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Round Lake property owners fight county's proposal to close off water diversion system

by Terrell Boettcher
 News Editor

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The Round Lake Property Owners Association (RLPOA) has expressed its "strong opposition" to Sawyer County's application to the Department of Natural Resources for permits to remove the channel and dam which were constructed 71 years ago to divert water from the Tiger Cat Flowage to Round Lake.

The proposed project is undergoing an environmental assessment by DNR water management specialist Dave Kafura. He is taking public comments until 4:30 p.m. April 16 before making a decision on the county's application.

The project would include demolition and removal of the concrete spillway dam, the 250-foot long by 30-foot wide concrete diversion channel, a lagoon above the dam, and the collapsed 30-inch diameter, 136-foot long metal culvert under McClain Road. After excavation, the site would be backfilled. The county says it wishes to restore natural drainage of surface

water in the Chief River system and will convert the excavated area to an upland hardwood forest.

The diversion project was authorized in 1937 by the state Public Service Commission in response to an application from the county to divert surplus water into 3,054-acre Round Lake from the newly-flooded 1,365-acre Tiger Cat Flowage on the North Fork of the

Chief River.

Sawyer County Land & Water Conservationist Dale Olson says the project's "original purpose was for diversion of water from an undeveloped (Tiger Cat) flowage to Round Lake. Since the Tiger Cat is now developed and has minimum levels established, diversion of water most likely will not be possible. In addition, it is not in the best interest of two separate watersheds to share a channel capable of transferring invasive species."

Short Elliott-Hendrickson consultant Bernard Lenz says the "emergency spillway of the Tiger Cat dam controls the elevation of the flowage at a level which is too low for the diversion to be utilized."

Kafura says closing off the diversion canal and dam would "eliminate any possible diversion of surface water from the Tiger Cat Flowage system to Round Lake. Restoration of the natural physical barrier between these watersheds (Chippewa River and Couderay River) would reduce risk of inter-basin movement of aquatic invasive species" such as purple loosestrife seeds downstream and migration of rusty crayfish upstream.

Furthermore, "restoration of this geographic barrier would help to maintain genetic stock integrity of native species such as muskellunge," Kafura says. "Mixing of known heterogeneous stocks of migrating muskellunge between these two water systems would cause outbreeding depression in the recipient population, thus reducing reproductive fitness and/or ultimate size potential of this trophy species."

He added that restoring the barrier would prevent young largemouth bass from migrating downstream into Round Lake, where walleye is the featured species for fishery management.

After the dam and channel are abandoned, the land's ownership will revert to its original owners or their heirs, under the agreement between the county and land owner in 1937.

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Record file photo Water spills over the dam on the diversion canal between Lake Placid and Round Lake in this August, 2002 photo.

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Round Lake shore owners see the diversion system as helping keep their water levels up, thereby enhancing recreation and property values. "There is a perception that without the ability to divert surface water into Round Lake during low water levels, the recreational resources of Round Lake are impaired — particularly the ability to participate in recreational boating," Kafura says.

Conversely, Tiger Cat Flowage shoreowners see shutting off the diversion canal as way of keeping their water levels up, since their flowage is required to discharge a minimum flow downstream into the Chief River, Mud/Callahan Lakes and the Chippewa Flowage.

As of September 2009, the diversion channel was mainly empty, with some impounded water near the dam, five to six inches deep.

Kafura says the project "is not anticipated to result in significant adverse environmental effects."

RLPOA response

In a March 30 letter to Kafura on behalf of the RLPOA board of directors, president Bob Strachota said they are "strongly opposed to Placid Lake canal and dam abandonment, as proposed by Sawyer County. RLPOA believes that this proposal should be summarily denied. If abandonment is not denied, RLPOA requests a formal public hearing in the summer of 2011.

"This time frame is requested to allow RLPOA to have an independent analysis performed pertaining to the Sawyer County proposal. An environmental study and analysis is critical for complete evaluation of the impact on Round Lake and Little Round Lake."

Strachota said that abandonment "violates Chapter 31 of the Wisconsin Statutes concerning 'minimum flow' as described in Chapter 130 Waterway & Wetland Handbook. Barr Engineering has performed an analysis, which concluded that several cubic feet of water per second pass through the dam. This flow has been maintained even during the current protracted drought and is the only permanent surface water source flowing into Round Lake.

"The Placid canal and dam have been present for 70-plus years and there was a pre-existing drainage between Round Lake and Placid Lake prior to creation of the canal and dam," Strachota added. "Placid Lake was historically connected through sloughs to Round Lake, not the Tiger Cat flowage, via the diversion channel to Burns Lake — like it is now.

"Both Placid and Round lakes are in the same watershed, being adjacent headwaters of the Chippewa River," Strachota added. "They are just several hundred feet apart and interconnected by a shared water table. During the last 70-plus years of continuous water flow into Round Lake from Placid Lake, there is no documented negative environmental or biological impact on either water body. "

Strachota continued that "Placid canal/dam abandonment represents a lack of historical perspective. The canal and dam were not built by accident but as a response to water level problems in the past. The Placid channel/dam augments the pre-existing natural slough connection between the two lakes, which regulated the water level in Placid Lake."

Strachota added that the Wisconsin DNR and Sawyer County "insist on maintaining a minimum flow out of Round Lake through the artificial channel at Carlson Road on Little Round Lake. The proposed Placid Lake canal/dam abandonment represents arbitrary, inconsistent and punitive water management concerning Round Lake. This will have a negative effect on the public use of the lake.

"The project will negatively alter the natural esthetics of the land," the RLPOA letter states. "The Placid canal/diversion channel area is a very beautiful, natural area important to the public and wildlife. It is a unique area with flowing water, mature shade trees and aquatic habitat that does not exist anywhere else on the shores of Round Lake. RLPOA would be in support of public ownership of this land and preserving it as a historic public area.

"Abandonment of Placid canal/dam represents a continuing pattern of disjointed Round Lake watershed management policy," Strachota added. "RLPOA is in support of a comprehensive unified management solution. The main issue that needs to be addressed is modifying the 1941 Public Service Commission (PSC) order to reflect historic water levels. Specifically the absolute high water level in this order needs to be modified/ revised to minimize Sawyer County management liability.

"RLPOA would like to partner with the WDNR and Sawyer County to accomplish this goal as soon as possible," Strachota said. "RLPOA would also like to work with The Tiger Cat Association to ensure sufficient water for everyone.

"Placid canal/dam abandonment project represents a major, costly destructive excavating project and a large expense to Sawyer County taxpayers with no apparent, tangible benefit to the public," he added. "RLPOA has collected and will submit hundreds of names of individuals that have signed petition documents opposing Placid canal/dam abandonment."

The RLPOA has about 308 members out of the 635 property owners on Big

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