

Village wary of phosphorus expense

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Trustees' letter to state officials says municipalities unfairly saddled with cost of cleaning waterways

At this point, the battle is only on paper, but Village of Saukville officials have joined the growing tide of communities opposed to new phosphorus limits enacted by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Municipal leaders contend the tightened standards for wastewater treatment plants would have a staggering financial effect.

Following administrative rules adopted in 2010 to improve the quality of the state's water table, the DNR says the level of phosphorus allowed in water discharged from treatment facilities should be as low as .1 part per million. That standard is 10 times more restrictive than currently allowed.

Authorities say the stricter standard would result in cleaner water because phosphorus is a nutrient that feeds microscopic life, such as algal blooms. The DNR says the standards were adopted in response to federal law and are dictated by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The stricter standards apply to communities that send their treatment plant discharge water into waterways that do not meet the phosphorus limits, which includes the Milwaukee River.

Federal authorities note that about half of the state's surface waters already meet the new phosphorus limits, and plants that discharge into those waters would not be affected.

Phosphorus enters lakes and streams from nonpoint sources, such as when rain and melting snow passes over fertilized fields and livestock feedlots, as well as from point sources, such as discharges from municipal and industrial treatment facilities.

There is a provision for "water quality trading," which allows credits for communities that finance corrective measures used by local farmers that enhance stormwater management. State authorities have also mentioned the possibility of granting variances in some cases.

According to Saukville officials, merely paying for the design work for the upgrades needed at the treatment plant would cost \$800,000. That would need to be done by 2015, according to the proposed state timetable.

An even more substantial hit would come in the following years, when an estimated \$4.6 million to \$6 million treatment plant upgrade would need to be done.

The village's five-year capital spending plan has that plant work scheduled for 2018-19.

According to the village, the cost of the treatment plant upgrades would be about \$3,400 per household.

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At its last meeting, the Saukville Village Board joined other members of the Mid-Moraine Municipal Association in objecting to the phosphorus regulations.

In challenging the standards, the municipal group notes that no other neighboring state has enacted the stricter phosphorus limits.

A letter from the Association appealed to the leaders of member communities challenge implementation of the phosphorus standards.

In response to the appeal, the Village Board approved sending a letter of support for the phosphorus challenge.

The village's letter said municipalities are being unfairly saddled the burden of cleaning up the state's waterways.

"The residents of Wisconsin cities and villages are being required to bear a significant cost to accomplish the goal of cleaning up our state's rivers and lakes. That cost is out of proportion to the amount of phosphorus wastewater treatment plants discharge into Wisconsin waters, especially in comparison to agricultural lands," the letter states.

As trustees discussed sending the letter, there was some skepticism about the value of the approach.

"I am not sure a letter does much good, but it doesn't hurt," said Trustee Robert Hamann, chairman of the village's Utility Committee.

The village's letter has been sent to State Sen. Glenn Grothman and State Rep. Duey Stroebel.