in 2009 showed that Anoka County lakes, wetlands and streams could start drying up due to more developments leading to more groundwater pumping, according to Jamie Schurbon, a water resource specialist for the Anoka Conservation District.
Stephen Thompson, a professional geologist and supervisor of the hydrology and groundwater unit at the DNR, said the decreasing groundwater supply has been a problem for years. It just did not get a lot of publicity and attention from public officials until recent years.

A U.S. Geological Survey got a lot of publicity recently when it showed that falling water levels in White Bear Lake have largely been caused by increased groundwater pumping just brought more publicity to the problem.

“As a state, we’ve realized we don’t have an infinite supply of groundwater,” Thompson said.

In Anoka County, Schurbon said natural bodies of water are tightly connected to groundwater sources compared with other areas and the metro.

Thompson cannot recall any instance in which the DNR has told a community with an existing well that they need to pump less water than the well is designed for.

There are instances when the DNR in analyzing groundwater supply or the impact new city wells would have on private wells or surface waters has told a community to consider alternative water sources, he said.

For example, then-Ramsey Public Works Director Brian Olson told ABC Newspapers for a Feb. 26, 2010 story about groundwater supply concerns in Anoka County that the DNR previously did not grant Ramsey’s request to add three wells for the Ramsey Town Center.

The DNR asked the city to consider getting water from the Mississippi River, which Minneapolis, St. Paul and several suburbs such as Columbia Heights already do.

The Minnesota Geological Survey completed its own study within the past two months and the DNR is still in the process of conducting a hydrological groundwater study, Schurborn said.

These two studies will provide Anoka County with a geologic atlas that will give more concrete information about local groundwater supplies beyond what the Metropolitan Council study could provide, he said.

Eric Hagen is at eric.hagen@ecm-inc.com